25 October 2012 Thursday 10:30-12:30

**Philosophy Faculty Centre, University of Oxford**

**Feminism in Analytic Philosophy Reading Group**

**Reading for Week 3** (with Dr Pamela Sue Anderson leading discussion)

Bubeck, Diemut (2000) ‘Feminism in political philosophy: Women’s Difference’, in Miranda Fricker and Jennifer Hornsby (eds), *Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy.* Cambridge University Press, pp. 185-204.

Preliminary matters

**Central concepts and distinctions**

1. Are ‘politics’, ‘political philosophy’ and ‘political theory’ the same for Bubeck?
2. ‘Feminist politics’ seems to mean ‘feminism’ but also covers ‘feminist theory’ as

i liberal (feminist) theory

ii Marxist (feminist) theory

iii radical or conservative (feminist) theory

iv socialist (feminist) theory

v but Bubeck leaves out progressive (feminist) theory or ‘poststructuralist’ politics.

1. The imagery of ‘waves’ of feminism captures the going up and going down of feminist theory. Crucially, the ‘first’, ‘second’ and ‘third’ waves of feminist theory also come in and go out with the tide: always to return. Bubeck focuses on ‘second wave’ feminists which should be distinguished from

i first wave feminism (liberal theory?)

ii third wave feminism (difference theory?)

1. Bubeck raises a central issue: ‘difference’

i is the difference of women to men socially constructed?

ii Bubeck points to confusion between social difference and theoretical difference.

iii but she fails to raise the question of ‘sexual difference’ or ‘difference feminism’

where ‘sex’ is constituted by discourses of either female or male desire.

iv what about intersectional differences?

1. It is important to query what Bubeck assumes by ‘feminist standpoint theory’.

i what is standpoint epistemology?

ii what makes for a ‘feminist’ standpoint?

In the 1990s, my own definition of ‘a feminist standpoint’ was ‘an epistemologically informed perspective which is not given, but achieved’; and this achievement is ‘not without struggle’, since it is ‘a result of gaining awareness of particular positionings of women within relations of power, determined, but not definitively, by both material and social reality’ (2001, 145; cf. Hartsock 2001, 237). At the time I argued that the relation of knowledge to power is crucial to ‘a feminist standpoint’ within the context of a realist epistemology.

**Further readings**

Anderson, Pamela Sue (2001) ‘“Standpoint”: Its Rightful Place in a Realist Epistemology’, *Journal of Philosophical Research*, xxvi, 131-154.

Anderson, Pamela Sue (2002) ‘Myth and Feminist Philosophy’, in Kevin Schilbrack (ed.) *Thinking Through Myths: Philosophical Perspectives*. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 101-122.

Bulter, Judith and Scott, Joan W. (eds) (1992) *Feminists Theorize the Political*. New York and London: Routledge.

Crosby, Christina, ‘Dealing with Differences‘ in Butler and Scott (eds) (1992) *Feminists Theorize the Political*. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 130-143.

Harding, Sandra (1991) *Whose Science? Which Knowledge? Thinking from Women’s Lives.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Harding, Sandra (1993) ‘Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: what is “strong objectivity”?’ in Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (eds) *Feminist Epistemologies*. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 49-82.

Hartsock, Nancy C. M. (1983) ‘The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism’, in Sandra Harding and Merrill Hintikka (eds), *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodlogy and Philosophy of Science*. Dordrecht, Holland: Reidel/Kluwer, pp. 283-310.

Hartsock, Nancy C. M., (1998) ‘The Feminist Standpoint Revisited’, in *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays* (Oxford, UK and Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press), pp. 227-248.

hooks, bell (1981) *Ain’t I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

hooks, bell (1984; 2000) *Feminist Theory: From Margins to Center*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

hooks, bell (1990) *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

Irigaray, Luck (1993) *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. translated by Carolyn Burke and Gillian Gill. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; and London: The Athlone Press.

Jaggar, Alison (1983) *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*. Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allenheld, especially ‘Feminist Politics and Epistemology: Justifying Feminist Theory’, pp. 353-389.

Lugones, Maria and Spelman, Elizabeth (1983) ‘Have We Got a Theory for You?’ Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for “The Woman’s Vocie”’, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 6, 2: 573-581.

Ruddick, Sara (1989) *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. London: Women’s Press.

Smith, Dorothy (1981; 1987) ‘The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology’, Sorokin Lecture 12, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon; *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

The main question:

Does Bubeck’s ‘solution’ to what she sees as the problem of women’s difference throw light on the role of what she describes as ‘feminist inquiry’ in philosophy more generally? If yes, explain. If no, explain where Bubeck go wrong in her proposed solution to the problem of ‘difference’

**Outline of the Sections of Bubeck’s chapter**

**Her introductory pages**

Bubeck introduces the question of ‘difference’ which she takes to be the focus of ‘feminist political theory’; difference ‘can be used against any empirical or theoretical generalisation’ (Bubeck 2000, 185). She claims that feminists reflect on ‘three kinds of difference’:

1. ‘their own difference as women to men’
   1. on what grounds does she assert that this difference is ‘usually taken as a socially constructed gender difference’ ?
   2. we might contrast Bubeck’s view of women’s own difference (to men) to the view of French difference feminism; see Luce Irigaray(1993) on sexually specific discourse.
2. second type of difference is social differences between women
3. third type of difference is theoretical differences between feminists
4. Bubeck claims that (ii) and (iii) are conflated; and this conflation has been divisive for her. Bubeck assumes this is threatening to feminists and ‘feminism’ generally:
   1. This conflation occurred when second-wave feminism ceased to conceive feminist positions in ‘political’ terms as differences between liberal, Marxist, radical and socialist feminist (cf. Jaggar 1984). Bubeck insists that (crucially) political differences became differences of identities.
   2. Second-wave feminism is challenged by the emerging third-wave feminism as in the work of bell hooks (1981 and 1984) where it must be recognized that gender intersects with other social and material categories, including race, class, ethnicity, etc, as well as various combinations of these categories.

**Sections 1 to 5**

In section 1, Bubeck proposes to focus on feminist political theory and standpoint theory.

1. **Feminist political theory and standpoint theory**

‘Feminist political theory’ comprises ‘three distinct types of inquiry’.

1. the first type of feminist political inquiry is the historical and contemporary critique of ‘male-biased conceptions’ and false generalizations (186)
   1. certain concepts only capture men’s experience in a gender-divided world; for example, autonomy
   2. false generalisations about human nature, behaviour or values are true of men but not of women
2. the second type of feminist political theory is ‘the constructive reinterpretation of traditional concepts and the reworking of claims and arguments’ (186)
   1. the aim is to write ‘truly gender-neutral theory’
   2. conceptual reconstruction tends to follow the critiques of (i) type of feminist inquiry
   3. an example of both critique and reconstruction in feminist political theory is that of critiques of justice and reconstructions of care-based approaches to (maternal) politics; see Sara Ruddick’s *Maternal Thinking* (Ruddick 1989; cf. Bubeck 187)
3. the third type of feminist political inquiry reflects on the experience of feminist theorizing and political activism within the women’s movement
4. the three types of feminist political theory have been given epistemological support by ‘feminist standpoint theory’. As initially a Marxist epistemology (187), this feminist theory generates different standpoints. Consider its two premises:
   1. first, different ‘material conditions, especially different kinds of work and work relations’ different experiences, different conceptualizations and perspectives, hence, different theories about the world (187)
   2. second, different groups in society are systematically divided by the material conditions of their lives; standpoint theorists conclude that these different material locations generate different experiences of the world, and so different beliefs and theories
   3. thus, there are different standpoints.
5. In addition, the feminist standpoint theorist claims (on Marxist grounds) that ‘the standpoint of the oppressed group’ has ‘an epistemic privilege’ (187)
   1. the rationale is that ‘if there are antagonistic relations of oppression and exploitation between two social groups, the oppressors benefit from, and have an interest in, belief systems which distort reality, since such distortions will allow the oppressive system to maintain itself’ (187)
   2. ‘the oppressed, by contrast, have an interest in revealing social relations for the oppressive relations they are and struggling against them’ (187)
   3. Marxist point to ‘class’ as the social division which generates different standpoints; early feminist standpoint theorists pointed to ‘gender’ as the social division which generates different standpoints (cf. Hartsock 1983)

Bubeck’s conclusion/claim (the top of page 188) seems to reflect the position taken by Alison Jaggar in *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (1983) concerning feminist political theory. Or, as Bubeck reads this, feminist political theory can be understood as the development and usage of a feminist standpoint. In Bubeck’s own words,

However, as we shall see, standpoint theory can be turned against feminist theory understood as the product of a feminist standpoint, much as it turned against the malestream canon (188).

In section 2, Bubeck aims to address the problem of difference ‘in a roundabout way’ by considering ‘feminist standpoint theory’ and the ‘aporias’; together these make up an ‘antagonistic model’ of the epistemic process.

1. **The *aporia* of feminist standpoint theory**

An aporia is an impasse or perplexing difficulty which blocks the route forward. Bubeck begins this second section by reasoning that ‘If standpoints are defined by social divisions, any social division ought to be taken seriously as a source of a standpoint’ (188).

1. She illustrates the process of ‘proliferating standpoints’ until reaching ‘two possible endpoints’:
   1. either each person’s unique social condition warrants her or his own standpoint
      1. for example, Trebilcot’s ‘dyke methods’
      2. Trebilcot rejects ‘erasure’ through false inclusion in general claims
      3. she also rejects ‘false naming’ by others of her experience in ways which do not reflect her own experience
   2. or, the group oppressed by all possible systems of oppression must be identified as having the epistemologically most privileged standpoint, and hence the most cutting edge critique of everybody else’s theory (188)
2. Bubeck offers three objections to this ‘particularist’ position
   1. first objection is a *reductio* of standpoint theory
   2. second objection is that no general theory can be generated; only stories are possible, not theories
   3. third objection is that the individualization of standpoints fails to take into account the material and social circumstances under which knowledge comes about; to be true to its materialist roots it must end not in individuals but ‘the most oppressed social group’. (189)
3. the third objection (above) leads back to (i) b. above.
   1. the endpoint of this alternative, though, is equally problematic
   2. standpoint theory should not end as a relativist theory (with different equally valid standpoints) but into a *realist* theory for a ‘valid conceptualization of social reality’
   3. see Nancy Hartsock (1983 and 1998)
   4. see bell hooks (1984; cf. Bubeck 190)
   5. the problem of ‘trumping’ standpoints as claims to being ‘the most oppressed group’ continue.
4. Marxist solution is to take only one (crucial) social division into the account of the epistemically privileged standpoint; that is, the capitalist and the wage earner;
5. any society with multiple social divisions faces the proliferation of standpoints.
6. Bubeck proposes that the process of knowledge production in standpoint theory is wrong (191).

In section 3, Bubeck aims to replace an ‘antagonistic’ with a ‘dialogic[al]’ model

1. **Coming to know: antagonistic and dialogic models**

Bubeck returns to assess knowledge production in the original Marxist model of the epistemic process. This process for the Marxist involves, at its heart, a theory of ‘class antagonism’.

1. ‘Standpoints exist because of the existence of classes which are locked into antagonistic, oppressive class relations’ (191).
2. Bubeck draws two points from the Marxist picture of class antagonism…
   1. first, the systematic connection between social conditions and knowledge
   2. second, the antagonism pervading the representation of social conditions and knowledge
   3. Thus the connection between social conditions and knowledge is precisely what remains attractive to (a range of) feminist standpoint theorists
3. However, caution is necessary: this point of connection (above) must be separated from the antagonistic relations (192).
   1. ‘the very fact that false claims [mystifying ones] are characterized as “mystifying”, or even “oppressive”, indicates that the social antagonism is seen as played out between and through people when conceived as knowers’ (192);
   2. hence, there must be antagonistic relations between knowers, as well as between theories.
   3. But Bubeck questions the adequacy of the antagonistic model regarding knowers, theories and standpoints.
   4. Bubeck finds examples from feminists where social identities of knowers may not be antagonistic (consider lesbian and black feminists).
4. A dialogical model of the epistemic process can and does replace the model of antagonistic relations
   1. for example, Maria Lugones, a latina, and Elizabeth Spelman, a white american woman, ‘Have We Got a Theory for You?’ (1983);
   2. even if oppressive, assymmetrical relations skew the positions in a dialogue between feminists, they do not render them impossible;
   3. hence, there is a call for dialogue between potential knowers.
5. Several points concerning the dialogical model of knowledge
   1. knowledge is ‘produced’ jointly, through mutual listening and talking;
   2. the relations by which knowledge is produced are cooperative;
   3. knowledge is a ‘public’ good for both oppressed and oppressors;
   4. the process by which knowledge is gained is at least as important as the final product: knowledge itself;
   5. it is the character and quality of the interaction between potential knowers divided by oppressive relations which will legitimate the knowledge produced by the dialogue.
6. Bubeck concludes that the impasse in feminist standpoint theory results (only) from the antagonistic model and antagonistic relations.
7. The question is whether the problem of difference creates the impasse; that is, too many social divisions generate the proliferation of standpoints (194).
8. ‘Why should it not be possible for potential knowers of various social positions to try to disentangle truth from distortion *in discussion with each other*?’ (194)
   1. first reason might be that oppressors are too caught up in their own ideology to be capable of participating in such cooperative discussions
      1. this might be unlikely but not impossible, according to Bubeck
   2. second reason might be that oppressors cannot be motivated by anything other than their interests qua oppressors, hence would not want to disengage from the benefits and mystifications of their own privileged position
      1. again, this does not exclude the possibility of oppressors being morally or politically motivated by considerations and interests other than those they would be expected to have in virtue of their own social position
   3. third reason might be that, even if we accept the replies to the first two reasons, cooperative dialogue is still practically impossible because it would be too riddled with power differentials and antagonisms… between oppressed and oppressors.

Bubeck proposes that we turn to the experience of ‘the feminist community’ with ‘difference’.

In section 4, Bubeck seeks a ‘solution’ to this problem (above) in recognition of the need for ‘cooperation’ and finds ‘commonality’ as a way out of the impasse of difference(s).

1. **Difference, cooperation and commonalities**

Despite social divisions feminists have often overridden doubts concerning the possibility of cooperative and mutually supportive relations in their own community (195).

1. Recall the example of Lugones and Spelman (1983);
2. the feminist commitment to end all forms of oppression has made it possible to shed other racist, heterosexist, etc. prejudices and privileges in order to dialogue; that is, to find, in bell hooks’s terms, ‘a common and solidaric “liberatory ideology”’ (Bubeck 195; cf. hooks 1984, 161)
3. Bubeck also mentions the feminist commitments to ‘solidarity’ and to ‘friendship’ as the basis for transforming the antagonistic model into the dialogical model for knowledge-production;
4. a common politics would be the goal of a theory of women’s oppression valid for all women.
5. However, once divisions between women were located in social locations and identities then the possibility of a theory of women’s oppression valid for all women seemed to be irretrievably lost;
6. thus, the problem is grounding feminist theory in social differences (196).
7. And yet, Bubeck comes up with another alternative: ‘a commitment to epistemic cooperation and the search for commonality *in the face of acknowledged differences and divisions’* (196):
   1. postmodernist feminists have objected to silencing the diverse experiences of women;
   2. one response to the postmodernist feminist objection is to create a practical ground for the commonality;
   3. Bubeck proposes ‘a collective (and individual) act of *will*, and an act of *faith’* in the possibility of ‘cooperative oases’;
   4. one can question whether commonalities have to remain open.

In section 5, Bubeck concludes that this solution (above) can be applied to ‘theoretical and political processes’.

1. **Epistemic and political dialogue**

If Bubeck’s argument of the previous section is correct, then ‘the lesson to be learnt from the feminist encounter with difference is that the moral and political commitment of feminism to cooperative dialogue provides the only possible ground for a common feminist theory’ (197).

1. This lesson is learnt in ‘the sphere of knowledge,’ but Bubeck thinks that it can be usefully understood in the *politica*l sphere;
2. Bubeck contends that the solutions for both problems (of the epistemic and the political) rest in similar procedural solutions: cooperation and dialogue;
3. dialogical model is proposed for both sorts of processes, epistemic and political.
4. what are ‘the conditions’ producing the ‘right’ results in the epistemic and political spheres?
   1. the right conditions would counteract the distorting effects of an oppressive context; Bubeck proposes ‘three types of conditions’ relating to ‘three types of processes’ (198):
      1. first type of condition is the structures and institutional settings in which the processes take place. Here the type of process which
         1. the most important is ‘*non-exclusion’*
      2. second type of condition is the participants and those of their activities which constitute the processes. Here the type of process is
         1. ‘*commitment and ability to listen to everyone’s claims’:* ‘listening’ is both a condition for ‘right’ results and a context for overcoming antagonistic difference (199)
         2. *‘an ability to stand back from and reflect critically on their experience, views and values’*
   2. third type of condition is the different phases or aspects of these processes viewed as taking place in time and over time. Here the type of process(es) is
      1. separation (separate spaces, separate groups, separate activities) as one aspect or phase of the dynamic
      2. negotiation which has two parts
         1. voicing of and listening to difference
         2. negotiating commonalities in the light of the differences that have been aired
      3. once the figure of difference has received enough attention, a ‘background’ commonality may come into view
      4. a possible outcome of dialogue is the understanding of difference as an artificial difference which can be overcome through social change

Bubeck claims that her solution to the problem of women’s difference throws light on the role of feminist inquiry in philosophy more generally.

**Conclusion**

Bubeck does try ‘to rescue the possibility of feminist theory and politics from the clutches of a counterproductive picture of difference suggested by the antagonistic model that is implicit in standpoint theory’ (201). The outcomes are that

i processes of ‘reaching decisions’ and ‘acquiring knowledge’ in the feminist community would (ideally) constitute a form of extended dialogue;

ii acceptance of the dialogical model by both feminist theory and politics creates a separate phase of a more general, universal dialogue;

iii additional thought: ‘the feminist standpoint is *transitional*, in that once gender oppression is abolished there is no social division left to generate it’ (201).