

Transcendence and Feminism: Response to Anderson's "Feminist Challenges to Conceptions of God"

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Abstract An argument that Pamela Sue Anderson's critique of Irigaray commits her to a version of the Ideal Observer Theory, a theory Anderson rejects. This paper was delivered in the APA Pacific 2007 Mini-Conference on Models of God.

Keywords Transcendence · Feminism · Pamela · Sue · Anderson · Luce · Irigaray

Anderson's principle focus is on what is problematic in Luce Irigaray's project of transcendence whereby women may 'become divine'. She proposes that Irigaray's work can provide grounds for perpetuating patriarchal oppression or leaving intact 'the degrading aspects of a masculine transcendence and bodily immanence'. We need a different model of the divine to more effectively challenge the way in which concepts of God 're-inforce 21st century forms of self-harm and masochistic or sado-masochistic abuse'. Irigaray's outlook is plagued by 'that self-deception and/or self-hatred due to a general lack of self-knowledge'; it harbors a trap of 'self-enclosure...with the danger or narcissism...within an ethical solipsism'.

I do not contest this analysis, but I propose instead that Anderson's critique of Irigaray commits her to endorsing a form of transcendence she has elsewhere repudiated, namely the transcendence that is at the heart of the ideal observer theory.

According to a version of the ideal observer theory that Anderson rejects in 'What's Wrong with the God's Eye Point of View: A Constructive Feminist Critique of the Ideal Observer Theory,' an event or act is good if it would be approved of by an ideal observer (IO) and an event or act is bad if it would be disapproved of by an IO.¹ An observer is ideal if that observer knows all of the non-moral facts (facts that are the basis of moral approval or disapproval), the observer is omniscient (affectively apprised of the points of view of all involved parties) and is impartial. I

¹This essay is in the collection *Faith and Philosophical Analysis*, H. Harris and C. J. Insole (eds.) (Hants: Ashgate, 2005).

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have articulated and defended this view elsewhere, arguing that it constitutes a regulative ideal of moral inquiry. That is, in moral inquiry we do, in fact, seek to resolve our differences about the non-moral facts, we strive to affectively appreciate and take seriously the experiences (e.g. *what it is like to be oppressed*) of those involved, and we strive for impartiality. I believe the ideal perspective may be plausibly described as ‘a God’s eye point of view.’²

Anderson rejects the IO theory on the grounds that it is either incoherent or unable to resolve basic conflicts. Rather than reply to these charges here, I adopt a different strategy of arguing that Anderson is herself committed to some version of the IO theory.

I begin by highlighting where Anderson and I agree and then suggest that she is implicitly committed to a version of the IO theory.

Anderson believes that ‘women need to get beyond what has been conceived to be the prison of their bodily immanence.’ Moreover, ‘the fundamental task is to have women and men recognize themselves as subjects who are self-transcending in formative ethical practices and in new discursive formations’. Anderson applauds ‘critical openness to self-transcendence’. And she suggests ‘that we reconsider true transcendence as the recognition of the intrinsic goodness of persons in moving outside of themselves to the right degree’. Having noted these points of concord, I now suggest that it would be unintelligible or at least at odds with the ‘concrete practice’ (to use Anderson’s phrase) of moral discourse and inquiry for Anderson to claim that Irigaray’s project perpetuates patriarchy, masculinist agenda, narcissism, ethical solipsism and so on, and yet if she (Anderson) were more fully or completely informed of the non-moral facts, if she were more completely or fully affectively apprised of the points of view of all involved parties, and she was impartial, she would not make such a claim. The cost of rejecting the IO theory would amount to conceding that her charge against Irigaray rests on either false or partial beliefs about the non-moral facts, either misidentified or partial affective awareness of those involved, or on a partiality or commitment that is not recognizable in impartial reflection. Arguably, impartiality is precisely what is violated in the masculinist agenda to which Anderson (and I) are opposed. Moreover, the comprehensive ideal that constitutes the IO theory would seem to be the natural ally in the articulation of a critique of narcissism, solipsism, self-hatred, undue self-enclosure, and so on, and an ally as well in providing the ideal aim of ‘critical openness to self-transcendence’.

It may be objected that the problem with the IO theory is that it privileges a third person point of view. Anderson seems to favor discursive practices of the kinds that one finds in Linda Zagzebski’s work whereby persons reach agreement through the practice of comparing perspectives, solicitude, and challenge. Does this constitute a radical alternative to the IO theory?

I do not think so. In practice any recognizable moral inquiry will have to incorporate all three conditions captured in the IO theory. To reject this would

²I defend this position in “The God’s Eye Point of View” in *Faith and Philosophical Analysis*, “Relativizing the Ideal Observer Theory,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 1:49, 123–38, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) and elsewhere.

amount to a dialogue that did not give primacy to sort out disagreements over the non-moral facts, did not involve the familiar appeal to affective awareness or strive for impartiality, e. g. to strive not to privilege masculinist ideals.

In conclusion, I suggest that if the IO theory is faced with the serious charges of either incoherence or futility, these are charges that face both myself—as an explicit advocate of the IO theory—and Professor Anderson whom, I believe is implicitly committed to the IO framework.