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4-1-2004

## Review of *Feminists Doing Ethics* edited by Peggy DesAutels and Joanne Waugh

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Published version. *APA Newsletter of Feminism and Philosophy*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Spring 2004): 131-132.  
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## ***Feminists Doing Ethics***

Edited by Peggy DesAutels and Joanne Waugh  
(Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers,  
2001). 240 pp. \$24.95. ISBN: 0-7425-1211-8.

### **Reviewed by Theresa Weynand Tobin**

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*Feminists Doing Ethics* is an important collection of essays on topics ranging from moral agency and moral reasoning, to character and virtue, to hate crimes and humanitarian aid. Editors Peggy DesAutels and Joanne Waugh intend for their volume to emphasize a fundamental insight of feminist ethics that Margaret Walker identifies in her opening essay: rather than viewing morality as being opposed to power many feminist moral philosophers view morality as “inevitably, and fundamentally,” about power (ix).<sup>1</sup> True to the spirit in which this volume is offered, these essays form an enlightening body of theoretical work governed by the idea that fundamental to the study of things moral is the study of real moral agents who find themselves in complex relationships of power.

The view that morality is about power requires a methodological departure from the underpinnings of traditional moral philosophy. Accordingly, this volume begins with a section entitled “Theory Matters.” In the first essay, Margaret Walker proposes that by naturalizing our approach to ethics, we can embrace a power-sensitive morality that is both “empirically obligated and politically emancipatory” (4). One important task for moral philosophers is to analyze the way morality as a naturally occurring structure manifests itself in particular communities and the various powers that must be used to maintain it. This kind of analysis requires moral philosophy to be interdisciplinary, which marks yet another distinctive feature of the essays in this collection and of much contemporary feminist moral philosophy in general. Though most of the contributors to this collection are philosophers, careful reflection on and integration of empirical information from many other disciplines supports many of their respective analyses and conclusions.

In the second essay, Uma Narayan exposes the inadequacy of the category “Woman” for organizing feminist theoretical and political work. Her argument stems from reflections on the complex ways in which the interests of women who are differently situated may not be compatible because of disparities in power that stem from the intersection of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and other such factors. Narayan challenges feminists to organize theoretical and political work around politically chosen alliances that more accurately represent the complexities of various forms of oppression and that allow more of us who are politically interested to address them. Though any essay in this book could be read discretely, I found it extremely beneficial to read them in light of these two opening essays as they create a methodological framework for the remaining contributions.

One of the most cohesive sections of this volume, “Forming Selves, Being Agents,” contains three outstanding essays that explore the ways in which power affects identity and moral agency. Diana Tietjens Meyers engages the debate in contemporary feminist theory over whether or not women have gender identities. Arguing against both essentialist views and anti-identity views and drawing from Nancy Chodorow’s work in psychoanalytic theory, Meyers presents a more nuanced third alternative she calls individualized gender identities. This third alternative acknowledges that all women

do not share the same identity *as women*, but allows that the selves we are and can become depend, to some degree, on the gendered meanings attached to the social locations that we inhabit—in ways that we may not be able to change.

This theme is picked up by the remaining two essays in this section. Hilde Lindemann Nelson uses rich examples from life and fiction to demonstrate how the narrative construction of oppressive identities can restrict one’s ability to freely exercise moral agency. Though identities can be narratively repaired, which can redeem one’s capacity to exercise moral agency; if enough damage is done, repair may be limited or impossible. Bat-Ami Bar On discusses how the formation of her body as a violent body has been both her own project and, as a Jewish-Israeli child in post-independence Israel, the project of a nation (63). Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, Bar On explores the possibility of justification for the violent female body, carefully navigating the issue, as she recognizes that feminists are typically suspicious and critical of violent bodies, since violent bodies have often been the bodies of men inflicting violence on women.

The essays in “Character and Its Virtues” extend the discussion of moral agency using a virtue ethics lens. Lisa Tessman argues persuasively that because oppression functions in a structural, systemic, and targeted way, it prevents members of certain groups from attaining certain external goods necessary for leading a good life, and it deprives people of a social environment conducive to the development of virtues that facilitate human flourishing. While making a strong case for this kind of analysis, Tessman proceeds cautiously, as she is acutely aware of the problematic nature of characterizing the oppressed as lacking virtue. Nancy Potter offers a context-sensitive investigation of forgiveness. Through extended analysis of a fictional story in which the characters’ lives are marked by physical and sexual abuse and by oppressive identities, Potter concludes that in some contexts, refusing to forgive may not be a vice. Determining how to act virtuously requires being attentive to our individual tendencies and inclinations; but Potter cautions that “we also need to know how structural power relations have socialized us to view virtues and vices differently for different groups of people” (148).

The remaining two essays in this section probe some issues that have plagued the justice/care debate in feminist moral philosophy. Margaret McLaren argues that placing care within a virtue-ethics framework can solve some of the problems of viewing care ethics as a normative moral theory, problems such as perpetuating damaging feminine stereotypes (109). Like McLaren, Barbara Andrew is also concerned that care ethics upholds an ideal of the moral agent that perpetuates a damaging feminine stereotype, one she calls the “Angel in the House.” Seeking to free care ethics from the “Angel in the House,” but arguing that ideals are important, Andrew suggests an alternative moral ideal for feminist ethics, one that embodies both autonomy and relationship: “the creator of found art and the pursuer of erotic joy” (120). Echoing the theme that runs throughout this volume, Andrew remarks that though all “ethics participate in power,” not “all power limits and oppresses; some liberates and empowers” (130). Our goal is to develop ideals that facilitate the latter.

The fourth section of the volume, “Thinking Right, Feeling Good,” includes two essays that explore moral reasoning or emotions. Phyllis Rooney derives important conclusions about moral reasoning by exploring how recent studies in feminist psychology on sex and gender reveal situational aspects of gender that facilitate a better understanding of situational aspects of moral reasoning. James Lindemann Nelson then

turns our attention to the emotions. Using literary examples primarily from Jane Austen's work, Nelson challenges Naomi Scheman's ontology of emotions—that they are entirely socially constructed—arguing that it may undermine Scheman's important epistemic conclusions about the role of emotion in achieving moral knowledge and moral objectivity.

The final section, "Taking Responsibility," includes three essays that tackle some applied issues. Using a feminist ethic of care, Joan Tronto's insightful essay reveals an alternative way to understand and to resolve the conflicts that often arise between professionals and managers. Natalie Brender convincingly demonstrates that the way in which well-intended, but politically impoverished individuals in Western countries extend to suffering peoples in distant places is ineffectual. She argues that our care for distant others needs to be informed not just by "realities of need" that are made so vivid in the visual images of the suffering in mass media, but also by "realities of power," which will enable us to understand and address the causes of such suffering and not merely its symptoms (211). In the final essay, Alison Bailey argues for an approach to hate crimes that calls for community and not just individual accountability. She revises Larry May's work on shared responsibility to create moral space for victims to participate more fully in addressing these problems. Bailey's "shared respond-ability" approach preserves the moral agency of victims, by encouraging community members not to fix problems for victims, but to fix problems with them.

*Feminists Doing Ethics* is an outstanding collection of essays by feminist scholars that can quite effectively supplement both beginning and more advanced thinking about morality. Perhaps one of its greatest contributions to the field is the way these authors and editors conceive of moral philosophy itself. As the title suggests, ethics is indeed something that we do, and moral philosophy is better understood as a practice rather than as a profession. Conceiving of moral philosophy as a practice encourages sensitivity to the powers involved in defining, naming, educating, and influencing, and reveals new possibilities for what moral theory can contribute to the real world.

#### Endnotes

1. In their introduction, the editors also note that many of these essays came out of an international conference on feminist ethics, *Feminist Ethics Revisited*, that took place in October 1999.

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## ***Feminist Interpretations of Ludwig Wittgenstein***

Edited by Naomi Scheman and Peg O' Connor (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002). 472 pp. \$34.50. ISBN: 0271021985.

## ***Oppression and Responsibility: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Social Practices and Moral Theory***

Peg O' Connor (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002). 168 pp. \$21.95. ISBN: 0271023465.

### **Reviewed by William Cowling**

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For those of us who came of age, philosophically, when Wittgenstein's work was still largely the intellectual "property" of positivist philosophers, the very idea that his work would attract the critical attention of feminist thinkers still takes a moment to process. However, as the two works I review here eloquently attest, this hesitation is unwarranted. The growing feminist literature on Wittgenstein has already begun to underscore the deep relevance his thought has for a variety of feminist projects; and this despite the many aspects of his work and life that might make such an outcome seem so highly improbable, or even "perverse."

It is well-known, of course, that Wittgenstein's personal and professional lives were a maze of contradictions. His misogyny and anti-Semitism were aspects of an ambivalent relationship to his own sexuality born, in part, of a Victorianism that had not yet run its course in the *fin de Siecle* Vienna of Wittgenstein's youth. His work in the *Tractatus* reflected a naïve faith in the power and potential of the positivist agenda for language and science initiated by Russell, Whitehead, and Frege, among others. Had he taken seriously his own pronouncements that the *Tractatus* laid to rest most of the important problems confronting philosophy, his place as merely one more of the analytical boy philosophers who provided the impetus for the Vienna Circle would have been secure. But the real power of his thought prevented this from happening. His discovery that the nature of language is intimately entangled with the cultural world in the form of "games" and "family resemblances" would, almost from the beginning, illuminate the inadequacies of positivist thought. But this aspect of his work had to wait until he rejected the atomism of the *Tractatus* that he did as part of the struggle that drove him to rethink his own life and the role of philosophy in general, two projects that would occupy him until his death. These later elements in Wittgenstein's thought provide much, although not all, of the background for the material found in *Feminist Interpretations of Ludwig Wittgenstein* and *Oppression and Responsibility: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Social Practices and Moral Theory*.

As with each of the previous volumes in the Rereading the Canon series, *Feminist Interpretations of Ludwig Wittgenstein* offers a generous selection of original essays in which feminist philosophers engage the thought of a major figure in the Western philosophical canon. Compiled and edited by Naomi Scheman and Peg O'Connor, the present anthology engenders what, for many, will be completely new conversations in which Wittgenstein becomes a dialogical