Feminism and Metaethics

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1. Introduction

Feminism is first and foremost a political project: a project aimed at the liberation of women and the destruction of patriarchy. That project does not have a particular metaethics; there is no feminist consensus, for example, on the epistemology of moral belief or the metaphysics of moral truth. But the work of feminist philosophers – that is, philosophers who identity with the political project of feminism, and moreover see that political project as informing their philosophical work – raises significant metaethical questions: about the need to rehabilitate traditional moral philosophy, about the extent to which political and moral considerations can play a role in philosophical theorizing, and the importance of rival metaethical conceptions for first-order political practice. I discuss some of the contributions that feminist philosophy makes to each of these questions in turn. I hope to call attention to the way in which feminist thought bears on traditional topics in metaethics (particularly moral epistemology and ethical methodology), but also how feminist thought might inform metaethical practice itself.

I should say from the outset that this is by no means a complete taxonomy of all the metaethical issues raised by feminist philosophy or feminism. Given the richness of not only feminist philosophy, but the entire feminist tradition, such a task is beyond the scope of this chapter. But I do hope to offer some sense of the significant metaethical questions thrown up by feminism and feminist philosophers.

2. Rehabilitating traditional moral philosophy

Extant moral philosophy (like all philosophy) is largely the product of men, and men operating under patriarchal assumptions – the inherent superiority of men to women, the inherent superiority of the symbolically masculine over the symbolically feminine (reason over emotion, individual over community, mind over body), and the centring of male experience as normative or ideal, with female experience (if attended to at all) treated as marginal, aberrant or non-ideal.

Recognising this, how should the feminist moral philosopher (or indeed any moral philosopher suspicious of patriarchy) proceed? One radical proposal is to repudiate extant moral philosophy as a hopelessly masculinist project, necessarily bound up with the subordination of women. We can distinguish two different forms of this

radical stance. On the first view – call it the 'radical political critique' – the very project of *theorizing* morality, as opposed to embracing it merely as a form of lived practice, is antithetical to the project of women's emancipation. The theoretical stance, with its idealisation and cool remove, is one that (powerful) men take up in order to entrench their privilege; women (and other subordinated groups), meanwhile, must jettison theory and embrace practice in order to secure their political emancipation. Unsurprisingly, this isn't a view that feminist philosophers, *qua* philosophers, typically endorse, though it is certainly a view endorsed by some feminists. (There are of course many moral philosophers, feminist and not, who think that moral theorizing, done properly, should not resemble 'theory' in the scientific sense of the term – see e.g. Murdoch 1970, Williams 1985, Rorty 1999. But I take it that insofar as these philosophers write systematic and dense texts, they do not eschew theory entirely, just 'theory' in the pejorative, scientistic sense.) I will return to the relationship between philosophical theory and feminist political practice in section 4.

On a second view – call it the 'radical epistemic critique' – extant moral philosophy is *epistemically* contaminated and condemned by its bad origins in patriarchy: because extant moral philosophy is (at least in part) the product of a distorted worldview (viz. patriarchy), it must be false. This sort of view runs the risk of committing the genetic fallacy, making a bad inference from a feature of the context of theory-construction (patriarchy) to a claim about the truth of the theory. Suspect contexts can produce true theories, and vice versa. That said, reflecting on the 'bad' origins of a philosophical theory can give us strong reason to think that our belief in it is unjustified: if it turns out that we believe a theory merely because it is conducive to patriarchy, then we might be required to abandon the belief – just as learning that we formed a belief on a hallucinogenic drug might very well require us to do the same. But such debunking claims must be vindicated in a piecemeal fashion, by showing in each case how the forces of patriarchy have distorted our ethical or metaethical theorizing in a way that renders a particular received theory epistemically suspect. Thus the radical epistemic critique gives way to a moderate epistemic critique, according to which moral philosophy need not be entirely jettisoned, but instead *rehabilitated.*

Much of the work done by feminist ethicists can be characterised as taking this moderate or rehabilitative approach. Below I detail some aspects of this proposed rehabilitation.

2.1 New topics, themes and questions
As a political practice, feminism is deeply concerned with women's experience: what it is like, what concepts we need to capture it, how we can transform it. In feminist ethics, this concern with women's experience most obviously means a shift in which topics are seen as appropriate for ethical theorizing – towards topics of particular

concern to women, including rape, pornography, objectification, marriage, pregnancy and motherhood. Where these topics have already been discussed in mainstream ethical theory, feminist ethicists often draw attention to new aspects of that topic, aspects neglected because of the male bias of those doing the theorizing. Thus in the case of pornography, which had already been the subject of philosophical debate before the rise of feminist ethics, ethicists typically focussed on whether it was morally permissible to *consume* pornography, and thus implicitly took up a male perspective. Feminist philosophers have shifted the debate by attending to how pornography affects women, both as participants in the production of pornography and as foci of sexualised objectification (MacKinnon 1989 and 1993, Hornsby 1993, Langton 2009, Bauer 2015). Thus feminist ethicists remind us that even when mainstream ethicists attend to 'women's topics', the very questions they find interesting are motivated by particular, often privileged perspectives.

The development of feminist ethics has been much influenced by Carol Gilligan's (1982) argument that ways of moral reasoning are gendered, with men typically concerned with issues of rules, justice, individualism and autonomy, and aspiring to abstraction and universalism, and with women typically concerned with issues of care, interpersonal relationships and the emotions, and more focussed on the particular and the contextual. While Gilligan's claim has been subject to much feminist criticism for being a suspect empirical generalisation that re-enforces patriarchal gender stereotypes (Card 1995, Houston 1987, Bartky 1990, Moody-Adams 1991), it nonetheless catalysed a turn in feminist ethics toward dimensions of ethical reality that are culturally associated with the feminine, including the moral psychology of emotions, especially the 'negative' emotions (see e.g. Narayan 1988, Jaggar 1989, Nussbaum 2001, Tessman 2005, Bell 2009, cf. Lorde 1984) and the ethics of interpersonal relationships (see, e.g., Noddings 1984, Benhabib 1992, Friedman 1993, Kittay and Meyers 1993, Baier 1995, Held 1995, Hekman 1995). This work in turns threatens the related distinctions between the personal and the political, and ethics and politics.

Power, and its particular role in the subordination of women – but also, crucially for many feminists, its role in the subordination of other oppressed groups – has been another central focus for feminist ethicists, particularly radical, Marxist, multicultural, postcolonial, global, lesbian, phenomenological, psychoanalytical, postmodern and third-wave feminists. Some of the many questions about power that feminists raise are: What is the value of choice in women's liberation? What is the relationship between my subordination *qua* woman and other axes of subordination (e.g. class, race, disability status)? In what ways do some women subordinate others? What is the relationship between patriarchy and state-sponsored violence? What conditions (the psychodynamics of the family, society's need for reproduction) give rise to and sustain the ideology of patriarchy? How does liberation differ for different women? What relationship ought women have to culturally enforced

gender expectations? What does it feel like to be constructed as a woman? What are the possibilities for moral agency under patriarchy? Does it even make sense to talk of 'women' as a group, or is this merely to participate in a renewed subordination of those who do not neatly fit our proposed category? For discussion of some of these questions, and many others, see e.g Irigiray 1974 and 1977, hooks 1981, Lugones and Spelman 1983, Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983, Spivak 1988, Fraser 1989, MacKinnon 1989, Young 1990, Butler 1990, Frye 1991, Mouffe 1992 and 1993, Kristeva 1995, Ackerly and Okin 1999, Mitchell and Mishra 2000, Narayan and Harding 2000, Benhabib 2002 and 2008, Gould 2004, Mahmood 2005, Zerelli 2005 and Krause 2008.

It is important to note just how very diverse the topics, questions and themes addressed by feminist ethicists are, and how inaccurate the common identification of feminist ethics with 'care ethics' is.

2.2 New starting points: experience and the non-ideal

The centrality of women's experience to feminism has not only meant a proposed shift in topics for ethics; it has also meant a proposed shift in how we theorize those topics. In particular many feminist ethicists have argued that ethics must start from actual, lived experience. We can distinguish in this demand at least two claims, one about the proper *objects* of ethical theorizing, and a second about the kind of *evidence* or *methods* appropriate to ethical theorizing.

Idealisation is central to ethics in at least three senses. First, in being a branch of *normative* theory – that is, the branch of philosophy concerned with how things ought to be – ethics invokes various normative ideals, such as justice, fairness, caring or emancipation. Second, like all philosophical (as well as social/natural scientific) theorizing, ethics involves a certain amount of abstraction; in order to theorize a given phenomenon, ethicists imagine a paradigm case of whatever they wish to discuss – abortion, disability, charitable donation – stripping away incidental details to leave only (what they take to be) the phenomenon's essential properties. Third, ethics often involves idealisation in the sense that it offers theories about how things ought to be, without saying much about how they actually are (Mills 2004).

Both the second and third kinds of idealisation have been criticised by feminist philosophers. For example, Nancy Bauer has recently argued that feminist debate about pornography is hampered by its refusal to consider the phenomenology of pornography: what it is to watch and moreover be aroused by it, for both men and women (Bauer 2015). In so doing Bauer accuses feminist philosophers of having changed the subject, from pornography as it really is to a hypothetical pornography that has few if any real instantiations. Similarly, we might worry that mainstream philosophical debates that think about abortion as the mere wilful destruction of a human foetus – rather than as an act that takes place within a social context of deep

gender inequality – again idealizes to the point of subject-changing (Jaggar 1997). The worry in neither case is with abstraction as such – after all, to make any general claim about a real phenomenon we must represent it, and thus ignore some of its properties – but with the kind of abstraction that deforms the real thing into a purely philosophical construct. Philosophising about philosophical representations that differ greatly from the objects represented can lead to substantive mistakes about what we ought to do in our actual circumstances.

The third kind of idealisation – describing how things ought to be while not paying attention to how far short actuality falls from that hypothetical ideal – has come under attack, most notably by Onora O'Neill (1987, 1993), Charles Mills (2004) and Catharine MacKinnon (2012). According to Mills, the problem with ideal theory (in the third sense of 'ideal') is that in not discussing the histories of subordination, oppression, inequality and violence that shape our highly non-ideal realities, ideal theory does not guide us toward any achievement of the (putative) ideal. Indeed, Mills suggests that ideal theory serves to re-enforce the non-ideal status quo, constituting an ideology that serves the interests of socioeconomically privileged white men – that is, the interests of most philosophers. MacKinnon suggests something similar when she writes that "[o]ne cannot help wondering why some schools of philosophy have become a place where what something actually does is not considered pertinent to the exploration of what it could or might do. Life is not a game of logic, an argument's plausibility is not unaffected by the social reality to which it refers, and power's denial of abuse is not a function of not having read a philosophical proof that such abuse is possible" (MacKinnon 2012, xv.)

In his critique of ideal theory, Mills takes it as self-evident that ethics aims not only to describe the moral ideal but to provide some practical guidance on how enact it. He writes: "Nor could it seriously be claimed that moral theory is concerned only with mapping beautiful ideals, not their actual implementation. If any ethicist actually said this, it would be an astonishing abdication of the classic goal of ethics…" (171). Certainly feminist philosophers, *qua* feminists, would join Mills in thinking that philosophy ought not merely describe the world. But one might think that Mills misunderstands his colleagues in assuming, as he seems to, that all ethicists would join him in this. Looking at much of contemporary ethics – with its unabashedly recherché thought experiments and its seeming drive to formalisation for its own sake – it's hard not to suspect that merely 'mapping ideals' *is* the ultimate goal for at least some ethicists. If so, then the critique of ideal theory advanced by Mills, O'Neill and MacKinnon contains a demand for a fundamental reorientation in how we conceive of the aim of moral philosophy. Ethical theories should not only be judged for their truth or plausibility, but also for their practical significance.

The second version of the feminist claim that ethics must start from actual experience is about the *evidence* that should be used in ethical theorizing. According

to feminist standpoint theory – a descendant of Marxist standpoint theory – women, because of their social and material subordination to men, have privileged epistemic access to certain truths (Hartsock 1987). Most feminists (and, presumably, many non-feminists as well) will agree that women are epistemically privileged vis-à-vis their own experience: they are in a better position to know what being a woman *is like* than those who aren't women. (Indeed, perhaps *only* women are in a position to know what it's like to be women; cf. Nagel 1974.) But standpoint epistemologists are generally committed to the stronger claim that women are also in a better position to know truths about the social world that lie beyond their own experience, specifically the truth about how gender subordination operates at both a material and ideological level. This is because men, as beneficiaries of the subordination of women, are motivated (however unconsciously) to accept a belief system that distorts their grasp on reality; men's ability to understand patriarchy is thus undermined by their own material interests in perpetuating it. Women, meanwhile, both need to understand the ideology of their male oppressors in order to survive (e.g. to avoid being raped or killed), and have a material interest in uncovering the truth of patriarchy. Feminist standpoint theory, like Marxist standpoint theories – which make analogous claims of epistemic privilege for the proletariat vis-à-vis bourgeois ideology – is not a variety of relativism. It does not merely claim that men and women have different understandings of the world. Rather it claims that, *ceteris paribus*, women are in a position to have a *superior* understanding of certain dimensions of the social world. (This *ceteris paribus* caveat is vital if standpoint epistemology is going to accommodate the phenomenon of women who, in the Marxist terms, suffer from 'false consciousness' – i.e. an internalisation of patriarchal ideology – and thus are hardly in a good position to understand the reality of their situation, especially when compared with a man with strong feminist inclinations. Whether the phenomenon of false consciousness undermines the force and interest of feminist standpoint epistemology remains an open question within feminism.)

Thus feminist standpoint epistemology is a substantive and provocative claim in moral epistemology. Its popularity amongst feminists has however diminished in recent decades, mostly because of the important turn toward *intersectionality* within feminism (hooks 1981, Crenshaw 1989, Collins 2000). According to an intersectional analysis, to understand a person's particular oppression, we must think about intersecting axes of oppression: not just one's gender, but also one's position within capitalist work relations, one's race, ethnicity or caste, one's disability status, one's sexuality, and so on. Importantly, these axes of oppression are not merely additive: if one is a black woman, one is subordinated *as a black woman*, and not just as a woman and as a black person. Many feminists have thought that an intersectional orientation requires one to jettison feminist standpoint epistemology (Narayan 1992), since the latter might seem to presuppose a single standpoint that all women share, and thus not duly take note of the many differences in oppression between women. But there is arguably still a place for a moderate standpoint epistemology

within an intersectional feminism. Different, intersecting forms of oppression might give one particular forms of epistemic advantage: *qua* woman one might be especially well-placed to recognise misogyny, but *qua* white person one might be badly placed to recognise racism. A commitment to intersectionality might then simply requires us to think more carefully about the multiple ways that our epistemic situation is shaped by our social position (cf Bubeck 2000). While considerations of intersectionality have led some feminist ethicists to insist that they are theorizing only about *their* particular, individual situations – that they speak only for themselves (see e.g. Trebilcot 1991) – another option is to theorize in a way that is open to critique from women who experience forms of oppression that oneself does not.

Whether or not they endorse standpoint epistemology, most feminists agree that lived experience is vital for the acquisition of moral and social knowledge. But just what sort of role does experience play in such acquisition? In *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), Murdoch argues that what is needed is a particular quality of *attention* to reality – the kind of careful, ego-less attention we give to those we truly love. Only through such attention to our everyday worlds – and not through mere meditation on abstract moral principles or ethical puzzle-solving – can we come to see and act in accordance with the good. Many feminist ethicists join Murdoch in this broad outlook, insisting that there are certain forms of moral knowledge that can only be had by attending carefully to the real details of actual human experience, including Eva Kittay (1998), Nancy Bauer (2001), Martha Nussbaum (2003) and Alice Crary (forthcoming). Here, for example, is Kittay discussing what she learned through having a disabled daughter:

> the worst anticipation was that her handicap involved her intellectual faculties. …. I was committed to a life of the mind. … How was I to raise a daughter that would have no part of this? If my life took its meaning from thought, what kind of meaning would her life have? …. [W]e already knew that we had learned something. That which we believed we valued, what we—I—thought was at the center of humanity—the capacity for thought or reason, was not it, not it at all (ibid, 150)

These ethicists are often particularly concerned with the capacity of literary narrative to transform our moral understanding, and urge that such narrative should have a more central role in our ethical theorizing. If they are right, then it will turn out that much of mainstream ethics is misguided in the cursory way it treats experience only as fodder for cases – examples for the elicitation and testing of intuitions – rather than as a deep source of moral knowledge. Rather than assume we know which are and are not the essential features of a case, and that our immediate responses to highly abstracted cases are epistemically reliable, we should instead patiently engage with actual phenomena in all its detail, in the hope of coming to a deeper insight than that afforded by standard methods.

3. The place of politics in philosophical theorizing

The term 'feminist philosophy' raises a fundamental metaphilosophical question: how can philosophy, *qua* indifferent pursuit of the truth, have a specific political or moral orientation? Isn't 'feminist philosophy' a contradiction in terms, suggesting a form of inquiry that is at once (*qua* philosophy) oriented toward the truth and (qua *feminist*) oriented toward a particular political goal (cf. Bauer 2001: ch 1 and Haack 1993). This is a common but mistaken view, presupposing a naïve conception of 'standard' philosophical method. (At least, it's a mistaken view that feminist philosophy can be at best sham-philosophy; I'll touch on the question of whether feminist philosophy can genuinely be *feminist* in section 4.) That is, on any plausible way of filling out the worry, either it doesn't really apply to feminist philosophy as practiced, or it applies equally to philosophy in general. I'll discuss the most plausible ways of unpacking the charge that feminist philosophy is a contradiction in terms – at best sham-philosophy – and show, in turn, why they miss the mark. In so doing I will try to speak to the ways that political and moral considerations can legitimately enter our philosophical theorizing.

3.1 The genetic fallacy

First, one might worry that feminist philosophy – by rejecting views that are produced by and conducive to patriarchy – commits the genetic fallacy, wrongly inferring from the badness of a theory's origin to the conclusion that the theory must be false. But, as discussed in the introduction to section 2, feminist philosophy need not be engaged in any such fallacious reasoning. Of course, the moral badness of the context of the development of a view does not entail the falsity of that view. (The view that women should have access to birth control might have emerged from a eugenicist context, but it doesn't mean it's false.) But the fact that a view was created by biased inquirers, and moreover that the view is useful in securing those inquirers' privileged status, does give us at least a *prima facie* reason to doubt the truth of the view. When feminist ethicists comb through historical and contemporary moral philosophy on the lookout for possible masculinist distortions which they aim to fix, they are engaged in good reasoning, not bad.

3.2 The unrevisability of feminist belief

Second, one might worry that feminist philosophy is not really philosophy because feminist philosophers are not sufficiently open to revising their core feminist commitments – e.g. about the reality and badness of patriarchy. It is of course true that one of the hallmarks of good inquirers is that demonstrate a certain openness to challenge and revision. But it is a mistake to think that philosophers are in the habit of leaving *every* one of their commitments open to revision, or are capable of defending all of their fundamental commitments to the satisfaction of the sceptic. After all I cannot defend my conviction that I have hands to the satisfaction of the

external world sceptic, and the proponent of classical logic cannot defend his views to the satisfaction of the dialethist (and vice versa). As Quine (1951) said, our webs of belief encounter the tribunal of experience (and, as might add, argument) as a whole, and each of us is distinguished by which beliefs are located centrally in our webs (that is, relatively immune from revision) and which lie at the periphery (that is, susceptible to revision). This is no less true of non-feminist philosophers than of feminist philosophers. Utilitarians, for example, are notable for their ardent commitment to the rule of utility-maximisation even in the face of what others take to be decisive counterexamples. Epistemicists about vagueness would rather accept (what many think of as) the metaphysically odd view that *bald* or *tall* has a sharp cut-off than sacrifice the law of the excluded middle. And so on. Philosophy in general is characterised by a great diversity in how revisable different claims are taken to be – which claims are thought of as unrevisable, fixed points, and which are thought of as expendable moving parts. Indeed this diversity is in part what explains how, in philosophy, intelligent people can disagree so vehemently about so many things.

Still the sceptic of feminist philosophy might insist that feminist philosophers are wrong to hold *ethical* and *political* beliefs so near the centre of their webs. But why? It is often taken for granted in philosophy that claims from philosophy's 'core' (metaphysics, epistemology, language) enjoy some sort of methodological priority over ethical or political claims. According to this view, our ethics can be guided by results in core areas, but not vice versa; we cannot, for example, dismiss a metaphysical view because it implies that rape isn't bad or that the patriarchy doesn't exist. But feminism should lead us to query this orthodoxy, and in particular the view of metaethics – as an exercise in discovering the nature of moral truth and belief independently of any substantive moral claims – that goes along with it. (Indeed it's not just feminist philosophers who prompt such questions. Some non-feminist philosophers explicitly reject certain metaphysical, epistemological and even scientific views on the grounds that they clash with their deeply-held moral beliefs – see, for example Dworkin (1996) and Nagel (2012).) For example, if a certain view in epistemology implies that there is no such thing as ideology, why shouldn't that be taken to count against the view? No doubt those who are sceptical of ideology will not think this a persuasive reason to reject the epistemological view. But for those who take the existence of ideology to be a fairly obvious fact about the social world, wouldn't they have reason to reject an epistemology that couldn't accommodate it? If so, then it isn't at clear that claims from philosophy's 'core' should take any methodological priority over 'political' claims.

3.3 Conflating practical reasons with epistemic reasons
Third, one might charge feminist philosophy with conflating practical and epistemic reasons – specifically, believing certain views not because they are supported by the evidence, but because they are politically useful or convenient to believe. In other words, feminist philosophers stands accused of engaging in a certain kind of vulgar

pragmatism. In response to this one should begin by noting that pragmatist philosophy, though scorned by many mainstream philosophers, is not usually considered a contradiction in terms. Second, one should query whether it is even conceptually possible to engage in such 'vulgar' pragmatism: a reason to believe *p* is a reason to believe that *p* is true, and so while it might very well be possible to take the usefulness of believing *p* as reason to *try to make oneself* believe *p*, it's not at all clear that it is possible − given the conceptual links between belief and truth − to take the usefulness of believing *p* as a reason simply to believe *p*. If so then it is not possible for feminist philosophers to commit the sin they are accused of committing.

Perhaps then the charge should be revised: feminist philosophers don't believe their views because they are politically useful, but they do *promote* and perhaps *present themselves as believing* their views because it would be politically useful if others adopted those views. Here one might ask: what is wrong with this? Do non-feminist philosophers only promote their views because they believe they are true? Do they not sometimes, for example, promote views to whose truth they are not entirely committed because it would be in their professional interests to have their views adopted? One might of course think there is something dishonest about exhorting others to believe a view of whose truth one is not oneself convinced. But one's reasons for doing so might matter to the ethical question. Perhaps it is one thing to advance a view of which one is not entirely convinced in a bid to win fame, and another to advance a view of which one is not entirely convinced because it would serve justice if others were to adopt it.

Relevant to this is a program that Sally Haslanger (2000, 2005, 2012) calls *ameliorative metaphysics*, and that Alexis Burgess and David Plunkett have elaborated under the heading *conceptual ethics* (Burgess and Plunkett 2013 and Plunkett and Burgess 2013). According to this program, it is a legitimate philosophical question to ask, in the face of competing concepts (e.g. of *terrorism* or *woman*) or conceptual schema (e.g. justice vs care), which of these concepts or schema best serve our practical purposes. That is, we can ask not only descriptive questions about how we do in fact represent the world, but also *normative* questions about how we should *choose* to represent the world. And in some cases, Haslanger argues, we can legitimately exhort others to adopt certain concepts or schema on the grounds that they are most ethically apt. This programme is promising in large part because it makes explicit something that we as philosophers already do − consider the standard metaphysician's answer as to why we should speak in terms of green/blue rather than grue/bleen (i.e. because the former predicates 'carve the world at its joints') − and points to a way in which ethical and political considerations can (and already do) play a role in our seemingly non-ethical theorizing.

Conceptual ethics thus nods towards a certain pragmatist spirit whilst retaining a fairly orthodox understanding of what success in ethical theorising looks like. That's

because the conceptual ethicist takes success in ethical inquiry to be a *true* answer to a question – namely, which concepts or schema best serve our practical purposes? – and takes the philosopher to be particularly good at getting at this truth. A good question, one raised by some feminist ethicists, is whether a more radical reconceptualization of success in ethics is possible, one that shifts away from the orthodox focus on truth. One potentially radical proposal is to understand success in ethics to involve the acquisition not of truth but of *justification*, where justification is taken to be an immanent property that exists within the social world, rather than an epistemic property that attaches to a particular individual's belief.

Various traditions in moral philosophy – most obviously universalizability theories (Kant 1788; Hare 1963, 1981) and contractarian theories (Rawls 1971) – insist that the justification of some putative ethical norm depends on people's hypothetical acceptance of that norm. This conception of moral justification as dependent on groups of people rather than on individuals is welcomed by many femninist philosophers. Nonetheless universalizability and contractarian theories have come under frequent attack by feminist philosophers for ignoring the differences between people and thus overestimating our ability to reliably predict agreement (Arnault 1989, Jaggar 1993). Even Habermasian discourse ethics – which insists that moral justification is borne out of actual 'domination-free' discussions between people – has been criticized for idealizing away the machinations of power in conversation (Fraser 1986, Young 1997; cf. Benhabib 1992). According to such feminist critics, a real process of moral justification must be thoroughly non-idealized: it must not presuppose a basic similarity of all people or prize some styles of thinking over others, and it must be accessible to all people regardless of formal training and educational background. In other words, the discursive processes that give rise to moral justification must be genuinely and radically inclusive (Jaggar and Tobin 2013). On such a view, ethics becomes not a method for arriving at moral truth, but a practical, partly empirical inquiry into how we might create the conditions for moral justification (Tobin and Jaggar 2013). In other words, on such a view, ethics gives out onto politics.

4. The importance of philosophy for feminism

In the introduction to the last section I suggested that while feminist philosophy cannot reasonably be thought of as insufficiently *philosophical*, it might nonetheless be thought of as insufficiently *feminist*. Many feminists have felt that philosophy – at least mainstream analytic philosophy – is antithetical to the feminist political project, because of its insistence on the traditional ideals of reason, objectivity and truth. For such feminists, genuine liberation requires liberations from such strictures as well. Consider these quotations from Bauer and MacKinnon, respectively:

> From the point of view of sceptical feminists, philosophy—with its emphasis on passionless thinking, reason, objectivity, universality, essences, and so forth—apotheosizes a way of encountering the world that is inherently and hopelessly tailored to serve the interests of men and thwart those of women (Bauer 2001: 19).

> Objectivity is the epistemological stance of which objectification is the social process, of which male dominance is the politics, the acted out social practice. That is, to look at the world objectively is to objectify it (MacKinnon 1987: 50)

Against such worries, analytic feminist philosophers have been at pains to defend the importance of such notions as reason and objectivity for feminism:

> The insistence on the localness of all norms of judgement renders postmodernism incapable of sustaining ordinary judgements, such as the judgement that some forms of social organization are plain unjust, or that some beliefs are plain false…Suppose someone protests 'Equal pay for equal work!', or 'Slavery is wrong!'. And suppose the protest is met with a shrug of cynical insouciance from the powers that be. Postmodernism is unfit to characterize that response as unreasonable, or unjustified, or even inappropriate (Fricker 2000: 151).

> In order to make any complaint whatever about the way things are, a feminist must at least implicitly appeal to standards that determine when one state of affairs or kind of conduct is better or worse than another…she must be appealing to moral standards of good and bad or right and wrong (Radcliffe Richards 1995: 369).

These debates are thorny, and raise familiar metaethical questions about the sources and nature of moral authority and truth. But these debates also raise a less familiar metaethical question: to what extent does political or moral action require certain metaethical commitments, and in what sense 'require'?

For many philosophers it might seem obvious that one cannot pursue a political goal without believing in its objective value or without taking oneself to have reason and truth on one's side. But this claim sits in tension with the empirical evidence of many feminist (and anti-colonial, LGBTQ and other) activists who have repudiated reason, truth and objectivity, whilst pursuing real, material change. Philosophers might respond that those feminists who claim to jettison objectivity, reason and truth are are mistaken about their own psychology. But philosophers might do well here not to assume that everyone has the drive to coherence that is so characteristic of philosophers. Politics and people are messy things, replete with surprises not predicted by our best theory. Perhaps the only meaningful sense in which feminism 'requires' philosophy is the sense in which those of who already identify with philosophy (myself included) are driven to reconcile our theory with our practice. But as a political practice, feminism is fundamentally about transforming the world,

not theorizing it. Whether philosophy has an important role to play in that transformation is ultimately itself a practical, not theoretical, question.

Related Topics

Realism and objectivity
The role of social facts in metaethics
The autonomy of ethics
Intuitionism in moral epistemology
Conceptual analysis and metaethics

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