**Feminism in Analytic Philosophy MT 2012 week 5 Feminist ethics**

**NB This handout gives summary/interpretation of the two papers, plus some comments which are marked as such or enclosed in square brackets.**

**Marilyn Friedman ‘Feminism in ethics: conceptions of autonomy’**

***A starting point***: the wish to address the oppression of women: ‘*Women’s voices have been virtually absent from western ethics until this century’. ‘Feminist ethics explores this imbalance in moral philosophy and seeks to rectify it’.* (205)

**History of feminist ethics:**

***Start***: look at issues that have been discussed by men but from a woman’s perspective.

***Then***, from 1980s feminist ethics exposes ‘male’ biases in concepts and methods of philosophical ethics. Gilligan as a major catalyst, building on e.g. Chodorow on care and mothering. Cultural feminism emphasises women’s different yet valuable approach.

*‘Defenders of both of those traditions (utilitarianism and Kantianism) tended to regard the moral point of view as impartial, impersonal, universal and principle-based, and to give great importance to theories of justice.’*  (207)

***General features of feminist approaches***: Personal point of view important and seen as absent from focus on matters of public morality; defence of care, usually contrasted with notions of justice; defence of the personal and relationships; defence of emotion’s place in ethics, and linking this to cultural denigration of women. These claims often made in conjunction with empirical claims that women are generally more relational than men, together with claim that such personal features will impact upon the theory one produces.

***Then***, from mid 1980s, noteworthy objections arose: 1, empirical data questionable; 2, care and relationship bias reflected a certain (dominant yet problematic) social group of women; 3, lack of attention to differences between women.

Feminist ethics was developing alongside compatible developments in mainstream philosophical ethics including search for alternatives to Kantianism and utilitarianism, such as modern Aristotelianism. ***So what is distinctive about feminist critiques*?** (211)

1 expose and challenge ‘male’ biases in mainstream, especially those which justify subordination of women;

2 ‘the personal is the political’;

3 develop moral concepts theories and methodologies incorporating the perspectives of (diverse) women usually seeing relatedness and emotion as archetypically female;

4 incorporate diversity among women into theories, since some have been left out, and they need to speak for themselves: issue of representativeness is important.

**Comments:**

***One***: this history is necessarily brief, but produces a thumbnail sketch of mainstream philosophical ethics which perhaps caricatures its ‘maleness’ and dependence on a universalistic reason. E.g. Hume on sympathy? Mill/Taylor on the family as the breeding ground for vice, and the importance of listening to women’s views? etc etc …How much do any inaccuracies matter in characterising feminist ethics in opposition to mainstream ethics? Is there for instance a danger that a truncated history may itself occlude the influence of women?

***My conclusion is***: if feminist ethics can learn anything from the notion of mothering, it’s this: don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater. We may learn a lot from past thinkers, even the men who may have had insights despite themselves. What I don’t know is whether there is importance in the way in which a space is carved out for a feminist ethic by opposition to a mainstream view characterised in these rather unsubtle ways. *After discussion*, I think more that the purpose of the characterisation of mainstream ethic is to indicate a pervasive and gendered popular approach to ethics.

***Two***, a general claim is made regarding philosophical methodology: a basic claim made is that metaethics is not sharply distinct from normative ethics, and normative ethics not sharply distinct from applied ethics, which is not sharply distinct from personal position. This general claim is made prominent by work in feminist ethics *inter alia*, but can be held regardless of one’s final conclusions regarding specific claims of feminist ethics.

Questions arise, showing the helpfulness of distinguishing philosophical ethics from its application. E.g. just because Kant himself might have interpreted his theory according to sexist biases, does this necessarily mean that these biases are inherent in his approach? A view of the power of oppressive forces to use whatever is within their grasp to oppress women and others might argue otherwise: had traditional moral theory been based on emotion and relations, it may still have found a way to crush women.

***Three***, a clearer analysis of mainstream philosophical ethics might serve us better to identify what we want in a feminist ethic. Put crudely, one might wonder why an approach grounds itself on the alleviation of oppression as basic, then straightaway attack ethics based on justice; attack individualism and then long for self-determination. There is obviously a need for finer distinctions. See later on, e.g., Kantian notions of autonomy and what these might contribute to feminist ethics.

***Four***, so if a starting point for feminist ethics is women’s oppression, we at the very least have to equip ourselves with a set of tools for understanding and critiquing this.

***Five***, what makes for a distinctive feminist contribution, if anything? What is the role of the baseline quest to undo women’s oppression in this, and does this serve to differentiate or give a distinctive voice to feminist ethics? Can we even identify who counts as working in feminist ethics and who does not?

**Friedman on feminist conceptions of moral autonomy** (211)

Friedman’s account of Kant on autonomy stresses its basis in the universal; discusses feminist ethics in terms of the ‘non-impartiality of any actual ethical standpoint’. (212)

Friedman argues we need a more plausible account of self-determination than that given by Kant. Appeals to feminists as women often denied self-determination and encouraged to identify emotionally with the needs of others. ‘*Thus the conception of morality as self-governance has never been applied as fully to women as it has been to men*.’ (215) Moral philosophy did not just lead to men being main beneficiaries of the theories, but also neglected the social nature of moral understanding. But this in itself does not allow that all should contribute equally to the moral enterprise. So a social conception of moral understanding that neglects individual women’s moral competence cannot by itself serve to end women’s oppression; women may be best ruled by others. (215)

**Comments**: over-eggs the pudding. Does not stress practical reason in Kant; ignores the role of happiness in Kant’s thought; omits here reference to a Kantian conception of moral agents all equally possessing moral autonomy, which could be useful to a feminist approach, (in fact arguably is precisely what she needs) only to introduce it later in the paper.

Moreover, the social history of women’s moral agency is more highly complex than she perhaps allows. For instance, women are often charged with moral education, in particular of children, and often charged to keep sexual morality in line, albeit to standards generally set by men. Given her (later) concerns to clothe ethics in empirically nuanced account of social relations this is a pity.

**Friedman on personal autonomy: ‘self-determination in the quite general sense of choosing how to act and live one’s life.** (216)

***Its history in feminist ethics***: personal autonomy seen as an unproblematic; concern was with processes which unfairly denied it to women. Later, critiqued as based on an unrealistic psychology of the person, and for overly individual nature. Feminists, *et al*, have critiqued these. Standard current account is of ***relational autonomy***: 1, we become distinct selves only through interpersonal relationships with other persons; 2, autonomy requires capacities that must be learned through others or exercised in interaction with others.

Notes that mainstream philosophers of autonomy have acknowledged these aspects [comment: e.g. it’s in Mill], but have little to say about what’s wrong with these popular masculine ideals. ‘*I suggest, however, that the appropriate target of feminist autonomy critiques is not mainstream philosophy but rather an ideal of masculine autonomy that pervades the popular culture of many societies*’. (218)

***Two challenges***: 1, social relations not always benign in their effects on women, so feminist research into these is ‘strikingly relevant’ to feminist accounts of autonomy. Social relations are both necessary for and yet barriers to autonomy. ‘*The theoretical problem now is to give each of these contrasting theses their due and make them cohere*.’ (219)

2. Reconceptualise the nature of selfhood and individuality in a coherent manner. Personhood and sociality, versus separation of personhood needed in autonomy. ‘*Feminist explorations of the concept of autonomy can help to articulate the nature of this minimally distinct and coherent self – and to determine the complex ways in which social relationships bear on its prospects for autonomy*.’ (220)

**Comments**: Friedman here introduces a distinction between the work of philosopher and more popular or cultural thinking that was perhaps obscured earlier in the paper. In arguing for how feminist approaches may be different, she may be saying something interesting about how philosophy parses itself from other empirical disciplines. This in itself could help to explain one reasons for why feminist philosophy is left out in the cold.

**Alison Jaggar ‘Feminism in Ethics Moral Justification’**

***Starting point***: Feminism: is ‘defined in opposition to male dominance’. (225) (Cf Friedman.)

Suggests ultimately that philosophers’ claims of authority in defining moral justification may themselves constitute practice of dominance.

***Feminist challenges to the analytic tradition:***

***1. Intuitionism***: Anderson claims Moore consults a very narrow range of intuitions and dismissed those different to him, anecdotally with bullying tactics. Suggests a problem with intuitionism itself in grounding moral claims in something where there can be no possibility of learning from the experience of others. ***Comment***: Had Moore had a different idea of how we develop the capacity for moral intuition, or not been a bully, the story might be completely different.

***2. Universal prescriptivism***: Arnault on Hare. Hare argues that reasoning with universalizability requires humans to think like ideal observers and step into the shoes of others. Getting to know the minds of others is a practical difficulty which we can strive to overcome. He assumes people are mostly alike and argues away apparent counter examples; Arnault argues Hare relies on a classically liberal notion of the self. Thinks people have diverse interests and often care about others non-instrumentally, and individual differences are significantly linked to their social identities, and suggests recommendation to adopt the standpoint of another unworkable in practice. ‘*One cannot imaginatively identify with a different person and still remain oneself.*’ (229) ***Comment***: there is a question about how much the precise claims Hare made about what we have in common and how to apply universalizability are essential to the basic approach he takes. Loss of self-hood in imaginative identification with the other seems a bit drastic.

***3. Hypothetical contractarianism***: Rawls, Okin, Jaggar . Rawls’ picture of moral justification is coherentist: Feminist arguments against Rawls include complaining that in the original position we are all heads of households which excludes consideration of the domestic sphere. Okin – we need to include domestic issues under the sphere of justice. Like Hare she sees some practical difficulties but does not think these insuperable. Jaggar has argued that human needs and interests are essentially contestable and so it is impossible to substitute private reflection for public discussion; also considers the strategy of the Veil of Ignorance elitist to operate as requires education. ***Comment***: we need to think carefully about what constitutes elitism and what is really needed for moral agency.

***4. Domination-free discourse***: Habermas, Benhabib, Young. Habermas: the substantive content of moral agreements cannot be inferred through philosophical thought experiments but instead requires real-world discourse. Benhabib sees this as promising but suggests some revisions: 1, challenges distinction between public and private domains; 2, challenges ‘masculine’ formulation of abstract general norms. Others add that Benhabib does not go far enough, e.g. in seeing the non-neutrality of language, or arguing that the whole notion of adopting the standpoints of others is disrespectful.

***Jaggar’s thesis*** – these problems of moral justification infect the whole liberal tradition descending from the Enlightenment: The moral subject appears as generic but is a social type; those who depart from this type are viewed as deficient; sphere of morality excludes intimate and family relations; so there is no space to critique and think about issues that especially concern women; mainstream conceptions of moral justification disallow space for the subordinate to express their moral views; moral theories are not universal but self-serving and circular. (234)

Any ‘good-enough’ moral theory must: conceptualise the moral subject so as to eliminate covert bias; take care not to eliminate marginalised discourses and persons; must be practically available to all no matter how well educated; must scrutinise areas of life of importance to any group.

Liberal moral theories have focused on what we have in common (235) [Comment: actually Mill moaned about precisely this e.g. in his essay on Bentham] and ignored our bodies. Many challenges to the liberal self, e.g. communitarian, feminist. Feminists have highlighted differences over commonalities, and insist that commitment to equality means we have to take note of actual inequalities. Hence we are likely to have disparate moral viewpoints and styles of reasoning. *This means we have to question monological conceptions of moral justification.* (236)

Many contemporary fem. philosophers reject idea of solitary moral reflection. (236) [Comment, This seems to be the core of her critique of Hare, Moore, *et al*.] Instead of trying to enter the viewpoints of others, we need to listen to them. ‘*…in fact every identification of a moral problem presupposes an interpretive point of view that should be made explicit and examined. It is because moral reasoning is inevitably hermeneutic that it must be pluralistic and interactive*.’ (237)

The remedy for existing bias is to reconstrue moral rationality as a characteristic primarily of social processes and only secondarily as a property of individuals. Individual rationality consists then in proficiency in interactive skills and virtues necessary to participate as an equal in productive moral discourse. [Comment: of course, ‘equal’,’participate’ and ‘constructive’ are all normative.] Insufficient attention has been paid to practical and theoretical problems posed for egalitarian discourse by systematic difference and inequality. Feminists have engaged considerably with these problems, e.g. of language, and of the need for ‘hearing’ - ‘*moral deference*’. (239)

Jaggar says this does not mean relativism – because this would be inconsistent with feminism’s non-negotiable commitment to opposing male domination. Nonetheless, here are multiple points of view and conclusions of moral dialogue are always provisional and fallible.

*What’s distinctively feminist*? Many non-feminists criticise Archimedean points as simply mistaken but some feminists criticise them in terms explicitly moral and political. E.g. Walker argues that traditionally conceived ‘point-of-viewlessness’ insulates itself from critique of partiality, hence insulating their own claims to moral validity. Some have hence abandoned the notion of moral justification. ‘*Some feminists, however, are still concerned that feminism be able to justify its moral claims*.’ (241) Others however try to ground moral justification in less covertly elitist terms that are more transparent and democratic. But ends by noting that these use the master’s tools, rather than scrapping them, to build a house with no head nor master.

**Comments**: How is any notion of progress in dialogue conceptualised? How in fact is dialogue established as occurring (ref: Monty Python argument sketch)? This must be cashed out in some way that does not make reference to an abstract Archimedean point, e.g. in terms of transparency, progress, but how are these detected and measured? And is not the basic starting point of insistence on addressing women’s oppression one such Archimedean point? (Moreover, one that might be managed differently were it differently described.) How is *hearing another* assessed?

Does she perhaps exaggerate the monolithic nature of some mainstream ethics?

Building a house with no head nor master was precisely the aim of many mainstream ethicists.

Or is this again, similar to Friedman, a critique of exactly how mainstream philosophy is done in some places (but not everywhere), as it means there must be an overtly empirical element.

**So, is there a difference between feminist ethics and merely *good* ethics?**

If not, we may still have a problem, if doing ethics well requires an adjustment away from the abstraction of much of the mainstream and dominant academy.

If there is an overly rigid insistence that feminist ethics steps off from a particular normative starting point, it may find itself hoist on its own petard of failing to engage in dialogue, best practices of hearing, and interaction between theory and practice.

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