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Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics. by Virginia Held

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The Philosophical Review, Vol. 104, No. 4 (October 1995)

FEMINIST MORALITY: TRANSFORMING CULTURE, SOCIETY, AND POLITICS. By VIRGINIA HELD. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Pp. xi, 285.

Virginia Held argues that feminism has a distinct contribution to make to morality, one that will transform theory and society by beginning from the experiences of women and children. Her main thesis is that the mother-child relation should be taken as the primary moral relation and the model, at least initially, for all other relations in society. She spends the first four of the ten chapters of this book arguing for the distinctness of feminist moral theory; then chapters 5–7, chapter 10, and the epilogue discussing the difference that taking the mother-child relationship as the paradigm for morality would make to theory and society; chapters 8 and 9 criticizing what she takes to be her major nonfeminist competitors, especially contractualist liberal theory. Regrettably, none of these projects are, I think, particularly successful or enlightening in their failure.

The first section of the book is devoted to showing that feminist morality has something new to say. Held focuses not on her own contribution to ethics, but on that of feminists generally since the 1970s. Among the things she claims feminists have introduced to ethics are: the denial of purely causal explanations of behavior, a focus on oppression rather than free choice, the promotion of experience over theory and emotion over reason, the demolition of the public/private distinction, the concept of the relational self, and most importantly an emphasis on women's experiences and hence caring rather than on rights, duties, or interests. Only the last of these can legitimately be claimed to be unique to contemporary philosophical feminism, and the most obvious contribution of feminism—namely, the establishment of the claim that women and men are of equal moral worth and that this ought to be the starting point of moral theory—is strangely obscured in this book.

Held eventually moves on to her own views, discussing what it would be to take the mother-child relation as morally (in practice and in theory) primary, and how doing so would make a difference to society. To take the mother-child relation as primary is first to be concerned with the welfare of children and second, I think, to take a caring attitude toward others in the way that mothers do toward their children. I say "I think" here because Held is never clear exactly how the mother-child relation is to be extended beyond the realm of children. Her method is to examine particular social/cultural problems that she identifies and to assert what the feminist who takes the mother-child relation as primary would say. She claims that the feminist method is to avoid theory and focus on particulars, but the prob-

lem with this is that it is not always clear how to go on. I find I need a theory in order to generalize or to justify my way of generalizing to those who would disagree with me. Held might also have seen this had she spent more time trying to rebut genuine objections to her views. To the question “who are the children and who are the mothers?” in the larger society, she answers simply that if we are afraid to be treated like children that is a just a reflection of “the deficiencies of actual parental practices” (213). This response is absurd. I don’t want to be treated like a child because I am no longer a child. It was appropriate for my parents to treat me like a child, to consider my best interests and guide my behavior accordingly even when that was contrary to my wishes, because they were the better judges of my interests. For normal adults it is not the case that others are better judges of their interests.

More generally, care is not what most normal adults need or want from most others in society. Held does sometimes acknowledge this—for example, when she writes, “we need different moral approaches for different moral domains of society” (218)—but then she goes on to say that feminist moral theory will tell us which approach is appropriate for each domain. How are we to understand what this means? Held examines several social/cultural problems to illustrate feminist moral thinking: mass media, the significance of birth, violence and war, and the understanding of freedom. Concerning mass media she argues that if we were more concerned with flourishing children than with property rights or other liberal rights, society should provide better television for children. Although this sounds right, I can’t see why one would need feminist moral theory to argue it. Of course, if one is going to erase the hypothetical from the claim, one needs to justify being concerned primarily with flourishing children, an argument that is conspicuously missing in this book. While her discussions of violence, war, and freedom are largely summaries of familiar feminist work, I found Held’s discussion (chap. 6) of the significance of birth as a cultural activity rich and useful; it is the one part of the book I can recommend.

The book also contains a critique of contractualism and other sorts of individualist liberal moral and political projects. The problem with these theories, Held explains, is that most persons are not isolated economic men for most of their lives and that many important relationships are not voluntary. If moral theory began from the perspective of women and took the mother-child relation as primary, she argues, then it would recognize the error of individualist theories. Contractualists have long noted that we have important, inalienable, and yet nonvoluntary relationships and that persons are not literally self-sufficient rational contractors all of the time. As I understand it, what they are trying to do is to justify the demands of morality when ties of affection and familial obligation do not obtain, and

that does comprise a considerable portion of our relations in the world, even for primary parents of small children.

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ORIGINS OF ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY. By MICHAEL DUMMETT. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994. Pp. xi, 199.

Frege was the grandfather of analytical philosophy, Husserl the founder of the phenomenological school, two radically different philosophical movements. In 1903, say, how would they have appeared to any German student of philosophy who knew the work of both? Not, certainly, as two deeply opposed thinkers: rather as remarkably close in orientation, despite some divergence of interests. They may be compared with the Rhine and the Danube, which rise quite close to one another and for a time pursue roughly parallel courses, only to diverge in utterly different directions and flow into different seas. Why, then, did this happen? What small ingredient into the thought of each was eventually magnified into so great an effect? (26)

The immediate aim of this book (a revised version of a series of lectures originally published in *Lingua e Stile* 23 (1988): 3–49, 171–210) is to lay a foundation for answering these last two questions. Dummett avows the further aim of helping to repair the rift that yawns between the analytic and Continental traditions. Yet this is not, and does not purport to be, a work in the history of philosophy. For one, the author does not aspire to comprehensiveness, ignoring such figures as Russell and Moore on the ground that their contribution to the analytic tradition has already been well documented. Second, there is little attempt to trace causal connections among philosophers or within an individual philosopher's development. Instead Dummett traces what he terms the history of thought rather than of thinkers.

Making no pretense to neutrality as between the analytic and Continental traditions, Dummett primarily speaks from the former point of view. He characterizes analytic philosophy as adhering to two principles: (1) that a philosophical account of thought can be attained through a philosophical account of language, and (2) that a comprehensive account of thought can only be so attained (4). Such a formulation is notoriously ambiguous, and the above two theses should be rewritten as four, in the first two of which 'thought' is replaced by 'propositions', while in the last two of which 'thought' is replaced by 'intentional states'.

Thus disambiguated, Dummett contends (chap. 2) that Frege was an