

FEMINIST ETHICS: FROM LOCAL TO GLOBAL

by Andrea C. Westlund

Barbara S. Andrew, Jean Keller, & Lisa H. Schwartzman, eds., *FEMINIST INTERVENTIONS IN ETHICS AND POLITICS*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005. 245p. bibl. index. pap., \$34.95, ISBN 978-0742542693.

Rebecca Whisnant & Peggy DesAutels, eds., *GLOBAL FEMINIST ETHICS*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008. 285p. bibl. index. \$75.00, ISBN 978-0742559103.

Virginia Held, *THE ETHICS OF CARE: PERSONAL, POLITICAL, AND GLOBAL*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006, 2007. 211p. bibl. index. \$75.00, ISBN 978-0195325904; pap., \$45.00, ISBN 978-0195180992.

Feminist ethics and social theory are by now well-established philosophical subfields, characterized by an impressive variety of approaches and themes that are united in the conviction that *gender matters*. That is, gender (however we are to understand that vexed category) matters to our construction of moral problems, our understanding of moral agency, our assessment of moral theories and practices, our articulation of central moral concepts, and much more besides. This trio of books, the first two of which are recent installments in the *Feminist Constructions* series edited by Hilde Lindemann, Sara Ruddick, and Margaret Urban Walker, provide an excellent snapshot of the current state of scholarship in these fields. Anyone wishing to orient herself within current feminist ethics and social thought would do well to start with these volumes, which have much to offer both newcomers and seasoned participants in the debates around which they are structured.

Though their emphases differ, the three books share overlapping themes. Among the most prominent foci of attention are justice-related concepts such as rights and equality, care-related concepts such as compassion and responsiveness to need, and, finally,

ly, the global dimensions and potential of these concepts for feminist theory and practice. *Feminist Interventions in Ethics and Politics* (henceforth *Feminist Interventions*) is primarily theoretical in its orientation, while *Global Feminist Ethics* contains more applied ethics. Virginia Held's book, as its title suggests, provides a sustained treatment of the branch of feminist ethics that has come to be known as the ethics of care, tracing out its philosophical lineage as well as suggesting how it might be applied to moral and social problems at the national and international levels.

Feminist Interventions is a good place to start, in part because it has the earliest publication date, but more significantly because it begins with a set of refreshing new essays on the concepts of gender and sex themselves. As the editors of this volume note, feminist scholars began treating gender as a significant category of analysis more than thirty years ago. In doing so they generated important lines of critique of traditional theories, as well as fresh new approaches to a range of moral, political, and social problems. Indeed, some of those problems were hard even to recognize as problems without the conceptual tools made available by gender analysis. It has become increasingly clear, however,

that the category of gender cannot be taken for granted. In recent years many feminist theorists (some influenced by multicultural and global perspectives, others by varieties of post-modern and post-structural theory) have questioned the usefulness of the category, fearing that any attempt to define women will be problematically essentialist and exclusionary. At the same time, many have stressed the reality and urgency of women's oppression, wondering how feminist theory and practice can be coherent and effective without some understanding of what or who women are.

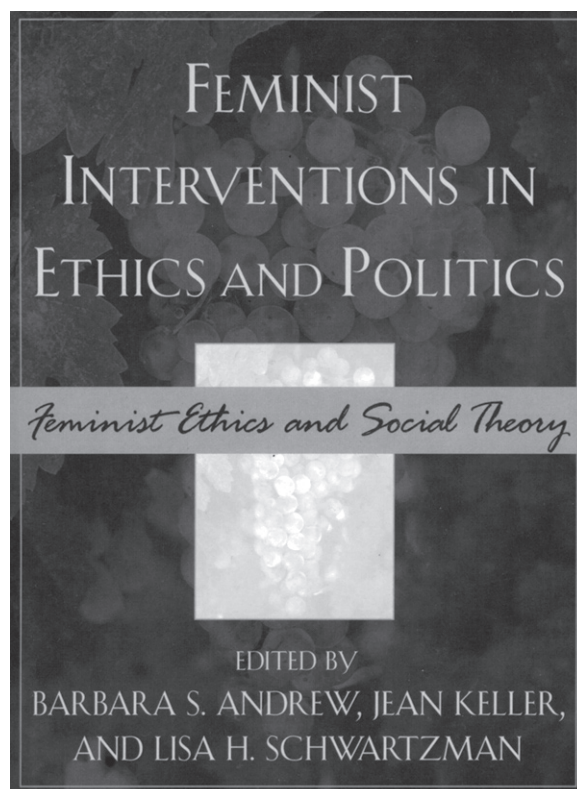
The three chapters grouped in Part I of *Feminist Interventions* are among the most careful and constructive treatments of these issues I have read in a long time. All seek to transcend the current impasse in the debates over gender and its relation to sex. Linda Martin Alcoff and Marilyn Frye both argue that it is possible to acknowledge some biological underpinnings of gender categories without treating members of those categories as homogeneous or as biologically determined to fill particular social roles. Interestingly, Frye argues that the essentialism debates have been driven by a mistaken view about what biological and social categories are and how they work. While I do not have space to

outline the details of her argument, it is both creative and careful and, in my view, succeeds in shedding new light on a persistent problem. Ann Ferguson's contribution rounds out the section, arguing that we should not reject the sex–gender distinction “just because both ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ have been socially and historically constructed” (p.59). Ferguson defends a “social energy” theory of gender identity and sexual orientation on which one's sense of self is multiple, layered, and constantly changing.

I have spent some time on the essays in Part I (which are more directly about metaphysics than ethics) because they raise and tackle difficult conceptual issues that have lurked in the background — and have sometimes emerged in the foreground — of the very project of developing a specifically feminist ethics. The remainder of the chapters in *Feminist Interventions* (and those in its companion volume, *Global Feminist Ethics*) are a testament to the great variety of approaches that have grown out of this project, and to the sophistication that many of these approaches have achieved.

Part II of *Feminist Interventions* focuses on virtues and their costs. Lisa Tessman examines the psychological burdens associated with virtues — such as intense and unyielding anger — that might be needed for effective resistance to oppression, and challenges the idea that virtues always benefit or lead to the flourishing of their bearers. Laura Cannon offers a critique of and response to Martha Nussbaum's conception of compassion, and Sarah Clark Miller defends the refreshingly unorthodox thesis that an ethics of care might be best developed from

Kantian starting points in the duty of beneficence. (It is interesting to juxtapose Miller's chapter with Held's book, described below, which takes the more conventional tack of pitting the ethics of care squarely against both Kantianism and utilitarianism.)



Part III includes new challenges to particular forms of feminism, including liberal feminism, ecofeminism, and so-called victim feminism. Liberal feminism has, of course, been challenged from multiple directions for several decades, but its contemporary defenders (including such prominent feminist philosophers as Martha Nussbaum, Susan Okin, and others) are far more sophisticated in their arguments and less vulnerable to standard objections than were some of their predecessors. But Lisa Schwartzman makes a compelling case that, even if liberal feminism has the tools to address

women's oppression once that oppression is well recognized, the methods of radical feminism are more effective in identifying women's oppression in the first place. Alison Kafer argues that ecofeminists have failed to examine disability oppression and suggests

ways in which the ecofeminist and disability rights movements might productively interact by focusing on issues such as green design, environmental health issues, and health care policy. Michele Moody-Adams responds to critics, such as Christina Hoff Sommers, who claim that feminism has lost sight of the ideal of equality and has become fixated on women's (alleged) status as victims. While Moody-Adams acknowledges that not all such critiques have been fair or accurate, she thinks they contain a kernel of truth: even multiply oppressed women are never pure victims, she argues, and even if women's preferences are partly shaped by oppressive conditions, women must nonetheless be recognized and treated as agents capable of critical reflection and social change.

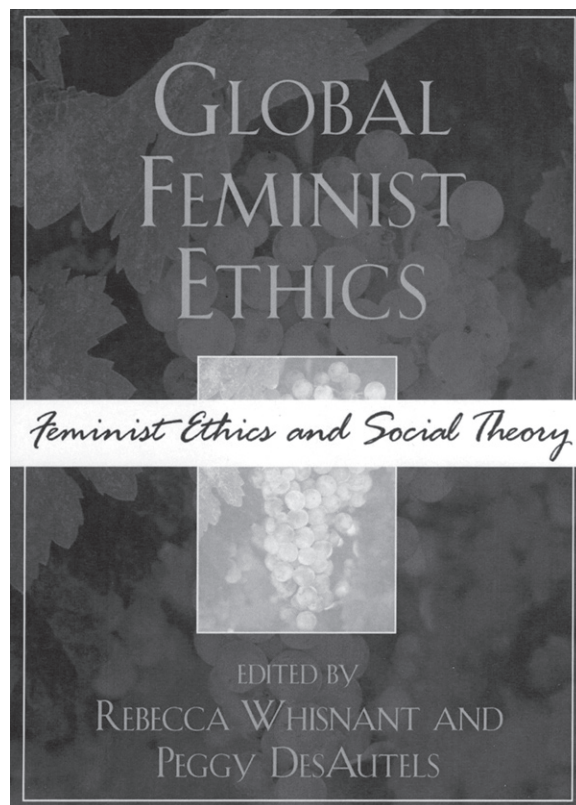
Part IV turns to global issues in feminist ethics and political theory, including Bat-Ami Bar On's reflections on just war theory and Shelly Wilcox's illuminating gender analysis of American immigration policy. In an essay that is sure to become widely cited and widely assigned, Alison Jaggar raises a core question for global feminism: How can feminist philosophers in the global North respond to practices in the global South that appear to be oppressive to women, without adopting a colonializing stance? Jaggar argues that non-intervention has not been a genu-

ine option for a very long time, since the fates of the global North and South are already intertwined in many ways. Northern feminists must not abdicate responsibility for the plight of women elsewhere, but Jaggar suggests that we may do the most good by attending to and addressing the ways in which Northern economic policies and political principles are implicated in injustices to women in the global South.

The themes of this final section of *Feminist Interventions* are picked up and further developed in *Global Feminist Ethics*. In fact, coeditor Peggy DesAutels uses Jaggar's contribution to the earlier book in her introduction to frame the themes of the newer volume and to suggest ways in which constructive dialogue between feminists across the globe might be shaped. As DesAutels puts it, "Just as we need to bring feminist perspectives to global issues, we need to bring global perspectives to feminist issues" (p.x). *Global Feminist Ethics* does a beautiful job of both. It brings together a set of gripping, original essays on issues ranging from cross-cultural childbirth practices to poverty to bodily and national sovereignty. As in the more theoretical *Feminist Interventions*, concerns with rights and needs, or justice and care, surface in many of the chapters and provide a framework for philosophical debate.

Part I of *Global Feminist Ethics* centers on forms of activity and work that either are unique to or have been assigned to women in both Western and non-Western cultures. James L. Nelson examines models of childbirth, Sabrina Hom discusses social networking and organizing practices among

domestic workers, and Virginia Held considers how an ethics of care might contribute to the erosion of the distinction between men's and women's work. I found Nelson's contribution, "Exporting Childbirth," particularly interesting. The experience of childbirth is often cited as significant by contempo-



rary feminist philosophers, but is relatively rarely discussed in detail. Nelson examines radically different but equally entrenched childbirth practices in the Netherlands and the United States, arguing that both models ("natural" versus "highly medicalized") reflect high degrees of social control of pregnant women. He argues that in "exporting" models of birthing to developing countries (and in rethinking our own models), we should be open to hybridized practices that respect women's legitimate interests without forcing them into prepackaged, mutually exclusive sets of options.

The chapters in Part II address global problems of hunger and poverty from a feminist perspective. Marilyn Fischer draws a parallel between contemporary ethics of care and Jane Addams's pragmatic approach to mobilizing women against hunger in Europe after World War I. Victoria Davion develops a feminist perspective on issues of trust, choice, and the construction of "knowledge" in the global controversy over the safety of genetically modified foods. Peter Higgins, Audra King, and April Shaw collaborate to develop a new definition of poverty, understood as "the deprivation of certain human capabilities" (p.96).

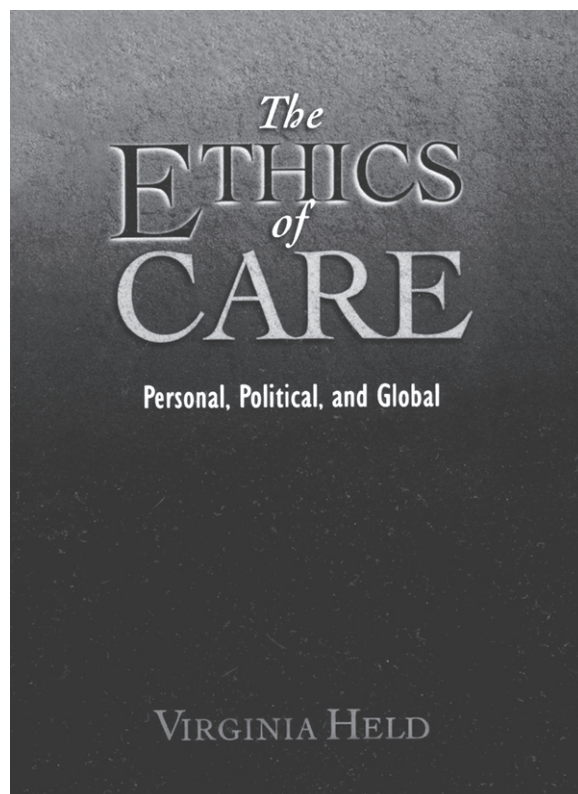
While more limited in their aims, Higgins, King, and Shaw share a certain amount of conceptual terrain with Martha Nussbaum, who has developed a "capabilities" approach to understanding the human good and social justice. In the first chapter of Part III, Alyssa R. Bernstein argues that the conception of human rights presented in Nussbaum's *Frontiers of Justice* is more compatible with that developed in John Rawls's *Law of Peoples* than many have recognized.

Other chapters in Part 3 also deal with human rights, with a particular focus on violations of women's bodily integrity. Serena Parekh tries to explain why many gender-specific violations of women fail to be conceptualized as violations of human rights, while Rebecca Whisnant argues that (contrary to some feminist arguments) the concept of sovereignty — including both of bodies and of states — continues to be of liberatory importance. Whisnant warns that her contribution contains graphic descriptions of pornographic images, and I confess that I found it

to be the single most difficult piece to read in all three of these books. Even though I have not looked at them myself, the images she describes are now irreversibly lodged in my imagination, darkening my sense of the social/sexual reality faced by our daughters (and sons). Unpleasant as this is, I think Whisnant does an important service in confronting us with the harsh realities of the Internet porn industry. Pornography has obviously been a controversial issue for feminists. But one cannot responsibly take a stand on the issue without knowing what's out there, and we need to be aware of how prevalent and easily accessible the more violent, degrading, and humiliating images really are.

The final section of the book, Part IV, focuses on responses to political and religious conflict, including the emotions, practices, and virtues (or vices) that play a role in those responses. Joan Tronto endorses a shift from the "right to intervene" to the "responsibility to protect" in peacekeeping discourse, and draws on the ethics of care to elaborate the latter. In a response to Hegel's view of the relationship between terror and identity, Bat-Ami Bar On suggests that embodied courage, rather than terror itself, may be a significant avenue to freedom. Finally, Lynne S. Arnault analyzes moralized disgust, explaining both its power and its limitations in political discourse. Expressions of disgust are powerful (and dangerously so), she contends, because of their conversation-stopping invocation of moral certitude. In resisting oppression, dialogue between different perspectives is precisely what needs to be kept open, not shut down.

Global Feminist Ethics as a whole, along with its companion *Feminist Interventions*, does an admirable job of advancing such dialogue. Not all of the collected authors would agree on how to frame or resolve issues of central feminist import, but the juxtaposition of their voices in these volumes is productive and stimulating. Both volumes are suitable sources of assigned readings in middle- to upper-level courses (including graduate courses) in feminist ethics and social thought.



The third book under discussion here is unlike the others in that it is a single-author treatment of one moral theory, along with its application to global social and political problems. In *The Ethics of Care*, Virginia Held extends the framework she began to develop in her previous book, *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics*, and responds to her crit-

ics. Held argues that the ethics of care, while still very new compared to its major philosophical alternatives (Kantianism, utilitarianism, and Aristotelian virtue ethics), nonetheless offers a viable alternative to all of them. That is, the ethics of care should be understood to be a full, alternative moral framework — not just a supplement — that corrects certain defects shared by its competitors.

Central among these defects, as Held sees it, is a tendency to regard individual persons, or motives of individual persons, as the primary unit of ethical analysis. Ethics of care is unique, in her view, in treating caring *relationships* between people as central. Held argues that care is both a practice and a value, or, perhaps more accurately, a practice with certain constitutive values centered on responsiveness to need. Care is not just a motive or an emotion, in her view, but also (if I understand her correctly) a kind of standard that we can use to evaluate relationships.

I am not always sure that I do understand the details of Held's view, since in this book she tends to err in the direction of breadth over depth. Held is incredibly widely read, and she feels at home in many different corners of a complicated body of literature. It is hard to think of an ethicist or political theorist with any relevance to her project that she has not discussed. I find, however, that she leaves a bit too much to the reader's imagination: we are repeatedly told, for example, that newer versions of ethics of care are not vulnerable to the objections raised against older versions, but she tends to defend this important claim in broad strokes rather than through painstaking argument. For

example, she claims that most ethicists of care now believe that justice and care are *both* important values, and that the challenge is to figure out how they are related within a comprehensive moral theory. One of her most central and intriguing theses is that care is the more fundamental value, and that it provides the wider context within which we can carve out space for the concepts and practices of justice. I, for one, would love to see a more detailed development of this thesis, but we only get its broadest outlines here.

Likewise, in the last section of the book, Held suggests that the ethics of care contains lessons of global and public, not just local and private, importance. She identifies several pressing problems of global import (the reach of markets, the role and nature of rights, the reach of the law) and indicates how she thinks the ethics of care could transform our thinking about these issues. But she tends to give us a snapshot of end products (telling us what kinds of policies a care-ethicist would endorse) rather than explaining exactly how care-ethics generates those results. Again, I take this to be an example of favoring breadth over depth.

Of course, breadth over depth can be a virtue in some contexts: individual chapters of this book could be very useful in introducing students (or other curious readers) to the central features of the ethics of care (Chapter 1) and the many different versions of the view that have been developed in recent years (Chapter 2). Other chapters (3–6) give a good sense of the relation of the ethics of care to competing ethical theories, while still others raise important issues about the scope of the view (Chapters 7–10). I would not recommend assigning the whole book in any given class, since there is a certain amount of repetition between the chapters. (The vast majority of them are revised versions of self-standing papers previously published elsewhere.) But individual chapters could be fruitfully combined with other, related materials in classes on ethics or feminist theory. While it is not obvious that all the criticisms Held makes of traditional moral theories hit their mark (for an alternative view, see Miller's provocative discussion of Kant and care in *Feminist Interventions*), it is indisputable that human dependencies and caring relationships have remained at the periphery of most moral theories. Held is surely right that there is something important to learn from these relations, and she does us a great service in putting them front and center where they demand our full attention.

It is difficult to sum up a review of three different books that contain so many different arguments on so many different topics. Reading them back to back, I am left feeling impressed and invigorated by the fruitfulness, diversity, and dynamism of contemporary feminist ethics. I have gained new ideas and energy for my own research and teaching, and I feel confident that many others will, too. Perhaps that in itself is the best recommendation I can give.

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