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**RETHINKING THE MORAL SIGNIFICANCE
OF MICRO-INEQUITIES: THE CASE OF
WOMEN IN PHILOSOPHY**

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RETHINKING THE MORAL SIGNIFICANCE OF MICRO-INEQUITIES:

THE CASE OF WOMEN IN PHILOSOPHY* - SAMANTHA BRENNAN

Women in Philosophy: What Needs to Change?, Fiona Jenkins and Katrina Hutchison (editors), Oxford University Press, forthcoming

Micro-inequities are small, unjust inequalities often pointed to as part of the larger story about the unequal place of women in the workforce. This paper sets out to examine micro-inequities in the context of women's careers in the academic discipline of philosophy. It also offers a philosophical analysis of micro-inequities, looks at some explanations about why moral philosophy has struggled with the problem of small harms, and argues that we need to rethink their moral significance. I argue that we should not treat acts and their results only on an individual basis. The existence of micro-inequities highlights a significant problem with doing so as cumulative effects are easily ignored when we do this. A final section offers some suggestions about solutions appropriate to the kind of wrongs that micro-inequities are.

The Context: Women in Philosophy in Canada

Looking at the situation of women in philosophy, it is helpful to begin with some numbers. (For a more complete picture in terms of numbers please see Bishop et al.,

this volume.) The situation of women in philosophy is much closer to that of women in the sciences than that found in any other arts and humanities discipline. In Canada, outside of the STEM fields—Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics—only theology fares worse than philosophy in terms of numbers of women. At the top fifty-four US research/doctoral schools the percentage of women on faculty according to the Philosophical Gourmet Report is a mere 18.49%. Things are better at less elite schools and better as well in Canada. The Canadian Philosophical Association's most recent equity survey puts the numbers at about 30% but not all schools report data. While we do not know this, we might reasonably worry that the schools reporting data are better than average in terms of equity. Those are the departments that think it is important to fill in and return the form. I have not included here data about women moving through the ranks but the pattern is much as one might expect. Women typically take longer to tenure and move more slowly from associate to full professor, if they do so at all. A further worry is that women retire earlier than their male colleagues and so spend much less time at the academy's highest ranks. These numbers affect such further honours such as the numbers of women who are fellows of the Royal Society of Canada or who are become Tier I Canada Research Chairs.

However, one important difference between the American and Canadian contexts is the degree to which equity goals have found widespread support among Canadian philosophy departments and among Canadian universities more generally. While there

are of course individual faculty members who disagree¹ at the university and government level there is significant support for the goal of equity in hiring. The Canadian Government's Federal Contractors' Program requires provincially-regulated employers with a hundred or more employees bidding on federal contracts of \$200,000 or more to certify that they will implement employment equity measures. Created in 1986, the FCP applies to universities and so Canadian universities are required to take steps to increase the representation of four specified groups in the workforce: women, visible minorities, aboriginal peoples, and people with disabilities. A 1991 Report of the Canadian Philosophical Association Equity Committee (philosophers Kathleen Okruhlik, Lorraine Code, Wayne Sumner, and Brenda Baker were among its members) made the following recommendations which were passed by the CPA membership at its Annual General Meeting:

- (1) By the year 2000 at least twenty seven percent of permanent or probationary faculty in any unit should be female, and by the year 2010 at least forty percent should be female.
- (2) In any decade in any department, at least fifty percent of new permanent or probationary positions should be filled by women.

¹ See, for example, the philosopher Andrew Irvine's May 27, 2010 editorial in the Ottawa Citizen which claims that discrimination against men is the real problem in philosophy.

(3) The first goal takes precedence over the second. (So, for example, if achieving twenty seven percent female faculty by 2000 requires a hiring rate for women that is higher than fifty percent, the higher rate should be implemented.)

Now, nearly twenty years later, it is obvious that Canadian philosophy departments have fallen far short of these goals. So why in the face of good will and political commitment have philosophers failed to meet goals to which we have collectively committed?

There are a number of different pieces to this puzzle. Many people think we need to find factors that make philosophy as an academic career special. But many of these roads lead to dead ends, if one thinks that these explanations will tell the complete story on their own. Some people focus on general worries about academic career paths and the extent to which typical male lifestyles and patterns are taken as normative. For example, the typical academic career path with very heavy workload expectations pre-tenure does not fit very well with the pattern of women's lives in which those same years are also often the only years available for child bearing and raising. But while this is true and is no doubt an issue, it's not unique to academic careers. Doctors and lawyers face similar challenges in terms of life stages which coincide with exceptional work demands and the number of women in these fields continues to climb. At many medical and law schools, women outnumber the men and it is women's life patterns which drive recent trends in career paths for doctors

and lawyers. Likewise, whatever is going wrong in philosophy, the explanation cannot come from the academy in general because the numbers of women in certain academic fields is on the rise. Within the sciences, biology is the obvious example of a field with growing numbers of women. Some feminist philosophers focus on the content of our discipline—the study of the writings of dead white men—and wonder whether that affects the numbers of women. But here too we are not alone. Classical studies, English, and history struggle with masculine canonical texts as well and those disciplines are rather more balanced in terms of gender.

Other explanations of the gender gap in philosophy focus on the hostility of our working environment, looking at some clear examples of outright discrimination and sexual harassment. While I do not doubt these situations exist—indeed I know firsthand that they do—such infringements of women’s basic rights to a safe and non-discriminatory workplace will not be the focus of my paper. It is not because they are not serious. They are very serious. But the wrongness itself and its source is not puzzling from the viewpoint of ethical theory. Usually such acts involve bad intentions, are against justified moral rules, and have bad results. On most moral theories they will come out to be wrong and their wrongness is over-determined. I am much more interested in the question of why people who are committed to doing the right thing end up failing.²

² It is the same reason why, out of all the books on just distribution of work in home, my favorite is Rhona Mahony’s *Kidding Ourselves: Breadwinning, Babies, and Bargaining Power*. Mahoney attempts to answer the

The most compelling explanations of the situation of women which do not focus on intentional wrongdoing such as harassment and deliberate discrimination look to the twin causes of implicit bias and micro-inequities. Sally Haslanger's well-known paper "Changing the Ideology and Culture of Philosophy: Not by Reason (Alone)" examines both of these explanations but focuses mainly on implicit bias (Haslanger 2008). Alison Wylie's equally excellent "What Knowers Know Well: Women, Work and the Academy" looks at micro-inequities from the perspective of feminist standpoint theory and is a wonderful contribution to work in feminist epistemology of social change (Wylie 2011).

The Barnard Report on Women, Work, and the Academy, citing a 1999 MIT report, describes these twin causes of women's inequality in the academy in these terms:

"The first is that biases operating below the threshold of deliberate consciousness, biases in interaction that are unrecognized and unintended, can systematically put women and minorities at a disadvantage. Second, although individual instances of these 'micro-inequities' may seem trivial, their cumulative effects can account for large-scale differences in outcome; those who benefit from greater opportunity and a reinforcing environment find their advantages

question of why men and women who set out with egalitarian commitments end up with an inegalitarian distribution of housework and childcare responsibilities (Mahony 1995).

compounded, while deficits of support and recognition ramify for those who are comparatively disadvantaged” (Wylie et al. 2007, 2).

My focus in this paper will be on understanding micro-inequities and their moral importance. To be clear though it is not because I think micro-inequities tell us the whole story of why there are so few women faculty members in philosophy. There are many different factors at play and some of them might not be significant if they were the only such factor. What happens, I think, is that these factors are compounded. So yes, there are real worries about the numbers of women who start off in philosophy in the first place, there are legitimate concerns about the masculine shape of the academy’s career path, there are some serious issues with sexual harassment and gender based discrimination, and it probably does make a difference that our canon is almost entirely composed of white male authors. I also think it’s quite likely that philosophy and other disciplines don’t differ all that much with respect to their micro-inequities (deep seated biases are similar across the professions) but micro-inequities do play a significant compounding causal role and altering them could go some way towards rectifying the imbalance. As such, we should be aware of micro-inequities and act to minimize their effects. I also think that understanding the moral importance of micro-inequities will have other payoffs in moral theory as well.

Understanding Micro-inequities

Why do those who try to do the right thing nevertheless fail? For example, why do Canadian philosophy departments who have endorsed equity goals fail to achieve equity in hiring? I think that micro-inequities are part of the answer. Because of their size micro-inequities are very easily overlooked by both the perpetrator and victim. One reason they are overlooked is because when we do moral philosophy we engage in a kind of individualism about acts and their results that prevents us from seeing cumulative harms. In what follows I look at some examples of micro-inequities, including everyday workplace interactions, and look to their cumulative effects in support of the claim that we should reconsider the moral importance of small inequities.

Micro-inequities, I began this paper by claiming, are small, unjust inequalities often pointed to as part of the larger story about larger scale inequalities such women's unequal place in the workforce. However, one doesn't find anything close to a precise definition of a micro-inequity in the literature on workplace ethics and equity. What exactly is a micro-inequity? People often contrast inequities with mere inequalities, where the former are taken to be unjust inequalities. The latter, inequality, is a neutral term while inequity assumes there is some injustice involved. An inequity is a harm that derives its wrongness from being an undeserved inequality. Micro-inequities are very small inequities. As far as I know there are inequities and micro-inequities. No

one talks about mini-inequities which would be halfway between a full-sized inequity and a micro-inequity. So we'll use micro-inequity for any inequity which falls shy of a counting as a full blown inequity on the basis of its size. The following are some definitions of micro-inequity from the literature on workplace climate:

(1) According to Bernice Sandler, "micro-inequity" refers to the ways in which individuals are "either *singled out*, or *overlooked*, *ignored*, or *otherwise discounted* based on an unchangeable characteristic such as sex, race or age" (Sandler 1986, 3; emphasis in original). A micro-inequity generally takes the form of a gesture, different kind of language, treatment, or even tone of voice. It is suggested that the perceptions that cause the manifestation of micro-inequities are deeply rooted and unconscious. The cumulative effect of micro-inequities can impair a person's performance in the workplace or classroom, damage self-esteem, and may eventually lead to that person's withdrawal from the situation.

(2) Mary Rowe defines micro-inequities as "apparently small events which are often ephemeral and hard-to-prove, events which are covert, often unintentional, frequently unrecognized by the perpetrator, which occur wherever people are perceived to be 'different'" (Rowe 2008, 45). Rowe is the person who first coined the term "micro-inequities." Rowe named one of her articles "Saturn's Rings" because the planet Saturn is surrounded by rings, which obscure the planet, but are made just of tiny bits of ice and sand (Rowe 1974). Rowe writes that her interest in this phenomena began with an incredible opportunity:

“In 1973 I took a job at MIT, working for the then new President and Chancellor. I was charged, among other things, with learning how the workplace could improve with respect to people who were under-represented at MIT—as examples, men and women of color, white women, and people with disabilities. As an economist I had expected to learn about big issues standing in the way of progress” (Rowe 2008, 45).

She writes that she did find a few big issues but not as many as she expected and not enough to account for the scope of the problems. What struck her instead were all of the “little issues.” She writes that little acts of disrespect, and failures in performance feedback, seemed to corrode some professional relationships like bits of sand and ice.

Why do micro-inequities have such wide ranging effects? One part of the story concerns expectations and the feedback pattern between expectation and success. There is a passage from the philosopher/poet Michael Frayn’s work on this subject which I think resonates with these themes. Frayn writes: “It’s not excellence which leads to celebrity, but celebrity which leads to excellence. One makes one’s reputation, and one’s reputation enables one to achieve the conditions in which one can do good work” (Chotiner 2010). In academic contexts this quotation made me thinking about the issue of the philosophy job market and who becomes an academic star. Many people think that because those people so identified as intellectually “hot” do go on to

achieve great things that our ability to spot brilliance is dead on. Some philosophers do act as if they possessed personal “genius detectors” which allow them to judge on the basis of one good question, one brow furrowed just the right way at just the right time or one speedy reply to a tough question that so-and-so is *really smart*. But I often have a thought like the Frayn quotation above: at least in some cases, the hot shots become real hot shots because we expect more of them. We follow their careers, read their papers, and attend their talks with heightened expectations. Of course, they also tend to get the jobs at pressure cooker universities with high research demands, little teaching to get in the way, and a “publish or perish” environment. A colleague once commented that he suspected you could take any of the candidates in top half of the academic job market, plunk them down into that environment, with that amount of attention and expectation and they would go on to achieve great things. Years after we could pat ourselves on the back, say what a good job we have done, and note how well our genius detectors work. Of course, this is speculative and it would be difficult to test but we ought to consider whether and what role expectation plays in success.

There are a variety of micro-inequities at play in the hiring scenario I sketched. Those of us concerned about equity wonder about the epistemic basis of these quick and certain judgments. A member of an appointments committee I sat on once asked us to consider whether the philosophers’ preference for the quick reply could be any more than an aesthetic preference. Doesn’t it matter more how good the reply is, not how fast it comes? Others worry whether those of us socialized to smile our faces off,

to always make others comfortable, can ever really look smart in that deep in thought, furrowed brow kind of way. (Maybe there's a kind of anti-botox that could give you brow wrinkles temporarily, kind of like an appearance enhancing drug for academic job interviews!) The philosopher Sandra Bartky writes about how she battled the tendency, when she started teaching, to think of the graduate seminars she taught as "tea parties" she was hosting in which it was her job to smile, to welcome everyone, and make sure that all of her students got along (Bartky 2002, 14). The University of Western Ontario equity guide for people on hiring committees asks if we can "hear" soft voices, southern accents, lilting speech as "smart." Never mind the tendency to discomfort if the candidate is disabled, outside prevailing norms for gender, or clearly of a non-standard sexual orientation. It may be that the ideal of a serious academic is masculine, and individuals who don't share the traits associated with the masculine professor are unjustly disadvantaged in campus visits.

These effects of differential expectations are also cumulative. Over a period of time the differences become real. Some people call this the Matthew effect from the following biblical passage in the gospel of Matthew, chapter 13, verse 12: "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." In the sociology of science, "Matthew effect" was a term coined by Robert K. Merton to describe how, among other things, eminent scientists will often get more credit than a comparatively unknown researcher, even if their work is similar; it also means that credit will usually

be given to researchers who are already famous (Merton 1968). One sees this especially in the granting of honours and awards. I have a fair bit of experience in this area since I served as chair of my department for eight years and one of the things you do a lot of as department chair is to nominate your colleagues for awards, honours, and grants. Some of the awards are very clearly meant to go in a sort of order. At my university you're a "faculty scholar" before you're a holder of the "Hellmuth prize" and before you're a "Distinguished University Professor." The teaching awards work similarly. It would be hard to jump in late in the game and get the career capping award without having also received any of the lesser awards that go before.

Committee members may lament the lack of qualified female candidates for various awards. I often hear people say, "We'd nominate a woman but she'd never get it. There are no qualified women." There may be a very real sense in which that is true but it is true as a result of decisions made much earlier. Here the parallel with the equal distribution of work in the home is striking. Yes, at the time an opposite sex couple sits down to make the decision as to who stays home to look after very young children and interrupt their career, it may be that the obvious and efficient choice from an economic perspective is that the woman do so. Yet this is only obvious and efficient in light of a whole series of educational and career choices in which the taking time off with children figured into her plan but not his.

The person who thinks women are not suited for a career with a heavy research or administrative load may find his opinions confirmed by the truth of these perceptions

in the case of senior women, and thus find his views about women in general reinforced. If these views then inform his views about junior colleagues, the cycle repeats. I find the same thing to be true in a variety of academic contexts—from teaching awards, to research honours, to appointments to meaningful and important administrative tasks. We might start out not seeing the junior women as qualified and then later we look and there are no senior women who are qualified. There was a point at which I thought it was best to “protect” younger female colleagues from some of the more demanding aspects of academic careers such as academic administrative committees and large class teaching but I now think such protection is mistaken. Later success depends on early success in ways that were not clear to me when I first started to think about women’s careers and choices. It is often the case that the later judgment—“There are no qualified senior women”—is correct even though our earlier judgment made it so.

To see how this sort of vicious cycle can manifest in practice, consider the example of the Canada Research Chairs program. These research awards show micro-inequities can compound as part of a self-confirming process. In the first years of the Canada Research Chairs program, only 22% of Tier II Chairs and 10% of the senior, more prestigious Tier I Chairs went to women. Wendy Robbins, in a February 16, 2010 posting on the FedCan blog “Equity Matters” notes that all of the top Program officials were men, as was 83% of its international panel of peer reviewers. In 2003 a team of eight women from across Canada laid a formal complaint, alleging

discrimination before the Canadian Human Rights Commission. *Cohen et. al. v. Industry Canada* was settled in 2006 by a negotiated agreement. The agreement required adherence to basic fair-employment practices such as advertising vacancies so that the pool of qualified applicants is as large as possible. Yet data still show that women, who are a third of full-time faculty in Canada, continue to be under-represented in CRC appointments.³

In 2008 the government invested \$200 million in the Canada Excellence Research Chairs program which seeks “to attract and retain the world’s most accomplished and promising minds.” Not only were there no women in the final nineteen researchers selected as the first Canada Excellence Research Chairs, there were none in the short list of thirty-six proposals either. Now, some better news: the government asked three leading female academics to probe what happened. Likely the government is acting both from a concern for justice and the cause of fairness for women researchers, and the wish to avoid another human-rights challenge of the Canada Research Chair program. The report’s authors—University of Alberta president Indira Samarasekera, Elizabeth Dowdeswell, head of the Council of Canadian Academies, and granting council head Suzanne Fortier—made recommendations to improve female participation. These include introducing a “rising stars” category, as well as one as for “established leaders,” a move that would change the aim of a program billed as a

³ . Although the percentage has slowly risen, reaching 25% in 2009, this represents only 17% of Tier I and 31% of Tier II Chairs. No data are reported for other equity groups—Aboriginal peoples, racialized minorities, and persons with disabilities—despite their inclusion in the settlement agreement.

magnet for top talent. They also recommend broadening the areas of the search and introducing an “open” category. Limited time was also a factor, they say. With very short deadlines, the old boys’ network was more likely to play a role in who was considered. They also recommend a shorter list of nominees as women may be reluctant to take part in a nomination process in which the odds of success are around 50%. Obviously, a number of factors resulted in the very low numbers of women but the point I am trying to make is these factors don’t work independently. If at each step along the way—from beginning an academic career to arriving at the career stage of senior researcher—one encounters micro-inequities, there may be very few women in the research chair applicant pool. Further, when we compound these micro-inequities with the micro-inequities in the CRC process itself, one can see how the result isn’t shocking or surprising. Rather, given micro-inequities and the ways in which they compound, one should expect these results.

Over time, these processes affect the candidates themselves. Judgments about performance can erode the self-confidence and self-esteem of women academics. What was initially perceived as a slight may just become business as usual, the norm. Women may come to see themselves as not deserving of the top awards or honours. People suffering the effects of micro-inequities may also experience themselves as shut out from others in their workplace. Writes Rowe: “Micro-inequities exert influence both by walling out the ‘different’ person, and by making the person of difference less effective” (Rowe 1990, 156). In other words, micro-inequities can lead

to poor performance—when we have low expectations of those we work with, those people have a tendency to deliver what is expected of them. “It’s a downward spiral; the more I behave in ways that devalue you, the less confident you feel. The less confident you feel, the less you’ll risk confronting issues or contributing innovative ideas. And the less you contribute, the less I’ll value you” (Moynahan 2009, 2).

A common response to micro-inequities is to give alternative interpretations or explanations of the event. We might also wonder why the person is so sensitive. Or we might deny that the event in question is so significant. The blogger known as “Female Science Professor,” in the September 7, 2009 entry on her blog “Musings of a Science Professor at a Large Research University,” writes that “Every time [she posts] an anecdote about a possible situation in which [she] may or may not have been treated in a way that could perhaps be described at least in part as sexist” she receives these responses and is then accused of man-hating. She describes her examples of mistreatment as mostly falling under the category of micro-inequities:

“There is a complete spectrum between the mini-incidents and the big unambiguous ones that most people would agree are sexist or racist. Clearly we need to eradicate the big unambiguous examples of discrimination, but are some (most?) people willing to accept micro-inequities because the incidents are, in many cases, so ambiguous? Where do you draw the line between deciding that someone is oversensitive vs. the target of habitual disrespect?”

One thing we might wonder is how micro-inequities are related to the problem of implicit bias. Recall that the Barnard Report cited at the start of this chapter referred to micro-inequities and implicit bias as the twin causes of women's inequality. These categories will often overlap though they need not. Not every micro-inequity will be the result of implicit bias and not all cases of implicit bias will result in micro-inequities. The inequalities that result from bias might be large and substantial. Likewise, a micro-inequity could stem from intentional discrimination or implicit bias. For example, a lecturer who repeatedly passes over female students' contributions could be aware of doing so and intend to because of a conviction that the contributions will not be valuable, or could be entirely unaware of doing so. In either case, each time a female student is not called on is a micro-inequity. If it turns out that some rather large differences in terms of women's participation in the discipline of philosophy can be explained as the accumulated effects of many, many actions with small results, most of which were unintentional harms stemming from implicit bias, then we ought to pay more attention to micro-inequities both in terms of understanding them as a moral phenomena and in terms of practical solutions.

Paying Attention To Small Harms As A Problem In Moral Philosophy

The problem of small harms is not new. Indeed, moral and political philosophers have worried about small harms and the tendency of moral theories to overlook them. Our moral frameworks—whether consequentialist or deontologist in nature—tend not to see small harms. When we see the moral world through these frameworks, small harms do not appear, though for very different reasons.

Let's consider deontological ethics first. Many rights theorists have difficulties with rights against small harms because of a commitment to absolute rights. Charles Fried is a champion of absolute deontology (Fried 1978). He articulates and defends the view that all rights are absolute. And on Fried's view, there can be no right not to be pinched. Being pinched is never an injustice. That's because such a right would protect a very small harm and since all rights are absolute there would be an absolute right not to be pinched. Clearly, that's absurd, writes Fried. Things like being pinched fly under the radar of the language of moral rights. Now we might reject Fried's particular view about where the right not be harmed kicks in but for each rights theorist there will be some point at which harms become large enough to be appropriately protected by a moral right. (There are also issues regarding rights against risk of harm that are relevant but I set these aside for now.) In an academic context, it may well be that we all have an equal right to respect from our colleagues. Swearing at someone or physically touching them in an aggressive way will count as a violation of the right to equal respect. But what about something whose effects are smaller and

harder to measure? How long I hold eye contact with someone when speaking is a form of acknowledgement and it may be that I treat men and women differently in this regard. Indeed, it's quite likely that I do. If I cut off someone's gaze prematurely, have I harmed that person? It may be a form of disrespect but it will difficult to say that I have a right to equal eye contact.

While rights theorists are deontologists who focus on act type in determining wrongness (whether B's rights violated, for example) other versions of deontological ethics focus on intention instead. But here too there are some rather obvious problems. In most cases involving implicit bias, the moral agent whose actions bring about the harm won't have intended it. At best there is a duty to try to fix such mistakes in our thinking but it's still up for debate which methods are most successful. Again, to consider an example from my own experience in academia, it's quite likely that I call on male students to speak more often than I call on female students. Apparently, it's something we all do. These sorts of mistakes, like the bias demonstrated in various CV evaluation studies, are not limited to men. And yet it seems unlikely that I intend to harm my female students in any way. Again, if intention is our focus, then it seems we may miss out on micro-inequities.

One might think that small harms would fare better in a consequentialist analysis. After all, consequentialist moral philosophers are concerned with outcomes and the overall good. Small harms and small benefits are part of the overall results. But consequentialists too have tended to ignore very small harms. I can have my interests

set back, or have some very small negative experience, but if it is too small to register for me then some consequentialists want to say that I haven't been harmed. To insist otherwise is to move to an objective standard of well-being. On this way of thinking, harms have natural boundaries and very small harms may be too small to register and hence cannot count in determining the good overall.

Derek Parfit draws out attention to this mistake in his book *Reasons and Persons* (see Chapter Three, "Five Mistakes in Moral Mathematics," in Parfit 1984). Parfit considers a series of mistakes in moral mathematics including at least one that is relevant to our purposes. The fourth mistake is ignoring small or imperceptible effects. Even if imperceptible, bad effects with sufficient extent or repetition can be very terrible indeed. Parfit's examples concern environmental issues such as overfishing and pollution, but his lesson can be just as important for small injuries and insults that are part and parcel of academic life for some people. If we view each act individually we might miss out on the aggregative effects and on the patterns that are relevant to understanding bias and discrimination.

Another useful resource in this regard is Andrew Kernohan's analysis of cumulative harms in his book *Liberty, Equality, and Cultural Oppression* (Kernohan 1998).

Kernohan's main interest is in Mill's harm principle as a justification for liberty restricting legislation and his main target, like Parfit, is environmental harm. He's interested in what happens when individuals commit acts that would not be harmful were each act the only one of its kind, but considered together they produce harmful

effects. Each act itself would not pass the harm test but if we consider the set of acts together we see that they produce cumulative harms. This doesn't quite match our problem but the concept of cumulative harm is useful. In our case we can think of the harm as being to an individual. The first few micro-inequities may not have a huge effect but over time, like drops of water on stone, a person's interests can be set back significantly.

We can thank Parfit and Kernohan for drawing our attention to this error common in contemporary ethics but there is another mistake at play here as well. Some feminist critics of moral philosophy typically fault contemporary moral theory for its individualism, focusing on persons as separate, autonomous, and not connected to one another in meaningful ways. But I have argued there is a more pernicious kind of individualism that can be found in contemporary ethics and it plays a role in contributing to our inattention to small harms such as micro-inequities. This kind of individualism applies to acts and their results. Consider the case of a very small slight or benefit, something so trivial that on its own it merits no particular moral attention. Frances Kamm, for example, argues that if we are choosing between turning a trolley down a track that has one person who will be killed on one side and one person and some flowers on the other, that the flowers can make no moral difference (Kamm 1996, 158). Morally speaking, we are faced with a tie. Likewise for small harms. I have a medicine that can cure one person of cancer and fix his hangnail or cure one other person who doesn't also have a hangnail; here again I'm faced with a tie. Flowers and

hangnails are too small to make a moral difference. But surely it makes a difference if the benefits and burdens, no matter how small, are distributed such that some people get a great many small benefits and others get a great many small burdens. We may allow benefits and burdens to sum within a person's life even in if they are too small to make a moral difference considered across persons (Brennan 2006, 259-261).

My position is that the question of whether some benefits and burdens are so small that they don't count morally cannot be answered outside of the context in which they occur and that we lose sight of morally important factors if we push all of the time to see wrongness in its smallest possible units. It is an important theoretical question how micro-inequities relate to the larger wrongs of which they are part. We might ask the following questions: Is it the case that the micro-inequities are not morally objectionable taken in isolation but they cumulatively cause the morally objectionable inequality? Alternately, one might think that each micro-inequity which forms a large scale unjust inequality is also wrong and the wrongness of the larger inequality is composed entirely of the sum of the wrongness of its parts. In the middle, one might think that the micro-inequities are each a little bit wrong but the wrongness of the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

But while this question is important I worry that focusing too much on it may cause us to lose sight of the forest for the trees. My own answer is that sometimes the individual micro-inequities will be wrong, even though we may not be in a position to blame anyone. Other micro-inequities may be neither wrong nor blameworthy. Some

might worry that not addressing the wrongness of the individual micro-inequities may seem to be letting people off the hook too easily, but it does allow us to shift our focus to collective solutions to the problem. As a group we have responsibilities for the outcome and group-based solutions are likely to be much more effective than individual ones. Finally, some may worry that the focus on micro-inequities lets us all off the hook for the large scale culpable wrongs that do occur in the academy. There are also important questions about why we have the implicit biases that we do. Aren't we as a society responsible for our sexist, racist, homophobic and ableist beliefs even if they are implicit in our thinking? My answer here is that there are questions both larger (societal beliefs that inform implicit bias) and smaller (individual responsibility), but that the most practical place to address the issues is that the level of the group in which we find ourselves, at the department and university level.⁴

What Should We Do To Help?

An obvious first step is to take micro-inequities more seriously. I mean this both as moral theorists and as advocates for equity in the academy. This doesn't mean, as some have assumed, that we need to take steps to outlaw or legislate against micro-

⁴ Another advantage of these mechanical responses seems to be that while it could be very difficult to hold anyone responsible for e.g. the length of time they hold eye contact with someone, it is much easier to hold someone responsible for failing to adhere to a mechanical policy.

inequities. Even self-regulation doesn't look like it will be particularly effective. Since the whole point is that many such actions occur below the threshold of conscious decision-making, it would be unfair to target individual actions. That said, it's appropriate within the workplace to raise awareness of the problem of micro-inequities but we need to do it in a way that doesn't involve tracing each and every act back to specific individuals.

There are hard and interesting questions here about collective responsibility and workplace climate which I don't have the expertise to address and which fall outside the scope of this chapter. Clearly, however, there are things that groups can do.

First, as a group we can decide to change some environmental factors that might be affecting our decision making. If unconscious bias is more of an issue when we face tight time constraints, then we should do what we can to loosen those constraints. In some cases, but not all, we can remove the information that's causing bias to occur. We should all read students' papers anonymously and grade them without access to names. Some things that help may seem at first to be beneath us as serious scholars. It turns out that environmental factors do make a difference. So, for example, being surrounded by pictures of dead, white, male scholars does influence our decisions. And that's something we can easily fix.

Second, some rather mechanical solutions will turn out to be the right approach, given how it is that the problems occur. For example, my university has a salary anomaly fund to which faculty members can apply (or Deans and Chairs can apply on

their behalf) when they think their salary is anomalously low when compared to faculty members with similar qualifications and achievements. Very often, not surprisingly, women are the beneficiaries of this fund. Some faculty members, with good intentions, lament the existence of this fund arguing that we ought to be able to get things right the first time. Indeed, we might wonder how such inequities come about and try to fix the process which yields unequal salaries. Yet given that the mistake is likely an aggregate of a number of very small mistakes, sometimes the errors will be hard to find. The committee which decides on anomaly fund salary adjustments is not in any better position regarding implicit bias but by the time matters make their way to this committee the mistakes are larger and easier to spot. Let me give one more example of a rather mechanical solution. It's my solution to the problem of calling on men and women equally. Again, rather than carefully examining my own motives and intentions about who I'm calling on or worrying about effects of my actions, I simply alternate genders on a speakers' list. Sometimes I have done this as well when chairing department meetings or when chairing talks as a way of trying to ensure that women's voices are heard.

Third, we can think about small, positive differences we can make. Mary Rowe and others have also studied successful workplaces which see increased participation and involvement by women, and one notable difference is the presence of micro-affirmations. These are the opposite of micro-inequities and are defined similarly.

Writes Rowe:

“Micro-affirmations—apparently small acts which are often ephemeral and hard-to-see, events that are public and private, often unconscious but very effective, which occur wherever people wish to help others to succeed. Micro-affirmations are tiny acts of opening doors to opportunity, gestures of inclusion and caring, and graceful acts of listening. Micro-affirmations lie in the practice of generosity, in consistently giving credit to others—in providing comfort and support when others are in distress, when there has been a failure at the bench, or an idea that did not work out, or a public attack. Micro-affirmations include the myriad details of fair, specific, timely, consistent and clear feedback that help a person build on strength and correct weakness” (Rowe 2008, 46).

Fourth, we can extend the range of characters on whose shoulders moral responsibility falls.¹ Maureen Scully and Mary Rowe suggest that we need to train bystanders in the workplace. She writes that “a bystander could be anyone who sees or otherwise becomes aware of behaviour that appears worthy of comment or action” (Scully and Rowe 2009, 1). In the past, much workplace training has focused mainly on three cohorts: people who do or say something (whether positive or negative) that might merit a response; people who are impacted by what is said or done; and supervisors. There is a fourth cohort that is also important: there may be one or more *bystanders* present, who can influence the workplace climate. Bystanders can highlight

positive acts that might otherwise be invisible or overlooked. They can redirect or de-escalate negative acts that might be problematic. Bystanders might be peers or teammates. They might be subordinate or senior to the person whose comment or behaviour warrants reaction. Training that encourages “active bystanders” takes into account the different power dynamics and contexts that may be involved. Bystander training is designed to help people in all cohorts to note—and to commend—the achievements of their fellow workers. Such commendations often matter a lot to the person concerned and are thought to be useful in encouraging future, socially desirable behaviour.

In conclusion, micro-inequities are not the complete explanation of women’s situation in philosophy but they are part of the problem that we can understand and do something about. At the same time, it is my hope that a better understanding of micro-inequities and their moral significance will be useful for other areas of moral philosophy.

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