

Diversifying Syllabi 2018 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter (1-2 pages max.)

Article/Essay Title: “Feminist Transformations of Moral Theory”

Author: Virginia Held

Readability: Easy/Moderate

Held writes in an accessible style, but makes lots of references to background knowledge that undergraduates might find difficult.

Thesis:

Held observes that the history of moral theory has been primarily constructed from a male point of view, with fundamental assumptions that are not gender-neutral. She suggests that moral theory must be transformed to successfully account for women’s experience.

Key Definitions:

N/A

Brief Summary:

The History of Ethics:

Held begins by summarizing several historical moves in philosophy, with the goal of showing how ethics has generally rejected feminine values. She notes that philosophers have typically focused on rationality (typically associated with masculinity) as a way of controlling the emotions (typically associated with femininity). She illustrates this trend with several examples:

- The form/matter distinction in Greek philosophy;
- Aristotle’s conception of the household and the polis;
- The conceptualization of mothering as natural, rather than distinctively human;
- Hobbes’ account of human nature;
- Etc.

Held argues that traditionally, the feminine has been conceived as something to be overcome, rather than celebrated. Female experience has been largely irrelevant to morality. Held argues that these views distort human experience. She suggests that because these attitudes and assumptions are so deeply ingrained, it is impossible to simply “absorb the gender that has been ‘left behind’” (327). Rather, we must recognize the moral value of the feminine and shape moral theory in such a way as to account for these values. While she does not offer a unified theory, she suggests three focal points for transformation: the split between reason and emotion, the public/private distinction, and the conception of the self.

Reason and Emotion

Held argues that a genuinely universal moral theory must take into account both men's and women's experiences. Focusing on women's experience of moral problems reveals that traditional ethics has typically ignored relationships between embodied persons. Women's experience has tended to be less concerned with applying abstract principles of justice, and more concerned with the moral emotions and an ethics of care. Rather than preserving rationality at the expense of the emotions, women's experience both respects and requires the development of moral emotions as a partial basis for morality. In contrast, traditional views of ethics, which often appeal to "mutually disinterested rational individuals," do not take these values into account (333).

The Public and the Private

Held argues that gender biases have distorted traditional conceptions of the distinction between the public and the private. While the household has historically been framed "as if on an island beyond politics" and identified with nature, the public domain has been identified with what is "distinctively human" (334). Dominant patterns of thought have seen women, and specifically mothering, as closer to nature and less distinctively human. However, Held argues that this reveals a bias as human mothering is no more "natural" than any other human activity. She suggests that moral theorists ought to be highly concerned with the transformative creation of new persons. Revising the realm of morality to account for the "private" can offer guidance with regard to human relationships.

The Concept of Self

Held claims that traditionally, ethical theory has been concerned with the "poles of individual self and universal all" (337). That is, the interests of the self must be reconciled with the interests of others. Held argues that traditional views of ethics have neglected moral relations and artificially pitted the isolated self against others. This has resulted in an individualistic view of morality that does not account for our ties to other persons. For instance, universal theories that apply to "all rational beings" cannot account for the moral value of relationships (339). Because the self is fundamentally relational, ethical theories that frame individuals as isolated beings cannot be successful. Gendered accounts of ethics rightly value autonomy, but fail to appreciate the caring and relational connectedness that is distinctive of women's experience. Thinking of the self as an individualistic, bounded entity distorts much of what is valuable about human relationships. Rethinking this conception of the self avoids these problems in favor of an account that takes social context seriously and allows for the development of a "moral satisfactory relational self" (344).

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

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Author: Virginia Held

Possible Applications:

- Intro to Ethics
- Feminist Philosophy
 - o NB: this article is a bit dated, and does not accurately reflect the current state of these fields
- Ancient Philosophy
- Political Philosophy
- Political and Social Thought

Complementary Texts/Resources:

- Pair sections of it with the pieces it critiques
 - o Ex. Aristotle, Hobbes, etc.
- Judith Butler or Gail Weiss on embodiment
- Sally Haslanger, “On being objective, being objectified”
- MO Little’s “Why a feminist approach to bioethics?”
 - o Also Doshi, Vidhi. “Why Doctors Still Misunderstand Heart Disease in Women.”
<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/10/heart-disease-women/412495/>
- Patricia Hill Collins “Toward an Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology”
- Sarah Jane Leslie’s “Carving up the social world with generics”
- Kathleen Okruhlik’s “Gender and the biological sciences”
- Videos on the history of ethics from Crash Course Philosophy

Possible Class Activities:

- Think more about the idea that starting a conversation in certain terms dictates how the conversation goes
 - o Is there a way to illustrate that in the classroom? Small groups, pass out prompts with slightly different starts to a conversation on the same topic
 - Ex. on the topic of climate change: what should we do? What should be done? Who is to blame? Is there a problem?
- Close reading and gender analysis of passages of related passages from Aristotle, Hegel, etc.
- Work through some current examples of gender/sex bias, like the lack of menstruation tracker in Apple Health: <https://www.livescience.com/48040-apple-healthkit-lacks-period-tracker.html>