INTRODUCTION

Feminism is first and foremost a political project: a project aimed at the liberation of women and the destruction of patriarchy. This project does not have a particular metaethics; there is no feminist consensus, for example, on the epistemology of moral belief or the metaphysics of moral truth. But the work of feminist philosophers—that is, philosophers who identify with the political project of feminism, and moreover see that political project as informing their philosophical work—raises significant metaethical questions: about the need to rehabilitate traditional moral philosophy, about the extent to which political and moral considerations can play a role in philosophical theorizing, and about the importance of rival metaethical conceptions for first-order political practice. I discuss some of the contributions that feminist philosophy makes to each of these questions in turn. I hope to call attention to the way in which feminist thought bears on traditional topics in metaethics (particularly moral epistemology and ethical methodology) but also to how feminist thought might inform metaethical practice itself.

I should say from the outset that this is by no means a complete taxonomy of all the metaethical issues raised by feminist philosophy or feminism. Given the richness of not only feminist philosophy but the entire feminist tradition, such a task is beyond the scope of this chapter. But I do hope to offer some sense of the significant metaethical questions thrown up by feminism and feminist philosophers.

REHABILITATING TRADITIONAL MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Extant moral philosophy (like all philosophy) is largely the product of men, and men operating under patriarchal assumptions: the inherent superiority of men to women; the inherent superiority of the symbolically masculine over the symbolically feminine
Recognizing this, how should the feminist moral philosopher (or indeed any moral philosopher suspicious of patriarchy) proceed? One radical proposal is to repudiate extant moral philosophy as a hopelessly masculinist project, necessarily bound up with the subordination of women. We can distinguish two different forms of this radical stance. On the first view—call it the ‘radical political critique’—the very project of theorizing morality, as opposed to embracing it as a form of lived practice, is antithetical to the project of women’s emancipation. The theoretical stance, with its idealization and cool remove, is one that (powerful) men take up in order to entrench their privilege; women (and other subordinated groups), meanwhile, must jettison theory and embrace practice in order to secure their political emancipation. Unsurprisingly, this isn’t a view that feminist philosophers, qua philosophers, typically endorse, though it is certainly a view endorsed by some feminists. (There are of course many moral philosophers, feminist and not, who think that moral theorizing, done properly, should not resemble ‘theory’ in the scientistic sense of the term [e.g. Murdoch, 1970; Williams, 1985; Rorty, 1999]. But I take it that insofar as these philosophers write systematic and dense texts, they do not eschew theory entirely, just ‘theory’ in the pejorative, scientistic sense.) I will later return to the relationship between philosophical theory and feminist political practice.

On a second view—call it the ‘radical epistemic critique’—extant moral philosophy is epistemically contaminated and condemned by its bad origins in patriarchy: because extant moral philosophy is (at least in part) the product of a distorted worldview (viz. patriarchy), it must be false. This sort of view runs the risk of committing the genetic fallacy, making a bad inference from a feature of the context of theory-construction to a claim about the truth of the theory. Suspect contexts can produce true theories, and vice versa. That said, reflecting on the ‘bad’ origins of a philosophical theory can give us strong reason to think that our belief in it is unjustified. If it turns out that we believe a theory merely because it is conducive to patriarchy, then we might be required to abandon the belief—just as learning that we formed a belief on a hallucinogenic drug might very well require us to abandon that belief. But such debunking claims must be vindicated in a piecemeal fashion, by showing in each case how the forces of patriarchy have distorted our ethical or metaethical theorizing in a way that renders a particular received theory epistemically suspect. Thus, the radical epistemic critique gives way to a moderate epistemic critique, according to which moral philosophy need not be entirely jettisoned but instead rehabilitated.

Much of the work done by feminist ethicists can be characterized as taking this moderate or rehabilitative approach. Below, I detail some aspects of this proposed rehabilitation.

New Topics, Themes, and Questions
As a political practice, feminism is deeply concerned with women’s experience: what it is like, what concepts we need to capture it, and how we can transform it. In feminist ethics, this concern with women’s experience most obviously means a shift in the topics seen as appropriate for ethical theorizing towards topics of particular concern to women, including rape, pornography, objectification, the family, pregnancy,
and motherhood. Where these topics have already been discussed in mainstream ethical theory, feminist ethicists often draw attention to new aspects of them, aspects neglected because of the male bias of those doing the theorizing. For example, in the case of pornography, which had already been the subject of philosophical debate before the rise of feminist ethics, ethicists typically focused on whether it was morally permissible to consume pornography, and thus implicitly took up a male perspective. Feminist philosophers have shifted the debate by attending to how pornography affects women, both as participants in the production of pornography and as foci of sexualized objectification (MacKinnon, 1989, 1993; Hornsby, 1983; Langton, 2009; Bauer, 2015). Thus, feminist ethicists remind us that even when mainstream ethicists attend to ‘women’s topics’, the very questions they find interesting are motivated by particular, often privileged perspectives.

The development of feminist ethics has been much influenced by Carol Gilligan’s (1982) argument that ways of moral reasoning are gendered, with men typically concerned with issues of rules, justice, individualism, and autonomy, and aspiring to abstraction and universalism; and women typically concerned with issues of care, interpersonal relationships, and the emotions, and more focused on the particular and the contextual. While Gilligan’s claim has been subject to much feminist criticism for involving suspect empirical generalizations that re-enforce patriarchal gender stereotypes (Card, 1995; Houston, 1987; Bartky, 1990; Moody-Adams, 1991), it nonetheless catalyzed a turn in feminist ethics towards dimensions of ethical reality that are culturally associated with the feminine—including the moral psychology of emotions, especially the ‘negative’ emotions (e.g. Narayan, 1988; Jaggar, 1989; Tessman, 2005; Bell, 2009; cf. Lorde, 1984), and the ethics of interpersonal relationships (e.g. Noddings, 1984; Benhabib, 1992; Friedman, 1993; Baier, 1995; Held, 1995; Hekman, 1995). This work in turn threatens the related distinctions between the personal and the political, and between ethics and politics.

Power, and its particular role in the subordination of women—but also, crucially for many feminists, its role in the subordination of other oppressed groups—has been another central focus for feminist ethicists, particularly radical, Marxist, multicultural, postcolonial, global, lesbian, phenomenological, psychoanalytical, postmodern, and third-wave feminists. Some of the many questions about power that feminists raise are: what is the value of choice in women’s liberation? What is the relationship between my subordination qua woman and other axes of subordination (e.g. class, race, disability status)? In what ways do some women subordinate others? What is the relationship between patriarchy and state-sponsored violence? What conditions (the psychodynamics of the family, society’s need for reproduction) give rise to and sustain the ideology of patriarchy? How does liberation differ for different women? What relationship ought women have to culturally enforced gender expectations? What does it feel like to be constructed as a woman? What are the possibilities for moral agency under patriarchy? Does it even make sense to talk of ‘women’ as a group, or is this merely to participate in a renewed subordination of those who do not neatly fit our proposed category? For discussion of some of these questions, and many others, see Irigaray (1985a, 1985b), hooks (1981), Lugones and Spelman (1983), Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983), Spivak (1988), Fraser (1989), MacKinnon (1989), Young (1990), Butler (1990), Frye (1991), Mouffe (1992, 1993), Kristeva (1995), Ackerly and Okin (1999), Mitchell and Mishra (2000),

It is important to note just how very diverse the topics, questions, and themes addressed by feminist ethicists are, and how inaccurate the common identification of feminist ethics with ‘care ethics’ is.

**New Starting Points: Experience and the Non-ideal**

The centrality of women’s experience to feminism has not only meant a proposed shift in topics for ethics; it has also meant a proposed shift in how we theorize those topics. In particular, many feminist ethicists have argued that ethics must start from actual, lived experience. We can distinguish in this demand at least two claims: one about the proper objects of ethical theorizing, and a second about the kind of evidence or methods appropriate to ethical theorizing.

Idealization is central to ethics in at least three senses. First, in being a branch of normative theory—that is, the branch of philosophy concerned with how things ought to be—ethics invokes various normative ideals, such as justice, fairness, caring, and emancipation. Second, like all philosophical (as well as social/natural scientific) theorizing, ethics involves a certain amount of abstraction; in order to theorize a given phenomenon, ethicists imagine a paradigm case of whatever they wish to discuss—abortion, disability, charitable donation—stripping away incidental details to leave only (what they take to be) the phenomenon’s essential properties. Third, ethics often involves idealization, in the sense that it offers theories about how things ought to be without saying much about how they actually are (Mills, 2004).

Both the second and third kinds of idealization have been criticized by feminist philosophers. For example, Nancy Bauer has recently argued that feminist debate about pornography is hampered by its refusal to consider the phenomenology of pornography: what it is to watch and moreover be aroused by it, for both men and women (Bauer, 2015). In so doing, Bauer accuses feminist philosophers of having changed the subject, from pornography as it really is to a hypothetical pornography that has few if any real instantiations. Similarly, we might worry that mainstream philosophical debates that think about abortion as the mere wilfull destruction of a human fetus—rather than as an act that takes place within a social context of deep gender inequality—again idealize to the point of subject-changing (Jaggar, 1997). In both cases, the worry is not with abstraction as such—after all, to make any general claim about a real phenomenon, we must represent it and thus ignore some of its properties—but with the kind of abstraction that deforms the real thing into a purely philosophical construct. Philosophizing about philosophical representations that differ greatly from the objects represented can lead to substantive mistakes about what we ought to do in our actual circumstances.

The third kind of idealization—describing how things ought to be while not paying attention to how far short actuality falls from that hypothetical ideal—has come under attack, most notably by Onora O’Neill (1987), Charles Mills (2004) and Catharine MacKinnon (2012). According to Mills, the problem with ideal theory (in the third sense of ‘ideal’) is that in neglecting to discuss the histories of subordination, oppression, inequality, and violence that shape our highly non-ideal reali-
ties, ideal theory does not guide us towards any achievement of the (putative) ideal. Indeed, Mills suggests that ideal theory serves to re-enforce the non-ideal status quo, constituting an ideology that serves the interests of socioeconomically privileged white men—that is, the interests of most philosophers. MacKinnon suggests something similar when she writes:

One cannot help wondering why some schools of philosophy have become a place where what something actually does is not considered pertinent to the exploration of what it could or might do. Life is not a game of logic, an argument’s plausibility is not unaffected by the social reality to which it refers, and power’s denial of abuse is not a function of not having read a philosophical proof that such abuse is possible.

(MacKinnon, 2012: xv)

In his critique of ideal theory, Mills takes it as self-evident that ethics aims not only to describe the moral ideal but to provide some practical guidance on how to enact it. He writes: “Nor could it seriously be claimed that moral theory is concerned only with mapping beautiful ideals, not their actual implementation. If any ethicist actually said this, it would be an astonishing abdication of the classic goal of ethics” (Mills, 2004: 171). Certainly, feminist philosophers, qua feminists, would join Mills in thinking that philosophy ought not merely describe the world. But one might think that Mills misunderstands his colleagues in assuming, as he seems to, that all ethicists would join him in this. Looking at much of contemporary ethics—with its unabashedly recherché thought experiments and its seeming drive to formalization for its own sake—it’s hard not to suspect that merely ‘mapping ideals’ is the ultimate goal for at least some ethicists. If so, then the critique of ideal theory advanced by Mills, O’Neill, and MacKinnon contains a demand for a fundamental reorientation in how we conceive of the aim of moral philosophy. Ethical theories should not only be judged for their truth or plausibility but also for their practical significance.

The second version of the feminist claim that ethics must start from actual experience is about the evidence that should be used in ethical theorizing. According to feminist standpoint theory—a descendant of Marxist standpoint theory—women, because of their social and material subordination to men, have privileged epistemic access to certain truths (Hartsock, 1987). Most feminists (and, presumably, many non-feminists as well) would agree that women are epistemically privileged vis-à-vis their own experience: they are in a better position to know what being a woman is like than those who aren’t women. (Indeed, perhaps only women are in a position to know what it’s like to be women; cf. Nagel, 1974.) But standpoint epistemologists are generally committed to the stronger claim that women are also in a better position to know truths about the social world that lie beyond their own experience—specifically, the truth about how gender subordination operates at both a material and an ideological level. This is because men, as beneficiaries of the subordination of women, are motivated (however unconsciously) to accept a belief system that distorts their grasp on reality; men’s ability to understand patriarchy is thus undermined by their own material interests in perpetuating it. Women, meanwhile, need to both understand the ideology of their male oppressors in order to survive (e.g. to avoid being raped or killed) and have a material interest in uncovering the truth of patriarchy.
Feminist standpoint theory, like Marxist standpoint theories—which make analogous claims of epistemic privilege for the proletariat vis-à-vis bourgeois ideology—is not a variety of relativism. It does not merely claim that men and women have different understandings of the world. Rather, it claims that, *ceteris paribus*, women are in a position to have a *superior* understanding of certain dimensions of the social world. (This *ceteris paribus* caveat is vital if standpoint epistemology is going to accommodate the phenomenon of women who, in the Marxist terms, suffer from ‘false consciousness’—that is, an internalization of patriarchal ideology. Whether the phenomenon of false consciousness undermines the force and interest of feminist standpoint epistemology remains an open question within feminism.)

Thus, feminist standpoint epistemology is a substantive and provocative claim in moral epistemology. Its popularity amongst feminists has, however, diminished in recent decades, mostly because of the important turn towards *intersectionality* within feminism (hooks, 1981; Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000). According to an intersectional analysis, to understand a person’s particular oppression, we must think about intersecting axes of oppression: not just one’s gender but also one’s position within capitalist work relations; one’s race, ethnicity, or caste; one’s disability status; one’s sexuality; and so on. Importantly, these axes of oppression are not merely additive: if one is a black woman, one is subordinated as a black woman, and not just as a woman and as a black person. Many feminists have thought that an intersectional orientation requires one to jettison feminist standpoint epistemology (e.g. Narayan, 1992), since the latter might seem to presuppose a single standpoint that all women share, and thus does not duly take note of the many differences in oppression between women. But there is arguably still a place for a moderate standpoint epistemology within an intersectional feminism. Different, intersecting forms of oppression might give one particular forms of epistemic advantage: qua woman, one might be especially well placed to recognize misogyny, but qua white person, one might be badly placed to recognize racism. A commitment to intersectionality might then simply require us to think more carefully about the multiple ways that our epistemic situation is shaped by our social position (cf. Bubeck, 2000). While considerations of intersectionality have led some feminist ethicists to insist that they are theorizing only about *their* particular, individual situations—that they speak only for themselves (e.g. Trebilcot, 1991)—another option is for thinkers to theorize in a way that is explicitly defeasible by critique from women who experience forms of oppression that they do not.

Whether or not they endorse standpoint epistemology, most feminists agree that lived experience is vital for the acquisition of moral knowledge. But just what sort of role does experience play in such acquisition? In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Iris Murdoch (1970) argues that what is needed is a particular quality of *attention* to reality—the kind of careful, egoless attention we give to those we truly love. Only through such attention to our everyday worlds—and not through mere meditation on abstract moral principles or ethical puzzle-solving—can we come to see, and act in accordance with, the good. Many feminist ethicists join Murdoch in this broad outlook, insisting that there are certain forms of moral knowledge that can only be had by attending carefully to the real details of actual human experience, including Eva Kittay (1998), Nancy Bauer (2001), Martha Nussbaum (1990), and Alice Crary (forthcoming). Here, for example, is Kittay discussing what she learned through having a disabled daughter:
The worst anticipation was that her handicap involved her intellectual faculties. … I was committed to a life of the mind. … How was I to raise a daughter that would have no part of this? If my life took its meaning from thought, what kind of meaning would her life have? … We already knew that we had learned something. That which we believed we valued, what we—I—thought was at the center of humanity—the capacity for thought or reason, was not it, not it at all.

(Kittay, 1998: 150)

Like Kittay, many feminist ethicists are often particularly concerned with the capacity of literary narrative and first-personal testimony to transform our moral understanding, and they urge that such narrative should have a more central role in our ethical theorizing. If they are right, then it will turn out that much of mainstream ethics is misguided in the cursory way it treats experience only as fodder for cases—examples for the elicitation and testing of intuitions—rather than as a deep source of moral knowledge. Rather than assume we know which are and are not the essential features of a case, or that our immediate responses to highly abstracted cases are epistemically reliable, we should patiently engage with actual phenomena in all its detail, in the hope of coming to a deeper insight than that afforded by standard methods.

THE PLACE OF POLITICS IN PHILOSOPHICAL THEORIZING

The term ‘feminist philosophy’ raises a fundamental metaphilosophical question: how can philosophy, qua indifferent pursuit of the truth, have a specific political or moral orientation? Isn’t ‘feminist philosophy’ a contradiction in terms, suggesting a form of inquiry that is at once (qua philosophy) oriented towards the truth and (qua feminist) oriented towards a particular political goal (cf. Bauer, 2001: chapter 1; Haack, 1993)? This is a common but mistaken view, presupposing a naive conception of ‘standard’ philosophical method. (At least, it’s a mistaken view that feminist philosophy can be at best sham-philosophy; I touch on the question of whether feminist philosophy can be genuinely feminist below.) That is, on any plausible way of filling out the worry, either it doesn’t really apply to feminist philosophy as practiced, or it applies equally to philosophy in general. I’ll discuss the most plausible ways of unpacking the charge that feminist philosophy is a contradiction in terms—at best sham-philosophy—and show, in turn, why they miss the mark. In so doing, I will try to speak to the ways that political and moral considerations can legitimately enter our philosophical theorizing.

The Genetic Fallacy
First, one might worry that feminist philosophy—by rejecting views that are produced by and conducive to patriarchy—commits the genetic fallacy, wrongly inferring from the badness of a theory’s origin to the conclusion that the theory must be false. But, as mentioned earlier, feminist philosophy need not be engaged in any such fallacious reasoning. Of course, the moral badness of the context of the development of a view does not entail the falsity of that view. (The view that women should have access to birth control might have emerged from a eugenicist context, but that doesn’t mean it’s false.) But the
fact that a view was created by biased inquirers, and moreover that the view is useful in securing those inquirers’ privileged status, does give us at least a prima facie reason to doubt the truth of the view. When feminist ethicists comb through historical and contemporary moral philosophy on the lookout for possible masculinist distortions that they aim to fix, they are engaged in good reasoning, not bad.

The Unrevisability of Feminist Belief

Second, one might worry that feminist philosophy is not really philosophy because feminist philosophers are not sufficiently open to revising their core feminist commitments—for example, about the reality and badness of patriarchy. It is of course true that one of the hallmarks of good inquirers is that they demonstrate a certain openness to challenge and revision. But it is a mistake to think that philosophers are in the habit of leaving every one of their commitments open to revision, or that they are capable of defending all of their fundamental commitments to the satisfaction of the skeptic. After all, I cannot defend my conviction that I have hands to the satisfaction of the external world skeptic, and the proponent of classical logic cannot defend his views to the satisfaction of the dialethist (and vice versa). As Willard Van Orman Quine (1951) said, our webs of belief encounter the tribunal of experience (and, we might add, argument) as a whole, and each of us is distinguished by which beliefs are located centrally in our webs (that is, relatively immune from revision) and which lie at the periphery (that is, susceptible to revision). This is no less true of non-feminist philosophers than of feminist philosophers. Utilitarians, for example, are notable for their ardent commitment to the rule of utility-maximization even in the face of what others take to be decisive counterexamples. Epistemicists about vagueness would rather accept (what many think of as) the metaphysically odd view that bald or tall has a sharp cut-off than sacrifice the law of the excluded middle. And so on. Philosophy in general is characterized by a great diversity in how revisable different claims are taken to be—which claims are thought of as unrevisable, fixed points, and which are thought of as expendable moving parts. Indeed, this diversity partly explains how, in philosophy, intelligent people can disagree so vehemently about so many things.

Still the skeptic of feminist philosophy might insist that feminist philosophers are wrong to hold ethical and political beliefs so near the center of their webs. But why? It is often taken for granted in philosophy that claims from philosophy’s ‘core’ (metaphysics, epistemology, language) enjoy some sort of methodological priority over ethical or political claims. According to this view, our ethics can be guided by results in core areas, but not vice versa; we cannot, for example, dismiss a metaphysical view because it implies that rape isn’t bad or that the patriarchy doesn’t exist. But feminism should lead us to query this orthodoxy and, in particular, the view of metaethics—as an exercise in discovering the nature of moral truth and belief independent of any substantive moral claims—that goes along with it. (Indeed, it’s not just feminist philosophers who prompt such questions. Some non-feminist philosophers explicitly reject certain metaphysical, epistemological, and even scientific views on the grounds that they clash with their deeply held moral beliefs [e.g. Dworkin, 1996; Nagel, 2012].) For example, if a certain view in epistemology implies that there is no such thing as ideology, why shouldn’t that be taken to count against the view? No doubt those who are skeptical of ideology will
not think this a persuasive reason to reject the epistemological view in question. But for those who take the existence of ideology to be a fairly obvious fact about the social world, wouldn’t there be reason to reject an epistemology that couldn’t accommodate it? If so, then it isn’t at all clear that claims from philosophy’s ‘core’ should take methodological priority over ‘political’ claims.

**Conflating Practical Reasons with Epistemic Reasons**

Third, one might charge feminist philosophy with conflating practical and epistemic reasons—specifically, believing certain views not because they are supported by the evidence but because they are politically useful or convenient to believe. In other words, feminist philosophers stand accused of engaging in a certain kind of vulgar pragmatism. In response to this, we can begin by noting that pragmatist philosophy, though scorned by many mainstream philosophers, is not usually considered a contradiction in terms. Second, one could query whether it is even conceptually possible to engage in such ‘vulgar’ pragmatism: a reason to believe \( p \) is a reason to believe that \( p \) is true, and so although it might very well be possible to take the usefulness of believing \( p \) as reason to *try to make oneself* believe \( p \), it’s not at all clear that it is possible—given the conceptual links between belief and truth—to take the usefulness of believing \( p \) as a reason simply to believe \( p \). If so, it is not possible for feminist philosophers to commit the sin they are accused of committing.

Perhaps, then, the charge should be revised: feminist philosophers don’t believe their views because they are politically useful, but they do *promote* and perhaps *present* themselves as believing their views because it would be politically useful if others adopted those views. Here, one might ask: what is wrong with this? Do non-feminist philosophers only promote their views because they believe they are true? Do they not sometimes, for example, promote views to which they are not entirely committed because it would be in their professional interests to have their views adopted? One might of course think there is something dishonest about exhorting others to believe a view of which one is not oneself convinced. But one’s reasons for doing so might matter to the ethical question. Perhaps it is one thing to advance a view of which one is not entirely convinced in a bid to win fame, and another to advance a view of which one is not entirely convinced because it would serve justice if others were to adopt it.

Relevant to this is a program that Sally Haslanger (2000, 2005, 2012) calls *ameliorative metaphysics*, and that Alexis Burgess and David Plunkett have elaborated under the heading *conceptual ethics* (Burgess & Plunkett, 2013; Plunkett & Burgess 2013). According to this program, it is a legitimate philosophical question to ask, in the face of competing concepts (e.g. of *terrorism* or *woman*) or conceptual schema (e.g. *justice* vs. *care*), which of these concepts or schema best serve our practical purposes. That is, we can ask not only descriptive questions about how we do in fact represent the world, but also *normative* questions about how we should *choose* to represent the world. And in some cases, Haslanger argues, we can legitimately exhort others to adopt certain concepts or schema on the grounds that they are most ethically apt. This program is promising in large part because it makes explicit something that we as philosophers already do—consider the standard metaphysician’s answer as to why we should speak in terms of green/blue rather than grue/bleen (because the former predicates ‘carve nature
at its joints’)—and points to a way in which practical considerations can (and already
do) play a role in our seemingly non-ethical theorizing.

Conceptual ethics thus nods towards a certain pragmatist spirit while retaining a fairly
orthodox understanding of what success in ethical theorizing looks like. That’s because
the conceptual ethicist takes success in ethical inquiry to be a true answer to a question—
namely, which concepts or schema best serve our practical purposes?—and takes the
philosopher to be particularly good at getting at this truth. A good question, one raised
by some feminist ethicists, is whether a more radical reconceptualization of success in
ethics is possible, one that shifts away from the orthodox focus on truth. One potentially
radical proposal is to understand success in ethics to involve the acquisition not of truth
but of justification, where justification is taken to be an immanent property that exists
within the social world rather than an epistemic property that attaches to a particular
individual’s belief.

Various traditions in moral philosophy—most obviously, universalizability theories
(Kant, 1788; Hare, 1963, 1981) and contractarian theories (Rawls, 1971)—insist that the
justification of some putative ethical norm depends on people’s hypothetical acceptance of
that norm. This conception of moral justification as dependent on groups of people rather
than on individuals is welcomed by many feminist philosophers. Nonetheless, universal-
izability and contractarian theories have come under frequent attack by feminist philoso-
phers for ignoring the differences between people and thus overestimating our ability to
reliably predict agreement (Arnault, 1989; Jaggar, 1993). Even Habermasian discourse
ethics—which insists that moral justification is borne out of actual ‘domination-free’ dis-
cussions between people—has been criticized for idealizing away the machinations of
power in conversation (Fraser, 1986; Young, 1997; cf. Benhabib, 1992). According to such
feminist critics, a real process of moral justification must be thoroughly non-idealized; it
must not presuppose a basic similarity of all people or prize some styles of thinking over
others, and it must be accessible to all people regardless of formal training and educa-
tional background. In other words, the discursive processes that give rise to moral justifi-
cation must be genuinely and radically inclusive (Jaggar & Tobin, 2013). On such a view,
ethics becomes not a method for arriving at moral truth but a practical, partly empirical,
inquiry into how we might create the conditions for moral justification (Tobin & Jaggar,
2013). In other words, on such a view, ethics gives out onto politics.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PHILOSOPHY FOR FEMINISM

In the introduction to the last section, I suggested that while feminist philosophy cannot
reasonably be thought of as insufficiently philosophical, it might nonetheless be thought
of as insufficiently feminist. Many feminists have felt that philosophy—at least main-
stream analytic philosophy—is antithetical to the feminist political project because of its
insistence on the traditional ideals of reason, objectivity, and truth. For such feminists,
genuine liberation requires liberation from such strictures as well. Consider these quota-
tions from Bauer and MacKinnon, respectively:

From the point of view of sceptical feminists, philosophy—with its emphasis on
passionless thinking, reason, objectivity, universality, essences, and so forth—
apotheosizes a way of encountering the world that is inherently and hopelessly tailored to serve the interests of men and thwart those of women.

(Bauer, 2001: 19)

Objectivity is the epistemological stance of which objectification is the social process, of which male dominance is the politics, the acted out social practice. That is, to look at the world objectively is to objectify it.

(MacKinnon, 1987: 50)

Against such worries, analytic feminist philosophers have been at pains to defend the importance of such notions as reason and objectivity for feminism:

The insistence on the localness of all norms of judgement renders postmodernism incapable of sustaining ordinary judgements, such as the judgement that some forms of social organization are plain unjust, or that some beliefs are plain false. … Suppose someone protests 'Equal pay for equal work!', or 'Slavery is wrong!'. And suppose the protest is met with a shrug of cynical insouciance from the powers that be. Postmodernism is unfit to characterize that response as unreasonable, or unjustified, or even inappropriate.

(Fricker, 2000: 151)

In order to make any complaint whatever about the way things are, a feminist must at least implicitly appeal to standards that determine when one state of affairs or kind of conduct is better or worse than another. … She must be appealing to moral standards of good and bad or right and wrong.

(Radcliffe Richards, 1995: 369)

These debates are thorny, and they raise familiar metaethical questions about the sources and nature of moral authority and truth. But these debates also raise a less familiar metaethical question: to what extent does political or moral action require certain metaethical commitments, and in what sense ‘require’?

For many philosophers, it might seem obvious that one cannot pursue a political goal without believing in its objective value or without taking oneself to have reason and truth on one’s side. But this claim sits in tension with the empirical evidence of many feminist (and anti-colonial, LGBTQ and other) activists who have repudiated reason, truth, and objectivity while pursuing real, material change. Philosophers might respond that those feminists who claim to jettison objectivity, reason and truth are mistaken about their own psychology. But philosophers might do well here not to assume that everyone has the drive to coherence that is so characteristic of philosophers. Politics and people are messy things, replete with surprises not predicted by our best theory. Perhaps the only meaningful sense in which feminism ‘requires’ philosophy is the sense in which those who already identify with philosophy (myself included) are driven to reconcile our theory with our practice. But as a political practice, feminism is fundamentally about transforming the world, not theorizing it. Whether philosophy has an important role to play in that transformation is ultimately itself a practical, not theoretical, question.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I’d like to thank the editors, David Plunkett and Tristram McPherson, as well as Lea Schroeder, for their helpful comments on earlier drafts.

RELATED TOPICS


REFERENCES


FURTHER READING