

Jun 3rd, 9:00 AM - Jun 6th, 5:00 PM

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Commentary on Khameiel Al-Tamimi's "Feminist Alternatives to Traditional Argumentation"

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1. INTRODUCTION

In drawing attention to different issues and concerns in feminist discussions of argumentation, Khameiel Al-Tamimi shows that the feminist question with argumentation is by no means a simple or straightforward one. Feminist discussions raise issues about different styles or modes of reasoning and arguing, and they direct attention to the broader contexts of argumentation and, in particular, to the role of adversariality in the structure of those contexts. Her paper also raises questions about the relationship between feminist and not-specifically-feminist alternatives to dominant modes and conceptions of arguing and argumentation. I welcome this opportunity to further examine particular issues in this discussion, and, especially, the relationship between a putative "feminine style of arguing" and the framing of specifically-feminist concerns with argumentation.

While I agree with Al-Tamimi that alternatives to dominant understandings of argumentation (alternatives such as narrative, coalescent or cooperative approaches to argumentation) merit significant development (and along some of the lines that she suggests), I disagree with some of the ways in which she constructs these alternatives as "feminist." I will first discuss my disagreement in terms of what I admit is the tricky relationship between "feminist" and "feminine." I will then examine some of her alternative suggestions for argumentation in terms of their promise for coalescence with feminist epistemological developments.

2. FEMINIST AND "FEMININE"

When she uses phrases such as "feminine style of arguing" (pp. 2, 3), Al-Tamimi may not mean to posit such a style or styles as uncontested givens. Such a phrase (along with "women's/feminine ways of knowing") has been considered quite problematic in feminist philosophy. The idea of "women's/feminine ways of knowing" has certainly surfaced in feminist epistemology, for example, but the primary focus has been on how problematic the idea is. Among other things, it involves generalizations about women (across different

racess, classes, and cultures, for example) that have been the focus of significant critical scrutiny in the past three decades of feminist theorizing. Feminist arguments are less about advancing “women’s” or “feminine” styles or modes *than they are about questioning the historical and sexist construction of such “feminine” styles as distinct from, or contrary to, the “masculine” styles that were taken to represent ideals of reason, argumentation and knowledge.* The “feminine” functioned historically as a rhetorical or metaphorical construction to mark that which is beyond the realm of true reason and knowledge—and that is certainly an issue in feminist discussions. Thus, the ready use of such wording (without the scare quotes especially) runs the risk of implicitly supporting this sexist gendering in the history of philosophy, rather than uncovering it for critical scrutiny. In effect, wording like “feminine styles of arguing” can implicitly support that tradition, rather than challenge it in way that advances new thinking about reason and argumentation. Such wording also draws on stereotypes of “masculine” and “feminine” that still persist, and still discourage women from pursuing what have traditionally been constructed as “masculine” modes of reasoning and arguing. Feminists, in general, are not invested in promoting those stereotypes with their continuing limiting effects. In addition, these uncontested associations have also functioned, I suspect, to discourage argumentation theorists from seriously developing what they have implicitly accepted as the “feminine” alternatives to standard models or approaches to argumentation, the alternatives that Al-Tamimi seeks to develop.

I am not suggesting that the conundrum here is an easy one to get out of. But I do think that it is possible to acknowledge the historically persisting gendering of modes or styles of reasoning and arguing (which had no business being gendered in the first place) *while also being mindful of and resisting* the conceptual limitations and traps that that same gendering has brought about. This is why I stated as a main goal in my paper (in the paper Al-Tamimi cites), that I wanted to advance feminist reflections on adversariality (in particular) in a way that “*doesn’t* engage problematic assumptions about essential or natural gender differences in styles or modes of reasoning and arguing.” (p. 5) Even assumptions about *socialized* differences (which Al-Tamimi makes on one occasion) also have to be handled with care, given that stereotypes also work their way into constructions or descriptions of individuals’ approaches in argumentation. As I also argued in that paper, gender stereotypes or associations can also confuse rather than clarify

what modes or qualities such as ‘linear,’ ‘abstract,’ ‘contextual,’ ‘relational,’ or ‘supportive’ [or I would now add ‘narrative’] mean when it comes to spelling out their operating in the specifics of argumentation, particularly when they are presented as gender-differentiated or oppositional modes.” (p. 2)

3. ADVANCING ALTERNATIVES AS FEMINIST

If the relationship between “feminist” and “feminine” is at best a problematic one, how, then, might specifically-feminist work contribute to the advancement of alternative modes or models of argumentation (we might even call them “feminist alternatives”), particularly modes or models that have been traditionally constructed or understood as “feminine.” In the latter part of her paper, Al-Tamimi discusses aspects of narrative and coalescent/cooperative alternatives to traditional argumentation. Though I question how

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she initially sets up these alternatives as feminist, she discusses them in a way that, I maintain, lend themselves to specifically-feminist elaboration.

With respect to narrative arguments Al-Tamimi writes: “Feminists, then, are more suited to talk about narrative arguments because women tend to use narrative as a form of argument.” (pp. 3-4) First, such a general claim about women needs empirical justification. Second, if it is true, it does not automatically follow that feminists should endorse it, though—as Al-Tamimi asserts—it may, initially at least, give power of voice to women. An analogous argument has been made in feminist ethics: even if women are more likely to use “an ethics of care,” feminists argued, it is not necessarily recommended as a feminist ethic if (as many claimed) it represents the voice of the marginalized or oppressed.

Al-Tamimi proceeds, somewhat independently of this empirical claim, to argue that a narrative approach may, in many situations, be more suitable as a tool to advance knowledge. I agree, though then it’s not clear how we might spell out what the specifically-feminist argument for narrative advantage is. I suggest that one way to augment this argument with work from feminist epistemology involves arguing that a narrative approach is more likely to draw attention to the background context of claims or arguments and thus provide a better understanding of their content and meaning. Such a focus also draws attention to gender and other power- or status-inflected social relations and their role in the production of knowledge—something that is stressed especially in feminist epistemology. Emphasizing narratives forms of argumentation as a way to uncover some of the epistemic effects of social location can thus help advance feminist arguments about the situatedness of knowledge and the problematic epistemic effects of unjust social relations. This may be in part what Al-Tamimi is also suggesting when she maintains that “Recognizing narrative arguments requires flexibility and open-mindedness as well as the ability to contextualize.” (p. 5)

The other main alternative to traditional argumentation that Al-Tamimi examines involves “seeing argument as coalescence and cooperation.” Certainly there are specifically-feminist reasons to commend this alternative, if as she maintains (drawing from the work of Lamb)

a cooperative process to argumentation [...] increases the visibility of the silenced [women and minorities in particular] by promoting discussion rather than adversariality. (p. 5)

Her discussion of Hunzer’s approach using “disputants” and “mediators” in structuring discussion and debate certainly brings this out. As she maintains, traditional adversarial argumentation somehow suggests that when someone “wins” an argument it is assumed that “the other person will see the rationale behind why a certain belief won, but this is not the case.” (p. 6) I agree that in many cases little is accomplished with adversarial argumentation other than silencing people who may have much to contribute to the discussion. In such cases it cannot be recommended on straightforward epistemological grounds—perspectives or evidence relevant to the situation or dispute is not considered. Following this line that Al-Tamimi suggests also coalesces well, I think, with feminist epistemological projects engaged with making visible the negative epistemic effects of relations of status and power. Though she does not use such terms in this context, this is an example of where feminist epistemological insights can be advanced without the problematic use of the terms “masculine” and “feminine”—indeed the use of such terms

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would likely confuse the clarity of the feminist epistemological argument that needs to be made.

In her discussion of narrative argument, Al-Tamimi (drawing on Summerfield's work) notes that there are limitations in the way that "traditionally we conceive of narrative and argument as two separate poles" (p. 4). I agree that we need to examine what underlies this limited conception, and I think that gender stereotypes associated "masculine" and "feminine" styles of interaction are part of the problem. Her point here is well taken, and again recommends special caution in the way we work with a philosophical history of sexism and gendering that has engendered limitations both in the way we think about gender and in the way we think about argumentation.

[Link to paper](#)