

Spring 2015

Review: 'Gendered Readings of Change'

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Fischer, Marilyn, "Review: 'Gendered Readings of Change'" (2015). *Philosophy Faculty Publications*. 150.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl_fac_pub/150

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Gendered Readings of Change: A Feminist-Pragmatist Approach

Clara Fischer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.) 256 pages. \$95.00. ISBN: 978-1-137-34787-9.

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Fischer casts a wide net in seeking a conception of change with which to understand feminist transformation of both self and social institutions. She explores metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and political theories of change in developing a feminist-pragmatist approach. Writing clearly and carefully, Fischer employs her knowledge of relevant primary and secondary texts deftly. She has a particularly admirable ability to appreciate what various philosophers have to offer while honestly appraising and seeking remedies for weaknesses in their theories.

Part I, "Genealogical Reflections on Change," contains three chapters. The first, "Women, Change, and the Birth of Philosophy," sets up why a feminist account of change is needed. Fischer begins with Parmenides and the ambiguous role of the goddess in his poem, "On Nature." She pairs this with analyses of the a-sexual birth of Athena as Athen's creation myth, Pandora's evil interventions into the harmonious all-male world, and Aristotle's gendered account of reproduction. This gives strong support to Fischer's claim that, in Greek myth and philosophy, women occupy a role she calls gendered (im)mutability. If change is illusory or bad, women are active agents responsible for evil. If change is good, women are passive and not fully human.

Chapter two, "Change in Dewey's and Aristotle's Metaphysics," compares Dewey's and Aristotle's accounts of how the world exhibits both change and stability. For example, seasons and individuals undergo constant change, but they do so in fairly stable and predictable patterns. While fully acknowledging differences between Aristotle's teleological hylomorphism and Dewey's emphasis on non-teleological interaction among organisms and environment, Fischer is particularly struck by the two thinkers' affinities. Both are naturalists and work out the relation between change and stability within nature, without appealing to the transcendent realm. Fischer concludes first, that Dewey's account of change owes much to Aristotle, and second, that Dewey's differences from Aristotle give an opening for using Dewey's metaphysics toward construction of a feminist analysis of the self. The chapter itself contains little feminist analysis. If read as a compare and contrast essay, the chapter is very well done and supports the second conclusion. I am not convinced by Fischer's first conclusion, however. Both philosophers were working within the scientific theories of their time. While Dewey had studied Aristotle, he wrote in an era when Darwin's evolutionary theory served as the generative metaphor in every discipline. Dewey could well have developed his theory using the intellectual resources of his time. A different sort of argument is needed to show that affinities

between Dewey and Aristotle indicate actual lineage and are more than interesting points of overlap.

Chapter three, "Change in Dewey's and Aristotle's Self," examines Dewey's and Aristotle's ethics. Again, Fischer uses the many affinities between the two accounts to claim that Dewey's ethics should be understood as Aristotelian. Both conceive of the self as inherently social, both find ethics and politics inseparable, and both conceive of character as formed via the development of habits. Fischer points out, however, that differences between the two views are crucial in making Dewey's conception of the self a suitable starting point for constructing a feminist self. Aristotle places humans into a natural hierarchy, with all women and some men inferior to a class of elite, rational males. With Dewey's interactionist view of the relation between self and environment, the self is more fluid. My reading of this chapter is the same as for chapter two. As a compare and contrast essay, it is very well done. However, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, theorists working within evolutionary paradigms commonly used the basic terms with which Dewey constructed his theory of the self. They often described society as an organism, considered morality as largely based on custom, and understood animal and human behavior in terms of habits. Because Fischer does not assess whether Dewey could have derived his conception of the self from within the evolutionary theorizing of his day, her claim that Dewey based much of his conception on Aristotle is unconvincing.

Part II, "Feminist-Pragmatist Reconstruction of Change" (chapters four and five), takes Dewey's conception of the self, reconstructs it with a feminist lens, and uses that to address possibilities for feminist democratic change. Now there are many ways to structure a monograph, from a collection of separate articles that share common themes, to an integrated whole. I read the book as closer to the former. Linkage between the two parts depends on Fischer's claim that Dewey to a significant extent drew his metaphysics and ethics from Aristotle. Had Fischer placed her presentation of Dewey's conception of the self in Part II rather than Part I, Part II could be read separately. This is not a criticism as much as an observation about how the book is constructed.

Chapter four, "The Feminist-Pragmatist Self," looks for a conception of the self that can account for the experience some women have of coming to feminist consciousness. They sometimes report that for a period of time everything seemed to be a jumbled confusion, and they emerged totally transformed. Fischer begins with Dewey's model of the social self, formed in interaction with the environment. Habits formed as adaptations to the environment give stability, yet often are flexible enough to change. Fischer explicates coming to feminist consciousness in terms of substituting habits of perceiving situations through feminist lenses for non-feminist perceptual habits. The process is gradual, beginning with a few habits which then interact with and lead to change in more habits; hence the period of confusion. Fischer stresses the need for careful self-reflection, especially to bring unconscious non-feminist habits into conscious awareness. While what Fischer does

is thoroughly laid out, she could have put more stress on how action and reflection are constantly intertwined. Experimenting with feminist actions, even if one is not fully convinced, is often a crucial part of the process, and gives a supply of materials to reflect on.

The final chapter, "Democracy and Change as Transaction," takes feminist consciousness into the political arena. How should a feminist self think about and try to bring about change in oppressive social institutions? Fischer clarifies how for feminists and pragmatists, the dualisms separating ethics from politics and the private from the public sphere do not hold. Personal identity is socially embedded and always functions in interaction with public spaces and meanings. Fischer appreciates Dewey's model of democracy as cooperative inquiry. She supplements it with Iris Young's model of inclusive participatory democracy, finding Young more attuned than Dewey to variations in communicative style, and thus more open to women and other non-dominant groups. Concerned that Young's focus on procedural matters makes her deliberators thin and ethereal, Fischer supplements Young's model with Jane Addams's story of how many of the old immigrant women living in her Chicago neighborhood found meaning and comfort in the "devil baby," rumored to be residing at Hull House. Addams's open receptivity and sympathetic understanding enabled her to find wisdom in people with vastly different communicative styles, belief systems, and patterns of living. Fischer moves nimbly among these models and makes a good case for bringing them together. I wish Fischer had said more about how becoming able to do what Young advocates and Addams demonstrates, is a matter of developing habits of listening and understanding that take much time and practice to acquire. All the same, as in previous chapters, Fischer works carefully and appreciatively with her material. The model she develops is worthy of serious consideration.

An author cannot cover everything in one book. There are implications of the feminist-pragmatist self not addressed that I hope Fischer and/or others will explore in the future. Now I speak as an insider. I find the feminist-pragmatist conception of the self and of the process of change more convincing than alternative constructions. Yet, there are disquieting implications. On this view, radical change in the self and in social institutions is impossible. For pragmatists, both selves and institutions are bundles of habits. Change, unless violently imposed, occurs piecemeal, through working on a few habits at a time. The conception thus has a built-in conservatism to it. While at a given point in time one may work toward feminist consciousness or feminist institutional change in terms of a few habits, at the same time, untransformed habits continue to function, and continue to reinforce the status quo. Change is tenuous and can often be undone. On this view, it is understandable why the promise of the women's rights and the civil rights movements of the 1960s remains unrealized a half century later. For a feminist-pragmatist conception of change, this is a sober and sometimes tragic reality. It is not a "problem" that can be fixed within the theory.

Regardless of whether the book is read as a collection of essays or as an integrated whole, the chapters are skillfully

written and many issues are thoughtfully addressed. Fischer's achievement is impressive.

Forgiveness and Retribution: Responding to Wrongdoing

Margaret R. Holmgren (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). 310 pages. \$29.99. ISBN 9781107695658.

Reviewed by Hailey Huget

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Margaret Holmgren's *Forgiveness and Retribution: Responding to Wrongdoing* is a refreshingly bold attempt to argue for an unpopular, often marginalized position within the forgiveness literature: that unconditional forgiveness and self-forgiveness are always morally appropriate, even when an offender has not apologized. Holmgren presents the "paradigm of forgiveness" as a way of responding to wrongdoing that is opposed to "attitudinal retributivism," which she characterizes as the idea that "enduring attitudes of resentment and self-condemnation are morally appropriate under certain circumstances" (5). Holmgren argues that such attitudes of resentment and self-condemnation are *never* appropriate.

In chapter one, Holmgren offers an outline of her project and provides an initial characterization of the attitudinal retributivist position that forms her target throughout the work. Attitudinal retributivists, on Holmgren's account, argue that forgiveness is inappropriate or even blameworthy in circumstances where an offender has not apologized or repented. This is because granting forgiveness to an offender without his apology can demonstrate that the victim lacks of self-respect, lacks respect for the offender, or lacks a general respect for the demands of morality (9). Holmgren then proceeds to argue that adopting an attitude of "unconditional genuine forgiveness" not only demonstrates self-respect, respect for the offender, and respect for morality, but meets these criteria more fully and completely than attitudinal retributivism (9).

Holmgren characterizes unconditional genuine forgiveness as a virtue—which she defines as an *ingrained, integrated attitude*. In chapter two, Holmgren contrasts the attitude that forms the paradigm of forgiveness with those that form the paradigm of retribution and argues for the moral superiority of the attitude of forgiveness. For Holmgren, attitudes have a cognitive component, an affective component, and a motivational component (23). For an individual to possess the complete, integrated attitude of forgiveness, one must form the belief that the offender is a sentient being and moral agent who, as such, deserves respect and compassion (33); one must feel such kindness and compassion toward the offender; and one must actually desire that the offender flourish (34). While adopting the attitude of resentment involves withdrawing goodwill toward the offender until she either makes amends or some other conditions have been met, adopting the attitude of forgiveness involves no withdrawal of goodwill at any point.