

Book Review: *Feminist Philosophy: Time, History and the Transformation of Thought* edited by Synne Myrebøe, Valgerður Pálmadóttir and Johanna Sjöstedt, Södertörn University, 2023, 386 pages. ISBN: 978-91-89504-36-3



REDESCRIPTIONS

Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory

BOOK REVIEW

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As the editors explain, this book is the outcome of several years of exchanges between the contributors and others, starting with a Feminist Philosophy Circle that met for three years as part of the Nordic Summer University beginning in 2016. This is reflected in the wide range of contributions and the number of topics covered under thematic headings that focus on temporality, history, transformation and knowledge production. The book provides a fascinating snapshot of contemporary feminist philosophy and an opportunity to take stock of this marginal (from the point of view of mainstream philosophy in the University) branch of philosophical scholarship. The book does not pretend to cover all areas of feminist philosophy, but it does enable us to look, from different angles, at what the project of feminist philosophy might mean as we enter the second quarter of the 21st century. It isn't possible to do justice to all the contributions in a single review, so what follows is organised in terms of key questions and issues that are raised explicitly by the editors and contributors.

The most obvious issue addressed in different ways across the volume concerns the meaning of the key terms 'Philosophy' and 'Feminist' and the relationship between them. Is philosophy distinguished by a particular level of abstraction and atemporality (Pulkkinen, Scheman, Rosengren)? If philosophy is focused on thinking, then how do we conceptualise thought (Mahrdt, Jóhannesdóttir)? What is the relationship between philosophy, history and politics or practice (Pulkkinen, Edenheim, Gustaffson)? Should philosophy be interdisciplinary or undisciplinary (Myrebøe et al., Scheman, Davanger)? Different authors offer different answers to these questions; some seem to disturb the idea of there being any distinctiveness to philosophy at all, while others criticise contemporary philosophy for its abstractness and neglect of the role of sense or emotion or embodiment in thinking. Others suggest that we can rescue philosophy by bringing insights from history, politics, psychoanalysis and socio-scientific analysis into philosophy's heartland questions about wisdom, knowledge, truth and the good life. In this respect, 'feminism' figures as simultaneously a threat and promise for philosophy,

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although there is no consensus as to what ‘feminism’ means, and feminism in its turn can also be conceived as threatening philosophical and political insight. For some of the contributors, feminism is understood as a tradition of political and ethical practice grounded in different assumptions from those within mainstream philosophy. Rather than being abstract, feminism and feminist ideas are embodied and embedded in context. Rather than being separate from the world of practice, feminism is necessarily practice. For others, feminist ideas are filtered through the lens of poststructuralist or queer thinking, in which certain versions of feminism – perhaps, in particular, those associated with phenomenology – become the object of critique (see the contrast between Davanger and Jóhannesdóttir). Unsurprisingly, as different conceptions of philosophy meet different accounts of feminism, there is no consensus about how the relationship between feminism and philosophy should be understood, and the borders between what counts as feminist philosophy and what does not are blurred.

There are, I would suggest, two things that unite the volume, even given profound differences between contributors. One is a commitment to the idea of pluralism in feminist philosophy; the other is the now almost common-sensical rejection of the idea of feminist thinking and practice as a story of linear progress. Thirty years ago, feminist philosophy – whether in the form of rescuing women thinkers excluded from the philosophical canon; re-reading canonical texts to bring out their negative and positive insights into the workings of gender; or developing new ontologies, epistemologies and ethical theories – saw itself as, at the very least, a work of improvement on the status quo and potentially a transformation of masculinist and misogynist thinking. Thirty years on, feminist philosophy has lost confidence in progress, not only because, in institutional terms, feminist philosophy remains marginalised within the discipline, but also because it has come to question the relationship of philosophy to history, time and political change. We see this in Pulkkinen’s examination of tensions between philosophy’s supposedly ‘omnitemporal’ nature, concern with timeless questions and the historical and political sensibilities that ground feminist thinking. We see it also in Fjelkestam’s queering of temporal hierarchies, in which some things count in terms of historical significance and other things do not, and in Edenheim’s use of psychoanalytic theory to drive a wedge between history and temporality, citing Benjamin to call attention to the present as a temporality of emergency. Lindén and Poulsen unsettle notions of being able to capture stable meanings through historical research by using fiction and film, drawing on Derridean hauntology and the idea of a political unconscious. In a different mode, drawing on Quine’s epistemology, Izraeli emphasises the inherited weight of history in the stubborn persistence of stereotypes. Although these arguments are different, none of them are marked by optimism about holistic transformative change. Instead, transformation figures in less ambitious ways, working through the potential of conceptual and practical tensions to generate changes in theory and practice.

Of course, one reason why this volume lacks the optimism of earlier interventions in feminist philosophy is because of a consciousness of failures in the trajectory of feminism over the past decades. Several contributors are deeply concerned with the dangers of essentializing the meaning of ‘women’ or ‘feminism’. Cenedese’s fascinating account of the *Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand* ties the importance of expanding space for this feminist archive to the need to accommodate the expansion of the meanings of ‘woman’ and ‘feminism’. Scheman insists that feminist epistemology is rooted in recognition of intersectionality, in part by clarifying lines of accountability in claims to knowledge. Söderbäck, in a powerful discussion of *Antigone* in relation to the

central character in the film *A Fantastic Woman*, argues for the need for a dynamic understanding of embodiment that avoids teleological closure. Davanger argues against the language of intersectional identity and for a non-reactive poststructuralist approach to feminist politics. However, although many of the contributors are wary of what they see as old essentialist mistakes, others are more willing to build on the distinctiveness of aspects of sexed embodiment to make their case for a specifically feminist and/or woman's perspective in philosophy. Rosengren, although conscious of the anachronism of associating Margaret Cavendish with feminism, nevertheless sees the 17th-century thinker as exhibiting a 'feminist ethos' in her denial of Cartesian dualism, and Jóhannesdóttir expresses her phenomenology of thinking through resonances between the location of the foetus and the inhabitation of landscape. Bouvrie also draws on the pregnant body as exemplifying a site of liminality in which subject/object dualisms are suspended.

A broad theme of the volume is epistemological, encompassing issues of epistemic justice, but also the relationship between knowledge and praxis and the material conditions for the production of feminist knowledge. There are arguments for different ways of complicating feminist standpoint epistemologies (Scheman, Davanger, Knezevic); for relating theory and practice in studying the ways that knowledge regimes are gendered (Gustaffson); and for challenging modern exclusions in secular categories, such as the private/public distinction (Økland). Cenedese, as already mentioned, makes a strong case for the feminist archive, not only in arguing for the possibility of its expansion but also for the engagement with feminist thinking that is enabled by the physicality of, as she puts it, a space where human and textual bodies can meet and interact. Her argument is a useful reminder of how the production of knowledge is conditioned by embodiment, a longstanding claim of feminist theories of knowledge. The editors of the volume call attention to broader conditions of feminist knowledge production. In the Conclusion to the volume, they tell the story of its origins but also draw attention to how research and pedagogic contexts of the contemporary University have become increasingly hostile to feminist scholarship inspired by the humanities, in contrast with the much more open and enabling conditions of the Nordic Summer School (now under threat). As described, the contents of this volume emerged out of iterative processes of collective learning, in which many tensions, between different disciplinary backgrounds and interests, different political commitments and different levels of epistemic confidence were constantly negotiated but never resolved. As the Editors put it at the end of the volume:

'What was exposed throughout the work of "Feminist Philosophy: Time, History and the Transformation of Thought", was an international and interdisciplinary desire to be given a space for thought, wonder and discussion that transgress feminism as theory and practice. Our hope is that feminist philosophy, as a productive culture of practice, can carve out further spaces within more academic institutions and thus contribute to critical inquiry and transgression of the contemporary logic of profit, self-assertion and competition' (377).

Feminist philosophical arguments can be distinguished by the extent to which they rely (or not) on stable, foundational understandings of the significance of embodiment or history. They can also be distinguished by whether they are primarily in the mode of critique – unsettling dominant masculinist or feminist ontological or epistemic assumptions – or whether they are in the mode of construct, putting forward a

substantive account of embodiment, experience, time, history, knowledge or truth. On the evidence of this volume, both modes continue to be important for feminist philosophy, but it is practiced more in the mode of critique than that of construct perhaps more so now than 30 years ago, following the loss of confidence in conceptual claims about women and feminism. There are constructive arguments within the volume, but they are often not fully elaborated, emerging as brief conclusions out of critical engagement with opposing positions. The chapters by Jóhannesdóttir and Bouvrie stand out as being predominantly in constructive mode, but also perhaps as being least in keeping with intersectional or poststructuralist sensibilities.

To what extent, then, have the Editors realised their ambition of feminist philosophy as a productive and transgressive culture of practice? They have certainly done so in the mode in which the contributions to the volume were produced and in the distinctive outcomes of the philosophical conversations in which participants in the project engaged. In this respect, they set up feminist philosophy as plural and open-ended, marked by a greater intellectual humility than may have been the case in earlier debates within feminist philosophy. At the same time, in some of the contributions, there is a clear commitment to the superiority of particular ways of doing feminist philosophy over others, and it would have been illuminating to see contributors to the volume debating more directly with each other. One of the dangers of a disciplinary conversation as it matures is that it also fragments. A key lesson of this volume is that, unless different exponents of feminist philosophy continue to engage directly with each other, we may be left with multiple transgressive lines of inquiry and a much more tenuous sense of what is produced by these multiple lines of thought that renders the label 'feminist philosophy' meaningful and the project of feminist philosophy worthwhile.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author is a current member of the *Redescriptions* Editorial Board.

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