

PROCREATION, POWER, AND PERSONAL AUTONOMY: FEMINIST REFLECTIONS

Chapter 10

Coming to Terms with Contemporary Scholarship on Sex and Gender: Prospects for Social and Political Action

"I can't stick it all together," he said. "Sex, politics, the past, myself. I am all in pieces." "Who can stick these things together? Why expect" she demanded. "But in *me*," persisted Stephen, "the gaps are so *great*. I am hardly made of the same human stuff. The same human matter. There is no consistency in me. No glue. No paste. I have no cohesion. I make no sense. I am a vacuum. I am fragments. I am morsels".... "The people I like I don't approve," he persisted. "The people I approve I do not like. The women I like I cannot love. The woman I love I cannot like. The life I seek I could not endure. I seek a land where the water flows uphill. I seek simplicity."

Margaret Drabble's character Stephen Cox in *The Gates of Ivory* (1991, 105).

Throughout these pages I have been pointing to the innumerable ways women's experiences are continually in the process of creation and invention through new uses of language, new practices, emerging traditions, and changing identities. But, unlike Stephen Cox whose identity has come apart, most of us manage to keep our moorings and utilize discontinuities to reconfigure our autobiographies in fresh ways. As I read Sally Ruddick, for instance, she is not only seeking to reproduce maternal experiences but to provoke new modes of experiencing. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires were not merely appealing to established mothering practices. Their political engagement was redefining maternal interests--using the master's tools to deconstruct the master's house. Collectively, feminists have drawn on emancipatory strategies to envision alternative futures in which difference among women's experiences and interests would be utilized constructively as a resource to facilitate coalition building. For the recognition that there is no central locus of power, hence no single mode of resistance, shows the need for multiple strategies, both to resist relations of domination across the social field and to build coalitions that will foster new configurations of mutual support. But because feminist debates are located within specific political and cultural contexts, it is doubtful that feminists can speak with a single voice except within very limited domains.

Integral to such strategies in the domain of reproductive policy would be integration of women's objectively imposed identities as reproducers with their subjective identities as embodied beings possessed of capacities to experience pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation as sources of personal and social meaning. Incorporation of such a policy within a political context would make visible the paradox implicit in the burgeoning infertility industry, exposing how the effort to reinscribe motherhood as women's normative state has facilitated the emergence of novel conceptions of what it means to be a mother. Not only traditionalists but many feminists, too, are deeply divided about the destabilization of traditional norms of motherhood. Some see this destabilization as an unqualified threat fragmenting the functions of women's bodies which, in their view, constitute a unitary whole. But this is surely an

idealized vision of women's bodies that does not cohere with either the actual ways women are viewed or how they view themselves. There is reason to ask whether this idealized image of motherhood is worth perpetuating. "Social" mothers have been around for a long while and their role has not always been devalued. Albeit, we have not always had "gestational" mothers and "genetic" mothers. But why not? Surely some biological and gestational mothers who are pressed by circumstance to transfer rearing responsibility to others would prefer to retain an intimate social connection with their offspring. Some who do rear their own biological children might actually prefer to play a lesser role in child rearing without having to sever "parental rights." A space needs to be opened to rethink conceptions of "mother" and prepare the ground for new options embedded in different political and social structures.

Such rethinking, though, cannot be circumscribed within the framework of women's lives alone but must encompass a broader spectrum of thinking about self and social identity. Though I do not count myself as a postmodern feminist, I am convinced that we can all learn from its characterization of fragmented selfhood, that reigning conceptions of human agency need to be rethought, particularly relations between subjectivity and social power. Feminist politics needs to be tied to a historicized conception of human experience that situates women's experiences within a more inclusive social framework. We need a deeper understanding of how individual identities emerge out of microstructures of power and interpersonal relationships. But postmodern feminists have also much to learn from other feminist thinkers who are committed to emancipatory strategies. Without any idealized perspective toward the future feminism would lack resources to advance a long-term feminist politics. Enormous differences in perspective separate disparate feminist tendencies—whether they be radical, socialist, liberal or whatever—yet each is firmly anchored in an ideal vision. Even feminist critiques that play them off against one another utilize such visions when they appeal to disparities between their present strategies and long-range aims.

Stephen Cox's sense of a disrupted existence resonates with post-modern/poststructuralist associations. But unlike so many who celebrate the rejection of a unitary and coherent subject, he does not glorify his rootlessness: he mourns it. For him it represents a loss of coherence, an inability to make intelligible sense of his experiences. Others may view his complaint as a facile indulgence of a privileged white male typifying the colonizer's perspective. But he perceives himself as a revolutionary come to join a failed Cambodian revolt. His account of himself resonates with sense of fracture, fragmentation. Not only is he lost psychologically, but the politics of change he had embraced is shattered too. He is left bereft with a set of commitments that cannot be reconciled in any cultural context open to him (146). His lament makes clear the intimate connection between self-identity and an emancipatory social vision.

Cox sees himself as lacking the kind of particularized moral ideal Diana Meyers champions in her 1994 book. Meyers stresses the need for an ideal to ground a notion of moral identity definite enough to provide practical moral direction. However, her account has the tone of an individual achievement rather than a political one. Cox tries that route. He experiments with a diffuse assortment of moral ideals but none fit. He seeks identity with a Cambodian cause that rejects him. He cannot abide the British culture that accepts him. Dawning on him is a gradual realization that individual self-definition is only possible within a compatible political context, that self-governance is inseparable from social interdependence. His own personal struggle is not unlike the struggles of countless women set adrift within a gendered world that offers them no future that they can embrace as their own. The common vision marking the wave of the feminist movement that washed over us in the 1960s set a course these women could follow. This chapter assesses the prospects of continued adherence to such an agenda in the

light of subsequent fractures in feminism that have problematized the pursuit of a common reproductive politics.

Prospects for collective feminist action

Insofar as strategies to displace prevailing gendered constellations of power are linked to theoretical analyses of relations between women and power, it is by no means clear how far feminists can move to forge alliances. For the feminist movement today is marked by profound differences, particularly pertaining to universal claims about masculine oppression and feminine identity. Some fear that feminist viewpoints have scattered into so many fragments that the subject of feminist discourse is in danger of losing its voice altogether amid a proliferation of particular situational voices. bell hooks, among others, has called for resistance to the call for any common politics. There is," she maintains, "much evidence substantiating the reality that race and class identity create differences in quality of life, social status, and lifestyle that take precedence over the common experience women share—differences which are rarely transcended" (hooks 1984,4). The diversity of women's perspectives is often viewed as fragmenting women into competing groups. But diversity both within the individual psyche and among women can also be viewed as a moment of reclamation drawing Black women from the margins of feminist discourse to the center; prodding feminists to rethink the partiality of perspectives they had implicitly universalized.

Others, while acknowledging that the call for a common politics has often been used to excuse privileged women from turning their attention to differences in social status, fear that feminist politics has been so cannibalized around internal struggle that we are even losing sight of the struggle against racism and sexism. Alice Kessler-Harris (1992) echoes the response of many in calling for a more open consideration of our differences as the only basis upon which we might come to an understanding of the positions of other women and build more durable coalitions.

In light of the fragmentation of feminism at many levels, it is unclear what sort of coalitions we might build from our present theoretical positions. Judith Butler presses for an "antifoundational approach to coalition politics" (1990, p.15) which does not settle in advance what the content of "women" will be. She cautions, though, that whatever outcomes are likely to emerge from such coalitions cannot be predicted in advance without impeding the very dynamics of the process that constitutes them. She points out the need to acknowledge power relations that are already built into the dialogue and are likely to affect its outcome. But she sees within this approach the possible emergence of only provisional unities directed to particular concrete actions.

Her proposal is very modest and its workability would depend on the constitution of particular coalitions. Some feminists will undoubtedly hope for much more and aim still toward a more global understanding of the world that structures groups along axes of domination. My own reservations about Butler's proposal are more particularistic. I am convinced that her pragmatic approach to coalition politics is on the right course. But since theory and practice interpenetrate one another at many levels of discourse, the issue of the identity of the collective "women" cannot be wholly disentangled from the subjectivity of concrete women. Nor can particular programs for political action be considered in isolation from theories of power relations. Current feminist controversy about the proper analysis of power relations -- whether power is organized around a few major axes of domination or is decentered, shifting

and unstable -- is bound to influence whatever practical strategies are devised. If, as some feminists believe, power relations radiate from above around a single central axis then, indeed, only resistance strategies are appropriate. If, on the other hand, power is so thoroughly diffused throughout the society that no systematically unequal relations of power are identifiable (as some followers of Foucault maintain), then only the most localized strategies could possibly alter power relations. Neither conception provides an understanding of power likely to advance programs for social transformation.

Others have proposed that feminists need to rethink the social world far more radically than either the essentialist or social constructivist options have allowed. Adoption of Foucault's categorization of all alternative perspectives as subjugated knowledges fails to dislodge the dominant conception of relations between knowledge and power. Women's perspectives, some think, need to be taken as constitutive of a very different kind of world. Elizabeth Janeway in "The uses of power" has noted the roles Rachel Carson and Jane Jacobs have played in changing common perceptions of how we ought to deal with the physical environment and with urban problems. Hopefully, feminists can play an analogous role in influencing reproductive technology policy.

Here I cannot exhaust all of the issues that the new modes of reproduction force to the attention of women but only prod my readers into asking still further questions. As Susan Griffin so trenchantly observes: "It is not necessary that we agree on every point, for what we have in common is not small." Thus I will focus only on the leading contenders among models for fabricating a sense of community allied to a conception of autonomy that can again draw feminists together around a common vision.

In other words we need a model that integrates two moral perspectives that are commonly viewed as antagonistic, the standpoints of the "generalized and the concrete other."¹ The generalized moral standpoint that informs the traditional formal conception of the autonomous self has been attained only by blinding itself to its own concreteness and abstracting from the very content essential to the making of morally discerning judgments about the likeness or unlikeness of concrete situations. This latter point has been forcefully made by a number of feminists who, following Carol Gilligan's critique of moral development theory, emphasize the inadequacy of a generalized moral perspective that is unresponsive to the needs and wants of actual individuals embedded in historically specific situations. Some of these feminists, however, embrace Gilligan's work with such uncritical enthusiasm that they fail to recognize the importance of a generalized standpoint for making comparative assessments of morally relevant features of specific situations. Gilligan, herself, is often critical of women who are so fully invested in caring for others that they neglect their own needs.² Though an understanding of autonomy that integrates both generalized and concrete perspectives would need to abandon the quest for the ultimate universality Kantian and utilitarians reach for, it could act as a regulatory ideal checking the propensity of

¹I borrow this language from Seyla Benhabib 1992, 158-159.

²A number of authors have considered the risks to women in giving themselves uncritically to the needs and preferences of significant others, both children and partners. For a superb analysis of these risks see Bartky's "Feeding egos and tending wounds" (1990).

those who control discourse and practice to universalize their own needs and wants and relegate to the margins the needs and wants of the disenfranchised. 3

Rather than idealizing only one model of human relations (such as the prevailing model derived from marketplace transactions), an alternative moral perspective toward the generalized other might draw on a plurality of models appropriate to different domains of human activity (including those that have been "privatized" by the prevailing account). Virginia Held (1984, 1993) has elaborated a model based on mother-child relations, though she withholds from this particular idealization any claim to exclusivity. Other feminists are interested in constructing an alternative model around relations among friends⁴. Here I will discuss each of the leading contenders and weigh their strengths and shortcomings.

Held favors the relation between mother and child as an idealized metaphor of human relations (acknowledging the limitations of its applicability) because mother-child relations are far more highly structured than ties among friends and mothering has historically offered women the opportunity to exercise agency more fully than other relations available to them. The mother has a responsible role in a creative project, transforming a helpless dependent creature into an independent autonomous adult.

However, like the institutionalized caregiving of health care workers, mothering may slip into a morally defective mode of caring. For traditionally mothers have been expected to subordinate their own interests to those of their children. So over-reliance on the mothering metaphor risks normalizing relationships of inequality and risks perpetuating women's subordination because the experience of mothering is not wholly separable from institutionalized expectations of mothers. For these reasons some feminists reject mothering as a model of moral agency: to them it represents a distorted sense of agency that undermines reciprocal interaction. Hoagland (1991) argues that since the very purpose of mothering is to wean the cared-for of dependency the model can provide little direction in envisaging a relationship among equals. However, since the caring offered within medical settings (in rehabilitative care or psychotherapy, for instance) also seeks its own self-extinction, the mothering metaphor might usefully illuminate the dynamics of provider-patient interaction and bring its practice and goals into better alignment.

Feminists who are most troubled by limitations of the mothering metaphor have generated an alternative model patterned after relations among friends which places more emphasis on equality (Friedman 1989, 1993; Raymond, 1986). Raymond emphasizes a conception of thoughtfulness that incorporates both reason and caring, a quality of passion that manifests a thinking heart possessed of a robust sense of self, and a striving for the full use of one's powers. Friedman stresses the importance of multiple friendships that afford the opportunity to participate in overlapping communities, so that one acquires a plurality of standpoints from which to critically assess one's choices, values, and character, thereby overcoming the tendency to uncritically accept social norms. Friendship, however, unlike medicine or mothering, is a comparatively loosely structured relationship seldom embedded in the kinds of goal-oriented activities and institutionalized expectations that characterize such densely ordered practices as medicine or mothering. Friendships depend on their own inherent quality (see Bonhoeffer). It

3. AD adds here: "On universality quote Beroffen in *Hypatia* 2001 issue on problem of evil."

⁴ See Friedman 1993 and 1989; also Raymond 1986.

is the content of the particular relationship that binds friends together and determines their character and intensity of the friendship. Much of their value seems to lie in their free and unconstrained exercise.⁵

Yet friendship often generates duties that are partially structured by human biological limitations and the conventions and social arrangements prevailing specific to particular social structures, e.g., organizing a celebration to mark a festive occasion, caring for a sick friend, and arranging a funeral. However, unlike medical practice or mothering, most contemporary societies place few constraints on those who slight the duties of friendship. Lacking in relations even among closest of friends is the external recognition and network of enforceable rights and obligations that hold family relations together.

5. Probably Silvia Federici, 2012. *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. PM Press. 186.

Despite these asymmetries, the practice of medicine might draw on at least some features of each of these models. First, like medicine, both friendship and mothering are caring relationships involving commitment to the good of others and action to advance that good. Moreover, the caring embedded in these relationships differs from generalized beneficence in that achievement of the intended good can only come about through shared activity as an expression of a particular relationship. Unlike the giver and the receiver of disinterested beneficence, the good a friend does for a friend or a mother for a child is integral to the way they are bound up together. Since such activity is likely to be very particular to that relationship, it is not interchangeable with doing good to undifferentiated others. The medical provider and patient also share a common goal which, I have argued, should optimally be particularized to the circumstances and choices of each individual patient.

Second, the practice of medicine is vulnerable to forms of exploitation similar to those that endanger friendship or good mothering. The mutual understanding that friendship fosters and the intimate attunement to another's needs that marks good mothering confer an increased power to advance another's good that distinguishes the moral dimensions of such situations from situations that are approached from the perspective of the disinterested impartial observer. Since this power brings in its wake increased risk of violating the other's agency, both relationships require a moral sensibility that resists the temptation to use the other exploitively to further aims and ends that don't cohere with their own. Since the use of parental metaphors in medicine has tended to exacerbate power imbalances by supplanting the patient's own self-understanding with the physician's construction of her good, cautious selective use of the mothering metaphor might be instructive here, more useful for many purposes than the friendship model which presupposes a relation among equals. Unlike paternalism that perpetuates patient dependency on the power and authority of physicians an optimal parenting relationship should foster development of capacities of dependent ones to care for themselves in ways that advance their own projects and capacities to sustain relationships among equals. Providers might be encouraged to draw on their own experiences, to recover the felt sense of situations where they were the powerless ones. Having adopted that point of view, ask how a mother or father who cared for one's present and future wellbeing could be responsive to their child's project to gain greater control over her life. Much as good parenting requires transferring power and encouraging independent decision-making and projects as the child matures, so health care providers might come to see themselves as fostering the autonomy competencies of their patients, including their capacities for innovation, development, and change (Meyers 1989).⁶

Bonds, not boundaries

Though analysis of the moral practices bound up with caring relationships such as mothering and friendship is instructive in generating continuities and interconnections between modes of personal connection and provider/patient relationships, I am persuaded that they cannot replace generalizable

⁶I recognize that few relationships between parents and grown children wholly exemplify this model. Material conditions may perpetuate or invert relations of dominance and subordination. Or the psychological residue of early relationships may have such a tenacious hold that patterns of inequality cannot be overcome. But I am convinced that, at least within democratic societies, such a model does serve as a regulative ideal guiding conceptions of what constitutes "good" parenting.

moral principles. Unlike Noddings (1984) and Manning (1992) who see caring as an adequate model to meet all the requirements for moral guidance,⁷ I think caring is too risky a metaphor to rely on to redress imbalances in power relationships.⁸

In conclusion, I will point to several kinds of situations that call for a generalized conception of moral obligations to others.

First, we are positioned beings given to universalize our own partial perspectives, often lacking the moral imagination to reach beyond the context of our own lives to adopt the other's point of view, so we need a generalized perspective that acknowledges the kinds of morally significant differences that might lead the other to make choices we cannot even understand. Thus we need a generalized conception of autonomy that recognizes both that individual identity cannot be abstracted from its embeddedness in particulars and that caring can easily become over-intrusive unless the other's autonomy is adequately respected. Second, an enlarged conception of equality is required that acknowledges the caregiver's own needs in order to adequately care for herself, not only in order to guard against "caring burnout" (Manning 1992, p.76) but also out of respect owed to the caregiver herself. Third, we need a transformed understanding of beneficence that recognizes the claims of those distanced from us by geographical borders or the boundaries of race or class. The advancement of moral goals often calls for collective action that extends beyond the particularity of personal relations. If we restrict our moral range to those to whom we can provide care directly, others are likely to fall outside the realm of our moral consideration--even where we had a hand in creating the conditions under which they must live. Fourth, time is a scarce resource in competition with other demands. Those needing care are bound to outnumber available resources, so a conception of justice is required to distinguish the most urgent needs (Tronto 1993).

Hence the need to preserve both a generalized and a concrete standpoint.⁹ But by beginning moral inquiry from the initial position in which individuals are taken to be situated social beings rather than presocial abstract individuals the moral significance of concrete relationships will not be left behind in the move toward a generalized perspective. What is important for the practice of medicine is that we initiate moral inquiry from the concrete standpoint of the one needing attention rather than the standpoint of a generalized other and that we recognize differences between self and other at the outset.¹⁰

⁷ Both argue that where questions arise about appropriate care we don't need to appeal to rules to avoid defective care, but need only invoke an ideal instance of caring behavior.

⁸ See Nussbaum on Noddings' paradigm in *Sex and Social Justice*, pp. 74-75--"socially deformed norms" particularly, taking moments of fusion as paradigmatic. (Argue for a dialectical relationship between spontaneity and reflection--like Peirce's 2ndness and 3rdness.)

⁹I owe the central distinction between these two standpoints to Benhabib 1992.

¹⁰ AD's drafts of this chapter end rather abruptly here. From one of them, I believe that she intended to go on here to include an updated and revised version of her groundbreaking paper "Converging concerns: Feminist bioethics, development theory and human rights, in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 29(2), 2004.

