

## HAS FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY LOST CONTACT WITH WOMEN?

### Feminists Doing Philosophy or Doing Feminist Philosophy?

In one sense, doing philosophy as a feminist is unproblematic: there is no reason why feminists should be unable or unwilling to do philosophy. There is however another sense in which it is highly controversial whether doing philosophy as a feminist is feasible: it is not clear that there is a feminist *way* of doing philosophy or, more generally, that feminism provides a methodology for scholarship.

There are certainly a number of feminists who believe that there is such a thing as “feminist philosophy,” and, of these, some who regard the traditional way of doing philosophy in the Anglo-American tradition as male-biased or anti-feminist. Given the understanding of feminism I propose however I suggest that there cannot be a way of doing philosophy which is inherently feminist. It may be that, as a matter of empirical fact, all or most feminists in the profession do philosophy in a certain way, though this seems highly unlikely. Whether this is the case or not however, nothing about feminism as I understand it that mandates a particular philosophical methodology.

This is not to say that feminists who do philosophy should leave their feminism at home. Philosophers working central areas of analytic philosophy are in an especially good position to expose popular misconceptions about gender which are cited in support of policies that are disadvantageous to women and, as feminists, should do what they can toward this end. Arguably, one of the worst consequences of the way in which “feminist philosophy” has come to be perceived in the profession has been the reluctance of many women who do philosophy in the analytic tradition to deal with feminist issues philosophically, to work with women’s organizations in the profession or to identify themselves as feminists.

I should like therefore to consider some ways in which analytic philosophers can use their expertise and professional status to promote the goals of feminism--because this is what I believe “doing philosophy as a feminist” comes to. As a preliminary however I should make it clear what I mean by feminism.

## **Act Utilitarian Feminism**

By “feminism” I shall mean the doctrine that, insofar as possible, societies should be organized in such a way that men and women have the same opportunities at the same costs. This does not mean merely that the same options should be available to men and women but that the odds of achieving the same results should be equal for men and women in the aggregate and that some individuals should not have to pay more heavily than others for exercising their options in virtue of their gender. It means, for example, that a female applicant’s chances of being hired as a dishwasher, computer salesperson, gardener, mail room clerk or fork-lift operator should be the same as a male applicant’s. It means in addition that women shouldn’t have to work harder than men to get the same recognition, or undertake a “double-shift” if they work outside the home, or forego having children in order to have a career, or be subject to isolation, ridicule or harassment if they succeed in obtaining “non-traditional” jobs.

Many academic feminists would not be sympathetic to this definition. It is however an account that I suspect most advocates of equality for women would accept and, perhaps even more significantly, one which opponents of equal rights for women would emphatically reject. Furthermore, arguably, this is the account which, given reasonable empirical assumptions, flows from the ethical theory I assume, namely Act Utilitarianism. According to this account pleasure and pleasure alone is good. In addition, I do not distinguish between “higher” and “lower” pleasures: an action is right just in case it maximizes overall utility.

It seems a reasonable empirical conjecture that a level male-female playing field is more utility-producing than a state of affairs in which people’s options are limited by gender or where the costs and risks of choosing a course which is considered inappropriate to one’s sex are prohibitive. All other things being equal, the more options people have the more likely they are to hit on the occupation, friends, venue and way of life that make them happiest. Of course all other things are not equal. Primitive people whose options are highly restricted do not feel the frustration we should feel in their circumstances. There is however no reason to think that they are happier than we are and no compelling reason I can see to reject the commonplace that the more options we have, the

less our lives are constrained by gender, ethnicity, race, class and other unchosen conditions, the happier we shall be. The goal of feminism as I understand it therefore is to eliminate insofar as possible the constraints, and differences in costs, risks and benefits for pursuing the same policies, that have traditionally been attached to gender.

The version of feminism which I assume, initial appearances to the contrary is not “Liberal Feminism,” as described by, Jaggar and others. According to Jaggar, Liberalism and hence Liberal Feminism presuppose “normative dualism...the view that what is especially valuable about human beings is their ‘mental’ capacity for rationality.”<sup>1</sup> Act Utilitarian Feminism, by contrast, does not assign any special value to the capacity for rationality: pleasure and pleasure alone is intrinsically valuable. The Act Utilitarian Feminist does not seek to minimize social differences that attach to gender because gender is biologically based and hence in some sense less valuable than mental characteristics or because she holds that essential human characteristics are properties of individuals given independently of any particular social context, the doctrine of “abstract individualism.” Rather she holds that these differences ought to be minimized because, on net, they are potent sources of human misery and frustration for both men and women.

Given this understanding of feminism, it is hard to see how one can do philosophy in a feminist manner. There are however issues one can address philosophically in the service of feminism thus understood and a great many popular myths about gender which are detrimental to women’s interests that philosophers can expose.

### **What Philosophy Can Do**

My particular interest in feminism is in issues concerning the economic status of women and their position in the labor force. I think these issues are central because, arguably, the male-female wage gap, and sex-segregation in the labor force which is largely responsible for it, generate more misery for women, and for children, than any other inequity from which women as a group suffer.

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<sup>1</sup>Alison Jaggar. *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983) p. 40

My aim as a feminist is to is to proselytize and influence policy toward the end of eliminating sex segregation in the labor force. I have done a number of things with this end in mind.

The most important thing I do is team-teaching a course, “Women and Work,” with an economist, in which we consider ethical and economic issues concerning women’s labor force participation. We discuss such philosophical topics as the notion of choice and ethical questions concerning affirmative action as well as empirical issues about women’s economic status and position within the labor force.

Because our course satisfies a general education requirement and counts as an upper division economics elective for economics and business majors as well as a general education philosophy requirement we are in the happy position of preaching to the unconverted and in our experience we have been able to dispel a number of misconceptions and even effect some conversions. Many students are simply unaware of the empirical facts of the matter, in particular the level of sex segregation in the labor force, the extent of the male-female wage gap for workers in comparable positions, and, most importantly, the pervasiveness of sex discrimination in hiring and promotion. We display the hard data and set them straight.

The most pervasive misconception however is the myth of the Perfectly Efficient [Labor] Market. According to this myth in its simplest form, the sexual division of labor is freely chosen by both men and women because, given their initial preferences, it results in the overall best situation for all concerned. In fact many economists reject this myth.

From the game-theoretical point of view one interesting feature of markets is the inefficiency which results when participants become locked into *suboptimal equilibria*, states of affairs in which each player does the best he can for himself *given the choices of other players* but where all players would be better off if they chose differently. Players in such circumstances make rational decisions on the basis of their reasonable expectations of how others will behave and all fall into the pit. Within the labor market employers and employees second guess one another and base their decisions on predictions of how others will behave. Women quite reasonably expecting to face discrimination in hiring and promotion may be reluctant to invest in training and choose instead to

devote themselves to furthering their husband's careers; employers, in light of women's reluctance hesitate to hire them in responsible positions or offer them opportunities for further training.

This is the classic vicious circle in which the effects of discrimination are enhanced by feedback effects--and, arguably, a good deal of women's disadvantage is the result of such vicious circles. On this account women--and men--are caught in an evil net. We talk about game theory and the way in which the analyses it suggests may explain the situation of men and women in the labor market and in society at large. We use materials from business administration texts used in business courses to discuss how circumstances conspire to maintain the sexual division of labor and to suggest ways in which students, as job applicants and eventually as managers involved in personnel decisions can work to undermine the system.

A number of my colleagues and other feminists in the profession with whom I have discussed our course regard it as feminism at a very primitive stage, if feminism at all, because we discuss feminist issues within the framework of completely traditional economic and philosophical theories. Especially frustrating are colleagues who assume that we have adopted this stance because we are ignorant of feminist critiques of traditional philosophical methodologies or because we are ignorant of recent advances in feminist scholarship. In fact we find a good deal of this material implausible. So do students. Students however take us seriously.

In addition to teaching courses which are directly concerned with gender issues, there is a great deal that feminists who teach philosophy can do to dispel superstitious misconceptions about gender and promote the goals of feminism.

Currently, for example, there is confusion about the implications of results research on the brain. Informal surveys suggest that many reasonably educated Americans affirm with great conviction that "science has shown that men and women think differently."

This conviction cries out for clarification and correction. First, we want to know exactly what the data are about, e.g. lateralization, the relative size of the hypothalamus in men and women, and so on. We should also like to know what male-female differences appear in the results from tests of mathematical ability and the like, whether they are across the board differences or on the

average differences and, if the latter, how great the male-female overlap is. Secondly, and more philosophically, how are we to assess this data? What is the significance of differences at the hardware level? What is meant by “thinking differently”?

I have considered these issues when I have taught philosophy of mind.

Philosophers of science can respond to the fallacies of pop sociobiology and everyone who teaches baby logic or “critical thinking” can expose the fallacious arguments cited in support of policies that harm women. Philosophy properly understood is the triumph of rationality over convention, habit, superstition and stupidity and, as such, it can only benefit women.

### **Academic Feminism’s Failure**

My own interest in feminism is practical rather than theoretical. I am a feminist because for me being female has always been a source of disutility: all other things being equal I should have much preferred to be male. Being female meant I was under pressure to dress up, diet and take care of my appearance--a source of pain, frustration and chronic failure. Most importantly, it meant that the sort of jobs that were open to me were, given my temperament, preferences and aptitudes, misery-producing.

In spite of women’s high visibility in Academia, the legal profession, TV newscasting and some other high-profile professional areas, glass ceilings and glass walls are still locked into place and when it comes to the market for non-professional jobs, where most man and women compete, sex segregation is taken for granted and virtually unabated. I was turned down for a job washing dishes because it was “a job for a fella” and, when I admitted over the phone that the job operating a sweeping machine on a factory floor about which I was inquiring was “for myself,” after a muffled conversation on the other end, the position mysteriously evaporated. Employment agencies sent me on interviews for administrative assistant positions while my husband, with similar academic qualifications was told that he could not apply for such jobs because “administrative assistant” was “a code-word for woman.”

This is that way things are for women. And women, by and large, don’t like it.

Women like myself however look at some of the women in the profession who are most visibly identified as “feminists” and do not see any help. We see them conducting campaigns to expunge the generic “he” from the literature, assessing the merits of lesbian separatism and arguing about issues that seem at best peripheral to our practical concerns from the ethic of caring to the incomprehensible minutiae of neo-Marxist analysis. Currently a great many women disavow “feminism” because of what they perceive as the adversarial stance toward men and because feminism as popularly understood does not seem to have anything to do with the bread and butter issues that concern them.

If the consequences of these disavowals were strictly semantic, there would be little reason for concern. We could always coin a new term, say “schmeminism” to designate the policy that most women support. The consequences however are substantive, since conservatives have repeatedly cited women’s disavowals in support of their claims.

I have suggested some ways in which we can do philosophy as feminists. It may be that in the end “feminism” within the profession will become a specialty area, with its own jargon and folkways, like Process Philosophy or Marxism, which will provide a vehicle for adepts to engage in dialogue with one another and which lose all contact with extra-professional reality. This would be a shame because feminism as I understand it is not a specialty or a family of ideologies but a commitment to the reasonable proposition that people’s options should not be restricted on the basis of gender. It would be unfortunate if the study of political and ethical underpinnings of feminism became detached from this practical concern. Whatever happens however women will continue to press for equal access to the goods that men have traditionally enjoyed, and philosophers who are feminists will have ample opportunity to help promote this goal.