



HAL
open science

Book Review: Feminist Philosophy Reappraised

Margrit Shildrick

► **To cite this version:**

Margrit Shildrick. Book Review: Feminist Philosophy Reappraised. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 2005, 12 (4), pp.489-494. 10.1177/1350506805057106 . hal-00571258

HAL Id: hal-00571258

<https://hal.science/hal-00571258>

Submitted on 1 Mar 2011

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Book Reviews

FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY REAPPRAISED

Robin May Schott

Discovering Feminist Philosophy: Knowledge, Ethics and Politics

Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003, 157 pp., ISBN 0-7425-1455-2

Herta Nagl-Docekal

Feminist Philosophy, trans. Katharina Vester

Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004, 250 pp., ISBN 0-8133-6571-6

The appearance of two new introductory texts on feminist philosophy is to be greatly welcomed, both for their resolution in taking on the subject as a whole, and in providing the opportunity to compare the different approaches employed by two respected 'European' academics. Robin May Schott is US trained but now living and working in Copenhagen, while Herta Nagl-Docekal – whose book is translated from German – is a professor at Vienna University. As such, both are fully open to the European tradition of modernist philosophy and draw widely on sources to which native English speakers may have little access. As my own interests have been very largely within the field of recent continental philosophy – represented by feminists such as Luce Irigaray – and the Anglo-American take on poststructuralism – in which Judith Butler is exemplary, I was intrigued to see how both authors would appeal to my concerns. Moreover, given that like many feminist academics exposed to the full interdisciplinarity of women's studies, I would hesitate to define myself as a philosopher per se, the question of how philosophy shapes and interacts with broader issues was always in the forefront of my reading.

While feminists generally have little difficulty in rejecting the familiar claim that philosophy is the master discourse that grounds all subsequent intellectual endeavour, that is not to say that some understanding of how philosophy works and what it addresses is not an essential component of gender politics. Both Schott and Nagl-Docekal are rightly committed to the affective power of their discipline without being blinkered about either the anti-women claims made on its behalf, or its propensity to overlook the feminine altogether. Indeed, as Schott's subtitle indicates, philosophy is never detached from politics, and both books are careful to bring out the intersections characteristic of feminist thinking and activism. Although the two works may be primarily directed towards philosophy students – including, one hopes, those who have little sympathy with or understanding of feminism – their appeal as specifically *feminist* texts must engage a wider audience of feminist scholars seeking an overview on what might justify the study of philosophy. The task for the authors, then, is to maintain a sufficient level of analytic sophistication to satisfy the most sceptical student of philosophy, while remaining

accessible to those without prior experience of the discipline. Does it work? My quick response is yes, the appeal and potential of feminist philosophy is effectively explored and will provoke further reflection, but that neither work truly excited me as many women's studies texts have done. One difficulty is that where other work may reasonably get away with some degree of rhetorical gesture, philosophy – if it is to be taken seriously – is constrained to be much more careful in structuring its central arguments. I do not mean that a slavish rationality is necessarily demanded – though Nagl-Docekal has much to say in rationality's defence – but that there is a need for a certain form of coherence. As I detail below, the two books are variably successful in maintaining an appealing momentum.

In *Discovering Feminist Philosophy*, Robin May Schott addresses head-on what she perceives as an active hostility to, or prejudice against, her subject. As a migrant outsider, she is all too aware of the gap between the strong representation of women in formal political structures in Denmark, and their struggle to maintain a professional footing in the academy. As with other countries, the situation vis-a-vis philosophy is particularly acute – bleak, says Schott – but she turns it to her advantage by insisting that 'an outsider status can generate key philosophical questions' (p. 4). She rapidly outlines the substantive indicators through which it is clear that far from having now achieved equality, women remain subject to oppression, violence and discrimination worldwide, and she firmly establishes the credentials of feminist philosophy in tackling such political realities. In incorporating some autobiographical material into her account, Schott not only offers an easy mode of access to her material, but performatively demonstrates the feminist aversion to the privileged (though always unrealized) impartiality of mainstream philosophy. Her strategy of recalling the hostile occasion of a mixed philosophy seminar in order to introduce a set of familiar objections to feminist philosophy, and her own counter-responses, works extremely well. Schott is enabled to lay out and defend some central tenets of the feminist position including the significance of a non-essentialist understanding of sexual difference; the relation between masculinity and rationality; the effects of power, and the relations between norms and social reality; the problematization of universality; and the importance of recognizing that philosophy can be both strategic and substantive. And as she sees it, a fully constituted feminist philosophy should always relate to bodies marked by sex.

For Schott, the achievements of feminist interventions in the field can best be understood in the context of the three related themes of the history of philosophy; theories of knowledge; and ethics (p. 21). With regard to the first, feminism is deeply concerned to uncover a history of sexism that permeates philosophy from the earliest work, and Schott lucidly articulates some core objections to Kant – among others – as the philosopher who has most outraged feminists. His notorious assertion, 'I hardly believe the fair sex is capable of principles', is hard to dismiss, and Schott duly remarks that his philosophy 'illustrates an ascetic posture that is based on a distancing from and denigration of feeling, sensuality and the feminine' (p. 39). Nonetheless, she does not wholly condemn Kant and generously references, albeit with reservations, the many feminist philosophers – including Nagl-Docekal – who would reclaim his work as essential to the feminist project. Indeed, the purpose of Schott's meticulous attention to the gaps and contradictions of philosophical history is not to expose its worthlessness, but to insist on the value for philosophy as a whole of recognizing what is 'unknown and unthought' (p. 29). Against the view that philosophy can be all-inclusive and complete, Schott believes that it is only in questioning such assumptions that we are pushed to the borders of thought. Alert readers will detect here not just a

concern with the missing gender dimension, but a move towards an altogether more postmodernist understanding of what philosophy can and cannot achieve. It is not that Schott ever comes out as a postmodernist as such, but that she is fully alert to the significances of the instabilities that are threaded through the mainstream history. For feminists, it is not a matter of resolving those instabilities, but of appreciating the value of producing multiple interpretations that make no claim to finality. As Schott puts it: 'it is in the spirit of living in the present critically that feminist readers open up places for innovative readings, dissenting views, and maverick approaches' (p. 47).

Moving on to epistemology, Schott picks up that idea with reference to the perspectivism of the arch maverick Nietzsche, whose work has found an increasing place in feminist philosophy. But, she asks, if knowledge is always situated, then how should we understand the philosophical attempt to transcend the particular context (p. 54)? As is obligatory on such occasions – and how one longs for a wholly iconoclastic defiance here – Schott makes the ritual denial of relativism, as well as of any essentialist connotations of the phrase 'women's ways of knowing'. Her explanation of the differences between feminist and traditional epistemology is careful and thorough, and clearly shows why the situatedness of gender is by no means the only issue at hand. The feminist attention to questions of community, power and desire does not so much undermine the notions of truth and reason so dear to the Enlightenment as contextualize them sociohistorically. In short, for Schott, knowledge always implies a 'social enterprise' (p. 55). Similarly, 'knowing another person is . . . a reciprocal relation' (p. 62) that is affective, fluid, ambiguous and sensual, and which demands an ethical responsibility for and towards the other. What Schott hints at here goes right to the heart of a feminist ethics, particularly as it is conceived postconventionally, and I would have welcomed more detailed engagement with specific writers. Instead, the text returns to a somewhat formulaic run-through on the strengths and weaknesses of feminist empiricism, standpoint theory, and finally some postmodernism that chiefly engages with the corporeality of knowledge in the philosophy of Elizabeth Grosz and Luce Irigaray, but it felt as though an opportunity to open up the feminist debate had been missed.

The real strength of Schott's work shines through, however, when she turns, in the concluding sections, to a fuller discussion of ethics that abandons the overview approach and deploys her own specific research interests. In Chapter 3, 'Feminist Ethics of Conflict', Schott brings her whole discussion up to date by focusing her reflections on ethics around the issues of war rape and sexual violence, particularly with regard to the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. She adopts a deliberately 'bottom-up' context-dependent approach that, in asking how people actually respect or break moral norms, involves a whole process of rethinking the moral subject, moral knowledge and moral responsibility (pp. 88–9). Referring to Simone de Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity, Schott maintains a typically postmodernist paradox: that 'Failure is immanent in the structure of human freedom, and it is human failure that makes ethics meaningful' (p. 94). This is a long way from the usual fare of feminist ethics, and clearly marks Schott's determination to move beyond the expected. Her use of a phenomenological approach to the corporeality of experience similarly allows her to view ethics as an embodied relation that inherently involves conflict and power differentials. When it comes to the need for ethical repair, Schott considers and rejects the model of recognition, gives her partial approval to the notion of witnessing – which she commends particularly for its emotional depth – and finally opts for the ethics of alterity, which promotes a thoroughgoing responsibility to and for the other that does not depend on

achieving consensus. As Schott notes: 'ethics includes phenomenological, institutional, and symbolic dimensions, even though this approach may be viewed as trespassing boundaries between ethical and political analysis' (p. 125). It is an altogether sophisticated analysis that remains nonetheless easily accessible to the reader.

As Schott ends her book with another reminder of the inequalities still facing women in the world today, so Nagl-Docekal begins hers with an overview of discrimination that gives the lie to the claim that we live in a post-feminist era. Such a view, she remarks, is 'a political-programmatic statement of a conservative thrust rather than a descriptive proposition' (p. xv). Having established the continuing relevancy of the feminist project, she asks how philosophy has contributed to and legitimized the hierarchy of the sexes, and how feminist philosophy might develop alternatives that undermine existing asymmetries. To this end, she promises a close textual reading of key passages, and a critical reassessment of some of the central theses of feminist theory. Nagl-Docekal warns against what she calls the 'rhetorically overdrawn figures of dismissal' (p. xx) that permeate some forms of feminist thinking and attempt to put certain positions beyond properly argumentative discussion. In pointedly naming 'the death of the subject' or the constructivist notion of the body as just such positions, she signals her own intention of reclaiming a modernist analytic that will look somewhat sceptically on postmodernist alternatives. And so it proves.

Given a central concern with hierarchical gender relations as a point of organization, Nagl-Docekal tackles successively philosophical anthropology, aesthetics, reason and the philosophy of law to provide an increasingly politically engaged summation of the task of feminist thinking. Her approach, however, is always readily identified as that of a modernist philosopher, and some readers may find her carefully reasoned style a little daunting. There is a certain formality to it that may be unfamiliar to non-philosophers, and indeed it is part of Nagl-Docekal's remit to expose unchallenged dogma to such an analysis. In places, the outcome is extremely lucid and easy to follow, but at times I began to feel somewhat ground down. Unfortunately, my biggest problem was with the opening chapter, 'On the Anthropology of the Sexes', which among other things lays out an understanding of the concept of freedom that is essential to her subsequent argument. While it is clear that Nagl-Docekal is well versed in poststructuralist and post-modernist theory, she quickly establishes that her own commitments lie elsewhere. Her treatment of the differential deployment by Butler and Grosz of discursive materiality makes the sharp point that both perform an unproblematic shift from an analytic approach to language to the ontological matter of the production of sexual difference through discursive practices. Nagl-Docekal remains unconvinced by the arguments of either and remarks that: 'Juridical, medical and disciplinary regulating norms, which are claimed to be the source of what we consider natural facts, presuppose natural conditions. . . . Without the question of how to deal with certain facts, there would not be any norms' (p. 32). Now, the logic of this objection, the structure of which Nagl-Docekal repeats in various forms throughout her book, may be indisputable, but it is not clear to me that Butler or Grosz would be substantially shaken by such an appeal to foundations, given that her own approach is necessarily discursive. In an endnote, Nagl-Docekal floats the idea that Butler's inconsistencies – and how can we deny them? – are part of a learning process, which would at least seem to me to signal a properly feminist methodology on Butler's part. Nonetheless, Nagl-Docekal declines to follow through such an idea, and I can't help feeling that she throws the baby out with the bathwater.

In the following chapter, the author provides an excellent assessment of Freudian theory and the question of his biological determinism, before turning to consider the feminist ploy of *écriture féminine*, which she finds both misleading and inadequate. Once again, Nagl-Docekal is perhaps too literal in her approach to the extent that her dislike of metaphor severely restricts her discussion, for example, of 'writing in white ink' (p. 64). More than being a reference to the 'femininity' of breast milk, white ink is also about the invisibility of women, which is a sociohistorical point well worth making. When it comes to Kant's lapses in rigour, however, Nagl-Docekal seems altogether more forgiving, sometimes with convincing justifications, sometimes not. The value to me, however, is that her approach did force me to recognize that feminist hostility to Kant is not always well grounded, but often directed to a grossly oversimplified reading of his work. Inevitably, it is in the chapter on reason that the author's Kantian credentials are most apparent, and in which her fuller critique of some of feminism's favourite theorists emerges. As she points out, we can only critique reason by appealing to it: 'any discussion of androcentric patterns of thinking requires, as a necessary precondition, a capacity for reasonable reflection' (p. 96). Nagl-Docekal insists that she is not decrying the stimulation provided by many feminist theorists, but that their rhetoric cannot stand up to properly constituted philosophical analysis. Her argument is so carefully constructed that it is difficult to fault on its own terms, but nonetheless it seems to me to devalue non-logical ways of thinking that may yet produce indispensable shifts in how we understand gender hierarchies. Perhaps we do need to be more aware of the incompleteness of much feminist theory, but there is surely strength too in precisely that feature that always holds open the questions rather than closing them down.

In her final section, Nagl-Docekal, in line with Schott's approach, states clearly: 'The ultimate aim of feminist philosophy . . . is to provide theoretical foundations for a feminist politics' (p. 133). She begins with a beautifully nuanced consideration of Kant's moral theory as it is based on the human capacity to choose our own ends. Disappointingly for me, however, that potential is reduced to an appeal to the value of contract theory as delivered via the law and through a revised definition of citizenship that takes the rights of women into account. It is a rather flat, even abrupt conclusion that almost left me wondering whether some further move in the original text had somehow been left out. In general it is hard for me to agree with the development of Nagl-Docekal's argument – it would involve giving up too much that pushed my own thinking on – but she is too good an analyst to ignore, and I hoped for a grander finale. Overall, then, my response was very mixed. It is, admittedly, a long time since I was constrained to approach philosophy like this, and my occasional impatience is unlikely to be shared by readers who primarily avow the continuing value of modernist concepts and principles. What doesn't help, however, is a degree of infelicity in the translation itself, which induces a somewhat heavy effect, though again I became most aware of it only at points where I found the substantive argument difficult to follow. Nagl-Docekal is undoubtedly a very fine philosopher who makes some telling points about the dangers for feminism of less than rigorous thinking, and it seems a shame that her editor did not iron out some of the unnecessary stylistic distractions.

Both these books are unusual as introductory texts. In referencing unfamiliar continental feminist philosophers and relating their work to the accepted mainstream, each is a potentially valuable addition to our resources, and Schott in particular will have a strong transdisciplinary appeal. The difficulty with Nagl-Docekal's text lies perhaps in a certain negativity of tone, which will please those fed up with sloppy postmodernist thinking, but is unlikely to win new converts

to the Kantian tradition. In an ideal world there would be time to assimilate both, but if I had to choose I guess that Schott will better engage the emerging philosophical imagination.

Margrit Shildrick
Queen's University Belfast

BATTLING THE BINARIES? REVISITING 'HE, SHE AND IT REVISITED'

M. Lie, ed.

He, She and IT Revisited: New Perspectives on Gender in the Information Society
Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 2003, 304 pp., ISBN 82-05-31550-7

Even in egalitarian Norway and despite various efforts by the Norwegian government, private organizations, researchers and educators, a gender gap remains in the design and use of computers and the Internet. This book collects recent work by Norwegian scholars to achieve 'a better understanding of how and if ICTs become gendered and how they also may become "degendered" by both design and user activities' (p. 29). The main issue addressed in this book is the influence of the hegemonic discourse of gender and ICTs on policy-makers, designers and users.

Although the sole focus on Norwegian researchers and Norwegian empirical material is a narrow one for an edited book and, in this respect, the title is misleading, this book does present an important contribution to gender and ICT studies. Norway is known for its high level of ICT penetration and the equality-oriented politics of the government, which Norwegians call 'state feminism'. Hence, an investigation into the effectiveness of this politics may well provide insight into the situation of other European countries. Moreover, Norwegian gender and ICT researchers have built up an impressive, high-quality body of research that dates back to the 1970s, making Norway one of the leading countries in gender and ICT research from a social studies of technology and co-constructivist perspective.

In the chapter 'Male Positioning Strategies in Relation to Computing', Corneliussen identifies the hegemonic discourse on gender and ICTs as follows: experience, interest and knowledge of computers are expected of men, and men are related to activities such as the 'actual handling of the computer (technical knowledge, software development) and activities related to play (computer games)' (p. 110). This subject position is condensed in the image of the hacker. This is a persuasive stereotype, which keeps girls and women away from computers as they vigorously reject this style of life and compulsive way of engaging with technology. Hence, the subject position that remains for, and is associated with women, is the opposite of the hacker, a position of no special interest, experience or knowledge of computers. For women, the computer is supposed to be 'useful or a necessity, and . . . the computer first and foremost is seen as a tool for concrete objectives', e.g. for the use of email and word-processing (p. 112). In all the chapters, it seems that regardless of whether policy-makers, commercial firms and individual computer users accept the myth (and most do), they have been influenced by it.

In the chapter 'Forget the Hacker? A Critical Re-Appraisal of Norwegian Studies of Gender and ICT', Gansmo, Lagesen and Sørensen are interested in the extent to which researchers themselves 'may contribute to the conservation of unfortunate symbolic practices related to the production of misleading gendered dualisms' (p. 37). Interestingly, perhaps one of the most important publications of Norwegian researchers in the past did counter the hacker stereotype by showing