Chapter 2 Undoing Power Hierarchies



Abstract What alternatives have been created within feminist pedagogy to question power hierarchies and to make teaching more inclusive? What approaches were adopted in the Gender and Philosophy summer schools in order to achieve these goals? After discussing these questions, I demonstrate how the concepts of "alienation" and "situation" can be used to analyse power dynamics and the framework they provide to the rest of the book.

2.1 Feminist Pedagogy

The idea of education as a powerful tool for change is not new. Plato suggested the idea that the right kind of education allows both women and men make full use of their talents and help create the ideal state. Later many women thinkers from Christine de Pizan (1405/1999) to Catharine Macaulay (1790/2014) voiced the idea that it is impossible learn about the real intellectual potential of women without providing them an education that is as good as that of men. Also Mary Wollstonecraft (1792/2000) argued that giving women a rational education will allow them to contribute to the activities of the society in a more comprehensive manner.

When thinking through the question of inclusion in the teaching of philosophy, one of the most obvious reference points are those of feminist pedagogy. For feminist pedagogy, the idea of change through education—the ideals of liberation and empowerment—has been essential. This is no wonder considering that the roots of feminist pedagogy are in the feminist movement and in feminist theorisation. Another important source for feminist pedagogy has been critical pedagogy, which has critical theory as its starting point and is described as a pedagogy of liberation. Here Paulo Freire's thinking and especially his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/1972) have been influential. The work of bell hooks, such as her famous *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), is influenced by Freire. Freire advocates dialogical learning, which is meant to enable members of the oppressed groups to get their voices heard. They share their experiences, become aware of their possibilities as political agents, and finally, act for their own liberation. These ideas are shared by many feminist theorists. In fact the

feminist practice of consciousness raising, which became widely known in the late 1960s, has been compared to and sometimes equated with Freire's conscientisation (*conscienzaçao*) or critical consciousness. At the same time, his lack of concern for gender issues has been criticised (see e.g. Luke and Gore (eds) 1992).

All in all, the different trends in feminist pedagogy have followed the shifts in feminist theory. Consciousness raising was primarily a technique of radical feminism, according to which the society was, inherently, a patriarchy and women its oppressed class. Consciousness raising groups were a way of learning about what it is to be a woman, and how personal and private experiences were related to the social reality. The sharing of experiences was a basis for political action. In a way, the later Internet-based feminist movements such as #MeToo can be seen as followers of consciousness raising groups, with the difference that now the personal experience is not shared only among peers but made public.

Another technique of feminist pedagogy that shares some features with consciousness raising is memory work. While consciousness raising had its roots in the New York of the 1960s, memory work is a method invented by a German sociologist and philosopher, Frigga Haug, in the 1980s. Memory work, which is likewise practised in a group, involves writing about specific memories followed by reciprocal commenting on them. The idea is to question the boundary between subject and object of research: the group is a group of co-researchers. The task is to learn about social structures through the memories of individual women (Haug et al. 1987; Onyx and Small 2001).

The concerns of feminism have broadened to cover the issues of different marginalised groups, including sexual, gender and ethnic minorities, as well as women of colour. The introduction of the term "intersectionality" in the late 1980s by Kimberlé Crenshaw was particularly important to the development of feminist pedagogy, for it facilitated the understanding that the marginalisations of different groups can affect each other, and, in particular, how one person may be marginalised in a number of ways (see also Hill Collins 2009, 15, 138–145). This implies that in a classroom, lecturers should develop their sensitivities towards minority students and find practices that allow an atmosphere of trust to develop and different viewpoints to become expressed (e.g. Caporale-Bizzini and Richter Malabotta (eds) 2009). The theory of intersectionality has gradually gained a more and more prominent position in feminist pedagogy, and, despite some criticisms, it remains central. In this book, questions related to intersecting marginalisations are discussed primarily in Chap. 4.

Initiatives have been taken to engage meditative and body awareness practices such as mindfulness in learning, and attention has been paid also to how space and the way it is used contribute to the learning situation and issues of hierarchy in the classroom (e.g. Asher 2003; Thompson 2017; Schalk et al. 2017). One of the most recent influences comes from posthumanism, which has led theorists of education to

¹ The term "intersectionality" was coined already in 1989, but it was only with third-wave feminism that it achieved its status. Kathryn T. Gines has traced the earliest expressions of proto-theories of intersectionality to the 1830s, in, for instance, Maria Stewart's pamphlet (1831) and Anna Julia Cooper's collection of speeches (1892), in which she discusses the particular position of Black women as outsiders to the debates on both gender and race (Gines 2011, 276).

consider the relevance of non-human agents for learning processes (e.g. Radomska 2013; see also Jokinen and Rautio 2016). Both body awareness practices and the relationship to non-human nature in learning philosophy are discussed in Chap. 4, in the context of the summer school held in Reykjavík.

To be sure, feminist pedagogy has not developed separately from other pedagogical trends. In fact, quite a few of its methods are used outside feminist pedagogy, which is understandable in the light of the current popularity of the student-centred approach. For instance, memory work is also used in social pedagogy.

Another issue that has become topical in the context of feminist pedagogy is trigger or content warnings, which were originally used by bloggers to flag content about sexual violence. The aim is not to warn everybody about all potentially challenging content but to take traumatised audience members into account. For them, presumably, facing such a topic might cause physical symptoms, in which case it could be helpful for them to prepare themselves, or to have the choice to leave the room before the situation gets too difficult to bear. It has been suggested that content warnings function as a code, signalling that traumatised individuals are taken into account.

It remains unclear, however, what the right policy would be from the point of view of students. Some researchers argue against the beneficial effect of trigger warnings on students (e.g. Sanson et al., 2019).² For now, many lecturers use trigger warnings by choice, and in the United States many universities demand that their faculty use trigger warnings so as to avoid lawsuits. In philosophy, a wide variety of subfields are unlikely to deal with emotionally distressful content, but others handle topics such as torture and sexual violence that require the lecturer to adopt a policy regarding trigger warnings. It is good to keep in mind that there are other ways to create a safe and open atmosphere in the classroom, such as a discussion of ethical concerns in the beginning of a course.

How does inclusive teaching of philosophy then relate to the broader context of feminist pedagogy? Surely there is no one correct way of teaching philosophy any more than there is one correct way of teaching anything else, for the "right" methods of teaching tend to depend at least partly on the personalities of individual lecturers. This said, it is clear that feminist pedagogy can at the very least sensitise the teaching staff to the question of the other: how do I as a lecturer relate to the other that is different from myself in terms of gender identity, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, social class, able-bodiedness, and so on? Is it my task to teach the students to conform to a tacit norm or to provide possibilities for the diversity of students to learn as themselves? This is a theme particularly prominent in bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress*. One of hooks's concerns is how Black students have to adapt to the White norm in mixed schools, whereas in Black schools they are allowed a history of their own, a learning environment that supports them in their

² Megan Sanson et al. (2019) are concerned that the widespread adoption of trigger warnings may further increase anxiousness in students. It is argued that if trigger warnings encourage avoidance behaviour in people with symptoms of PTSD, they are actually harmful in the long run. Benjamin W. Bellet et al. (2018) likewise suggest that trigger warnings increase anxiety towards allegedly harmful written material and that they reinforce the idea of trauma survivors as vulnerable.

particular situatedness. Without advocating gender separatism in philosophy, I will be discussing the needed strategies to allow women and other minorities find their roots and understand their specific situation within philosophy, rather than giving into feelings of alienation and rootlessness.

Another thing that feminist pedagogy draws attention to are the power struggles, power structures and hierarchies in the classroom. As I demonstrate in Chap. 5, these struggles are constantly present and observable. To be sure, many of the methods and exercises of feminist pedagogy can be imaginatively applied to the teaching of philosophy. Yet it is good to acknowledge that in disciplines that focus on power relations, such as gender studies, or education itself, it may be easier than in philosophy to motivate the spending of a considerable amount of time on reflection of the learning process, or exercises such as the privilege walk, or listening, dancing, improvisation, voice and sound work. In Chap. 4, however, I discuss ways to integrate such exercises in the philosophy class, suggesting that they can be applied fruitfully when the topic of the course supports their use.

Even if the demands of philosophical discourse can at times appear intimidating, for many students the philosophy class is also a kind of safe space, in which to concentrate on intellectual work and thinking together. Conversely, exercises that aim to empower students by engaging their emotions or call for sharing sometimes painful experiences have their own challenges. For this reason, if an experimental approach is taken, it is a good idea to inform the students before the course starts, and to specify the methods clearly in the course description and introduction. This gives the students time to prepare themselves, or to opt out. It is even better if, during the course, students can from time to time choose what type of approach is taken in the class. Even here, however, it should be acknowledged that a group decision can have alienating elements within it: now the dissenting individual feels alienated from the rest of the group rather than from the educational setting dictated from above. In other words, even if feminist and critical pedagogies offer a lot of tools for undoing power hierarchies and for involving the whole body-subject, they cannot entirely eliminate the feelings of not-belonging.

³ In the beginning of the privilege walk the participants stand in a row, and then, depending on their experiences and following the facilitator's instructions, take steps forward or backward. For instance: "If you are white, take a step forward." The idea is to concretise the way privileges work in life, giving you a head start in comparison to the less privileged. The problem is, of course, that the participants can find themselves in a vulnerable position, sharing a lot of information about themselves with people they may not know very well. For an explanation and critique of the privilege walk, see Meg Bolger's "Why I Don't Facilitate Privilege Walks Anymore and What I Do Instead" (2018). https://medium.com/@MegB/why-i-dont-won-t-facilitate-privilege-walks-any more-and-what-i-do-instead-380c95490e10at. Accessed 4 April 2022.

2.2 Gender and Philosophy Summer Schools

The Gender and Philosophy project organised four experimental summer schools on feminist philosophy. The summer schools were held in four Nordic countries—Iceland, Finland, Denmark and Norway—in the summers of 2016 and 2017. The idea was to experiment with inclusive pedagogies that would be particularly suitable for teaching philosophy. Students were recruited especially in the involved four universities: University of Iceland, University of Jyväskylä, Aalborg University and University of Oslo. Yet some students came from other universities and countries, mainly from Europe and North America, finding information about applying to the summer schools through the diverse networks of the organisers.

The summer schools were all rather different, starting from the number of participating students: the summer schools in Reykjavík, Jyväskylä, Oslo and Aalborg had respectively thirty, forty-one, twenty and twenty-four participants. All four summer schools had a clear female majority: women made up 79% of all the students. The students were expected to have a good background in philosophy. Most of them were master's students, but doctoral students were included. Some of the students attended several of the summer schools.

The order the summer schools are presented in this volume corresponds with the order they were organised in, with the exception of the Icelandic summer school, which was the first one we organised but is presented here second. All in all, the summer schools took quite different pedagogical approaches. The Reykjavík Summer School experimented with body awareness practices, whereas the Finnish summer school integrated the history of feminist thought into the discussion of the history of philosophy. The Danish summer school aimed to provide the students with a clear method, project-oriented—problem-based learning (PO-PBL), as the framework that allows them to work independently and to create their own research questions. The Oslo Summer School addressed the question of inclusion from the perspective of care ethics, taking the different learning styles of students into account by making a variety of learning methods available.

In other words, the summer schools explored the learning and teaching of philosophy each in their own way, pedagogically addressing the questions central to feminist philosophy such as the mind-body split, power hierarchies, the absence of women in the philosophical canon, and the dichotomy between reason and emotions. The summer schools are discussed in more detail at the end of the next three chapters. Before we consider the different aspects of students' situation in these chapters, however, and to better understand the question of inclusion and exclusion, it is necessary to examine the very concepts of "situation" and "alienation" as they are discussed in the history of philosophy.

⁴ The website of the project can be found here: https://genderandphilosophy.weebly.com. Accessed 4 April 2022.

2.3 Concepts of "Situation" and "Alienation"

In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Jean-Paul Sartre discusses the concept of situation at length, arguing that freedom only exists in a factual situation that includes one's past, one's spatial place, environment and mortality (2003, 503–573). Beauvoir elaborates on the concept of situation to describe the embodied existence of girls and women in *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir 2008; 2010; see also Beauvoir 1960, 562–563; 1984, 548–549; and Kruks 1998, 51; Ruonakoski 2015, 47–48; 2017, 336–342). According to her, it is within a social, cultural, historical, economical, psychological and bodily situation that a child grows into a woman, a man or a person whose identity does not easily fit into these categories, and embraces or rejects "feminine" or "masculine" attributes and modes of behaviour (Beauvoir 2008; 2010).

For many feminist readers the idea of situatedness may first bring to mind stand-point theory, represented by Nancy Hartsock's and Sandra Harding's work. In stand-point theory situatedness is understood first and foremost as epistemological: marginalised groups are thought to be socially situated in such a manner that they have a more realistic view of the power dynamics than others. In the phenomenological—existentialist tradition, situation is understood in reference to the totality of existence; yet it would be artificial to separate these two views of situation sharply from each other. Both Beauvoir's and Hartsock's philosophies are influenced by G. W. F. Hegel's philosophy and include ideas that bear a resemblance to W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness. The concept refers to the consciousness of oppressed subjects—in Du Bois's case Black people—who must be able to observe themselves not only from their own perspective but also from the perspective of their oppressors (see e.g. Du Bois 1964). Hartsock refers to this idea in her discussion of the epistemically privileged vantage point of women in patriarchy (Hartsock 1998, 27, 243).

According to Margaret Simons, Du Bois's racial theory and his concept of double consciousness influenced Beauvoir indirectly through the work of Richard Wright (Simons 1999, 176). This parallel would be visible in her analysis of woman as the secondary and inessential subject, who can become an accomplice in her own subjection, when she accepts man's perspective to her as the primary one (Simons 1999, 176–178). All in all, double consciousness can be seen as a form of alienation, for it presupposes an unwanted distance to oneself, which is mediated through the other's gaze.

⁵ Du Bois writes: "After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." (Du Bois 1964, 16–17.).

⁶ For the connection between Sartre, Beauvoir and Wright, see also Gines 2010.

Yet my use of the concept of alienation is informed by a wider array of philosophical perspectives. The term is, of course, quite loaded, due to the fact that it has been used in numerous ways in the histories of philosophy, sociology and psychology. One of the divisive issues has been whether alienation should be viewed as a universal human condition or as a historically, socially and psychologically defined state. Even in the works of Hegel, whose discussion on alienation (Entfremdung, Entäusserung) had an impact on later generations of philosophers, one can allegedly find two conceptions of the generalisability of the concept. In his earlier writings, Hegel relates alienation to a specific historical moment (his own time and its practice of Christianity),⁷ but later he reformulated his theory suggesting that alienation was an integral part of human existence and happens through work. In other words, in their work human beings create objects that express human life, but as human beings themselves change in the process of work, at some point the objects of their work no longer coincide with their purposes, and they cease to recognise the object world as brought into existence by themselves. Karl Marx, instead, argued that alienation is created by the capitalist production system, in which workers cannot identify with the product of their work. (See e.g. Gouldner 1980, 177–181; Lukács 1975, 19; Taylor 1980, 23–41.) Later thinkers, such as Sartre, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, embraced the idea of alienation as a permanent state of human existence: the self is split, unable to reach the wholeness which it nonetheless seeks.8

According to my hypothesis, women in philosophy are susceptible to experiencing a specific form of social alienation, which has been described as "a sense of incongruence" and "dissonance" by feminist critics (Allen et al. 2008, 164, 177, 185; Dotson 2012, 13–14). This alienation cannot be reduced to the inevitable alienation from the self, nor is it likely that it would be entirely tied to the economic system, considering that women have occupied a marginal position in philosophy ever since the days of Ancient Greece. With its ideology of constant competition and aspiration to produce more "results" with fewer resources, the recent educational politics has definitely made academic work increasingly precarious. Even so, it adds just an extra layer to the aforementioned sense of incongruence.

It is important to acknowledge that this alienation is not total. Philosophy as an art of thinking and as a possibility to ask fundamental questions is not what women students of philosophy and professional philosophers appear to feel alienated from. Should we then assume, following Hegel's second scenario, that philosophy *as a profession with specific social structures*—as distinct from to philosophy as radical

⁷ At that point Hegel argued that in comparison to the religious life of Ancient Greece, the Christian religion of his time represented an empty and alienated cultural form, which its practitioners follow under pressure, without a free engagement that would make the religion living (see Taylor 180, 23–41).

⁸ According Lacan, self-alienation is a necessary state for every human being, one that cannot be avoided: in its initial attempt to find its unity in the other, the self is fundamentally split. Sartre likewise argued that there is something profoundly dislocated in human existence, a fundamental gap between one's attempt to achieve a fixed identity and one's inability to stop the movement of transcendence. Finally, the same view of alienation as the permanent state of the human being can be found at the core of Derrida's philosophy (see Skempton 2010).

questioning and an art of thinking—has evolved past the phase in which it was the expression of the lives of its practitioners, and has become a hollow form which they no longer identify with? The problem is, of course, that the form may appear hollower to some than to others. Despite the fact that some women students and professional women philosophers adjust to the discipline without a problem, it may, indeed, be more typical of women than of men to seriously question the practices and limits of philosophy itself, for women were never the ones who primarily created those practices and limits. This imbalance is at the very core of the questions posed in this book.

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