

Four Puzzles on Gender Equality

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Abstract

There are dimensions along which men seem to be disadvantaged, on average, relative to women. For example, they can expect to live less years; in a growing number of countries they are, on average, less educated than women; they form an electoral minority; and their greater propensity to misbehave means that the overwhelming majority of the prison population is drawn from their ranks. These disadvantages, if they are real, all derive from an unchosen feature shared by one category of human beings: being a male. Does it follow that these advantages are unjust?

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PREAMBLE

Part of my job consists in giving talks. Many of them leave hardly any trace in my memory, but some of them I shall remember forever. One of these is the short speech I agreed to give in Brussels on the 25th of April, 2013 at the 2013 JUMP forum, a big annual event “for advancing women in the workplace.” What happened?

Over a year prior to the event, I had been asked by JUMP’s wonderfully dynamic director, my ex-student Isabella Lenarduzzi, whether I would agree to take part in a *débat des philosophes* on gender equality before an audience of hundreds of bright and active women. Despite my lacking any specific expertise on the subject, I accepted her kind invitation to open that debate, on the assumption that it would provide an opportunity for a common reflection on real and difficult issues, rather than for a rambling rehearsal of well-meaning platitudes. Given the time limit (ten minutes for the initial input), I asked whether I could be gently provocative. “Excellent,” Isabella said.

Because of unexpected technical difficulties, the debate had to take place without simultaneous translation, and hence in English rather than

in Dutch and French, as initially announced. For this reason, I probably skipped some qualifications. I did warn my audience that some of what I was going to say would be said ‘tongue-in-cheek’ but did not realize that this opaque metaphor meant nothing to many of them. Yet, as at least part of the audience laughed when I expected them to laugh, I felt confident that I was being understood.

I started realizing that something had gone wrong when booing joined the clapping after I finished. This was soon confirmed by the first commentator: my speech, the man said, had been an insult to both women and philosophy. After several other reactions in a milder tone but a similar vein, I was given a couple of interrupted minutes to start clarifying what badly needed clarifying – obviously not enough to convince the lady in charge of the conclusion that, behind the appearance of some of the worst bullshit she had ever heard, something was hiding that even she might have found palatable.

The result, I confess, was some predictable frustration. Facing a disapproving, even indignant, audience is part of the price we have to accept paying occasionally for playing our role as academics – i.e., people whose fate is not dependent on their popularity and who therefore have the freedom and responsibility to say what they believe is right even if their audience does not like to hear it. But the source of my frustration, in this case, was different. The part of the audience I had unintentionally upset, I felt, was not indignant because of what I said and thought, but because of what they had some reason to believe I said and thought, though never said or thought. And the fault, I realized, was mine.

What follows is a written version of what I did say on that occasion, without any significant alteration in substance or form. However, after the introduction and each of the four puzzles I presented, I have added (in italics) a slightly longer comment. These comments are meant to spell out more clearly what my ten-minute speech tried to say. I conclude with a brief epilogue on the connection between the philosophical questions I wanted to raise and the struggle for greater gender justice.

1. BACKGROUND: MULTI-DIMENSIONAL INJUSTICE TOWARDS WOMEN

I was invited to introduce a philosophical debate on equality between men and women. I want to do so in a way that befits a philosopher, that is, by questioning assumptions that are too easily taken for granted, by asking questions that may sound incongruous or that one would prefer not to ask

oneself. In particular, as I am addressing an audience with an overwhelming majority of women, I want to draw attention to four dimensions along which gender inequality does exist, but in women's favor. I am not claiming that they are all of the same importance, nor that they can, without qualification, be regarded as dimensions of gender injustice. I am claiming even less that the disadvantages incurred by men along these four dimensions currently offset the disadvantages incurred by women along many others.

[These other dimensions do not only include those most commonly mentioned, such as the income gap on both an annual and hourly basis, the extent to which women and men occupy positions of political or economic power, or the extent to which men and women perpetrate violence on members of the other gender. They also include, for example, the fact that, on average, women (have to) spend more time and money on their external appearance, wear more uncomfortable shoes, cover or uncover parts of their body, or are de facto denied access to public spaces or means of public transport at certain times.

This last aspect is of particular and growing importance, as highlighted, for example, by the conjunction of the motivation behind last year's "Picnic the Streets" action on Brussels' central lanes and of Sofie Peeters' superb documentary "Femme de la rue."¹ Sustainability will require us to live more and more packed together in cities, with urban housing becoming ever more expensive and hence private space ever smaller. This makes the quality and safety of public spaces ever more important for the well-being of all, and freedom from threats and harassment in those places increasingly crucial for a fair distribution of access to such well-being between women and men.]

Nothing in what I am going to say amounts to belittling the importance of these various dimensions or to denying that the disadvantages incurred by women along these dimensions far exceed the advantages I am about to sketch. But I do want to question the view that the latter is true as a matter of necessity or that it will be true forever.

2. LIFE EXPECTANCY

Life expectancy at birth is currently 82.5 years for European women and 76 for European men. One might be tempted to regard this as a minor advantage: an additional six years of life would be of greater value if they could be squeezed in at age 30 or 40 rather than added at age 80. But this is a

¹ "Picnic the Streets" is a movement that started with a massive unauthorized sit-in triggered by the opinion piece I published under that title in the Belgian press in May 2012 and that led to the city's decision to pedestrianize Brussels' central lanes. "Femme de la rue" is a short film first broadcast in July 2012 that documented how women were being harassed in some streets of central Brussels.

confusion. What hides behind the gap between the average lengths of women's and men's lives is a greater probability for a woman to reach and enjoy her forties, her fifties, her sixties, and so on, not only her nineties. One necessary consequence is that the gap between men's and women's incomes is smaller on a lifelong basis than on an annual basis: on average, men get a significantly higher income than women in every year they live, but they live less years. My point, however, is more fundamental. As regards inequalities in life, there is something that is presumably even more valuable than income: life itself.

[Perhaps a better way of conveying my point is as follows. Imagine a society in which one gender dies on average at age 50, the other at age 55, but the former has an average annual income 10% higher than the latter (with everyone guaranteed a decent minimum income). If this is all you know, which gender would you prefer to belong to? My guess is that many of us would go for the longer life. If instead, you would prefer to belong to the gender with the higher annual income, reiterate the thought experiment with a 5%, a 1% or even a 0.1% income gap, while leaving the respective life expectancies unchanged. I doubt that anyone would need to go to such a low income differential before indicating a preference for the gender with a longer life expectancy. As long as most people would be willing to give up some income in order to live longer, women's higher life expectancy reduces the inequality between men and women.

This claim is not self-evident, as shown by two interesting objections. Firstly, whereas the socially produced income inequality between the two genders is an injustice, should we not say that the inequality in life expectancies is not, because it derives either from a biological difference or a difference in lifestyles (or a combination of both)? In the former case, it is a natural fact, not a social injustice. In the latter case, it is a matter of choice for which people need to be held responsible, not of social circumstances which social justice requires us, as far as possible, to neutralize. But are just institutions not also required to reduce natural inequalities, say, between the more talented and the less talented, between the able-bodied and the handicapped? And are gender-specific lifestyles not a matter of social norms at least as much as of individual choice?

Secondly, doesn't the alleged advantage of women in terms of life expectancy overlook the inequality in the distribution of care work generated by this very advantage? Women do not only live five or six years longer than men, they are also on average two or three years younger than their male partner. This means that far more women than men are likely to still be around when their ageing partner is becoming frail and dependent. As long as much of the elderly care required in these circumstances is performed within the household, the necessary consequence is a very significant inequality in the amount of

domestic elderly care work performed by the two genders, which — as lives get longer and children fewer — may approximate or even exceed the size of the inequality in the respective amounts of domestic child care. Note that this holds even under the unrealistic assumption that both the will and capacity to care for their partner are the same for men and women. In this light, men's lower life expectancy might be interpreted as a trick to extract more care work out of women. Its impact could only be neutralized if elderly care work were 100% outsourced — which hardly seems desirable, even if it were affordable — or if women had male partners on average 5 or 6 years younger than them — which, for whatever reason, does not seem on the horizon.]

3. EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

Ever since the invention of school, men have long enjoyed a huge educational advantage over women. In most, if not all, developed countries, this has ceased to be the case for some years. In the European Union, for example, the percentage of women with a higher education degree is 25%, compared to 22% for men. And in Sweden, often regarded as the forerunner in matters of gender equality, the corresponding figures are 35% for women and 25% for men. Isn't the concern to reduce this inequality overshooting?

[One may reply that some overshooting would do no harm. After centuries of massive inequality favoring men, a few decennia of some inequality favoring women would be welcome. However, even if today's men were the descendants of yesterday's men only and today's women of yesterday's women only, thereby forming two separate lineages, this sort of intergenerational revenge would have a hard time passing as justice between members of the current generation. If only because today's men are just as much as today's women the descendants of the female victims of yesterday's injustice, I doubt anyone will, on reflection, take this objection seriously.]

Far more serious is the objection that even though women are, on average, more highly educated than men, they still earn lower incomes. This would seem to make the injustice even worse: not only do women get paid less than men, but they do so despite studying harder. No doubt this paradoxical situation is due in part to the time it takes for differences in educational accomplishment to be reflected in differences in professional success, but also and probably to a larger extent to the fact that women choose studies that lead to less lucrative careers. If this is the main factor, can the paradox still be viewed as amplifying the injustice?

Whatever the verdict on the previous two issues, there is a third consideration worth pondering. Irrespective of its specific content, the level of education

matters for reasons irreducible to earning power: it has a significant impact on health, for example, or on empowerment as citizens and household members. This is arguably why it features as an important separate variable in indexes of a country's human development proposed as alternatives to GDP per capita. If we accept this proposition, we seem led again to the same sort of trade-off as in the case of life expectancy: women's emerging educational advantage should then be regarded as offsetting (albeit in small part) men's economic advantage. Or can this only be said if the educational advantage is due to a difference in innate ability rather than to a difference in effort?]

4. POLITICAL POWER

If you combine the first two inequalities, you are in a position to predict the growth of a third one. From women's longer life expectancy, it necessarily follows, with universal suffrage, that they form a majority in the electorate. Moreover, in countries in which voting is not compulsory, there tends to be a significant statistical correlation between level of education and actually using the right to vote. Even in Belgium, where the vote is supposed to be obligatory, the less educated, I gather, are over represented in the growing percentage of non-voters. Consequently, the growing educational gap between women and men can be expected to express itself in a continuous strengthening of women's electoral majority.² If as a result of these trends women regularly cast over 60% of the votes, can it not be said that there is a political inequality in their favor, no doubt less outrageous as regards both size and source than the one that long prevailed in our so-called democratic past, but nonetheless real? Moreover, this inequality would hold even if the people elected into power by this predominantly female electorate kept being mostly men. On the assumption that the electorate is not stupid or blind, these people, whether women or men, will only be elected and re-elected if the policies they propose or adopt match the preferences of the female majority.

[Again, a simple thought experiment may make the point more vividly. Suppose you can choose between two electoral systems: one in which only women can vote and only men can be elected, and one in which only men can vote and only women can be elected. Which would you prefer? Isn't it obvious that those concerned with the fate of all women, rather than the career prospects of a few, should prefer the former to the latter? If this is the case, shouldn't the fact that women form a growing proportion of the voters (if it is a fact) count as a significant political inequality in their favor?

² This must be asserted with some caution, as one would need to verify that, for any given level of education, men do not vote more than women and that the overall positive correlation between education and voting holds for both genders taken separately.

Moreover, this inequality in electoral power is one which, if they so wished (and contrary to the institutional assumption in the thought experiment of the previous paragraph), women could convert into an even greater inequality in their favor among those who hold political responsibilities. This would be the case, for example, if our electoral system were organized so as to aggregate the votes of women and men in a way essentially analogous to the way in which Belgium's electoral system aggregates the votes of Flemings and Walloons in Belgium's federal elections or the votes of (supposedly) French and Dutch speakers in Brussels's regional elections: women would be required to vote for women only and men for men only.³ The seats in Parliament would then be automatically distributed in proportion to the number of men and women in the electorate. If all the government needed were support of a majority in the Parliament (without a further institutional constraint analogous to the parity rules in the Belgian and Brussels governments), an all-female government supported by the female majority could rule the country in impeccably "democratic" fashion.

There are of course good reasons to avoid extending to the gender divide the electoral pathology of Belgium's language community divide. It is important that those who want to govern a country should be electorally accountable to its whole population. But even with a strict analogue of Belgium's current electoral system, and hence in the absence of a guaranteed proportional representation of men and women in the elected assemblies, it is within the power of the electoral (and even greater voting) majority of women to vote into office a corresponding majority of women. Indeed, under the French or British system of single-member constituencies, and on the reasonable assumption that women form the majority of the voting public in every one of them, women have the power to make sure that only women get into the parliamentary assembly. However, the point to which I want to draw attention holds irrespective of whether women use their power in this way. It holds even if they elected into office only male candidates, those ambitious enough to fancy exercising the increasingly unattractive job of politician, but driven by their very ambition to advocate and implement policies favored by the female majority.]

3 For its federal elections, Belgium has a list-proportional system with provincial constituencies. In Flemish provinces, there are only Flemish candidates. And in Walloon provinces, there are only Walloon candidates. For the regional elections in the officially bilingual Region of Brussels Capital, there are two electoral colleges, with only Dutch-speaking parties standing in one, and only French-speaking parties in the other. Brussels voters can choose in which of these two colleges they wish to vote and are assumed to do so according to their own native language — an increasingly problematic assumption in a region with hundreds of distinct native languages.

5. HORMONAL INEQUALITY

The fourth inequality to which I want to draw attention is more delicate. Although part of what I am going to say will be said, as I hope you will notice, tongue-in-cheek, it is meant to draw attention to another important and difficult issue relating to the connection between gender injustice and gender inequality.

As a point of departure, take the rather unsurprising fact I recently heard that over 95% of the consumers of prostitution services are men. Why is this? This might have something to do with the fact that men's annual incomes exceed women's by a significant amount and that men therefore have more pocket money to spend on this expensive form of leisure. Though pretty ignorant on these matters, I suspect that the cause is more basic and has something to do with the difference between male and female libido, their respective hormonal endowments, or some other physiological difference. No doubt this difference can be said to generate some of the most despicable cases of domination of women by men (whether clients or pimps). But does it not also reflect a gender-based inequality of needs, i.e., a form of handicap? Men's greedier libido turns them into handicapped individuals, sometimes even super-handicapped *à la* Dominique Strauss-Kahn. Whether the price to be paid for this handicap takes the form of expenditure on sexual services or of a fall into a reputational precipice, isn't there here something to pity as well as to be indignant about?

[Attributing the frequency of some form of misdemeanor to the fact that the perpetrators are men rather than women does not disculpate them: an explanation is not an excuse, let alone a justification. Most men, after all, are not prostitution clients, and however plausible the claim that the strong statistical correlation with maleness reflects a genuine causal link, the role played by free will in the causal process is by no means irrelevant. This is arguably one key reason why we believe that prostitution services should not be subsidized in the way we believe psychiatric services and other forms of medical care should be. All of this hardly needs saying, I thought, but some of the reactions to the rather abrupt punch line of my speech suggest that stating the (fairly) obvious is not always a waste of time.

There is, however, a deeper challenge here. Consider the fact that young men are massively over represented among perpetrators of violent crimes (partly against women, but to a large extent against other men), and hence (luckily)

also among prison inmates. Here again, the hormonal story is not implausible.⁴ But the argument need not be fundamentally different if men and women had equally aggressive dispositions but men gave way to them more often simply because their genetic endowment makes them physically stronger. Under modern conditions, it is fortunately less easy to get away with violence than in the era of Genghis Khan. Has an advantage not thereby be turned into a disadvantage? Can it not be said that men are handicapped relative to women because of their greater propensity to end up in jail as a result of acts they would not have committed had they been women? Here again, it may be prudent to add that this is no excuse, nor justification, for their behavior. After all, there are men who have not spent one minute in prison any more than one cent on prostitution.

However, think about the way we react to similar figures displaying strong correlations between social background and smoking, or between social background and criminality. People who grew up in poor families tend to smoke far more than people from rich families (which makes the tobacco tax one of the most regressive taxes ever implemented), and they are disproportionately in prison (in part, no doubt, but not only, because they tend to be sentenced more severely for the same crimes). Is it not plausible to regard this as an aspect of the injustice they suffer? They did not choose to be poor, and had they been rich rather than poor they would not (probabilistically speaking) be wasting their money on cigarettes or their time behind prison bars. This should not prevent us from taxing the smokers or punishing the offenders, but should it not temper our indignation – especially if we happen to enjoy a more privileged background? Indeed, should we not view such facts as one of the expressions of the injustice inflicted on the poor?

In this light, let us return to those men who waste their money on prostitutes or misbehave in a way that gets them into trouble (whether incarceration or reputational precipice). They did not choose to be men any more than those born poor chose to be born poor, and had they been women rather than men, they would not (probabilistically speaking) have to bear these burdens. Is the analogy between the two cases not so strong that it would be inconsistent to regard the inequalities mentioned as an aspect of an injustice suffered by the poor, but not as an injustice suffered by men? (Note that the analogy holds irrespective of the validity of the hormonal diagnosis. If the difference between the behavior patterns of men and women has nothing to do with testosterone or any other physiological difference, but rather with the way in which boys

4 See Paula Casal's striking piece, which helped inspire the formulation of this fourth puzzle: "Love not war. On the chemistry of good and evil," in *Arguing about Justice*, Louvain-la-Neuve: Presses universitaires de Louvain, 2011, 145-156. Freely downloadable at www.academia.edu/2396206/Arguing_about_Justice_Essays_for_Philippe_Van_Parijs_PUL_2011_free_PDF

are socialized – say, being encouraged to play with guns rather than dolls –, the analogy would arguably be even closer).

This brings us to my philosophical question. Why is it that my intuition – and presumably yours – is different in the two cases? Is it simply because of the contingent fact that these handicaps suffered by men can hardly be said to offset the many unjust inequalities that favor them, whereas in the case of the poor they are added to a whole series of other clearly unjust inequalities in the same direction? Or is there a deeper, less contingent difference between the two cases? Is the key difference, for example, that it is hardly controversial that a world without poverty would be a better world, whereas some doubt (perhaps wrongly) that a mankind without males would be a better mankind? If this is not the key difference, what is?]

EPILOGUE: A PHILOSOPHER'S JOB

As mentioned at the start, part of the job of a philosopher is to question assumptions, and one effective way of doing so is by formulating puzzles by asking, for example,

(1) If society gives group B more money per unit of time while nature gives group A more units of time, can it always be said that there is an unjust inequality at the expense of group A?

(2) If society gives group B more money and group A better education, can it always be said that there is an unjust inequality at the expense of group A?

(3) If group B enjoys a majority among power holders and group A a majority among those who choose the power holders, can it always be said that there is an unjust inequality at the expense of group A?

(4) If group B's genetic endowment makes its members more likely to end up in prison, can this ever be counted as an injustice suffered by its members, none of whom chose not to be born a member of the less incarceration-prone group A?

Are these questions outlandish, far-fetched, deprived of any relevance to the most pressing issues and most urgent struggles for the sake of greater justice between men and women? At first sight, several of them certainly are. Yet they are worth asking. For each of them is meant to invite further thinking on the ideal of equality of opportunity that underlies much of the struggle for greater gender justice. The equalization of opportunities requires that one should neutralize the impact on our life prospects of circumstances beyond our control – including our being born women or men –, while making us bear the consequences of the choices we make – including those made by virtue of preferences that may happen to differ markedly between women and men.

Taking seriously the questions raised above and addressing the difficulties they reveal is essential to clarify, refine, and sharpen this ideal, and thereby to strengthen the struggles they inspire. Dismissing them, by contrast, deprives us of an opportunity to give a sounder basis to the struggle for greater justice along the gender dimension, as along any other. In particular, articulating the ideal in response to puzzling challenges is essential to put any particular struggle in a broader context: the concern for opportunities, the real freedom of those with least real freedom, irrespective of their gender, but among whom women are massively overrepresented.