Feminist Ethics

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*Feminist Ethics* aims “to understand, criticize, and correct” how gender operates within our moral beliefs and practices (Lindemann 2005, 11) and our methodological approaches to ethical theory. More specifically, feminist ethicists aim to understand, criticize, and correct: (1) the binary view of gender, (2) the privilege historically available to men, and/or (3) the ways that views about gender maintain oppressive social orders or practices that harm others, especially girls and women who historically have been subordinated, along gendered dimensions including sexuality and gender-identity. Since oppression often involves ignoring the perspectives of the marginalized, different approaches to feminist ethics have in common a commitment to better understand the experiences of persons oppressed in gendered ways. That commitment results in a tendency, in feminist ethics, to take into account empirical information and material actualities.

Not all feminist ethicists correct all of (1) through (3). Some have assumed or upheld the gender binary (Wollstonecraft 1792; Firestone 1970). They criticize and aim to correct the privileging of men as the more morally worthy half of the binary, or argue against the maintenance of a social order that oppresses others in gendered ways. More recently, feminist ethicists have commonly criticized the gender binary itself, arguing that upholding a fixed conception of the world as constituted only by “biological” men and women contributes to the maintenance of oppressive and gendered social orders, especially when doing so marginalizes those who do not conform to gender binaries (Butler 1990; Bettcher 2014; Dea 2016a). Feminist ethicists who are attentive to the intersections of multiple aspects of identity including race, class, and disability, in addition to gender, criticize and correct assumptions that men *simpliciter* are historically privileged, as if privilege distributes equally among all men regardless of how they are socially situated. They instead focus more on criticizing and correcting oppressive practices that harm and marginalize others who live at these intersections in order to account for the distinctive experiences of women whose experiences are not those of members of culturally dominant groups (Crenshaw 1991; Khader 2013).

Whatever the focus of feminist ethicists, a widely shared characteristic of their works is at least some overt attention to power, privilege, or limited access to social goods. In a broad sense, then, feminist ethics is fundamentally political (Tong 1993, 160). This is not necessarily a feature of feminist ethics that distinguishes it from “mainstream” ethics, however, since feminist analyses of ethical theory as arising from material and nonideal contexts suggest that all ethics is political whether its being so is recognized by the theorist or not.

Since feminist ethics is not merely a branch of ethics, but is instead “a way of *doing* ethics” (Lindemann 2005, 4), philosophers engaged in the above tasks can be concerned with any branch of ethics, including meta-ethics, normative theory, and practical or applied ethics. The point of feminist ethics is, ideally, to change ethics for the better by improving ethical theorizing and offering better approaches to issues including those involving gender. Feminist ethics is not limited to gendered issues because the insights of feminist ethics are often applicable to analyses of moral experiences that share features with gendered issues or that reflect the intersection of gender with other bases of oppression. Feminist philosophical endeavors include bringing investigations motivated by feminist ethics to bear on ethical issues, broadly conceived.