

"There is presently a call to favor women and blacks in employment and educational opportunities. Is such a practice itself unjustifiably discriminatory?"

American Philosophical Association

Eastern Division Program

December, 1972

Julie C. Van Camp
Department of Philosophy
Temple University
Philadelphia, Pa. 19122

After a long history of complacent acceptance of discrimination against blacks and women in employment and education, it is bitterly ironic that we should now hear cries of righteous indignation over reverse discrimination favoring these long-oppressed groups. Admittedly, "discrimination to end all discrimination" rings ominously of the oft-touted "war to end all wars." But a case has hardly been made out yet showing that the intrinsic disvalue of discrimination outweighs any possible instrumental value that might result from certain forms of discrimination. Further, as I hope to show, the discussion has suffered from a too narrow view of the parties affected by such reverse discrimination.

I assume here, without argument, that well-qualified women and blacks should be accorded at least the same consideration in employment and education as equally well-qualified white males. The question is whether such women and blacks should be accorded preferential treatment. I will by-pass the much more difficult question of whether the case for reverse discrimination is strong enough to support preferential hiring of women and blacks who are less well-qualified than white males (as in the case of hiring a woman with an M.A. over a white male with a Ph.D.).

One frequently heard justification for reverse discrimination is that it constitutes reparation to previously-oppressed groups.

Reparation, however, is more properly justified in contexts in which some fairly well-defined group has intentionally done harm to some other group. But in the long history of discrimination against blacks and women, the culprits are by no means easily identifiable. In the case of women, such factors in the past as the need for population growth and the lack of scientific information on reliable methods of contraception may be more responsible for the current situation of women than any deliberate "plot" by their male "oppressors." And, of course, many educated women have willingly propagated the now frowned-upon stereotypes of a woman's "proper place" in society. Uncle Tom's have also abounded in the black race, even up to the present day, and one could (although I won't) go so far as to place some blame for the current status of blacks on the failure of educated black people of the past to more militantly demand the rights of their people and strive harder to improve the self-image of their race.

My point is simply that the ascription of blame for the long pattern of discrimination against blacks and women is an extremely complex matter which must await vastly more sociological and historical information than we now have. Until such investigations can be carried out and ascriptions of blame justified, a policy of reverse discrimination for the present time must surely be justified on other grounds. Indeed, it is still far from clear that the reparations view could justify reverse discrimination at all.

A more promising line of argument for the justification of reverse discrimination, in education and employment generally, lies in unpacking the vague ideal of "equal opportunity." Surely equal opportunity does not simply mean "opening the door" to the educational and employment arenas and telling oppressed groups that from now on their sex or color doesn't matter--any more than freedom of speech means the right to buy a television network, as aptly stated by Nicholas Johnson. We have recognized the need for special assistance in obtaining adequate housing, medical care, and other basic needs by minority groups in order to help them get to that "gate" of opportunity in the first place. The factors which have kept some groups from being able to help themselves to those opportunities are complex indeed, and it is difficult to know where to place the blame. Clearly some have been due to wrongs committed in previous generations, although some may be due to hereditary factors which we are only beginning to understand. The important point here, however, is that the ideal of "equal opportunity" becomes a meaningless slogan and a cruel hoax if we do not assist people in making use of that opportunity. This line of argument most clearly applies to the provision of special educational programs for disadvantaged groups.

In the particular case of the hiring of college teachers, further arguments, centering on the impact of these hiring policies on the students, weigh heavily in favor of reverse discrimination. We long ago recognized the effectiveness of

various "conditioning" mechanisms in perpetuating the status of various groups. Women are molded into certain roles. They are told again and again that their place is in the home and that they not only should not display too much intelligence if they want to be socially acceptable, but that they could not prove to be as intelligent as men even if they wanted to. Little wonder then that far fewer women than men graduate from college or attempt graduate work. Blacks, of course, have been fed similar sorts of self-fulfilling prophecies. Making good on our ideal of equal opportunity must thus involve breaking down these stereotypes about the capabilities of women and blacks. From this perspective, it becomes clear that the preferential hiring of women and blacks is not a decision that affects only the candidates for those specific jobs. It is, rather, a practice which I see as vital to breaking down the long history of self-perpetuating myths that have served to keep women and blacks "in their place," and is thus a practice which greatly affects college students as well as the job candidates. It is all well and good for us to encourage young women and blacks to use their intelligence and to strive for the careers which they may be capable of and desire. But how much impact can such exhortations have on students when they arrive at college and find that all but a handful of their professors are white males, and that the women on campus are mainly employed as secretaries and the blacks as maintenance men and cafeteria workers? We need, in short, as many qualified blacks and women as we can possibly get now for college teaching to

serve as models for the students and help them to break out of the stereotypes that have been inflicted on them from time immemorial.

A policy of simply ending all discrimination in hiring now would slowly help to break down some of the stereotypes for students, as women and blacks gradually made their way into the field. But the self-fulfilling prophecies inflicted upon women and blacks constitute a vicious circle that can only be effectively broken by bringing as many qualified blacks and women as we can find into college teaching as soon as possible. This line of argument is not, of course, the only one bearing on the question of reverse discrimination, but it is clearly an important consideration that has often been overlooked. As the stereotypes are gradually broken down for our students, the policy of reverse discrimination should naturally be re-evaluated until someday we can move forward to a policy of no discrimination on the basis of color or sex.

A related consideration is the sort of education that is being offered, not just to women and blacks, but to all students. We have, hopefully, gotten over the idea that equality means making people "identical" and have recognized the value of the diverse cultures represented by different groups of people. Blacks have an especially rich culture and have much to offer white society. In the past, the ideal of a well-rounded liberal arts education led us to strive for, among other things, a heterogeneous student body. Doesn't this same ideal extend to providing a heterogeneous faculty to teach those students?

The stumbling block in discussions of reverse discrimination has been a failure to look beyond the limited context of the job applicants themselves, to the broader question of what sort of education a college is offering to its students and what it is doing to help solve the problems of society as a whole. Reverse discrimination in hiring continues one form of discrimination among job applicants, but it also moves in the direction of eliminating discrimination against the students and among the citizens of the society within which the university functions.

Julie C. Van Camp
Temple University
May 15, 1972



AMERICAN
PHILOSOPHICAL
ASSOCIATION

Eastern Division

Sixty-ninth
Annual Meeting

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS
SHERATON-BOSTON HOTEL
DECEMBER 27-29, 1972

Friday, December 29, 9:00–11:00 A.M., Fourth Session

E. Colloquium: Knowledge and Incorrighibility, *Hampton Room*

Chairman: Roderick Chisholm

1. William Edward Morris, Incorrighibility and the Pain Machine

Commentator: Richard Boyd

2. Marshall Swain, Epistemic Defeasibility

Commentator: Ernest Sosa

11:15 A.M.–1:00 P.M. Business Meeting (second session, if needed),
Grand Ballroom

AFTERNOON

2:15–5:15 Fifth Session

A. Symposium: *Content and Consciousness* by D. C. Dennett, *Grand Ballroom*

Chairman: Gilbert H. Harman

Speakers: Michael A. Arbib, Keith Gunderson

Reply: D. C. Dennett

B. Symposium: Plato on the Language of Justice, *Commonwealth Room*

Moderator: G. E. L. Owen

Speakers: R. E. Allen, Charles H. Kahn

C. Colloquium: Ethics and Aesthetics, *Independence Room East*

Chairwoman: Elizabeth Beardsley

1. Jack Kelly, Virtue and Pleasure

Commentator: John M. Cooper

2. John Lachs, Mill on the Happy Man

Commentator: Evelyn Barker

3. Jeanne Wacker: Reducing the Aesthetic to Art

Commentator: Ted Cohen

D. Colloquium: Meaning and Speech, *Independence Room West*

Chairman: R. C. Sleight, Jr.

1. Helen Cartwright, Some Remarks about Mass Nouns and Plurality

Commentator: Terence Parsons

2. Edward S. Shirley, The Impossibility of a Speech-act Theory of Meaning

Commentator: John F. Post

3. Stewart Thau, "The Favourite Philosophical Sense" of 'Meaning'

Commentator: Marilyn P. Frye

E. Special Colloquium on the Problem of whether Favoring Blacks and Women Is Unjustifiably Discriminatory, *Hampton Room*

Chairman: Conrad Snowden

Speakers (in order of appearance): Michael Bayles, Julie Van Camp, Charles King, Diana Axelsen

