

Feminism and Philosophy of Mind

‘The question ‘What is the nature of the mind?’ invites the retort ‘Whose mind?’... [T]he craving for generality which typifies philosophy recommends enlarging our area of concern: we must seek an account of the mental which applies to the minds of other animals and indeed to the mind of such mentally endowed creature as we can legitimately imagine.’ (Colin McGinn, *The Character of Mind*, p.1)

Personal Identity

The Psychological Approach: a person x at t_1 is identical to y at t_2 if and only if x and y are psychologically connected (in the right way).

P/B Dualism: there is a distinction between psychological and bodily criteria of identity. Only the former are constitutive of personal identity.

Feminist critics have targeted P/B Dualism. Since the Psychological Approach assumes P/B Dualism, any challenge which shows the falsity of P/B Dualism thereby shows the falsity of the Psychological Approach.

Specific criticisms: 1. Character; 2. Memory; 3. Social Circumstances.

In summary: P/B Dualism is false. There is no clear distinction between the psychological and the bodily.

Q1. How do these criticisms bear on Animalist theories of personal identity?

How do these criticisms relate to feminism?

SJ’s key claim: the Psychological Approach assumes a symbolically masculine account of identity.

What is a ‘symbolically masculine account of identity?’ – ‘while the mind and its capacity to reason are associated with masculinity, the body, together with our emotional sensibilities, are associated with the feminine’ (p.29); ‘... in European culture, the mind is associated with masculinity and the body with femininity. One term can stand in for, or symbolise, the other’ (p.41).

What reasons are there for thinking that the Psychological Approach assumes such an account of identity? ‘we sometimes find clues to the unconscious that hover round the margins of a text’ (p.42).

If this is true, what are the implications? Two suggestions.

1. *Downstream implications*. in sustaining a symbolically masculine conception of identity, these debates systematically exclude women. Two ways in which this can happen: through self-policing; through disciplinary boundary setting.

2. *Upstream implications*: in noting that the Psychological Approach relies on a symbolically masculine account of identity, feminist philosophers provide an *explanation* of why male philosophers have endorsed the account.

Q2. How much use do we need to make of the notion of the unconscious in order for this type of explanation to be made available?

Feminism

How can feminism contribute towards the philosophy of mind? Some suggestions:

1. It identifies new topics
2. It provides new insights
3. It acts as a 'reality check' on thought experiments
4. It provides a distinctive explanation and diagnosis of certain philosophical arguments and positions.

On 4: what kind of explanation does feminism allow? That there are gendered concepts – such as that of reason and emotion – and that male philosophers have unconsciously tended to privilege accounts in the philosophy of mind which place weight upon male-gendered concepts.

Cf. Myles Burnyeat on conflicting appearances: 'what assumptions, spoken or unspoken, are at work to make the familiar fact seem problematic?' ('Conflicting Appearances', p.73) SJ: what assumptions, spoken or unspoken, are at work to make a radically unfamiliar account of identity seem unproblematic?

Philosophy of Mind

'it is helpful to distinguish the type of criticism which pinpoints a particular flaw in a position from the type which indicates the shortcomings of an approach. The diagnosis I have offered is of the latter kind. Its critical force rests on the assumptions that we are in search of philosophical interpretations that answer to our experience and acknowledge the complexity of our lives, and that, in the case of personal identity, part of this complexity lies in sexual identity.' (p.43)

A worry about this way of presenting SJ's argument: it dilutes the proposal by reading it as an example of the first approach. The result is a feminist critique which can be accommodated without real change.

Some questions:

How do feminist critiques bear upon traditional debates in the philosophy of mind?
What are the right sort of questions to be asking in the philosophy of mind?
What would a feminist approach to the philosophy of perception look like?

ADG