

## Finding Their Voices: Philosophy as a Way of Life

*Singing in the Fire: Stories of Women in Philosophy*

By Linda Martin Alcoff (Ed.)

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### *Personal Confessions*

... every great philosophy ...[is] the personal confession  
of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir  
—Nietzsche (1886, quoted by Jaggar in Alcoff, 69)

Though I was trained as a psychologist, not as a philosopher, it is really in philosophy that my heart beats most passionately. That love of philosophy is one of the several things I have in common with the twelve contributors to this book of personal, autobiographical stories. Overall, I was amazed by the wide variety of experiences described in these stories. Each contributor has lived a life guided by a passion for philosophy as a way of life and a desire to share that passion with others. Each, in some way, has had to deal with the sexism that pervades academia and, apparently, the field of philosophy. Each has had to withstand a range of ordeals: “a variety of sexist practices, policies, and institutions in graduate school and the profession” (Warren, 157). Some also have had to deal with racism and its many variations (anti-semitism, homophobia, classicism, etc.). However, each of these philosophers has come to terms with these repeated challenges in such distinct ways. In Linda Martín Alcoff’s Introduction to this volume, she notes that all of these women have managed, somehow, not only to stay in the field, but also “to become respected and influential” (Alcoff, 1). So, more than anything, these stories give the reader a view into the moral fiber of these courageous women and into the paths each followed in order to survive “a socialization into mid-twentieth-century femininity with their intellects, and their intellectual curiosity, intact” (Alcoff, 1). With only one exception, all of the women in the book are academics. This would be my major critique of the book (since academia is only a very tiny part of the real world) *except* that, of course, this would be a critique of our culture and not of the field

as such, since it is our culture that has come to limit the opportunities of philosophers in such a way.

The title of the book hints at what is coming: each of these women has had to endure one or more trials of fire, “the challenges faced by women when we pursue intellectual work” (Alcoff, ix), challenges these women encountered *as* women, *as* women in philosophy, and *as* feminist philosophers. I am not certain that any of them came through this “singing,” but they each seem to have found some way to bear the brunt of their various challenges and even to have thrived. I can only wonder what impact their work might have had on all of us if we lived in a different world, a world in which the work of women was truly respected. Since we live in the world as it is, most readers will not have heard of most of these twelve living philosophers. Maybe that will be because we were not trained as philosophers or maybe because women and their intellectual work often are erased from academia, as they are from history. As Martha Nussbaum, probably one of the most well known writers in this book, boldly asserts in her essay: “The main problem of feminism in philosophy is the infantile level of human development of many of the men who are in it” (98). After telling a story of severe but “benign” (102) sexual harassment, Nussbaum goes on to say that she fears that “men are not yet ready for a world in which women’s sexuality will not be held against them in some way, and held against their work” (103). She then goes on to note the catch-22 that women in philosophy face: “The only way to gain a respectful hearing for ourselves, and our work, and our creativity and daring, at this point in human history, is to establish that we are not primarily sexual beings” (103). I say that this is a “catch-22” because to be fully human is to be embodied, and to be embodied is to be a sexual being. Men do not have to give this up, so why should women? In the end, Nussbaum admits that she is angry – but this give her hope: “I like my anger, and I know it is not going to kill anyone; it might actually do good. All this seems to me to be progress” (107).

The theme of “sexism in philosophy” winds its way through every one of these narratives (including some horrific stories of sexual harassment, assault, and stalking). Yet, I was most struck by three sub-themes—all offshoots of sexism—that show up in practically all of these stories and that demonstrate both the often-subtle nature of sexism and the courage of women who have prospered in spite of it.

*First Sub-Theme of Sexism*

The first sub-theme involves how these women refused to be lulled into setting their sights simply on achieving a safe academic job. Sandra Lee Bartky writes that, originally, she envisaged herself in “the cushy life of a professional academic,” a life that many women “before the women’s movement” saw as their only option since they were not allowed to imagine or create alternatives (21). Instead, many of the women in this book discovered, as Claudia Card points out, that “much of philosophy as I had learned it served interests opposed to my own” (44). As a result, virtually every one of these philosophers became actively engaged in some kinds of ‘extra-curricula,’ often radical, activities: everything from political actions to whistle blowing to Marxist theoretical critiques to campus activism to anti-war protests to deep, personal commitments with organizations fighting against social injustice. As noted by Alison Jaggar, “many of us aspired not to equality ... but instead to a radically new social order” (66). In order to achieve this kind of change, many of them sought to forge “a theoretical integration of feminism with academic philosophy” (Jaggar, 68) to show how “feminism probably has helped philosophy more than philosophy has helped feminism” (Jaggar, 70), “to move from philosophical analysis to philosophical action” (Shrader-Frechette, 135), and to do something that would transform “the abstractness of [a] philosophy ... oblivious to the concrete problems in the world around” them into a force for change and revolution (Narayan, 84). Perhaps this kind of political agenda is due to two factors: most of these women began their careers during a highly politicized period of time (just before or during the Second Wave of the women’s movement in the late 1960s) and all of them, presumably, were ‘hand-picked’ by the editor—*OR, maybe, this is because feminism is inherently political and philosophy is inherently hermeneutic:*

... we live in a condition of ever-increasing self-estrangement, which, far from being caused by the peculiarities of the capitalist economic order alone, is due rather to the dependence of our humanity upon that which we have built around ourselves as our civilization. Thus the task of bringing people to a self-understanding of themselves takes on an intense urgency. Philosophy has served this task for ages. (Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, 149).

While Gadamer never, to my knowledge, speaks directly of sexism, I

think he would agree that all of the “isms” are, unfortunately, thoroughly embedded in “our civilization” or tradition. Certainly, the stories in this book attest to the fact that both an engagement with feminist thought and a passion for philosophy were critical to achieving self-understanding and that self-understanding was critical to the formation of their respective activist paths.

### *Second Sub-Theme of Sexism*

The second sub-theme that stood out for me involves how the act of studying philosophy itself led so many of these women to discover that they were actually in possession of a mind (every bit as good as the male minds around them) and that they had a “philosophical voice” waiting to be revealed and expressed (Card, 43). Some of these authors write about this very directly: Card, for example, describes the long and complicated journey she followed in finding her “speaking voice” (45). Others write about it somewhat indirectly: Schutte, for example, simply refers to a “type of inner resolve in matters of conscience” that allowed her to sustain her philosophical work (123). Many of these writers acknowledge that, in spite of—or maybe because of—the challenges of sexism, they came to recognize, paradoxically, that they were also the recipients of some kind of privilege (by virtue of their race, economic class, educational opportunities, etc)—*and* that this meant they felt morally-bound to do something in response. Uma Narayan, for example, addresses this in the context of what she learned from one particular mentor: “He showed me how a passion for ideas could be intimately connected with a passion for justice and how the privileges of education carried with them political obligations to speak and work against injustice” (84). Now there is a spirit every discipline would do well to emulate!

### *Third Sub-Theme of Sexism*

The third sub-theme involves the kind of internalized sexism that many women are socialized into: the internalized voice that tells them that men are superior to women. Sandra Bartky writes about this when she describes her experience in graduate school:

I consciously avoided other graduate students, fearing to reveal the core

of stupidity I found within myself. I made friends among the campus poets, musicians, and painters. All that hiding and skulking around corners robbed me of one of the great goods of a graduate education—the casual and playful give-and-take of philosophical discussion, the playing with ideas, the opportunity to match one’s wits with others, hence to sharpen them. I was not driven away by my fellow students, all of whom seemed friendly; the sexism from which I suffered was deeper and disguised.

Another distinguished philosopher, Virginia Held, writes about the enormous anxiety she felt when she was about to deliver her presidential address to the eastern division of the American Philosophical Association:

It appalls me now to remember that in a difficult moment before this talk, I was actually comforted by the thought of George W. Bush. I told myself that if someone so obviously inadequate to the task of being president of the United States could actually occupy that office, I ought to be able to at least give a talk to the APA. The thought that women of all races, classes, and ethnicities, as well as men of groups previously excluded, will not do less well the jobs that privileged men have all along been doing not very well should strengthen the ambition of many ... (51).

And Alison Jaggar describes the “mixed messages” she got in the anti-war movement of the late 1960s. Quoting Lydia Sargent, she notes that the “assigned role” of women in those days was to be “housekeepers of the revolution,’ operating mimeograph and ditto machines, running errands, and providing sexual rewards for male heroes” (65). It was only through the ideas of the “women’s liberation movement” (as it was called then) that Jaggar was able to recognize that “something was wrong with the prevailing norms of gender rather than something was wrong with me.” (Jaggar, 65).

*Reflections on How They (and We) Do It?*

The women in this book have defied the forces of sexism. They were able to do this, in part, because of their courage; in part, because most of them enjoyed certain privileges; in part, because they yielded to rage before they were overtaken with despair; in part, because they found the support of other women; and, in part, because they chanced upon—often for the first time in their lives—mentors, both female and male, who encouraged

them and helped them to negotiate their way through an oppressive world and its oppressive systems. This latter point is driven home by Narayan who says it simply: “It is difficult to exaggerate the power of someone’s seeing you as a competent and interesting intellectual before you are in any position to do so yourself” (89). Karen J. Warren makes a similar yet dramatically different point when she talks about a particularly memorable professor, the content of whose courses she barely recalls: “Rather, it was his uncanny ability to motivate and inspire his students to think philosophically and to apply philosophical concepts and theories to one’s own life” that “endeared” him to her (Warren, 155).

For me, nearly all of these stories were inspiring and moving in some way. Sometimes because I identified with the author’s struggle, sometimes because their analytical proficiency was so penetrating, and sometimes just because they gave me hope. In the latter category was a remark by Held: “Philosophy as a gladiatorial contest is to some extent giving way to philosophy as a cooperative inquiry” (56). I doubt that is really true, but it reinforces my belief that feminism, in the hands of many, could change the world. The truth is that I am both an idealist and a cynic. I know that feminism could change the world, but I do not believe that the world is ready for feminism. Yet, like most of the philosophers in this book, I have to keep living what I believe and hoping for the best. In this context, I felt heartened and reassured by the following story told by Shrader-Frechette:

During the most violent days of busing protests, Pete Seeger came to Kentucky to help us and shared a story that I often tell my own students: During the worst part of the Vietnam War, Seeger was walking late on Christmas Eve in Times Square. The icy square was virtually deserted, except for a young man – a Quaker – carrying a sign reading “Stop the War.” Seeger stopped the fellow and asked, “Do you really think, by carrying that sign on this deserted square, that you are going to change the world?” “I don’t know,” the Quaker said, “but I’m hoping, if I carry this sign, at least the world won’t change me.”

I think that’s it in a nutshell.

### *References*

Gadamer, H.-G. (1979/1981). *Reason in the age of science*. (F.G. Lawrence, Trans.). Cambridge: MIT Press.