

HISTORY OF SWIP

It was agreed to form a Society for Women in Philosophy on **4 March 1989**, after a few years of informal meetings and reading groups. From the first there were two strands to the organisation. One focus was supporting women in philosophy. The second was to encourage feminist philosophy, which initially was gaining little recognition in professional philosophy in Britain.

Initial Aims

1. To widen network of women interested in being part of a group of women in philosophy; students, and teachers in the whole range of higher education institutions and interested women not attached to an institution
2. To provide support and encourage ideas and thought
3. To enable women working in philosophy to benefit from the feminist community and networks that already exist
4. To organise one or two meetings a year
5. To circulate a newsletter.

Founding members included: Margaret Whitford; Morwenna Griffiths; Anne Seller, Alison Assiter, Jean Grimshaw, Paula Boddington, Maureen Eckersley, Judith Hughes, Kathleen Lennon, Caroline Bailey, Ruth McManus, Soran Reader and others

By 1991 there were 80 members

The newsletter from the first included book reviews. It became the *Women's Philosophy Review* with issue 10 in 1993 and changed format into a journal in 1997, still weighted towards reviews but with some articles. Thereafter it included interviews with key figures and some special issues.

KEY DEBATES

In the 1980's many in the reading groups which preceded the formation of SWIP, were excited by S. Harding and M. Hintikka's *Discovering Reality* and frustrated by Janet Radcliffe Richard's *Sceptical Feminist*. Until Jean Grimshaw's book, *Feminist Philosophers*, 1986, feminist philosophy in Britain relied mainly on American sources. For much of the eighties in Britain epistemology was a key concern of feminist philosophers. There was no single feminist approach to epistemology which resulted. What was shared, however, was a recognition of the situatedness of knowledge and a belief that involving women in knowledge production would make a difference to what was produced. The impact of this work was not only felt within epistemology. It had a methodological impact in weaving together Anglo-American and Continental approaches to philosophy. This has been a mark of feminist work in Britain since the 1980s. In the 1980s alongside work in epistemology,

ethics received much attention. Firstly, echoing feminist thought from earlier centuries, there was a suggestion that ethics addressed from the perspective of many women's lives may give different priorities to specific and located relationships than that allowed by universalist moral principles. As in epistemology, the attempt to take account of this, alongside the demands of justice and impartiality, did not lead to a single feminist position but to a distinctive direction of concern. A collection, originating in the group meetings which became the Society for Women in Philosophy, and published in 1988 includes papers on ethics, political theory, epistemology, pornography, the nature of philosophy and the nature of rationality. Philosophy of religion and philosophy of language also became foci of attention.

In addition to these areas British feminists, alongside their Australian and European counterparts, began an engagement with the history of philosophy. This engagement was to uncover what philosophers had said about women; and then to consider how such views were woven into their philosophical theories in other areas. In many cases it was not possible to simply prune off their misogyny and leave other aspects of their views intact. Later feminist philosophers engaged with the history of philosophy to find strands of historical thought which were productive for feminist concerns, to find allies as well as antagonists. The interrogation of its history went hand in hand with an interrogation of the nature of philosophy itself, How had philosophy constructed itself in the image of those which had mostly been recognised as its practitioners? To articulate the masculinist nature of philosophy, however, and the way in which it had excluded the participation of women, close attention was required to the images and concepts which it employed. Philosophical language was no longer seen as a neutral and transparent medium. It became evident that its images and symbols led to a construction of both femininity and rationality in ways that stood in opposition one to the other. A similar opposition became evident when feminists turned their attention to aesthetics, where the concept of the sublime was constructed in a way that excluded the participation of women within it.

Feminist approaches to philosophy are informed by recognition of sexual difference, so an ongoing preoccupation for feminists has been the way in which this difference can be understood. Most reject a determining role for biology. For some British feminists in the 1980s difference in gendered perspectives was viewed simply as stemming from the material and social positions to which women had been allocated. There was, however, an increasing

interest in the psychoanalytic and post-structuralist strands of thought explored particularly by some French feminist theorists. Readers edited by Toril Moi and Margaret Whitford were important in drawing this work to the attention of English speaking philosophers (1986 *The Kristeva Reader* ed T.Moi;1991 *The Irigaray Reader* ,ed. M.Whitford) . In addition Margaret Whitford's interpretation of Irigaray had an important influence. (1991 *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*) What became clear was that an understanding of sexual difference required an engagement with the social imaginary associations of masculinity and femininity and its constructedness within a language into which we are initiated as we develop out of infancy. Again these concerns led, even analytically trained feminist philosophers, into the domain of continental psychoanalytic and philosophical thought. One consequence of this engagement was the exploration of the metaphysical consequences of taking woman as the norm for the human rather than man.

The 1990s saw the emergence of gender theory as a central area within feminist philosophy. Here the question of how our subjectivities become formed as masculine and feminine , the role played by our bodies in constituting our identities, and the fixity or otherwise of our categories, became questions for philosophical investigation. In the late 1970's and much of the 1980s, gender theory was regarded as primarily the concern of sociology. The most important influence in making these questions of philosophical import was the work of the American philosopher Judith Butler. (*Gender Trouble* 1990) Following the publication of Butlers work many British theorists have developed responses to such a performative account. This work has intersected with an increasing concern with the role of the body in the formation of identity and thereby the emergence of philosophies of the body as an increasingly prominent research area in Britain. Within feminism the question of difference has been of political concern since the 1980s. An emphasis on sexual difference has been matched by a recognition of differences within the category woman, and an awareness of race and disability as categories of bodily identity constructed by our social and linguistic practices.. Much of this work has been informed by poststructuralist theory .

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Please send any additions/ corrections to this history and bibliography

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