

Gendering philosophy

Johanna Lenne-Cornuez

Can one philosophize as a feminist when the history of philosophy is so gendered? Yes—but this requires paying close attention to the positions that traverse and often constitute it.

Reviewed: Vanina Mozziconacci, *Apprendre à philosopher en féministe* (Learning how to philosophize as a feminist) La Dispute, "Le genre du monde," Paris, 2025, 200 p., 20 euros.

Can one learn to philosophize as a feminist and thus teach philosophy as a feminist? This question, which Vanina Mozziconacci's book seeks to answer, is a provocation at two levels: first, because philosophy is averse to any pedagogy that would limit free thought to prescribed educational programs, and second, because feminist philosophy apparently does not exist. Mozziconacci addresses this twofold contradiction--and twofold challenge--while also being personally invested in these questions, in ways that both suspend and instantiate the standpoint epistemology she advocates. At the same time, she suggests that these are not secondary or subaltern questions, but that the stakes of how one teaches and relates to one's students are nothing less than philosophy's ultimate meaning. Enriching the famous feminist slogan, her thought draws on the conviction that "the personal is political and didactics are personal" (p. 27). Philosophy teachers cannot ignore the legacy of the discipline's history and institutionalized traditions that impose intellectual habits and cognitive blind spots that must be questioned, as well as relationships to knowledge and its presentation that can exclude those to whom it is addressed, or at the very least stand in the way of their achieving knowledge.

For a feminist philosophical didactics

Responding to the first objection, which maintains that philosophy precludes any particular pedagogy, Mozziconacci shows that, to the contrary, philosophy must address didactic questions, providing that it grasps their stakes. Her approach situates itself in the tradition of critical didactics that, in contrast to pedagogies that locate themselves outside of established fields of knowledge to formulate a universal, contentless method, draws upon resources distinct to its discipline to achieve a "critical social conscience" (see p. 26, where Mozziconacci cites a definition by Irène Pereira).

Yet the approach is not without risks, and it must blaze its trail while avoiding several obstacles. First, it must be careful not to substitute emotional support for intellectual critique. The substitution of disciplinary teaching for care-related work not only dissolves the critical role that teachers must attempt to fulfill but also assigns students fixed identities, preventing their emancipation. Philosophical work must never be psychologized or therapized in ways that depoliticize "the personal" by "individualizing domination stories" (p. 49). Furthermore, there is a risk in presenting doctrinal positions disconnected from their reflective and critical power and ready-to-use "techniques" that threaten philosophical freedom. In this respect, Mozziconacci's book differs from feminist pedagogy and gender equality textbooks. She emphasizes how the refusal to consider certain educational methods in the name of some sanctified conception of freedom serves as a convenient cover for ignoring power relations and the ways in which they inform ideas and their transmission. Moreover, a "philosophical didactics of philosophy" is identical to philosophy itself--a reflective movement that is constitutive of the discipline (p. 68).

But what does it mean to philosophize from a feminist perspective? To the second objection against a feminist philosophy, Mozziconacci replies that the latter is reducible neither to a "non-sexist" philosophy nor to partisan indoctrination. Feminist philosophy implies not only greater attention to gender-related injustices, but also an approach to problematization that abandons the notion of thinking "from nowhere" or "universal philosophizing" by reflecting on the ways in which knowledge is anchored in gender differences, while also opening philosophy previously deemed unworthy and obscure.

Feminist teaching of philosophy also rests on a social critique of scholastic achievement, talent, and merit. Belief in innate philosophical talent or genius explains not only the rejection of didactic reflection but also women's centuries-long exclusion

from the discipline: "Emphasizing didactics means taking philosophy off its pedestal; and taking philosophy off its pedestal and feminization often work in lockstep" (p. 79).

Rethinking objectivity

The question then becomes figuring out how to demystify pedagogical neutrality and knowledge's universality without abandoning the claim to objectivity or abusing pedagogical authority by imposing a doctrine. To illustrate the androcentric biases uncovered by feminist epistemologists, the book draws on the example of the social contract, which, according to Carole Pateman, turns out to be a sexual contract, and, according to Charles W. Mills, a racial contract.¹ Feminist philosophy thus implies a critique of liberal theories of the autonomous individual. Moreover, these critical analyses of contractualism show that the gender question has analogies with that of race, which suggests that to philosophize as a feminist necessarily requires philosophizing in an intersectional way. But does this one mean that one should philosophize specifically as a feminist, or in ways that are more broadly critical, granting particular attention to race as well as gender? Or to ask the question in an even more controversial manner: is it because one is a woman that one must learn to philosophize as a feminist, just as racial minorities must do so while addressing questions of race, disabled individuals from the standpoint of ableism, and so on?

The point, in short, is to show that all philosophical reflection must reconsider the question from which it thinks, yet without succumbing to relativistic perspectivalism or essentialized standpoints. Drawing on the work of Sandra Harding,² Mozziconacci defends the idea that feminist standpoint epistemology (FSE)-which does not simply consider particular perspectives but reflectively and actively reappropriates a situated to which one is subjected--"gives itself a better chance at objectivity than traditional epistemologies," as "the recognition of the socially situated character of all scientific activity entails the idea that it is a *resource* and not an *obstacle* to objectivity" (p. 91, author's emphasis). FSE must thus distinguish itself both from *ethnocentrism*, since being a woman is not a guarantee of epistemic superiority and "the

¹ Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Stanford University Press, 1988; Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*. Cornell University Press, 1997.

² Sandra G. Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is 'Strong Objectivity'?" in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, Routledge, 1993.

homogenizing categorization of femininity" must itself be approached critically, and from *relativism*, as some positions are "more illuminating than others when discovering and analyzing a particular reality" (p. 92). Against the illusions of unreflective scientific neutrality, FSE gives itself a better chance at objectivity while also pursuing a more egalitarian form of democratization.

Mozziconacci proposes that androcentric and racial blindness be conceived as "framing problems," consciousness of which makes possible a reproblematicization that can explain the "racial and sexual structuring of the world" (p. 95). Problematization, which is essential to philosophical work, must itself be examined in terms of the social context and interests in which it is born, without suggesting that minority experiences are self-evident truths. To illustrate this new "didactic contract" that Mozziconacci calls for, she shows how one might use philosophy textbooks in new ways, using them not as a course's basic framework, but to problematize its "positions" and "blind spots" (p. 108). Mozziconacci provides persuasive examples of the way in which textbooks render women invisible by "fascinating" the reader's gaze with allegorical figures (such as Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*), but never interrogate the "generic" use of such terms as "free man," refrain from connecting various issues relating to racial domination (this scattered approach preventing it from being considered as such), and propose alternatives to freedom while leaving them unquestioned (such as Kant's conception of the minor).

Transforming practice without indoctrination

To avoid the accusation that she is promoting political indoctrination, Mozziconacci rejects the easy solution: that of turning the classroom into a space for free discussion. First, even in such circumstances, the teacher's authority is still present. Second, the equivalence of all viewpoints and their sayable and audible character is a naïve illusion. But against Arendt's theory that education should preserve the world, feminist teaching holds that one must critique the world "with a transformative horizon" (p. 125).

In this vein, Mozziconacci proposes several "working horizons" for a renewal of philosophy teaching, which depend on the transformation not only of its content but also the ways in which it transmits knowledge. The first horizon examines the criteria used to categorize philosophical texts, their history, and the exclusionary

effects they produce; to stop avoiding the critical analysis of sexism in canonical texts; and to "discern gender in seemingly neutral concepts" (p. 140), of which Mozziconacci provides two examples: Kant's notion of "respect" and Sartre's concept of "bad faith." Far from promoting respect for the human person, Kant's construction of respect for women is, through its insistence on modesty, a way of keeping them in their place.

The second horizon examines the exclusionary effects of oratory jousting and argumentative warfare that philosophy often prioritizes. The critical work of feminist philosophy must be careful not to succumb to self-destructive hypercriticism. So as not to overvalue the will to objection that turns other people's thought into the enemy--to the detriment of the tasks of conceptualization and problematization--teachers must develop new philosophical activities. Mozziconacci offers several examples, such as rewriting, cooperative learning through "class puzzles," and the "surveying" method (this approach, which emerged out of workers' education movements, consists in cutting up a text and piecing it back together as a group).

Finally, against the myth of pure philosophical reflection freed of all interests and historical anchoring, Mozziconacci recommends "making (more) room for ... pragmatism broadly construed" (p. 174) by making students more aware of the practical consequences of using concepts, as well as of their conditions of emergence and the way they can be invested by a wide range of interests. Without presuming to resolve all these difficulties, this call for a renewal of teaching practices is informed by a sharper consciousness of the embodiment and contextualization of knowledge. It makes a persuasive case for the necessity and fruitfulness, for teachers and philosophers, of creative reflection on practices for transmitting knowledge and, for students, of the value of learning philosophy from a feminist perspective.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, June 16, 2025. Translated by Michael Behrent, with the support of Cairn.info. Published in booksandideas.net, September 1, 2026.