When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you... when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing. It takes some strength of soul—and not just individual strength, but collective understanding—to resist this void, this non-being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard.

Adrienne Rich

Statistics reveal that women who show aptitude for philosophy nevertheless abandon study or work in this field at markedly higher rates than men. They fall silent, as it were, when they might have been expected to go on speaking. Why? The hypothesis of this chapter is that in some cases, at least, the decision to stop speaking altogether comes after repeated experiences of having speech acts fail. As J. L. Austin points out, there are many ways in which a speech act can go wrong or turn out unhappily (Austin 1962). The kinds of failure and unhappiness that interest me here are those associated with the sense that the speaker has been ‘silenced’ and that this silencing is not an isolated case or accident, but the effect of a culture that is to varying degrees hostile to or dismissive of women. My contention is that within the culture of academic philosophy, presuppositions are regularly invoked that are prejudicial to women’s participation. This approach to understanding silencing is modelled on that found in the work of Rae Langton and Caroline West (Langton & West 1999). In what follows, I discuss their account of how

pornography works to silence women and then make use of their illuminating analysis of the mechanisms of silencing to explore the question of how women are silenced in philosophical contexts, as well as what might be done to remedy this.

Some might suppose that this level of analysis is superfluous; the best approach to overcoming gender-based silencing tactics would simply be for women to ignore them and carry on speaking, proving their philosophical skill by cumulative, irrefutable demonstration. At first glance, this appears to be the message of the Soma Sutta, an ancient text that depicts a woman of knowledge confidently overcoming an attempt to silence her. I take these verses as a starting point for my discussion, but argue that on closer analysis, Sister Soma’s story indicates that if contemporary women aspire to follow her example, we need more than a liberal feminist approach to overcoming barriers to women’s success in philosophy. We also need to recognise and combat the prejudices that linger like shadowy but powerful ghosts in the ‘blind men’s groves’ of contemporary academia, threatening women’s ability to survive and flourish in these places.

1. In Blind Men’s Groves: Does Gender (Still) Matter?

The Soma Sutta is one of a collection that records the experience and teaching of early Buddhist nuns. This brief text paints the portrait of a woman who seems to have little trouble neutralising the power of negative views about women’s capacity for wisdom:

Then, in the morning, the bhikkhuni Soma dressed and, taking bowl and robe, entered Savatthi for alms. When she had walked for alms in Savatthi and had returned from her alms round, after her meal she went to the Blind Men’s Grove for the day’s abiding. Having plunged into the Blind Men’s Grove, she sat down at the foot of a tree for the day’s abiding. Then Mara the Evil One, desiring to arouse fear, trepidation, and terror in the bhikkhuni Soma, desiring to make her fall away from concentration, approached her and addressed her in verse:

“That state so hard to achieve
Which is to be attained by the seers,
Can’t be attained by a woman
With her two-fingered wisdom.”

Then it occurred to the bhikkhuni Soma: “Now who is this that recited the verse—a human being or a non-human being?” Then it occurred to her: “This is Mara the Evil One, who has recited the verse desiring to arouse fear, trepidation, and terror in me, desiring to make me fall away from concentration.”
Then the bhikkhuni Soma, having understood, “This is Mara the Evil One,” replied to him in verses:

“What does womanhood matter at all
When the mind is concentrated well,
When knowledge flows on steadily
As one sees correctly into Dhamma.
One to whom it might occur,
‘I’m a woman’ or ‘I’m a man’
Or ‘I’m anything at all’—
Is fit for Mara to address.”

Then Mara the Evil One, realizing, “The bhikkhuni Soma knows me,” sad and disappointed, disappeared right there. (Bodhi 1997)

The verse of the Buddhist nun Soma suggests that a woman who is concentrated on the pursuit of wisdom will not be bothered by those who attempt to disturb her with disparagements or discouragements based on her status as a woman or any other aspect of identity. She will not be silenced by such tactics. Instead, her own understanding will allow her to rise confidently above such claims and calmly demonstrate their falsity, leaving those who attempt to undermine or distract her, including voices in her own mind, to become sad and disappointed, and disappear.

Applied to the question of how women working in philosophy might respond to gender-based disparagement or exclusion, this suggests that women should not get upset or angry, or allow themselves to be distracted from doing philosophy by any tactics or experiences that tend to make them fearful or doubt their own abilities. In particular, Soma’s story implies that we should not allow ourselves to be seduced into accepting a perspective that insists on gender as significant to the ability to do philosophy. Soma completely sidesteps the question of the relationship between being female and being able to attain to knowledge and wisdom. She doesn’t attempt to defend herself as a woman or give a more positive account of the capacities of women. Instead, she directly demonstrates her own abilities and implies that she is not “fit for Mara to address”—that is, she will not allow him to define her as a woman or anything else, regardless of what content or associations, positive or negative, might be attached to his categories. Among other advantages, this means she doesn’t have to concern herself with the problematic question Simone de Beauvoir poses at the beginning of *The Second Sex*: “What is a woman?”

Soma’s supremely calm and confident response to Mara may seem attractive but hard to emulate if you’re not a nun warding off Mara, the Lord of Sensuality, but a woman studying or working in a philosophy department, dealing with men who do not usually disappear right there and then when you refute their arguments. It may seem that Soma’s strategy is a bit too pure and
otherworldly to be practical and effective in the contemporary secular setting of a university. On more principled grounds, many feminists would insist on the fact that in spite of their aspirations to attain to universal reason, all philosophers are undeniably embodied, and the gendered aspect of embodied experience is something that must be recognized and addressed, not dismissed as irrelevant to philosophical achievement.²

On this argument, Soma might even be reproached for buying in to the privileged male philosopher’s fantasy that his body doesn’t matter, a fantasy traditionally supported by the fact that women or servants do most of the work to keep his body healthy and comfortable, so that his mind is free for more abstract adventures.³ Mara has won if he has convinced Soma to abandon or devalue what he calls “women’s two-fingered wisdom,” that is, a wisdom based on practical recognition of the embodied nature of human existence (the two fingers of the expression are said to refer to the two fingers needed to press a grain of rice to see if the rice has been well cooked⁴). On this reading, we might suspect that Mara actually disappears quite pleased with himself, only feigning dejection, because maintaining the fiction that gender makes no difference to one’s ability to succeed as a philosopher is one way to cover up the practical problems that make it difficult for women to survive and flourish in this field. It is a view that will tend to stymie from the outset any practical measures to identify and overcome gender-based discrimination or philosophical cultures that are inhospitable to women. It also maintains the elitist view that the philosopher has nothing to learn from the cook, and that practical wisdom is subordinate to more abstract forms of knowledge.

However, if we look at Soma’s response more carefully, and also consider that her verse was composed in a context in which the concept of a mind-body split was still many centuries away, we can see that she doesn’t claim that womanhood or gendered bodies don’t matter at all. Rather she implies that womanhood has no significance under a specific set of conditions, that is

When the mind is concentrated well,  
When knowledge flows on steadily  
As one sees correctly into Dhamma.⁵

This suggests that we can stop worrying about things like gender once we’ve established conditions that allow concentration of the mind, an uninterrupted

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³ These days, this is a fantasy that privileged women in the developed world may share, thanks to the fact that much of the menial labour required to produce consumer goods takes place in the developing world.
⁴ Venerable Tejadhammo, of the Association of Engaged Buddhists in Sydney, is my source for this interpretation (personal communication, August 2010).
⁵ Dhamma is a Pali term used in Buddhism to refer to teachings leading to enlightenment, and also to the laws of nature.
flow of knowledge, and clarity of intellectual and ethical vision (i.e., once we’ve achieved a peaceful, energized state conducive to philosophical inquiry). However, before these conditions have been attained, we may very well need to take into account the needs of an embodied self. Notice that the sutta begins by mentioning how the bhikkhuni dresses (in a monastic robe) and how she obtains food for the day (by going on an alms round). It also specifies the place where she goes to find enough calm and seclusion to enter into her practice of meditation.

These details indicate that the material needs of this woman have been met before she enters into her philosophical debate with Mara. The way in which her needs are supplied also indicates a positive level of social connectedness: The bhikkhuni’s food is provided on a daily basis by a community that is supportive of her way of life. It is worth noting that there is no discernible difference in the way the bhikkhuni Soma has her material needs met and the way a bhikkhu, or male monastic, would have his needs met. This suggests that she finds herself in a social and cultural environment in which men’s and women’s aspirations to monastic achievements are valued and supported without any distinction based on gender.

To this point, the lesson of Soma’s story for women pursuing study or careers in philosophy appears to be that it is essential to ensure equal access to relevant resources, whether material or social. Once this is achieved, gender ought to—and can finally—be regarded as irrelevant to the pursuit of philosophy, just as Soma suggests that a well-concentrated mind will be immune to identification with either gender. There are some indications that this form of justice has been achieved for women working or hoping to work in philosophy in Australia—for example, statistics indicate that women are appointed to ongoing positions in proportion to the numbers applying, which suggests that any previous bias in selection committees in favour of men has been effectively overcome. We might wonder, nevertheless, whether this is enough to show that women and men have equal access to all relevant resources for succeeding in philosophy. Such doubts are worth pursuing and addressing. But they do not take us beyond the liberal feminist goal of ensuring equal access to resources and structures that in themselves are not interrogated or expected to change in any significant way. Is this as far as Soma’s story can take us?

Let us consider the place into which Soma ‘plunges’ for her day’s ‘abiding.’ It has a significance that is not immediately apparent, but depends on knowledge of its history. The Blind Men’s Grove was given this name after a nun was raped here by a group of men. On leaving the grove, the men discovered an unexpected effect of their violence: All of them had become blind. So the bhikkhuni Soma is courageously entering a place in which the threat of sexual violence and male ‘blindness’ in relation to women have played themselves out in an explicitly embodied way, and not merely in the form of clever arguments put by Mara. This is the space in which she sits down to meditate—a space that,
though quiet and secluded, is not remote from the problems of male-female relations in the wider world.

The magical blinding of the rapists of Blind Men’s Grove is reminiscent of the self-inflicted blindness of the ancient Greek figure of Oedipus, who puts his eyes out after discovering that he has unwittingly fulfilled the prophecy that he would kill his father and have sex with his mother. This literal blinding is a self-punishment for his previous failure to ‘see’ in the sense of recognising or understanding the proper form of his relationships with others. In the case of Oedipus, the punishment may seem harsh to us. How could he have avoided his errors when the identity of the other people involved was hidden from him? In light of the modern concept of personal responsibility that is tightly tied to consciousness, Oedipus is innocent, but this does not shield him or others from the distressing consequences of his actions.

Similarly, we might see the actions of the ancient Indian rapists as driven or at least powerfully endorsed by common cultural assumptions about women who spend time alone in forest groves. In this respect, their blindness reflects not exceptional individual failures or faults, but a collective inability to see beyond prejudicial images of women to the reality of a woman’s actual capacities and vulnerabilities. The problem is cultural, but this does not shield these individuals from the consequences of their violation of the nun. In acting on the figurative blindness concerning women in their culture, they gave this blindness physical form, harming themselves, as well as their victim.

Is there a similar blindness at work in the world of academic philosophy? Can we identify a culture of prejudicial assumptions about women and their philosophical capacities that causes individuals to treat women poorly, doing harm to women, and in the process compromising their own ability to see or hear clearly (capacities of particular interest to philosophers)? The remainder of this chapter explores this possibility, arguing that such ‘blindness’ or ‘deafness’ constitutes a crucial dimension of the problems currently facing women in philosophy departments and elsewhere.

2. The Silencing of Women

Over many centuries, the Western tradition of philosophy has been a conversation between men, in which women’s voices have rarely been heard. These days, things are different. Women are able to speak as philosophers, in principle on an equal footing with their male counterparts. But this does not mean that the heritage of centuries during which women were denied the right to philosophical speech has been obliterated, or that prejudicial views of women as intrinsically incapable, or less capable, of doing philosophy have lost all their power. Not so long ago, one could find these opinions overtly
expressed by living philosophers, and they remain embedded in the texts of many
dead ones.6

Even if today, few would explicitly defend such ideas, I argue that they
remain in play as implicit assumptions, with the effect that women who attempt
to speak philosophically are systematically liable to have their speech acts go
wrong in mystifying ways—mystifying because the reason for the failure is not
immediately apparent. A woman may find that she is permitted, even encour-
aged or required to speak, only to have her speech dismissed or ridiculed as
incompetent. She may speak and have her speech misinterpreted or ignored
in spite (or even because) of the competency she displays. Such responses (or
failures to respond) frustrate the aims that motivate speech and can render her
effectively, and eventually literally, silent.

Ambiguous modes of silencing in which speech is systematically dismissed
or misinterpreted can be more painful to endure than simply being denied the
right to speak, because they tend to throw responsibility for the failure of com-
munication back onto the one who has been silenced. Perhaps it is her fault that
her speech was not well received; perhaps it really was hopelessly incompetent
or uninteresting; perhaps she is personally unsuited to work in philosophy. Or
perhaps she is just unloved by the people she is addressing; for reasons of their
own, they want her to stop making her philosophical speeches, however compe-
tent, to them. In any given case, any or all of these hypotheses may be plausible
enough; indeed, some variation on them may seem like the most reasonable
explanation to everyone involved.

The tendency to locate personal responsibility for communicative failure
with the woman who finds herself silenced, or with other individuals (male
or female) who are suspected of personal hostility toward her, turns attention
away from the question of collective or cultural responsibility for the silenc-
ing or exclusion of women in philosophy. Energies are wasted in debilitating
personal doubts and conflicts, and meanwhile, the collective Mara of the philo-
sophical world goes unrecognised. Rather than being banished, he is able to
continue his destructive work. Instead, it is the women who one by one disap-
pear, saddened and disappointed by their experiences in academia.

One way to bring the collective dimension of the situation to light is to think
of Western philosophy as a ‘language game’ (the concept is borrowed from
Lewis 1979) that commonly involves implicit assumptions that are prejudi-
cial to women. Rae Langton and Caroline West have used a parallel approach
in their work on how women can be ‘silenced’ by the effects of pornography
(Langton & West 1999). They show that pornography is a clear and pervas-
ive example of how certain constructed images of women and what women
are capable of, or what role they can be expected to play, have effects on real

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6 See Lloyd (1984) for a seminal study of the philosophical construction of the thinker as
‘man of reason.’
women. Even if individual women do not recognize themselves in these images, they may nevertheless have to struggle with them within the domain of their own identity, as well as in their relations with others. As Langton and West remark, the implications of this interpretative framework “go beyond the debate about pornography” (Langton & West 1999: 305). I adopt it in order to think about how damaging stereotypes or fixed views of women operate in the world of academic philosophy, and what can be done about them.

2.1. LANGTON AND WEST ON HOW WOMEN ARE SILENCED BY PORNOGRAPHY

The starting point for Langton and West’s analysis is an American legal debate over whether pornography ought to be protected as free speech. This question arose as the result of a feminist proposal to introduce anti-pornography legislation in the United States, an initiative led by Catherine MacKinnon, a high-profile lawyer and philosopher whose work has been pivotal in bringing about tougher regulation of pornography in Canada. In response to her uncompromising arguments about how pornography subordinates women, the American court responded with an equally uncompromising appeal to the right to free speech, rejecting the proposed legislation on the grounds that it was in breach of the First Amendment. (We can imagine that similarly defensive appeals to freedom of expression might greet any attempts to censor or otherwise control imagery or ideas prejudicial to women in philosophy.) West and Langton seek to occupy the middle ground in the conceptual space staked out by this stark opposition, by showing that the Court’s interpretation of pornography as speech (a definition rejected by MacKinnon) can be held together with MacKinnon’s view that pornography works to silence women.

At the nub of their argument is a view of speech that is influenced by J. L. Austin’s theory of speech acts. Austin points out that a lot of speech is not constative—it doesn’t make statements that can be assessed as true or false. Rather, many utterances are performative: They are ways of doings things, like getting married, to take one of his favourite examples. If you say “I do,” in the course of a marriage ceremony, this utterance isn’t true or false, it doesn’t report anything about the world, but it does something to change your status and the social organization of your world (Austin 1962).

Langton and West apply this insight to the debate over pornography to make the point that if we follow the Court and consider pornography to be a form of speech, it is necessary to take into account the fact that we “do things with words” and consider not just what pornography might say, but what it is that pornographic speech does, and how it does it. If one of the things it does is to silence women, as Langton and West maintain, then there is a conflict between pornographers’ right to speak and women’s right to speak that cannot be resolved simply by invoking the right to free
speech: This rhetorical move to defeat proposals for the regulation of pornography ought to fail.

Political philosophers such as Ronald Dworkin who defend pornography as an exercise of free speech compare it to speech “advocating that women should occupy inferior roles” or expressing an opinion that “women are submissive, or enjoy being dominated, or should be treated as if they did” (Dworkin 1991: 104, 105). These messages may be unpalatable, but they think we shouldn’t attempt to censor them; if we want to combat them, we ought to do so by speaking up against them. As good liberals, we should counter these views with our own persuasive arguments. We should let the Lord of Sensuality have his say, and then do our best to demolish his perspective with superior logic. One problem with this approach is that in our society, logic seems to have little power against Mara’s ‘speech acts’. The video porn industry in the U.S. is worth substantially more than Hollywood, and with the Internet, pornography is more readily available than ever before. Nevertheless, on this view, pornography doesn’t silence anyone; it just presents a set of views that seem to be extremely popular.

If this approach doesn’t seem entirely satisfying, you might think that this is because a mistake has been made at the outset in supposing that pornography is properly considered as speech. Do pornographers really want to persuade us of anything that can be compared to a political position? Aren’t they just trying to stimulate certain libidinous responses? Doesn’t pornography operate on a less than fully conscious, fully rational level? From this perspective, we might still be skeptical that pornography silences women, but instead concerned that it could lead to problems of addiction that might inhibit the free and rational aspects of the speech or choice of which a regular user of pornography is capable. The real problem might be that users of pornography who indulge in pleasure gained from seeing women sexually degraded and humiliated begin to lose their sight, like the men of Blind Men’s Grove—the repetitive power of pornographic imagery inhibits their ability to see beyond this to appreciate the ways in which living women and men differ from the images. On this interpretation, pornography doesn’t silence women; rather, it incrementally blinds the people who use it (whether they are men or women).

This could be said to amount to the same thing, however, because the sense of silencing that interests West and Langton is not literal. It’s obvious that our society is flooded with pornography. It’s also obvious that women are still speaking. We haven’t literally fallen silent. But it may be the case that along with pornographically induced blindness comes an etiologically related deafness. The people affected can no longer hear women’s speech clearly, because the sight of a woman’s body triggers pornographic images that interfere with

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7 See David Foster Wallace, 2005: 4–5. In 2005, he estimated the value of the U.S. adult-film industry at $3.5–4 billion, compared with $2–2.5 billion for legitimate mainstream American cinema.
the ability to pay attention to what she is saying. So a woman may speak and not be heard, or be misheard, or be heard but ignored. When such responses become systematic, they amount to a comprehensive silencing of women, as women's speech itself becomes equivalent to silence. Under certain circumstances, it may become impossible for a woman to say 'no' to an unwanted sexual advance, for instance. Of course, she can still utter the word 'no,' but it will not be heard as signifying refusal, or as signifying anything at all. It is not only pornography that can give rise to this kind of problem; any strongly held prejudice will tend to operate in this way. No matter what an individual who is targeted by prejudice says, this person's speech will be filtered or distorted or completely silenced by the operation of the powerful image with which he or she is identified by others, and perhaps even by him or herself.

This is the kind of result that concerns Langton and West, but they take a different route to arrive at the problem of the silencing of women. Rather than supposing that the power of pornography operates at an unconscious level, they grant the legal contention that pornography can be considered to be a form of speech and remain open to the idea that it produces its "effects on belief, desires and behaviour in a manner that is not utterly different from other forms of speech." (305) They then draw on David Lewis's model of speech situations as language games to analyse how pornography works as a language game that has the effect of silencing women.

Like other games, language games are rule-governed. But one of the most intriguing things about language games is that they include a 'rule of accommodation,' which, simply put, operates to make any unchallenged move acceptable. If I say something and no one challenges it, it becomes a valid move, and will shift the conversational 'score' of the game. An important way in which new moves are accommodated is by importing implicit presuppositions that support them as valid. In order to make sense of the language game of pornography, the viewer is typically led to supply presuppositions such as the idea that women are inferior to men, that they are sexual products on a market in which men are the buyers, and that sexual violence is normal and legitimate (gang rape is the example that most concerns Langton and West). It is worth noting that such presuppositions will be all the more readily supplied if they are "in the air," as it were, already familiar, although possibly unconscious elements of a shared culture.

Langton and West point out that in all language games, presuppositions are typically harder to challenge than explicit statements. Because they are implied, the suggestion is not only that they are true, but that their truth is something that can be taken for granted: "it is widely known, a matter of shared belief among the participants in the conversation, which does not need to be asserted outright" (309). This analysis suggests two reasons why the presuppositions implied in language games are powerful—they are elicited from the listener, rather than imposed upon him or her explicitly, so they become part of a move
in the game in which the listener actively, if inarticulately, participates. And when the listener makes this move, he or she has a sense that it is initiated and supported by others. It’s not an individual decision for which a person might feel personally responsible, but a comfortable (or perhaps anxious) joining in, a going with the flow.

If pornography is viewed as a language game that operates largely at the level of implicit presupposition, this goes some way to explaining both how it is that pornography says things about women and why the presuppositions it introduces are powerful enough to persist in other speech situations in ways that prevent women from making certain intended moves in these different but connected language games. Women may speak, but in a social language game that is to any significant extent continuous with pornography, there will be certain speech acts they can no longer successfully or easily perform. Langton and West give some examples: A woman may say ‘no’ in a sexual context, or she may describe a sexual ordeal with the intention of seeking justice or making a protest, but in each of these cases, her intended move may fail to count as ‘correct play.’

Interestingly, the rule of accommodation seems to fail at this point. It is not the case that the woman’s move in the language game is accepted unless and until challenged. Certain implicit presuppositions governing the situation have become more powerful than the explicit utterances of the speaker, and she is unable to import the different presuppositions that are required to support her own intended move. Langton and West explain this by concluding that women, “as participants in conversations where rape myths are presupposed as a component of conversational score, are silenced and subordinated” (318).

I would question whether women are even granted the status of ‘participant’ in these kinds of conversations. Insofar as the consumption of pornography of the type described by Langton and West can be understood as involving a conversation, this is a conversation between men, and one of its most fundamental presuppositions is that women are not the kind of creatures that are fit to take an active part in it. Women, or rather women’s bodies, are the major topic of the conversation; women are not participants in it. Whatever men’s pornography may ‘say’ about women, the content of its presuppositions is structurally related to the fact that it systematically excludes women from the conversation.8

This provides another way to understand why the liberal argument put forward by Dworkin and others fails. Pornographic speech, whatever its content, whether derogatory or appreciative of women, is not equivalent to statements of opinion expressed on the open market of liberal democratic political debate.8

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8 Of course, this is not true of all pornography, some of which is directed toward women or both genders. However, these (rarer) kinds of pornography do not raise the issues that concern Langton and West.
It does not make statements or import presuppositions that women are invited to debate and counter with their own views. A story in a men's magazine describing a gang rape is not attempting to communicate anything to women (this is one of the examples examined by Langton and West). It is not designed to elicit women's agreement or disagreement with presuppositions such as ‘Rape is acceptable and enjoyable sexual behaviour.’ Rather, it represents a private mode of conversation between men in which women do not have standing to participate.

Women can speak, in other contexts, about pornography, although even this language move is likely to be considered ridiculous and annoying by many male users of pornography. But women, as women, cannot take part in the pornographic language game as it goes on between men. If, as Langton and West suggest, this language game extends into the courtroom, the bedroom, the world of publishing, and so on, it is logical that when this takes place, women will find that they are not able to engage effectively in the conversation as it is carried on in these contexts either. A woman's speech will either be ignored, treated as incompetent, or it will be heard as if it had been scripted by a man. In the last case, a host of assumptions common to the pornographic language game will be used to reinterpret the sense of her speech, against her own intentions. Thus a woman's indignant or clinical description of a sexual ordeal she has undergone can be re-marketed as more pornography (see Langton and West 1999: 314).

If Langton and West are correct in contending that a significant and disturbing effect of pornography is to silence women, then in a society in which pornography has become a major and growing cultural influence, we are exposed to a real threat of having women's power to speak eroded. The silencing of women in pornographic 'language games' is likely to reinforce or ignite the potential for women to be silenced in other communicative situations. The world of academic philosophy, however refined it may be in some respects, is not immune to this problem, but such spill-over effects of pornographic speech in academia are not my central concern here.

Rather, I wish to draw upon this analysis of how pornography works to exclude and silence women to shed light on how women are silenced by images and presuppositions that are commonly accepted features of philosophical discourse. As shown by the debate over pornography, such silencing is invisible from the perspective of a purely liberal analysis. If we do not go beyond this, the persistent, systematic failure of women's speech acts remains mysterious, and will consequently tend to be explained by reference to crude prejudices that reinforce rather than illuminate the problem. To understand the silencing of women in philosophy requires a focus not just on the content of what is said in philosophical speech, but on what such speech acts do: whom they include or exclude, whose points of view they valorise, and whose perspectives are rendered incomprehensible or simply inaudible.
2.2. THE SILENCING OF WOMEN IN THE LANGUAGE GAME OF PHILOSOPHY

Like pornography, philosophy is a language game that tends to invoke assumptions that are prejudicial to women's participation. This is not to suggest that the assumptions invoked in the two language games are the same or even comparable; the extreme and often violent objectification of women that takes place in much heterosexual pornography has no legitimate equivalent in philosophical discourse. The presuppositions that function to silence women in philosophical contexts are much more limited in scope; they point only to the idea that women are incapable or less capable than men of philosophically valuable speech. Compared to the treatment of women in pornographic 'speech,' this may seem a relatively benign prejudice, but it is capable of handicapping and even driving women out of the highly culturally valued domain of philosophy.

When and how are presuppositions prejudicial to women's participation invoked in philosophy? A crucial factor is that like pornography, philosophy has traditionally been a language game reserved largely for men. In philosophical texts and symposiums that are dominated by male voices, the reader or listener may well be led to supply implicit presuppositions that involve the idea that women are unlikely or incompetent participants in philosophical conversations.

How does one make sense of the fact that almost all seminal texts in the 'language game' of Western philosophy are written by men? When this question is not raised and addressed thoughtfully, it is likely to be met by the unexamined assumption that women simply aren't as good as men at philosophy. As we have seen in the case of pornography, such a view need never be explicitly articulated; indeed, its influence in leading to the silencing of women will typically be greater and more difficult to combat (and to recognize) when it is not. When such ideas come into play, the results will parallel those we have seen in the discussion of the effects of pornography: a woman's expression of philosophical ideas is likely to be ignored, treated as incompetent (by others or herself), or to be heard as if her speech had been scripted by a man.

Helen Beebee provides a thought-provoking example of how this happens in contemporary analytic philosophy. In conceptual analysis, certain intuitions (about what counts as knowledge, for instance) that are standardly valorized as typical or shared turn out upon investigation to be more widely shared by men than by women (see Beebee's chapter in this volume). The authority of the philosophical text or teacher operates to trigger the implicit assumption that those who do not share the intuition—predominantly women—are philosophically deficient. This example is useful, because it shows that it can take considerable effort even to see that assumptions that are prejudicial to women in philosophy are being evoked in an apparently gender-neutral text or teaching environment. Students or readers who feel excluded by the assertion that
‘we share’ a certain intuition will not usually articulate this, or if they do, they will commonly be heard as expressing confusion that calls for clarification of the philosophical point being made, rather than an alternative perspective that poses a philosophical challenge to that teaching. Silenced by the effect of the assumption, they will not discover how many others also feel excluded—or that the exclusion is systematically related to gender, and not dependent on personal failings or differences.

The imagery and examples chosen by philosophers to illustrate their theoretical ideas are another point at which signals are emitted regarding who is granted standing to participate in the philosophical conversation. Consider John Searle’s oft-quoted example of metaphor: ‘Sally is a block of ice.’ As Robyn Ferrell testifies, such an example can engender ‘wordless anxiety’ in a woman attempting to engage with philosophical thought, an anxiety that will do nothing to enhance her ability to produce successful speech acts. While Searle, disavowing the sexual innuendo of his example, explains that the meaning of the metaphor is that Sally is ‘unusually unemotional and unresponsive,’ Ferrell suggests that the woman in philosophy evoked and provoked by Sally might alternatively ignite ‘as hysterical and alive to paranoia in every philosophical utterance.’

Ferrell’s description of Sally invites the suspicion that the real problem here might not be the suggestiveness of the metaphor so much as the sensitivity of the woman who (over)reacts to it. To extend the point, might talk of implied presuppositions that operate to silence women, while possibly useful in the case of pornography, amount to a form of paranoia when applied to the more refined and rational discourse of philosophy? The skeptic might wonder whether it is the philosophical text or the hysterical feminist gloss on it that is liable to provoke the kind of anxiety that might make an impressionable woman feel that she has no place in a philosophy department. Have we lost sight of the example set by women like Soma who calmly demonstrate the ability to rise above the effects of potentially disconcerting modes of speech?

If women in philosophy are disconcerted to the point of hysteria by examples like that of the metaphorical Sally, I would suggest that this reflects not merely personal sensitivity, but a predictable, even inevitable response to the stresses inherent in a context that proclaims to be open to and supportive of women’s participation, but regularly undermines women’s abilities to ‘do things with words.’ Hysteria and paranoia are precisely the symptoms to be expected in a situation in which women, particularly articulate women who reasonably expect to succeed, repeatedly find that their speech acts fail for no easily identifiable reason. Apparently innocuous images like that of Sally then come to

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9 The work of Michèle Le Dœuff is especially instructive in this regard (see Le Dœuff 1990).
10 These remarks by Robyn Ferrell come from an unpublished conference paper “Sally is a block of ice: Revis(it)ing the figure of woman in philosophy.”
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seem like coded signs of secret rules in a language game that women cannot win because in spite of appearances, they haven’t been given a fair chance to play.

It is important not to succumb to a hysterical or paranoid perspective, but it is equally important not to dismiss such reactions as indications of merely personal weakness. Evidence of bias against women in philosophy is provided not only in anecdotes of women’s experiences, but also in statistics that indicate that the introduction of blind peer review of articles submitted to philosophy journals results in an immediate increase in the number of papers authored by women that are accepted for publication. This shows that blind review is useful in excluding gender bias and allowing philosophers to appreciate the worth of women’s work, but it also confirms the hypothesis that when philosophers can see that it is a woman who is writing or speaking, prejudicial presuppositions frequently intervene to distort their vision or dull their hearing. Artificially blinding ourselves in order to mitigate this problem is a crude and partial, if ancient, solution. Thorough-going change will only be achieved when the prejudicial presuppositions that create the problem have been removed.

3. Overcoming Silencing: A Middle Way

What can be done to dispel the damaging presuppositions that tend to silence women in philosophy? The proposal to ban or regulate the ‘language game’ in question, which may appear viable to some as an answer in the case of pornography, seems clearly undesirable in the case of philosophy. Nor is it enough to suggest that women should simply try harder to make their perspectives heard. It is vital to acknowledge that, just as no amount of personal integrity could shield a nun from the danger of being raped while meditating in Blind Man’s Grove, no amount of personal brilliance, emotional fortitude, or sheer hard work can protect a woman from being silenced in a context in which implicit shared assumptions about the relevance of her gender operate to leach her words of their power. The suppression or distortion of women’s speech is a collective, cultural problem that needs to be addressed as such.

In order to think through how this might be achieved without compromising the freedom of thought and speech that are a crucial condition for philosophical inquiry, let us turn back to conceptual resources developed in the debate over how to address the silencing of women by pornography. In this context, Judith Butler argues that the problem of silencing will not be solved by legislating “lines of necessary continuity among intention, utterance, and deed” (Butler 1997: 93). This is how she characterizes Langton’s approach to

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the question of how to overcome practices of silencing and guarantee effective political agency and citizenship (in Langton 1993). More generally, Butler opposes the Habermasian solution of introducing “idealizing suppositions” that would constrain in advance the kinds of interpretations to which utterances are subject (Habermas 1987: 198).

Instead, she insists on the “equivocity of the utterance,” which “means that it might not always mean in the same way, that its meaning might be turned or derailed in some significant way” (Butler 1997: 87). The modes of silencing encountered by women in philosophy depend in part on this kind of equivocity. They are one way in which the meaning of utterances can be significantly “derailed.” However, for Butler this is not a reason to attempt to eliminate equivocity. She maintains that some of the most promising forms of contemporary political agency arise from strategies that exploit the equivocal nature of speech, turning the language of power against itself, interrupting and redirecting it, just as it interrupts and redirects the speech of the less powerful. This leads her to a conclusion that is not far from that of the liberal theorists who see pornography as speech that is entitled to protection and should be combated not by censorship but by alternative views traded on the free market of democratic discourse: “Insurrectionary speech becomes the necessary response to injurious language, a risk taken in response to being put at risk, a repetition in language that forces change” (163).

Butler’s analysis is helpful in that it points to the fact that the equivocity of speech is basic to its power. To attempt to eliminate it would be like trying to freeze the ocean. She is also eloquent in evoking the inevitable risks associated with the act of speech: “[I]f one always risks meaning something other than what one thinks one utters, then one is, as it were, vulnerable in a specifically linguistic sense to a social life of language that exceeds the purview of the subject who speaks” (87). This kind of vulnerability is necessary and productive.

But some speakers are vulnerable in more than “a specifically linguistic sense,” and the social life that conditions such vulnerability is not merely a matter of language. It is also a matter of social and material resources, physical space, and the reverberations of acts of kindness or violence. The structure of this extra-linguistic social life affects the question of who is given the chance to cultivate the capacity for skilled and effective speech. Along with the “social life of language,” it also generates implicit presuppositions that determine how speech acts are received. Butler may well be right that the best counter to injurious language is insurrectionary speech, but this does not address the question of what to do about injurious presuppositions that remain unspoken, but which nevertheless leach explicit utterances of the power to achieve their intended effects. Insurrectionary speech can work only if it manages to cross the threshold created by the kinds of silencing we have been considering. To achieve this, a battle also needs to be fought at the level of the implicit presuppositions that govern whose speech can be heard as they intend.
I think Butler is right when she suggests that it is vain and dangerous to attempt to “legislate” how people speak and listen to one another. The silencing of women in philosophy is a problem that necessarily exceeds the purview of the legal reforms that have been successfully used to overcome other hurdles to women’s participation in this field. On the other hand, it is not clear that risky, inflammatory speech is the key to a solution here. Insurrections tend to be bloody and exhausting; there is typically a high price to be paid for the temporary triumph of inflicting injury on the powerful. Guerrilla warfare, if superficially more glamorous and exciting, is no more attractive in the long term as a model for bringing about change than the imposition of dictatorial control.

Rather than attempt to combat silencing practices through mechanisms of control or provocation, I would suggest that lasting change is more likely to be brought about simply by patiently and persistently exposing the unexamined presuppositions that structure these practices, as well as the harm they do in inhibiting both the success of women in philosophy and the free development of ideas. If an unexamined life is not worth living, an unexamined supposition is not worth relying upon; any philosopher will agree to that. This is an attitude not notably shared by the consumers of pornography or respected on the battlegrounds of politics; in the field of philosophy, on the other hand, it represents a valuable resource for bringing about cultural change. Here, the unarticulated notions that compromise women’s ability to speak effectively can be held up to the transformative light of philosophical scrutiny.

For example, the effects of gender-specific language and imagery in philosophical texts and discussions can be consciously noted and examined. The possibility of bias in favour of men’s voices in philosophy can similarly be noted, tested, and challenged, for example, by observing the effect of blind reviews of articles for publication and similar practices when marking students’ work (or when students assess one another’s work). Attention can also be given to the question of whether women’s works are represented on course reading lists (and if not, why not?). More generally, it is valuable simply to raise the issue of silencing and encourage individuals to speak up about it when they feel it is happening, in order to find solutions adapted to the particular circumstances. As in Soma’s dialogue with Mara, the crucial first step is to recognise and name the problem. Once this occurs, the presuppositions that work to silence women in philosophy are likely to appear sad and disappointing, to philosophers of any gender, and consequently to disappear.

12 The most memorable and transformative philosophy course I took as an undergraduate was a course on philosophical and feminist biblical hermeneutics. The teacher, Dr. Erin White, asked us to practice a reading strategy that involved consciously noting the presence and effect of any gender-specific language in the texts we were reading for this course and any others we were following. It was a simple instruction, but one that had a dramatic effect in raising my awareness of this aspect of philosophical writing and its ambivalent effects.
Conversely, as long as prejudicial views of women go unchallenged, they reinforce the silencing of women across our culture as a whole. Efforts to challenge and defuse the power of negative attitudes toward women in privileged contexts, such as philosophy departments, are important not only because of the interests that a small group of women have in being able to pursue careers in philosophy, although this might be considered reason enough to make such efforts. They are important also to the message that is carried out beyond the academy to the wider society, in which the needs of women to have their speech respected and understood by men are connected to fundamental issues of safety and physical integrity. Until women's voices receive the same respect as men's in the elite domains of philosophy and religion, in which the most abstract forms of knowledge and deepest values of our culture are defined and debated, the chance that women's speech will be fully and reliably effective in other areas of life is slight.

References


