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Commentary on Fisher

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BEYOND THE BOG: A COMMENTARY ON LINDA FISHER'S "IS REASONING GENDERED?"

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As Linda Fisher notes, it has been one of philosophy's conceits that, if instances of reasoning or rationality can be found to be gendered, this must be only a contingent feature of those instances. On the traditional view, if they really are gendered such instances must count as instances of faulty reasoning or rationality, since the real thing is universal and free of such particular qualities as gender. This sort of argument is probably most familiar to us in the context of the philosophy of science where it is claimed that if a piece of scientific work is found to be gendered or raced—or as it is usually described, found to be biased—this is evidence of the existence of some bad science, not evidence that science as such has gender or culture specific features.

I take it to be consistent with Fisher's view to say that philosophy and science can be, and are gendered, and marked with other culturally specific features. Moreover, I understand her to be saying that, while these markings are contingent features of philosophy and science, this does not mean that philosophy or science could exist in any pure form, free of gendering or other contingent features.

As regards the question of whether philosophy or certain ways of reasoning reflect what we would want to call a gendered perspective, I would like to make a suggestion that perhaps muddies already muddy waters. As we have been made painfully aware, through critiques of standpoint theory, one of the problems with perspectivism is the problem of isolating and pinning down the various originary perspectives. For example, how do we go about separating out "the Black perspective" from "the working class perspective" from "the lesbian perspective", from the "woman's perspective" and so on? The answer is that we don't. This does not mean that philosophy and reasoning is immune from the effects of the forces that construct gender, race, sexuality, class, and so on, but simply that we don't need to presuppose the existence of these categories prior to the processes that construct them. Philosophy, I would suggest, and I take this to be consistent with Fisher's view, is one of those forces. It is both something that conditions as well as being something that is conditioned by gender and so forth. Philosophy participates in the construction of gender, in part through its gendered self-representation, as well as being in part constructed by other gender constructing processes.

Now, given the claims made by Fisher and other feminists, about the possibility that philosophy, science and other modes of reasoning are deeply gendered, an important question (particularly for feminists) is whether philosophy and science and reasoning in general can be done in ways that are free of or different from specifically masculine gendering.

But, one of the difficulties we face in considering questions about whether and how rationality and reasoning are gendered is that, as feminist epistemologists and philosophers of science have indicated, what rationality and reasoning are understood to be, within western intellectual traditions, is something that is almost wholly identified in masculine gender terms. The feminine, on the other hand, is identified with the irrational, or with non-rational or extra-rational responses such as the emotional or aesthetic. Rationality and even reasoning seem to have been

claimed as the exclusive right of those with authorized access to the domain of *phallogocentrism*.

If we want to entertain the idea that reasoning and rationality could be constituted in non-masculine ways—not as pure reason or rationality but as rationality or reasoning that could be called feminine, or described with perhaps some other gender term altogether—I think we need to employ a more general term in place of the terms "reasoning" and "rational activity" so as not to beg the central question. If we cannot come up with a new term, it would at least be useful to have some broader definition of the kind of activity in question.

I have a suggestion to make along these lines. It is one which I think fits the general feminist epistemological project and which I think is consistent with Fisher's approach to that project.

By "reasoning" we should understand, an activity or activities through which we attempt to *come to terms with experience*. This definition is deliberately broad so as to avoid the usual gendered dichotomies associated with reasoning when it is characterized as cognitive as opposed to emotional or affective behaviour, or intellectual as opposed to practical activity, abstract as opposed to concrete, formal and general as opposed to particular and so on.

This definition is also, I think, compatible with Fisher's emphasis on the *situated, experiential* features of the kind of analysis she is interested in.

So, for simplicity's sake I shall speak of "coming to terms with experience" in order to refer to an activity which could take various forms, gendered masculine or feminine (or in some other way if we do not assume that gender is of necessity a strictly bi-valued concept), and which, in one of its traditional forms, is called reasoning.

One of the advantages of this term is that, no-matter what the contingent features of this or that way of coming to terms with experience, each attempt cannot help but count as an attempt to come to terms. And how could we but come to something in some *particular* way? Given the nature of the metaphor, coherent speculation about coming to something in a universal way should be hard to get off the ground. This should not be taken to mean that all ways of coming to terms with something must be equally valuable. But the relative merits of this or that way of coming to terms with experience will have to be assessed in relation to specific values and objectives.

This brings me to some of the specific criticisms of the transcendent impulse within western intellectual history, which feminists have identified as masculine. From the hermeneutic stance that Fisher endorses, any "Icarus-like" attempt "to transcend context is at best naive, and at worst doomed to failure." But this, of course, depends on how you measure success and failure. Icarus-like attempts to come to terms with experience have been repressive, oppressive and destructive to be sure, but at the same time enormously culturally productive. Such diverse thinkers as Mary O'Brien¹ and Sigmund Freud have remarked on both the positive as well as negative features of the process that Freud called the sublimation of sexual desire and O'Brien describes as attempts to overcome the alienation inherent in male reproductive consciousness.

There are perhaps reasons for a parallel ambivalence about feminist epistemologies. For example, the question of the relationship between situatedness and relativism dogs feminists who seek an alternative and legitimate way of coming to terms with experience, just as the folly of Icarus threatens those who would defend "phallogocentric" approaches. But Fisher uses an interesting metaphor to express her faith that worries about relativism need not defeat feminists or others who encounter them. She says, "it is possible to hold to conditioned and contextualized rationality without falling into the bog of relativism." For those who want more precise directions on how to avoid being sucked into this bog, she advises taking up the stance of phenomenological epistemology, for whom "

[s]uch a position has always been fundamental.."

The stance of phenomenology and of hermeneutics that Fisher would have feminists take as their model is one that I have always found involves some sort of bootstrapping. But, I have said to myself, if it worked for Baron von Münchhausen why should it not work for us? Some days however, my faith in the likely success of this approach has been characterized by considerably less confidence than what the dauntless Baron was reputed to have possessed, and which is perhaps an essential feature of the stance itself.

Nevertheless, while thinking about the Baron and how the more cautious among us might get around the bog of relativism, I remembered yet another salutary story. It is a Hasidic story that is told of a famous Rebbe, the Rebbe of Radzin. It goes like this.

When the Rebbe of Radzin was still quite a young man, he came to his *shtibl* one day and found a couple of Hasidim engaged in an intense scholarly debate, which they could not bring to a conclusion. Because the Rebbe of Radzin was famous for his scholarship, they asked him to decide between them. Instead, he told the following tale:

Once a group of wagon drivers sat talking at the inn. As often happens, the oldest of them presided over the conversation. And now he pointed at a young man and asked, "Who is that young fellow?"

"He's a young wagon driver," was the reply.

"Come here, my son," the old driver said. "Tell me, what do you do when your horses draw your wagon into the mud?"

"You put a lever under the rear axle and lift the wagon out," replied the young man.

"Oho, clever lad," said the oldest driver. "But what happens if the lever sinks into the mud as well?"

"You take a beam and put it under the lever."

"Clever. Oh very clever. And you call yourself a wagon driver? If you've got a lever and a beam, there's no problem. But what if you don't have either?"

The young man stood silent, unable to reply.

"I'll tell you what," the old wagon driver said. "A good wagon driver doesn't let his horses pull the wagon into the mud in the first place."

And with that the Radzin Rebbe showed the two scholars how deeply they had sunk into the mire.²

Perhaps what feminist philosophers need to do, is to stay focussed on the real task at hand, the task of coming to terms with experience, rather than getting sidetracked into the boggy mire constituted by the demand to legitimate and defend the reasonableness of having gendered starting points and the philosophical propriety of taking particular paths on the journeys we are compelled to take so as to come to terms with gendered and otherwise situated experiences.

Notes

1. Mary O'Brien, *The Politics of Reproduction*. 

2. This story was shared with me by Hannah Picard, who attributed it to a book entitled, simply, *Jewish*

Folktales. 

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