Report and Opinion

Study On Feminist Philosophy In Language

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Abstract: Feminist philosophy of language has come a long way in a very short time period. Initially, most work in the area was critical, calling for changes either to language itself or to philosophy of language. More recently, however, the dynamic has changed, with the advent of several major positive research programmes within philosophy of language. In this entry, we first discuss the critiques that constitute the first phase of feminist work in this area, before moving onto the positive research programmes that have recently come to the fore. Our focus in this entry will generally be on the analytic tradition. For continental approaches, see the entries on feminist approaches to the intersection of analytic and continental philosophy, feminist approaches to the intersection of pragmatism and continental philosophy.

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Introduction:

How, if at all, has feminist philosophy influenced mainstream philosophy? When feminist philosophy became a sub-field of philosophy, integration of the insights and critiques of feminist philosophy into mainstream philosophy was a goal for many. However, feminist philosophy appears to have remained to some extent "marginalized," as Phyllis Rooney argues in her recent article, "The Marginalization of Feminist Epistemology and What That Reveals About Epistemology 'Proper.'"1 This issue includes invited articles on the influence of feminist philosophy on critical thinking, aesthetics, and metaphysics. They address the question of whether, and to what extent, feminist philosophy has been taken up by nonfeminist philosophers in these fields.

Catherine Hundleby argues feminist philosophy has not had sufficient impact on critical thinking but suggests a strategy for increasing its influence by revising the way that critical thinking courses are taught. She maintains that the Adversary Method, identified by Janice Moulton in 1983, is still the dominant paradigm in analytic philosophy, and that, as Moulton pointed out, is exclusionary. Hundleby argues that critical thinking courses, taught as introductory "service" classes in many universities, contribute to the reproduction of this paradigm. These courses are often taught by instructors with little expertise in argumentation

theory, from textbooks that accept the Adversary Method as their primary pedagogy.

One way of challenging the dominance of the Adversary Method would be to change how critical thinking is taught, taking into account alternatives modes of reasoning and the broader context of critical thinking provided by argumentation theory. Carolyn Korsmeyer argues that feminist philosophy has had a significant impact on mainstream aesthetics, but that "this influence can be difficult to see because much of the supporting evidence has lost its feminist label." She finds that, though there may not be many publications in feminist aesthetics, recent anthologies in aesthetics do include articles on the issues that feminists philosophers have emphasized. However, it is difficult to identify what feminism, as opposed to other innovative approaches in philosophy, has contributed. This is true, for example, of "everyday aesthetics." Korsmeyer also points out that many ideas that feminists brought to aesthetics and other areas of philosophy are now attributed to male theorists, such as Foucault or Derrida.

Invisibility of women

Feminist concerns, however, go beyond mere classificatory ones. Feminists have also argued that terms like 'he' and 'man' contribute to making women invisible—that is, to obscuring women's importance, and distracting attention from their existence. Fighting the invisibility of women is an

important feminist project in many areas,[1] and language that makes one less likely to think of women clearly contributes to this invisibility. There is good psycholinguistic evidence that those who encounter sentences (like (3) and (4)) using the terms 'he' and 'man' think more readily of males than of females.[2] If this is right, then the use of these words can be seen as contributing to the invisibility of women. This gives feminists a good reason to object to the 'gender-neutral' use of these terms.

Maleness as norm

If one's only worry concerned the obscuring of women's presence, however, it would be difficult to object to certain other terms to which feminists do commonly object: gender-specific occupational terms like 'manageress' (still common in the UK, though not in the US) or 'lady doctor'. These terms certainly do not contribute to the invisibility of women. Instead, they call attention to the presence of women. Moreover, they call attention to women's presence in positions of authority—doctor and manager. Nonetheless, most feminists who think about language find these terms objectionable.

The clearest reason for objecting to 'manageress' and 'lady doctor' is that the use of these terms seems premised on the idea that maleness is the norm, and that women filling these jobs are somehow deviant versions of doctors and managers. This is also a key objection to the use of 'he' and 'man'. Moulton (1981a) understands these terms on the model of brand names, like 'Hoover' or 'Scotch tape' that become generic terms for a product type. The message of such terms, she suggests, is that the brand in question is the best, or at least the norm. According to Moulton, terms like 'he' and 'man' work in the same manner: they are gender-specific terms for men whose use has been extended to cover both men and women. This, Moulton argues, carries the message that maleness is the norm. As a result, the use of these terms as if they were gender neutral constitutes a sort of symbolic insult to women. Laurence Horn and Steven R. Kleinedler (2000) have disputed the details of this, noting that 'man' did not begin its life as gender-specific and then get extended to cover both women and men. Rather, 'man' actually began its life as 'mann', a gender-neutral term, which only later acquired a gender-specific meaning. The temporal sequence, then, cannot support the claim that a gender-specific term has been extended to cover both genders. Nonetheless, Horn and Kleinedler agree that the use of terms like 'he' and 'man' as if they were gender-neutral perpetuates the objectionable idea that men are the norm for humanity.

Sex-marking

English, like most—but not all—languages, requires a great deal of what Marilyn Frye calls 'sex marking' (Frye 1983). For example, one cannot use pronouns to refer to a particular individual without knowing their sex. (Frye, in common with most feminists of the early 1980s, does not consider trans issues. She also does not consider the possibility that pronouns like 'he' and 'she' might be a matter of gender, not sex.) Frye notes the absurdity of this.

If I am writing a book review, the use of personal pronouns to refer to the author creates the need to know whether that person's reproductive cells are the sort which produce ova or the sort which produce sperm. (Frye 1983: 22)

Singular personal pronoun usage, Frye argues, is impossible without knowing the sex of the person one is discussing, and in many cases sex would otherwise be utterly irrelevant. Frye takes this to be an instance of a general tendency to make sex relevant where it need not be, which she takes to be a key feature of sexism. In addition, she suggests, the constant need to know and indicate sex helps to perpetuate the conviction that sex is a tremendously important matter in all areas. For Frye, this is a key factor in perpetuating male dominance: male dominance requires the belief that men and women are importantly different from each other, so anything that contributes to the impression that sex differences are important is therefore a contributor to male dominance.

Encoding of male worldview

The idea that some terms encode a male worldview is initially a puzzling one. One thing that is meant by it is, roughly, that the meanings of certain terms seem to divide the world up in a way that is more natural for men than for women. Good examples of this come from the terms 'foreplay' and 'sex'. 'Sex' is generally taken to refer to an act that is defined in terms of male orgasm, while the sexual activities during which many women have their orgasms are relegated to secondary status, referred to by terms like 'foreplay'. These terms, then, can be seen as based in a male perspective on sex. (It is worth noting that the 'male perspective' claim need not rest on the (implausible) idea that this perspective is shared by all men. Rather, it can rest on claims about what is typical for men, or on the claim that the only perspective from which certain understandings make sense is a male one.) As a result, these terms may serve as a barrier to accurate communication or even thought about women's experiences of sex (Cameron 1985; Moulton 1981b; Spender 1980

[1985]). Catharine MacKinnon and Sally Haslanger also discuss legal definitions of 'rape' as (among other things) involving more than 'the normal level of force', an understanding that seems committed to the idea that some level of force is acceptable in sexual relations (Haslanger 1995: 109; MacKinnon 1989: 173).

Languages may also lack words for things that matter a great deal to women. This sort of gap is another way that a language can be seen as encoding a male worldview. The term 'sexual harassment', for example, is a recent feminist innovation. Women's discussion of their experiences led them to see a certain common element to many of their problems, and as a result they invented the term 'sexual harassment'. Once the problem was named, it became much easier to fight sexual harassment, both legally and by educating people about it (Farley 1978; Spender 1985).

Miranda Fricker (2007) calls gaps such as that before the invention of the term 'sexual harassment' a form of hermeneutical injustice. Roughly speaking, this is what occurs when "some significant area of one's social experience [is] obscured from collective understanding owing to" (2007: 155) a gap in communal linguistic/conceptual resources that is more damaging to those from a socially disadvantaged group (to which one belongs). In her *Epistemic Injustice*, Fricker connects this up with issues in both ethics and epistemology, especially epistemology of testimony. We discuss this more fully in 2.4, below.

Reform efforts: successes and limitations

Problems like those we have seen so far are relatively easy to discern. Moreover, it may seem that they would be relatively easy to correct—new terms can be invented, or alternative words can be used. Much feminist effort has been devoted to this endeavour, and a huge variety of reforms have been proposed (see, for example, Miller and Swift 1976, 1980, and the papers in part two of Cameron 1998a).

One especially successful reform effort has been the increasingly accepted singular use of the third-person gender-neutral pronoun 'they' (in place of 'he') as in the sentence below:

Somebody left their sweater behind.

A key reason for the success of this reform is perhaps the history of the singular 'they'. As Ann Bodine has noted (1975 [1998]), the singular use of 'they' has a long history. It did not begin to be criticized until the 19th century, and despite all the efforts of prescriptive grammarians it has remained very popular in speech. Due to feminist work on the effects of 'gender-neutral' use of 'he', even

prescriptive grammarians are now becoming more accepting of 'they'. In very recent years, it is also becoming increasingly widespread to use 'they' as one's chosen personal pronoun, or, less frequently, to use another gender-neutral option such as 'ze' (Bennett 2016; Dembroff and Wodak 2017).

Other reform efforts have met with greater difficulties. Even some that have caught on seem to have backfired. Susan Erlich and Ruth King (1992 [1998]), for example, discuss the case of 'chairperson', intended to serve as a gender-neutral replacement for 'chairman'. Instead, in many places it is often used to indicate women who fill the post of chair, while men are referred to as 'chairman'. They take this to show that reforms cannot succeed unless attitudes change as well.

Moreover, feminist work on language has also indicated that there may be problems which are simply not amenable to piecemeal linguistic reforms. Some difficulties that have been raised go well beyond a handful of problematic terms or gaps. Deborah Cameron offers striking examples of writing that take males as the norm without using any particular terms to which one might object, such as the following, from *The Sunday Times*:

The lack of vitality is aggravated by the fact that there are so few able-bodied young adults about. They have all gone off to work or look for work, leaving behind the old, the disabled, the women and the children. (Cameron 1985: 85)

Clearly, in the above example, 'able-bodied young adult' is being used in such a way as to exclude women. Moreover, examples like this (and others Cameron provides) pass unnoticed by newspaper editors and many readers. There is clearly a problem, but it is not a problem that can be pinpointed by picking out some particular term as objectionable and in need of reform. Eliminating language use that takes males as the norm, then, must involve more than changing a few terms or usage rules.

Maleness of language

Some feminists (e.g., Penelope 1990; Spender 1985) argue that English is, in some quite general sense, male. (Corresponding arguments are also put forward about other languages.) One thing that is meant by this is that English can be said to be male in a manner similar to that in which particular terms can be said to be male—by encoding a male worldview, by helping to subordinate women or to render them invisible, or by taking males as the norm. One sort of argument for this begins from the examination of large quantities of specific terms, and the identification of patterns of male bias, and

proceeds from this to the conclusion that the male bias of English is so widespread that it is a mistake to locate the problem in a collection of words, rather than in the language as a whole. The first stage of this sort of argument is, obviously, a lengthy and complex one. The sorts of claims (in addition to those we have already seen) cited include (a) that there are more words for males than for females in English, and that more of these words are positive (Spender 1985: 15, citing Julia Stanley 1977); (b) that a "word for women assume[s] negative connotations even where it designated the same state or condition as it did for men" (Spender 1985: 17), as with 'spinster' and 'bachelor'; (c) that words for women are far more frequently sexualized than words for men, and that this holds true even for neutral words, when they are applied to women. Dale Spender, citing Lakoff (1975), discusses the example of 'professional', comparing 'he's a professional' and 'she's a professional', and noting that the latter is far more likely than the former to be taken to mean that the person in question is a prostitute. The sexualisation of words for women is considered especially significant by the many feminists who take sexual objectification to be a crucial element, if not the root, of inequalities between women and men. (For more on such examples, see also Baker 1992.)

This widespread encoding of male bias in language is, according to theorists like Spender, just what we should expect. Males (though not, as she notes, all of them) have had far more power in society, and this, she claims has included the power to enforce, through language, their view of the world. Moreover, she argues, this has served to enhance their power.

There *is* sexism in language, it *does* enhance the position of males, and males *have* had control over the production of cultural forms. (Spender 1985: 144)

This, Spender claims, provides circumstantial evidence that "males have encoded sexism into language to consolidate their claims of male supremacy" (Spender 1985: 144). Spender takes the evidence for this claim to be far more than circumstantial, however, and to support it she discusses the efforts of prescriptive grammarians. These include, for example, the claim that males should be listed before females because "the male gender was the *worthier* gender" (Spender 1985: 147, emphasis hers), and the efforts (noted earlier) to establish 'he' as the gender-neutral third-person English pronoun.

According to theorists like Spender, men's ability to control language gives them great power indeed. We have already seen ways in which what

one might call the maleness of language contributes to the invisibility of women (with respect to words like 'he' and 'man'). If one takes the maleness of language to go beyond a few specific terms, one will take language's power to make women invisible to be even stronger. We have also seen ways that what might be called maleness can make it more difficult for women to express themselves. Where we lack words for important female experiences, like sexual harassment, women will find it more difficult to describe key elements of their existence. Similarly, where the words we have—like 'foreplay'—systematically distort women's experiences, women will have a difficult time accurately conveying the realities of their lives. If one takes such problems to go beyond selected particular terms, and to infect language as a whole, it is natural to suppose that women are to a large degree *silenced*—unable to accurately articulate key elements of their lives, and unable to communicate important aspects of their thoughts. Spender and others also suggest that the maleness of language constrains *thought*, imposing a male worldview on all of us, and making alternative visions of reality impossible, or at least very difficult to articulate. These arguments often draw upon the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Sapir 1921; Whorf 1956). It is generally formulated very vaguely, but seems to amount to roughly the hypothesis that "our worldview is determined by the structures of the particular language that we happen to speak" (Cameron 1998b: 150).

(There is substantial controversy about what this means, and about the accuracy of attributing it to either Sapir or Whorf, but this controversy is not very relevant to the present entry.)

Some suggest that male power over language allows men to shape not just thought, but also reality. For example, Spender claims that men "created language, thought, and reality" (1985: 143). This is a very strong version of what Haslanger has called *discursive constructivism*.[3] She defines this view as follows:

Something is discursively constructed just in case it is the way it is, to some substantial extent, because of what is attributed (and/or self-attributed) to it. (Haslanger 1995: 99)

Feminists like Spender and Catherine MacKinnon (1989) argue that male power over language has allowed them to create reality. This is partly due to the fact that our categorizations of reality inevitably depend on our social perspective: "there is no ungendered reality or ungendered perspective" (MacKinnon 1989: 114). Haslanger (1995) discusses this argument in detail.

In general, the solution suggested is not to attempt to create a neutral language that can accurately capture reality in itself, a goal they would take to be nonsense. Instead, we must aim to create a new reality more congenial to women. Some feminists have argued that the only way to achieve this is for women to create their own language, either by redefining terms already in use, or by inventing a new language, with new words and new rules. Only in this way, they suggest, will women be able to break free from the constraints of male language and male thought, to articulate a competing vision for the world, and to work toward it (Daly and Caputi 1987; Elgin 1985; MacKinnon 1989; Penelope 1990; Spender 1985). Lynne Tirrell (1993) offers an especially sophisticated and complex discussion of this idea.

The claims discussed above concerning the maleness of English, its causes, and its effects, are far from uncontentious. First, the extent of male bias in language is debatable. Although it is right that there is much to worry feminists about a wide variety of specific terms and usages, it is far from clear that it is appropriate to claim that English is male-biased in some sweeping sense. It is also unclear exactly what the claim being made is. If this claim is taken to be that every term is male-biased, then it is highly implausible: it is very unlikely that there is a male bias present in 'piano' or 'isotope'. If the claim is simply that there is much for feminists to object to, then it is almost certainly right—but it is far from obvious that it is useful to focus on such a general claim rather than on specific problems, their complexities and their possible solutions (Cameron 1998b).

Next, the power that men have undeniably exercised in society (though, importantly, some groups of men have been vastly less powerful than others) by no means translates to a general power over language. Language is a difficult thing to control, as those who have attempted to create languages have learned. The main power men have had has concerned dictionaries, usage guides, and laws. While these are enormously important in shaping reality, and in shaping our thoughts, it is quite a leap to move from this power to the claim that men 'created language, thought, and reality'.

The claimed effects of the maleness of language are also problematic. We have already seen problems for the idea that men control language. The idea that men also control or create thought and reality faces further problems. The ability of feminists to successfully point out ways in which elements of language have obscured women's experiences counts strongly against the claim that

men control thought (Cameron 1998b); and, as Haslanger (1995) has argued in detail, discursive constructivism about reality is unsustainable. Nonetheless, it does seem right to notice that problems with specific terms can render it more difficult for women to communicate about important elements of their lives, and probably also more difficult to reflect upon these elements (Hornsby 1995). These difficulties could perhaps be described as partial silencing, partial constraint of thought, or hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 2007), which we discuss more fully in 2.4.

If the criticisms above are right, then women certainly do not need to create their own language. Many welcome this conclusion, worried that a women's language would doom women's thoughts to marginality and impede feminist progress. Moreover, the idea that women could craft a common language that allowed the articulation of all their experiences seems to ignore the fact that women differ enormously from one another (Crenshaw 1991; Lugones and Spelman 1983; Spelman 1988; see the section on feminism and the diversity of women in the entry on feminist philosophy). If women cannot use the same language as men, why should we suppose that women can successfully share a language?

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