

Joanne Waugh & Peggy DesAutels (Editors)

Feminists Doing Ethics

LANHAM, MD: ROWMAN AND LITTLEFIELD, 2001

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ISBN: 0742512118

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*Feminists Doing Ethics* is a selection of papers delivered at the Feminists Ethics Revisited Conference held in 1999. The articles are loosely grouped under five headings: Theory Matters; Forming Selves, Being Agents; Character and its Virtues; Thinking Right, Feeling Good; and Taking Responsibility.

Under "Theory Matters" are two articles. The first, by Margaret Urban Walker, urges ethics to investigate more thoroughly issues of power. It is here that feminists can make their voices heard. Those happily immersed in power structures are often blind to limitations and more covert oppressions these structures institute and perpetuate. This is not a new claim; however, Walker takes us further by emphasizing how responsibilities are related to power structures. Given the myriad of responsibilities a mature person has, no one universal moral theory or standard, such as equality, can bear the entire weight of those various relationships. One can be in charge in some situations, subservient to others, and equal in still others. The relationships and the responsibilities they create shape our identity and agency and are constantly changing. An abstract and universal moral theory (the ideal that has shaped philosophical thinking for centuries) cannot hope to deal with this diversity. Moral theory must be situated and contextual or it becomes too abstract to be practical. Walker urges feminists to add their relationships, responsibilities, contexts and situations to moral theory so that such historical dichotomies as abstract/concrete, public/private, rational/emotional are blurred and that we "see the power in morality—and to 'see through' to its conditions and costs" (13). The second article, by Uma Narayan, considers the scope of feminist concerns in morality. This article covers fairly familiar ground in feminist moral thought—who is a feminist; what is feminism? While Narayan's drive toward all-inclusiveness seems politically correct, "feminist" became so elastic I worried that it denoted anything.

The three articles comprising "Forming Selves" focus on moral identity and agency. The first article by Diana Tietjens Meyers discusses gender as a fixed category for identity. Not surprisingly, she argues that the concept of gender not devolve into an essentialist way of thinking, yet be kept as a helpful tool for feminists to use. I fear Meyers is eating her cake and trying to have it too. Hilde Lindemann Nelson talks about identity being the construction of a personal narrative, which, if the narrative contains negative and inhibiting aspects, can be helped by creating a "counterstory." She illustrates what she means by using the tale of a nurse who, basically, has her consciousness raised by interacting with other nurses with diverse perspectives. She is forced to "rewrite" or at least "amend" her narrative (identity) and become more assertive

(agency) through her exchanges with them. Interestingly, one of the problems that bond the women is the rather powerless relationship between them and doctors. Nelson's tale never reveals how the new-found agency-through-counterstory of our protagonist works with doctors. Instead, one is left with the feeling that even if the doctors didn't respond with increased respect, at least the nurses could find strength from one another by putting their ability to "spin" the scenario differently in their own minds with their counterstories. I do not find this as potentially life-altering as Nelson does, since it seems that the nurses still do not receive adequate respect from the doctors. The final article in this part is by Bat-Ami Bar On how violence has become part of her identity and how this shouldn't automatically be considered a bad thing.

Part Three, "Character and its Virtues," centers around care as better suited under a virtue ethics. I found this to be an interesting theoretical discussion. Should caring be subsumed under the theoretical umbrella of virtue or stand outside it? The authors of this section think caring may fare better when considered as a virtue. Both Lisa Tessman and Margaret McLaren believe that caring belongs within Aristotle's ethics (albeit without all that messy sexist stuff). Aristotle has external factors influencing morality and contextualizes morality, both pluses. In addition, his moderation condition avoids the pitfall of caring too much, one of the loudest criticisms of Gilligan's and Noddings's work. The suggestion is that feminists should work within an Aristotelian framework, clearing up the misogyny and bringing caring into the *polis*, where Aristotle had neglected it. Thus, caring, which Aristotle ignores, can be placed right alongside justice, which Aristotle stresses, and the care versus justice debate is reconciled. These are some of the advantages to placing caring within virtue ethics. On the other hand, sticking caring within a virtues framework robs it of its radical perspective. What had started as "and now for something completely different" is now part of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which needs a Book XI that discusses caring in a similar way that Book II discusses courage. Noddings certainly didn't want caring to be just one of many character traits a person possesses; she saw caring as constituting the moral person. Any other traits could influence but were always subsumed under caring. Did Aristotle have it basically right and all feminists need to do is tweak it to include caring? Does making caring a virtue make it banal? I think these are interesting questions, and that the articles in this section give rise to such questions and should generate much thoughtful discussion.

"Thinking Right, Feeling Good consists of two articles. The first, by Phyllis Rooney, attempts to break down the rational/emotional dichotomy so prevalent in the history of Western philosophy by arguing that moral reasoning necessarily involves emotions. She warns us to be wary of falling into the traditional genderized categories. Good moral reasoning in actual situations involves both abstract and concrete thinking, as long as we understand that these are not as polar opposites as they have been portrayed in the past in an effort to oppress women's participation in society. James Lindemann Nelson's piece on the metaphysics of emotions was less engaging for me. Here he argues against Naomi Scheman's contention that emotions themselves are social constructions by using Jane Austen's characters in *Sense and Sensibility*. Basically, he argues that the sense and meaning of emotions may be socially constructed, but the emotions themselves are not. Nelson argues that viewing emotions as ontological social constructs has negative consequences for morality. While I am convinced by Nelson's position, the piece reads like a tempest in a teapot.

Finally, “Taking Responsibility” centers around more “applied” feminist ethics. Joan Tronto discusses how care can be brought out of the private sphere and inculcated into the professions. Her example, however, centers on the health profession, obviously one where care already has a central theoretical (if not always actual) position. The implication is that the suggestions in this example, *mutata mutanda*, can be applied to other professions. I am skeptical of this move and would have preferred Tronto tackle a profession that is not so obviously sympathetic to care talk. The remaining two articles encourage making caring a less private and more public global phenomenon. These pieces tackle the criticism that the ethics of caring as it was articulated in the 1980’s was too parochial and show how caring can be expanded into the community and into humanity as a whole.

I found all these articles engaging, even those discussing areas in feminist ethics that haven’t sparked my interest. For philosophers interested in keeping up with the ever-burgeoning field of feminist concerns in ethics, this anthology provides a nice cross-section of topics. As a possible textbook selection, I can recommend it only for advanced or graduate studies. Students would have to be familiar with Carol Gilligan’s and Nel Noddings’s work as well as the criticisms those writings have generated to fully utilize this book. The editors do a nice job in the introduction explaining why these articles are feminist (and not just written mainly by women (and what feminism can contribute to the field of ethics. This is the first book in a new series by Rowman and Littlefield called “Feminist Constructions.” I hope that the subsequent volumes will be as strong as this initial one.

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