Abstract
Concerns about implicit bias against female academic philosophers have recently led to efforts to make academic philosophy a more inclusive discipline. Prominent examples of such initiatives are the Gendered Conference Campaign, encouraging event organisers to include women amongst invited speakers, and calls to philosophy book editors to include female authors in their collections.

At the same time, initiatives such as the GCC raise worries about tokenism. Many people believe that it is humiliating to accept a position if one has been offered it because of one’s sex. And women often worry that, if there are rules to include them in positions of visibility or prestige, or if significant social pressures towards gender inclusiveness play a role in selection processes, their achievements will be discounted.

Luckily, there is no good reason for these fears. I argue that there are several legitimate grounds – independent from professional merit – for including people in positions of visibility and prestige and that sometimes sex can be such a legitimate reason.

The spectre of tokenism
Many people believe that being a token woman is an awful situation to be and hence to be avoided. They think it is humiliating to accept a position if one has been offered it because of one’s sex. And women often worry that, if there are rules to include them in positions of visibility or prestige – or if significant social pressures towards gender parity play a role in selection processes – their achievements will be discounted.

At the same time, many think that female quotas in politics, business or academia – either as a formal an informal rule – would be a good thing. Generally, female quotas are deemed desirable for increasing women’s visibility, making them feel more included in society and giving them due recognition. The hope is that, in the long run, female quotas will result in more female role-models, and harness women's talent which is otherwise likely to be lost. Yet, the fear of being, or being perceived as, a token woman fuels resistance to quotas. I argue that, luckily, there is no good reason for this fear. If women were invited on the sole ground of their sex, this would indeed pose the threat of humiliation and of undermining women’s achievements. But nobody suggests including
women on the sole ground of their sex; being a woman should be acknowledged as one of the legitimate reasons for including women. Here I argue that in some contexts there are several legitimate grounds – independent from competence – for including people in positions of visibility and prestige and that sometimes sex can be such a legitimate reason. There is nothing wrong with being a token woman – although a lot is wrong with what makes tokenism possible! – and it is important to overcome the ambivalence of those who may be, at some point, a token woman.

I focus on attempts to give more visibility to women in academic philosophy such as the gendered conference campaign (GCC) that encourages conference organisers to bring more women as invited speakers, and campaigns to include more women as invited authors of chapters in edited books. Behind the GCC is the belief that the discipline of philosophy is overly dominated by men, domination both expressed and perpetuated through too many male-only conference and edited volumes. This is deemed to contribute to the stereotype that philosophy is best done by men. In turn, this stereotype undermines the self-confidence of women who aspire to become professional philosophers, or to remain in this exceptionally competitive profession. It also feeds the conscious or unconscious biases against women of the people who decide the fate of those who aspire to become or remain in the profession (Saul, 2012).

Now imagine that you, a woman, are invited to speak in a conference whose organisers openly subscribe to the gendered conference campaign. The mere fact that some people decided to do something about women's inclusion in the profession has of course not changed the profession overnight; you may still be one of the very few women around, whose presence is primarily meant to signal an intention to change things. In less happy cases, the organisers may be motivated by an intention to conform to mounting social expectations of female inclusion; often you cannot be sure whether this is the case. And you may not be taken as seriously as you would should you be a man. In these senses, you are a token woman.

Moreover, you know that in the absence of the GCC you would probably not have been invited. Someone else – most likely a man – would now be speaking in your place. Your sex most likely played a causal role in you being invited and in this sense, too, you are a token woman. Should you feel embarrassed, humiliated or otherwise unhappy with this situation?

At first blush it makes sense to feel uneasy. As with other forms of affirmative action, something like an aspirational female quota in academic conferences and edited
volumes entails that at least some of the women selected to take part as speakers or authors are not selected exclusively on merit, but also based on their sexual characteristics. If speakers are not selected on merit, the usual criticism goes, this is bad both for the quality of the event, and for all the women speakers and authors in general, who have reasons to wonder if their work is really deemed valuable to the profession. This gives you several things to worry about, if you are an invited woman:

i. whether the person who would have been invited in your place, in the absence of affirmative action, was unfairly excluded.
ii. whether the quality of the conference or volume in question is any worse for your presence.
iii. and whether people will think less of your work merely because you are a token woman.

I take it that the last two worries are closely connected: if you think your presence is not detrimental to the quality of the event, you should think that people have no reasons to discount your work merely because you were invited due to the fact that you are a woman.

The 'Levelling the playing-field' argument

One way in which people respond to criticism of female quotas is by formulating:

The levelling the playing-field argument points out that the field of professional philosophy is already biased against women (Haslanger 2008; Anthony 2012). This means that women are less likely to be invited to conferences or edited volumes than a man. Affirmative action to include women is merely trying to level the playing field such that women of equal talent and qualifications are treated on a par with men.

This argument speaks convincingly to part of the first worry above. It shows why the particular people – most likely, men – who would have been invited in the absence of any affirmative action are not treated unfairly: the men thereby excluded had no claim to be included in the first place. But it does not speak to the further worry that, under a purely meritocratic system, different people – perhaps different women – would have been invited in the place of the women invited thanks to affirmative action. There is no guarantee that organisers and editors following, for instance, the GCC, will end up inviting the same women that would have been invited according to purely meritocratic rules, that is the absence of both the GCC and bias against women.

So, even if the levelling the playing-field argument shows that affirmative action is not unfair to the people who miss some invitations because of it, it cannot fully dispel the uneasiness of being a token woman. For all it says, as an invited speaker or author you
may reasonably continue nourishing the doubt that, in a world of ideally organised academic events, you wouldn’t be there. And, as a female professional philosopher, whether you have in fact directly benefited from affirmative action or not, you have reason to worry that people who evaluate your accomplishments will think you were ‘a mere token woman’ in conferences and volumes where your work was presented, and hence refuse to give you credit for your accomplishments.

Another problem with levelling the playing-field argument is that it appeals to an ideal of pure meritocracy, which, if it was a valid and feasible ideal, would probably render ineffective attempts such as the GCC to make philosophy more inclusive towards women.

**Pure meritocracy in academia?**

Is pure meritocracy a truthful representation of how the selection of speakers and authors in philosophy works, or could work, or even should work? To address the empirical claim first, it is doubtful that selection for such academic events operates on the basis of pure meritocracy. People are invited to speak at conferences and participate as authors in edited volumes thanks not only to their expertise, but also to their academic reputation, acquaintance with the organisers, sociability or writing style. Editors typically want to include a variety of viewpoints and sufficient new ideas to make the volume interesting. Conference organisers are also interested in having a friendly group of speakers. All these goals – diversity and novelty of ideas, friendly and relaxed working relationships and good conversation in general – can, under lucky circumstances, serve to advance knowledge. But there is no reason to believe that the group of academics who are capable of advancing these goals in the context of particular conferences and volumes coincide exactly with the group of academics who are the absolute best in that particular sub-field, even if it were possible to decide on the identity of the absolute best. Finally, it is plausible that conference organisers and book editors use, at least occasionally, their decision power in order to invite – and thereby promote – their own academic friends or would-be-friends, current and former students and other people they wish to please for one reason or another.

Literature on meritocracy and female quotas in general stresses that pure merit doesn’t determine the allocation jobs or student places within the academy and even less does it determine job allocations outside it (Phillips 1995, Rivera 2012).

If meritocracy is not the only ground for selecting people, an important reason to doubt the legitimacy of affirmative action in real (as opposed to ideal) world circumstances
is gone. Supporters of initiatives such as the GCC need not worry that the campaign will undermine meritocracy: there is no pure meritocracy in the first place! As a potential token woman, you need not feel bad that your sex played a causal role in your selection: the majority of participants have been selected on multiple grounds, with their competence being only one of the relevant factors. Only rarely is a philosopher truly non-fungible as a conference speaker or author.

The fact that pure meritocracy is not a reality in contemporary academia should take the edge off the worry that one is a token woman. If selection on the basis of sex is unfair then it is a kind of unfairness already present in professional philosophy. As a token woman, you know that your sex has played a role in you receiving the invitation; but this fact is no special threat to the quality of the resulting conference or volume, nor should it feed any reasonable scepticism about the quality of your work. Most likely, other people’s character, sociability, unusual views or relationship with the organisers or editors have played a role in the invitations they have received. Some of them may be the token eccentric or the token humorist. And there is no reason to think that features such as these stand in any closer relationship with academic quality than one’s sex.

Equal opportunities, pure meritocracy, or adulterated meritocracy?

How worried should we be that academics are not being selected purely on basis of merit: what is the role that merit should play in selecting speakers and authors? I outline two plausible takes on the proper role of meritocracy in inviting speakers and authors. The first one rejects meritocracy in favour of equality of opportunity (of some kind), the second legitimises a form of ‘adulterated meritocracy’ in which some characteristics, but not others, are legitimate non-meritocratic reasons for inviting speakers and authors. In both cases, inviting women because they are women seems to be a very good idea, one that should make women pleased to participate qua women, and even qua token women.

Meritocracy is sometimes criticised for its incompatibility with equal opportunity. If people are selected exclusively on merit, then the less talented do not stand any chance. Other selection methods – such as, for instance, a lottery – could ensure equality of opportunity. Rejecting pure meritocracy in favour of an equal opportunity principle is compatible with preserving the scholarly nature of academic events, and with ensuring their high quality – although not always with maximising quality. All one needs to do is to apply the equal opportunity principle to a group of peers, who have already been selected as group participants on merit. In the profession of philosophy and, probably in the
academia in general, it should not be difficult at all to preserve quality while entirely rejecting meritocracy. To become an academic philosopher one has to undergo extensive education including a Ph.D. For many years now there has been a lot more demand than supply of jobs in philosophy, which means that, in order to remain in the profession after the successful defence of their doctoral thesis, philosophers usually have to publish their work in peer-reviewed venues. (You may dispute how good an indication of quality this is but, I take it, if the peer-review is anonymised, this is the best indicator currently available.) An organiser could, for instance, identify philosophers who work on particular issues using easily available, and increasingly large electronic databases and then run a lottery to determine whom to invite.

A straightforward lottery may or may not select some women as participants in each academic event: women constitute a considerably lower proportion of academic philosophers than men. But the lottery may as well secure one or several positions for women speakers or authors; having lotteries with female quotas is an improvement, if the sovereign principle of selection is the promotion of equality of opportunity. If the discipline of philosophy has been biased against women then qualified women had fewer robust opportunities than equally qualified men to enter or remain in the profession. A principle of equal opportunities applied to the more basic level of who enters and remains in the profession would then recommend weighted lotteries as a selection procedure. Moreover, if quotas will make professional philosophy more women friendly they will promote equal opportunities on the long term, by giving women philosophers more equal chances to enter and remain in the academia.

But maybe you are a die-hard defender of selection on merit within the academia who thinks that organisers should to ensure their events are as good as possible, rather than as observant of an equal opportunities principle as possible. In this case, the question is whether you can let pure meritocracy guide your choices. Probably not. For this to be possible, there should exist an objective hierarchy of merit and, moreover, organisers and editors should know it. But this is implausible; the best one can do if one wants to pursue pure meritocracy is to invite the people one judges to be the best of the best. In a globalised world of philosophy, however, the number of existing qualified philosophers (relative to particular topics) is much higher than the number of people whose work individual organisers or editors can be familiar with. Even if you do happen to know a lot of philosophers from the relevant field, chances are that you will find yourself at a loss when trying to decide whom to invite based exclusively on academic merit. What is worse, in all
likelihood reasons unrelated to merit will subconsciously guide the choice; full impartiality is not most people's strength. This risk cannot be completely avoided, but if one acknowledges that criteria other than merit are necessary one can at least consider which such criteria have some legitimacy.

So, even if pure meritocracy was desirable, attempts to implement it might be impossible or too fraught with risk. It then seems legitimate to allow other criteria in addition to merit make the final cut in the selection of speakers and authors. Beyond their immediate academic merit, conferences can contribute to the nurturing of a philosophical community, and a community is particularly important to philosophy – a practice that thrives through dialogue. Individual philosophers who participate in academic events can therefore contribute in more than one way to the goodness of a conference, or volume: through the quality of their work, but also through human qualities such as generosity, humour or friendliness, or through the message of inclusiveness that their mere presence can send if they are members of groups usually excluded from professional philosophy. Supposing that the pursuit of truth is the only aim of philosophers – as a believer in pure meritocracy will have to say – it will take more than mere academic merit to reach this goal best.

By contrast, inviting people because you want to promote them in the hope they will do the same for you seems less legitimate: it is not clear how this would advance the interests of conference participants, or of the members of the profession in general. Accepting a form of adulterated meritocracy, whether as a mere second best or as a fully desirable ideal, does not condone cronyism.

The following thought should be comforting to the token woman: if there was no policy to invite women in the first place, then other, equally merit-independent features of yours would explain, at least in part, why you were invited, and this would be all right.