

Challenge to Feminist Philosophy

Margarita Levin

The setting was the year-end convention of the American Philosophical Association (APA), Eastern Division. The sponsor of the papers to be delivered was the Society for Philosophy and Public Affairs. The main paper was ostensibly on recent trends in philosophical concepts of ethics, especially as they concern our rights and duties as family members. In reality, it may well turn out to have been the opening salvo in a battle for the hearts and minds of academic women.

The main paper was entitled "The Philosopher's War Against the Family" and was delivered by Professor Christina Hoff Sommers of Clark University. Sommers has edited a well-regarded textbook on ethics and has also written several articles critical of current views of the subject. The two commentators on this paper were Alison Jaggar of the University of Cincinnati and Kathryn Jackson of Montclair State College. Professor Jaggar, an active feminist, is the author of *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Rowman and Allanheld, 1983). The moderator was Professor Diana Meyers of the University of Connecticut.

Anticipating a newsworthy event, the editors of *Academic Questions* had asked me to report on the meeting. I would have attended in any case as I was curious to see how the philosophers present would respond to Sommers. She had sent me her paper beforehand and I had been struck by her forthright critique of feminist influence on contemporary ethical theory.

Whoever handled room assignments for the APA misjudged the interest this talk would attract. The crowd of sixty (rather large for a convention symposium) overflowed into the hallway. Surprisingly, it seemed to contain more men than women. The main paper's challenging title had clearly piqued the interest of some, sounded alarm bells for others. Although the room was stuffy, the lethargy that typically sets in at an academic talk was absent. The audience was alert and on edge.

Sommers began with general remarks about philosophers and ethics. Writing on ethical matters used to concern itself with "What it means to be a good son or daughter, a good mother or father . . . wife or husband . . . brother or sister," according to Sommers. But lately philosophers have concerned themselves far more with nuclear deterrence, toxic waste, animal rights, and affirmative action:

Modern ethics is singularly silent on the bread and butter issues of personal morality in daily life. But silence is only part of it . . . the contemporary philosopher is, on the whole, actively unsympathetic to the idea that we have *any* duties defined by relationships we have not voluntarily entered into. . . . Because the special relationships that constitute the family

as a social arrangement are [in a sense] not voluntarily assumed, many moralists feel bound in principle to dismiss them altogether. The practical result is that philosophers are to be found among those who are contributing to an ongoing disintegration of the traditional family.

At this point Sommers distinguished what she called the “conservationist” approach to social criticism from the “radical” approach. The former is grounded in “the conviction that the traditional arrangements have great moral weight and that common opinion is a primary source of moral truth.” Conservationism does not rule out the need for reform, but it does urge caution before tampering with what past generations have found workable.

The radical (or “Platonist”) approach to social criticism, as Sommers described it, sees the fact that some aspect of society is hallowed by tradition as, if anything, strong evidence of its undesirability. This view “is external . . . to the social institutions it has placed under moral scrutiny.” Sommers went on to give some examples of radical criticism of the family: the suggestion that children owe absolutely nothing to the parents who raised them, that husbands and wives “should think of each other as roommates when assigning household and parental tasks,” that young children who wish to leave their families should be assigned alternate caretakers.

All this led up to the heart of the paper, the attack on feminism, and the intakes of breath were audible as Sommers turned to this topic. According to her, feminist criticism is inherently radical. Its main target is the family, for it is there that all the harmful stereotypes are nurtured. If not for the chains of duty to husband and children that her family and society wrap around her, a woman would be a fully autonomous being. Feminist writers argue that achieving an ideal society requires sweeping changes in the family. “In the assimilationist society [as Richard Wasserstrom, past president of the APA, characterizes a nonsexist utopia], persons would not be socialized so as to see or understand themselves or others . . . essentially or significantly . . . [on the basis of their being] either male or female.” Ann Ferguson was cited as looking forward to the day when “love relationships would be based on the meshing together of androgynous beings.” Sommers went on to cite Jaggar as one whose ideal is described in a science fiction story depicting a society in which “neither sex bears children, but both sexes, through hormone treatments, suckle them. . . . To those who find this bizarre, Jaggar replies that this shows the depth of our prejudice in favor of the ‘natural’ family.”

Sommers’ most striking citation was Jaggar’s description of prostitution as the archetypal relationship of women to men. “Both man and woman,” Jaggar writes, “might be outraged at the description of their candlelight dinner as prostitution. But the radical feminist argues this outrage is due simply to the participants’ failure or refusal to perceive the social context in which the dinner occurs.” Sommers criticized as “hard and condescending” this ignoring or belittling of women’s actual choices, so common in feminist writings. She

drew the obvious comparison between feminism and Marxism, noting how feminists have appropriated the vocabulary and concepts of oppression, false consciousness, and the ideal of a society not divided along lines of class or sex. "And both [feminists and Marxists] are zealots, paying little attention to the tragic personal costs to be paid for the revolution they wish to bring about."

This was followed by a discussion of the work of Judith Jarvis Thomson and Michael Tooley, philosophers who are noted defenders of the right to abortion and infanticide, respectively.

Much of the rest of Sommers' presentation focused on the "social consequences of applying radical theory to family obligation . . . how the principled philosophical disrespect for common sense in the area of family morality has weakened the family and how this affects the happiness of its members." Although she herself had no new statistics to offer, she pointed out that those same philosophers who praise divorce as beneficial and liberating show no concern about the effects of divorce on children. She observed that when children are mentioned, philosophical proponents of divorce tend to assert, without evidence, that children are better off in a broken home rather than in one with unhappy parents. "The suggestion that parents who are unhappy should get a divorce 'for the sake of the children' is very contemporary."

Her presentation ended with the declaration that "a moral philosophy that does not give proper weight to the customs and opinions of the community is presumptuous in its attitude and pernicious in its consequences. In an important sense it is not moral philosophy at all. For it is humanly irrelevant."

Jaggar then presented her response. She began by saying that she had at first intended to focus on Sommers' discussion of ethical concepts. But, seeing how comparatively small a part of the paper this discussion comprised, she concluded, with considerable justification, that "an attack on philosophical radicalism in general and feminism in particular was the primary purpose of this paper." She went on to say that she took the paper personally since she herself had been singled out as a feminist spokesperson. She accused Sommers of "elementary misunderstandings, distortions or misrepresentations [of feminism]," and characterized her paper as "outrageous."

Jaggar spent a considerable portion of her time discussing what constitutes a "traditional family," and whether current statistics show such families to be in the minority. She challenged the claim that divorce is bad for children, arguing (as Sommers had in effect predicted she would) that the dangers of physical and sexual abuse in unhappy families are greater than the loss of income and the psychological trauma resulting from divorce.

Jaggar did not say whether she still stood by her claim that women who participate in traditional relationships with men are akin to prostitutes. She did say that the tendency in current feminism is to condemn not women's choices but the societal constraints on their choices. Jaggar denied Sommers' charge that feminism has had any influence on the changing American family. This

denial was rather surprising, inasmuch as academic feminism has always proclaimed itself to be a political movement that seeks drastic change in the university and in society in general. It was surprising also because in the closing lines of her response Jaggar seemed to confirm this latter claim by singling out Sommers as “one of those who has benefited the most [from feminism] . . . enjoying career opportunities . . . that have resulted in part from our work.” Jaggar called on her to “cease ridiculing the efforts of those who are working hard in her interest.” It must be pointed out that nowhere did Jaggar specify in detail any of Sommers’ alleged misunderstanding or distortions of feminist doctrine. (Professor Sommers was not given a chance to respond to the charge of ingratitude. But an answer seems obvious. Female scholars have as strict an obligation as male scholars to challenge errors and poor arguments. The incidental good that feminists may or may not have done academic women does not exempt them from such scrutiny.)

Professor Jackson’s response followed, dealing primarily with Sommers’ comments on abortion and on the voluntaristic aspect of contemporary ethics. Jackson steered clear of the feminist issues, and perhaps for that reason lost the audience’s attention.

The comments having finished, it is customary for the main speaker to respond to the comments. Professor Meyers attempted to eliminate this part of the meeting, telling Sommers that there was not enough time. Why she said this is unclear since there was no meeting scheduled for that room afterwards. Sommers went ahead with a response anyway, but she evidently had to keep it short.

In meeting Jaggar’s rebuttal, Sommers focused on two central issues. As to Jaggar’s claim not to be condemning women’s choices, but rather “the constraints within which women have made those choices,” Sommers asked, “why anyone should be taken in by this shift from directly condemning a woman’s choices to a finding that they are *irrelevant* because the woman making them is incompetent and her decisions not free. . . . What matters is that the actual choices that women make are [still] being ignored and discounted. . . . [T]he idea that Big Sister knows best stings *me* and should sting anyone with a modicum of liberal sensibility.”

A second point Sommers addressed was the whole question of whether feminists do or do not want men to share parental duties:

Jaggar notes that *all along* feminists have been inviting men to share in the rearing of children. . . . But there are invitations and invitations. It is a condition of entry that the man accept the feminists’ perspective on history and social reality: that the very maleness of men, their masculinity, is the primary source of the violence and destructive competitiveness in the world. . . . To some [men] it even seems that they are being asked to check their manhood at the door. . . . It is not unfair to characterize the posture of the feminist, past and present, as persistently forbidding and uninviting to men.

It seemed the atmosphere in the room became even more electric at this point

because for the first time in such a setting someone was giving an unvarnished account of what feminist philosophers have actually said.

With Sommers having concluded her abbreviated response, the meeting was opened for questions.

The audience was slow to respond—perhaps the violation of current academic taboos left the majority disoriented. I was the only one requesting the floor at first, and Professor Meyers granted it. Perhaps it was assumed that my eagerness was that of a feminist ready to attack Professor Sommers. The surprise was evident when I began by thanking her for having articulated the thoughts of women who do not feel that feminists speak for them. I went on to challenge Professor Jaggar's claim that feminism has merely been responding to and not actively promoting changes in American families. I had wondered whether I should remain a silent observer but felt that the opportunity to speak up could not be allowed to pass. I'm glad I made a statement because as it turned out I was the only woman in the audience who came to Professor Sommers' defense. When only men oppose feminism, the key feminist presupposition—that everything hinges on gender—seems to be confirmed. When women join in the criticism, the sex of the critic becomes irrelevant and attention properly shifts to the substantive issues.

Another questioner challenged the claim that children are in greater danger from male abuse than female, though this, since it was a factual issue, was somewhat beside the point of the argument. Yet another questioner challenged Jaggar on the fundamental issue: if social differences can be traced to biological ones which are innate, then doesn't all talk of oppression become specious? I am informed that Professor Jaggar granted that this would follow, but I did not hear her response because by this point the audience had become too noisy.

It should be emphasized that the audience had not remained quiet during the session, nor was the question period a decorous one. Both sides produced spontaneous outbursts and expressions of disgust. Meyers made no attempt to call anyone to order and reportedly later told Sommers it was her own controversial statements that were prompting the disorder.

At one point, Professor Jan Narveson, a noted moral philosopher, raised a well-taken and purely philosophical question about obligations that are not voluntarily assumed. No doubt he was uncomfortable with the strong feelings the session was producing and hoped to set a good example by reminding everyone of the ostensible reason we were all there. But if he was hoping to calm people down, he failed. Instead his remark served as a reminder of how far from a typical philosophy symposium this meeting actually was.

Professor Virginia Held of Hunter College, clearly angry, accused Sommers of "lying" about what the term "traditional family" has always meant. (Disputes about terminology are common in philosophy, as are charges of ambiguity, but they are not ordinarily couched in terms of deceit.) But having aimed her

remarks at Sommers, Held informed the chair that she wished to hear Jaggar respond. Sommers was not given a chance to reply to Held's observations.

The meeting broke up soon after this with tempers flaring and people gathering in knots to continue the arguments. Loud intemperate language, including obscenities, was directed at Sommers' defenders. All this served to underscore how novel this symposium was. Over the last decade feminist workshops, panel discussions and symposia have been held in ever-increasing numbers at academic meetings such as the APA, the Modern Language Association, and every other association in the humanities and social sciences. Whatever the ostensible topic—the Greek city-state or the novels of Thomas Hardy—the real themes are entirely predictable: feminist revisionism, feminist interpretation. The participants go through the motions of academic discussion with commentators and questions, but no serious criticism is every broached. Self-congratulation and mutual admiration are all that result.

Often entrenched views remain unchallenged, not through intrinsic merit, but because it is difficult to imagine such a challenge being mounted. The Sommers symposium showed, first, that vigorous criticism of feminism is possible, and second, that feminists meet such criticism with personal affront and anger.