

Across the Great Divide: Father and Daughter Philosophers

By **Margaret Betz** - March 25, 2020

Last October, I presented a paper at an Ethics conference focused on African Americans and justice. I was pleased to see an older gentleman in the audience, nodding in agreement. I was even more pleased when he approached me afterwards to congratulate me and offer his thoughts on my paper on “resistance violence,” a term I coined to refer to the violence carried out by historically vulnerable groups. The two of us proceeded to have an extended discussion about Nat Turner’s Rebellion and the murdering of the families of white slave owners; the older gentleman asked me to expand on my use of Miranda Fricker’s epistemic injustice to contextualize violence perpetuated by marginalized groups.

The older man was Professor Emeritus in Philosophy at Villanova University where he specialized in American philosophy for forty-five years. He is also my father, Joe Betz. Most philosophers would take it as a rare occasion to see their family in the audience. They might think of it as a novelty. As the youngest of his four children, I followed my father into pursuing a Ph.D. in philosophy by studying Continental thought at Boston College and Temple University and becoming a philosophy professor at Rutgers University. It has been a source of pride for both of us, an interesting story to friends and colleagues, and a source of wonder for me.

Being the child of an academic meant that I was already in a privileged position; I grew up surrounded by books, befriended his academics colleagues, and was exposed to complex ideas like the nature of reality and truth. When I was five, my father wrote “Appearance” and “Reality” on my crayon drawing of a girl smelling a flower: on the left side of the page, I drew how she looked, and on the right, I drew the same girl smelling the flower but with a scowl on her face to show she was, in reality, a mean person. As a result of these experiences, the college setting always felt like home to me. Unlike many of the first-generation students I currently

teach, my college experience didn't involve familiarizing myself with terms like "office hours" and "300 level course."

*The author,
Margaret
Betz with
her father,
philosopher
Joe Betz*

Yet as I reflect on my path studying philosophy and pursuing a career teaching it, I am able to see ways that my father and I faced different challenges becoming fully employed and gaining the respect of our students. My gender alone has had a tremendous impact. Being a woman in a male-dominated field has made my road more difficult. At a SWIP conference, a male attendant insisted my paper misinterpreted Foucault. Systematically, he made similar comments to many other female presenters as well. While my father and I are both academic philosophers, our experiences, outlooks, and prospects widely diverged in significant ways. Though my father experienced challenges in pursuing his education, he had an easier time becoming a philosophy professor. He lost his father when he was fifteen and faced financial difficulties attending college. He worked multiple jobs while pursuing his Ph.D., teaching night and summer courses to supplement his income. Married with a growing family, my father was hired in 1966 into a tenure track job while writing his dissertation. He had been invited to apply for the job by a former instructor at a school where my father had completed graduate courses earlier. His department had no women professors and the university had not yet admitted women students.

One generation later as I pursued my own degree, much had changed. Campuses were populated with female students and a growing number of female professors. Yet one generation was not enough time to address some of the most significant issues. During my four years of college at Villanova University, roughly half my classmates were women, but I had only five women professors. Motherhood would seem to be one of the reasons fewer women enter the professorate. **Amy Hudock** notes that if everything goes as planned for a woman in the academic world, by around the age of thirty-six she can begin to consider having a child

after she has completed her degree, gotten a job, and reached tenure. Thirty-six is considered “advanced age” in obstetrics, leaving women little time to plan a family.

As a woman entering the academic world, I was constantly made aware of these challenges. I finished my Ph.D. at thirty-one, a time at which my husband and I had agreed to start a family. This agreement was a compromise that allowed me to first complete graduate school—my husband was ready to start our family much earlier. But it meant that pursuing a full-time job would have to wait, a delay extended even further with the arrival of a second child. I remained in the adjunct teaching position that I had occupied as a graduate student. After taking some time off to parent full-time, I returned to adjuncting with a full course load and stayed in that position for ten years. Eventually, I got a full-time non-tenure track teaching position. [Colleen Flaherty](#) reported for *Inside Higher Ed* on a 2016 study by the TIAA Institute examining the changes in diversity in the academic world over the course of twenty years. While the study found diversity had increased, it was primarily among non-tenure track positions. Flaherty reports that while women hold 49% of faculty positions, they hold only 38% of tenured jobs.

These different experiences reflect our different outlooks, which are the subject of feminist theory and, to some extent, philosophy itself. My father implicitly understands the plight of financially disadvantaged students, for instance, and I am more attuned to how gender informs classroom dynamics and the subtle gender dynamics of what constitutes philosophical authority.

In addition, those differences reflect a radically changed state of higher education; reflect issues faced by women in academia; and inform what it means to be a woman in philosophy. In this Women’s History Month, it is useful to reflect on the gendered differences between men and women in academics. In her research on how motherhood affects female academics, [Mary Ann Mason](#) studied university gender demographics, particularly at University of California–Berkeley. She observed across the university that there were three times as many men in tenure-track positions as there were women. Referring to it as “Leaks in the Academic Pipeline for Women,” Mason found that, moving forward after receiving a

Ph.D., women and mothers are less likely to progress through the stages of a tenure-track position. She explains, “A high percentage of mothers slide into the second tier, the part-time adjunct and lecturer corps.” Like Hudock, Mason argues a fundamental underlying issue is that “timing is everything”: the child-bearing years for women coincide with crucially important career-development years.

The situation for women teaching philosophy is just as stark. Some of the best-known women philosophers of the late twentieth century – like Martha Nussbaum, Virginia Held, and Karen Warren – chronicled their experiences developing careers in philosophy in the book, *Singing in the Fire*; consistently, they express doubting themselves and their philosophical acuity. In their report “*Women in Philosophy*,” Eric Schwitzgebel and Carolyn Dicey Jennings cite research showing the proportion of women among full-time philosophy faculty at four-year universities in the U.S. is estimated to have been 9% in 1988 and 13%-17% in 1992. *Kathryn Norlock* updated a report on Women in the Profession to the APA Committee on the Status of Women in 2011. Norlock found that 21% of those employed in U.S. post-secondary education in philosophy are women and that women make up roughly only about 16.6% of full-time faculty. Regarding this reality, *Nicole Hassoun* draws the conclusion that, “Women are better represented as assistant than associate, and associate rather than full professor.” I am the face of these statistics across university positions and in philosophy. Fortunately, universities are becoming more aware of the importance of women’s presence in their philosophy departments.

My philosophical interests – namely, social and political philosophy – overlap with my father’s in significant ways, no doubt related to my upbringing as his child. My father became interested in the ethics of U.S. foreign policy and their effects on the poor, particularly in Central America. My interests similarly have focused on social and political questions about vulnerable people. And while he has experienced students who responded with hostility to him and his teaching, he has been sympathetic to the ways in which my similar experiences were the result of gender dynamics with male students. Perhaps this experience in the classroom is part of the primary way I notice the differences between my and my father’s engagement with philosophy:

representation. As **Charles Mills** argues, the whiteness and maleness of orthodox philosophy means that women have been talked about and black people have all but been ignored. Although it is improving, my own early education in philosophy included only one female professor, and no professors who were people of color. Mills wrote in 1998 of female students in philosophy courses (myself being one of them) experiencing “a systematic denigration of the nature of women,” as Thomas Wartenberg describes it. Mills adds, “There is no mystery, then about why women are likely to feel at least some initial discomfort with classical philosophy.” In my case, it has made me much more attuned to the significance of representation both in the philosophers I teach and the significance of those doing the teaching.

In my conversations with other philosophers, I have found that there are other daughters of philosophers currently in the profession, and it would be interesting to know if their experiences are similar to mine. Sharing our stories of this unique life experience would benefit the philosophical community as a whole as we consider education, parenting, and careers in philosophy. Having philosophy as part of our family tradition has been central to our family life. As I write, my son is completing his first philosophy course as a high school senior. Both my father and I have engaged with him about what he is learning. My father walked over to his bookshelf and handed my son a better translation of Plato (by Raymond Larson) than the one his teacher gave him. I have offered him my perspectives on the philosophers he is reading over our nightly dinners; he was interested to learn, for instance, that there are feminist interpretations of the Allegory of the Cave. My son has expressed interest in taking more philosophy courses once he reaches college. When he does, I see it as my responsibility to keep him engaged with questions about marginalization and representation in the field. His grandfather faced financial difficulties, for instance, but faced a better job market than I did, and embodied the ideal philosopher as a white man. Together, my father and I will engage with my son in these philosophical conversations across the generations.

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