

## FEMINIST ETHICS WITHOUT FEMINIST ETHICAL THEORY

(Or, More Generally, “ $\phi$  Ethics without  $\phi$  *Ethical Theory*”)

NATHAN NOBIS  
UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER

ABSTRACT: Let’s say that a feminist ethics is (among other things) one that takes considerations of gender to be highly significant (if not crucial) in many determinations of moral right and wrong. Must one accept some form of feminist theory in order to adopt a feminist ethical perspective? Nathan Nobis argues that one need not. He advocates what he calls a “minimal model” of feminist ethics, arguing that this model is sufficient to meet feminist goals. Nobis defends this minimalist model against the view that a feminist ethics must rest upon feminist theory.



There are at least two models of what it is to be a feminist ethicist or moral philosopher. One model requires that one accept a distinctively feminist *ethical theory*. I will argue against this model by arguing that since the concept of a feminist ethical theory is highly unclear, any claim that ethicists who are feminist need one is also unclear and inadequately defended. I will advocate what I call a “minimal model” of feminist ethics, arguing that it is philosophically and practically sufficient to meet feminist goals.

### 1. “MINIMAL” AND “EXTENDED” MODELS OF FEMINIST ETHICS

On the “minimal model,” to be a feminist ethicist one must meet only two conditions. First, one must have certain substantive moral beliefs regarding the treatment of and attitudes toward women and girls; second, one must believe that any moral theory that implies that these beliefs are false is *ipso facto* defective.<sup>1</sup>

According to this model, some moral beliefs that one must hold to be a feminist ethicist include the beliefs that at least some<sup>2</sup> “women are [and have been] victims of wrongdoing,” that some have been (and still are) “oppressed,” and that “much of society’s treatment of women is wrong” (Brennan, p. 860; Jagggar 1991, p. 95). Many other seemingly correct moral judgments like these could easily be voiced at all levels of particularity and generality.

Whether these beliefs are arrived at by intuitively “seeing” their truth or by way of extended reasoning and argument does not seem to matter for this model: it is neutral between foundationalist or intuitionist and coherentist or reflective equilibrium-based moral epistemologists, and even externalist theories of justification as well. However, what does matter is that the core of these beliefs are thought to be exceedingly well justified and reasonable, so much so that any abstract theorizing that implies that these beliefs are false is subject to, at least, serious doubt and scrutiny, or, more likely, immediate rejection.

Also worthy of rejection are theories that support the judgments that moral claims like these are generally true but give *obviously faulty* reasons for why this is so. Here we might also imagine a possible view about the treatment of women that is analogous to Kant’s treatment of animals: men should not harm women *because* when they do so they invariably wind up harming other men. Surely, even if it were true that men who harm women also (even necessarily) eventually harm men, this does not approach anything like the best reasons why men should not harm women. To use a fitting sports metaphor, interactions with women are not a “warm up” for the moral “ball game” that is played only by men. This view misses the obvious truth that women’s interests matter in their own right, just as Kant missed the fact that beings who have interests but are not autonomous, rational agents (such as many non-human animals and babies, mentally challenged and senile humans) deserve to have their interests directly taken into account.

While this Kant-inspired view is obviously flawed (both for women and, in its intended version, for animals), philosophers who accept the “minimal model of feminist ethics” might still accept other traditional ethical theories, such as other Kantian-like “golden rule” or respect-based rights theories, various deontologies and pluralistic consequentialisms, or virtue ethics (or, perhaps, some consistent combination of these views).<sup>3</sup> For feminists who seek insight into the *basic nature* of right and wrong, a traditional ethical theory is an option.

Some ethicists who are feminists take this option. Allison Jagggar reports that, “Not all feminists are convinced that western ethical theory is deeply flawed . . . ; on the contrary, some propose that one or another existing theory—perhaps with a little fine tuning—is entirely adequate to address feminist ethical concerns” (2000, 348). She characterizes this position as “a matter of adding women and stirring them into existing theory,” and thereby “us[ing] the philosophical resources of [the] times to challenge at least some aspects of women’s subordination to men.” Margaret Walker also reports that, “Some philosophers remain convinced that well-established traditions of moral thought and their allied epistemologies, in

particular those of Kant and Aristotle, can be effectively recruited to feminist criticism” (1998a, p. 368).<sup>4</sup>

An ethicist who accepts what I have called the “minimal model” of feminist ethics is someone like Walker and Jagger describe. He or she remains convinced that some “traditional” ethical theory is “good enough” to do the job needed to meet feminist practical and philosophical goals. She thinks something like a traditional ethical theory is roughly true and that it provides an adequate, if not the best, explanation for why her substantive moral beliefs about women are true. And she has not been convinced that the general structure of some traditional ethical theory or theory for how we ought to reason about moral theory and problems needs to be replaced. She also thinks that she has not been presented with a clear and adequately defended alternative to a traditional theory either.

Who might articulate and defend an alternative to this “minimal” model, which accepts traditional ethical theory? Someone who accepts what I will call an “extended” model of feminist ethics. This model requires that, to be a genuine feminist ethicist, in addition to meeting the two constraints of the first model (i.e., holding “positive” moral judgments regarding women and thinking they are well justified) one must also accept a distinctly *feminist ethical theory*.

Here I will examine a recent attempt to articulate what a distinctively feminist ethical theory would be like. I will argue that this attempt is, at least, problematic, and that some other common suggestions on how to distinguish feminist ethical perspectives are also problematic. Insofar as it is unclear what a feminist ethical theory would be, it is unclear what sense can be made of any demand, or even suggestion, that ethicists who are feminist (or any ethicists) should accept one. Therefore, I argue that, since it is entirely clear and comprehensible, the “minimal model” is theoretically and practically adequate to meet feminist goals. Although the minimal model seems to lack current popularity (since it is rarely discussed or praised by ethicists who are feminists), I advocate returning to it.<sup>5</sup>

## **2. “FEMINIST CONCLUSION” AND “WOMEN’S EXPERIENCE” REQUIREMENTS**

In her survey on the current status of feminist ethics, Samantha Brennan discusses a move beyond the minimal model of feminist ethics. Brennan suspects that an ethical theory like utilitarianism does justify pro-female moral judgments since only rarely would disrespecting women, treating them unfairly, and harming them in other ways maximize overall utility (p. 860). She suspects, however, that since utilitarianism could *require* the subordination of women in some possible (however unlikely) circumstances, it is probably not a theory that a feminist would want to accept.

But utilitarianism was only an example. She could have, presumably, picked any traditional moral theory that is extensionally correct—i.e., has the right practical implications for women—to make the observation that some moral philosophers who believe that, from their feminist perspective, that theoretical option is inadequate.

For example, Kantian perspectives allegedly place too much emphasis on reason, to the denigration of feeling; rights-based perspectives allegedly see people as radically individualistic, and not community and family-oriented; contractarian views allegedly see people as overly adversarial and non-cooperative, and so forth.

Brennan notes some ethicists who are feminist sense that they need to start anew and develop a distinctively *feminist* ethical theory, a theory that not only gets “the right answers”, but “get[s] them in the right way” (p. 860). This “right way” is, presumably, a *feminist* way, and, presumably, most or all, traditional ethical theories, even in their contemporary versions, either fail to do this or do it inadequately. Thus, in the first section of her paper she “examines the tension between two criteria which an ethical theory must meet in order to be counted as feminist” (p. 859).

According to Brennan, an ethical theory is a *feminist ethical theory* if and only if two conditions are satisfied. First, it must aim to “achieve a theoretical understanding of women’s oppression with the purpose of providing a route to ending women’s oppression”; she calls this the “feminist conclusion requirement.” Second, it must be an account of morality that is “based on women’s moral experience(s)”: she calls this “the women’s experience requirement” (p. 860). She takes “feminist ethical theories to be those ethical theories which share [these] two central aims” (p. 860).

Although the notion of a “feminist ethical theory” is commonly mentioned in feminist writings on ethics, Brennan’s discussion is the only one I have found that attempts to directly characterize the notion. Thus it is worthy of careful scrutiny. I am to show that both these conditions are problematic. So, in absence of other suggestions for how to understand the notion, the suggestion that feminists should consider a feminist ethical theory is quite unclear.

### 3. THE “FEMINIST CONCLUSION REQUIREMENT”: A CAUSAL, NOT “NORMATIVE,” CONDITION

If feminist ethical theories are ethical theories, then they are a subset of ethical theories in general. If this is the case, then Brennan’s first condition, that a theory offer “a theoretical understanding of women’s oppression with the purpose of providing a route to ending women’s oppression” is misplaced. This is because any theory or explanation that satisfies this condition will not be a rival to any traditional ethical theory, such as utilitarianism or Kantianism. This is because, in general, *ethical theories* do not attempt to provide theoretical understanding of *anyone’s* oppression with the purpose of providing a route to ending that oppression.

To understand any oppression with the goal of ending it is to try to identify the *causes* for why some group is oppressed and to strategize about what can be done to introduce new *causes* that will hopefully result in that group’s ceasing to be oppressed. For feminist purposes, identifying these causes will likely include identifying the moral beliefs that people have held that resulted in women being oppressed, including their beliefs (if they have any) about the *general nature* of right and wrong, or their *ethical theories*.

But, strictly speaking, this is the task for historical and social-scientific understanding; we might even describe it as moral psychology, but it is more psychological than what moral philosophers typically do. People with philosophical training might do this quite well (and, perhaps, people without philosophical backgrounds would do it less well<sup>6</sup>) but this project is to answer difficult historical, empirical and causal questions that are very different in kind from the theoretical questions about the *basic nature* of right and wrong and good and bad that traditional ethical theories attempt to answer. Brennan characterizes the “feminist conclusion requirement” as a “normative” condition (p. 860), but, unfortunately, there really is nothing “normative” about it, at least not in the sense that moral judgments are said to be normative.<sup>7</sup>

So, anything that answers to this condition is not an ethical theory, or, at least, it is not an ethical theory in any traditional sense of the term. So it cannot rival or be incompatible with any traditional ethical theory that has substantive moral implications that feminists would agree with. In fact, some set of proposition’s meetings this condition identifies it as *not* an ethical theory and *ipso facto* not a feminist ethical theory. Accepting a traditional ethical theory might very well, in fact, motivate one to pursue these kinds of important historical and causal questions that the condition alludes to, but many adherents of traditional ethical theories have no quarrel with anything meeting the condition because it simply addresses issues than ethicists, *qua ethicists*, do not address.

#### 4. INDETERMINACY IN THE “WOMEN’S MORAL EXPERIENCE” REQUIREMENT

Brennan’s second claim is that an ethical theory is feminist if it develops an account of morality that is “based on women’s moral experience(s).” Here moral experience is understood, roughly, as women’s beliefs about morality, how moral issues and ethical theories ought to be approached and evaluated, and how things seem, morally, to women (pp. 864–865). To rule out non- or anti-feminist women’s moral experiences informing what makes a theory feminist,<sup>8</sup> this condition should probably read that feminist ethical theories provide (2’) an account of morality that is based on *feminist women’s* moral experience(s).

There are a number of initial difficulties with (2’). First, as most feminists are quick to point out, the “moral experiences” of women and feminist women are not monolithic: although there is much agreement, there is also difference and disagreement. Some feminists find their moral experience lending support to egoistic-libertarian views, like Ayn Rand’s, Jan Narveson’s or Robert Nozick’s, while others find their experience to support more caring and other-regarding moral views. Provided “positive” moral views about women are implied by the theories accepted by these feminists, condition (2’) would seem to imply that almost *any* account of morality can be properly feminist, if it gibes with at least one, or some sufficient number (but what’s the number?), of feminist women’s moral experiences.<sup>9</sup> If almost any account of morality is feminist then that certainly does not allow for a distinct position.

Second, feminist understandings of morality (or ethical theory) are supposed to contrast with non-feminist understanding, which are said to be typically held by males. But there is little or no agreement among this set either. Some male philosophers, both past and present, take a rather Hobbesian view on ethics: they see us all in highly adversarial relations to each other, and think that, e.g., the *only* reason why you should not kill and eat your neighbor (if you might want to) is, ultimately, that this (probably) would not be in your best long-term self-interest.

Many feminists raise compelling objections to this picture of morality and often seem to take this as an indictment of all of traditional ethics. But this is a mistake since many not-explicitly-feminist male and female philosophers from a wide variety of theoretical perspectives find this picture of morality false and repugnant; their moral experiences suggests that, among other important moral truths, other beings with interests really matter in their own right, morally speaking, and morality sometimes requires that we sometimes promote their interests, at times even at cost to our own.<sup>10</sup> So these kinds of objections to egoistic views are not uniquely feminist.

Feminists will likely share much with these moral philosophers, yet they do not all call themselves “feminists.” So here the difference between some feminist women’s moral experience and non-feminists’ moral experience may not be very great. This suggests that it is often difficult, misleading, and unhelpful to conduct this debate in terms of generalizations of “traditional ethics” (and “feminist ethics”). This is unfortunately common and it would be better to address the weaknesses and strengths of particular, clearly identified views than make false generalizations about whole traditions or certain kinds of thinkers.

While it’s difficult to make very strong generalizations about feminists, women, men, and the history of moral philosophy, we should concede that *some* modest, yet truthful, generalizations can be made. One of these, as Brennan notes, is that since all mainstream traditional ethical theories have been developed by men, these theories “reflect the experiences of this group.” The result of this, according to Brennan, is that the moral “experiences” of most, or many, women are left out and/or made “impossible to make sense of” on these theories or, more generally, these perspectives (p. 861).

In this context, it seems that what it is for a moral theory to “make sense of experience” is for it to have moral implications for a particular domain of life that has moral significance, i.e., it implies that some actions ought to be done or that some response is morally appropriate, *and* that it is clear what these implications are.

One kind of women’s experiences that Brennan mentions is that of being in families. Although, of course, men and boys are part of families, she regrets that we have “an ethics for the marketplace or public sphere and no ethics for the family” (p. 861). Men’s experiences allegedly pertain to “public” life, so their main concern is with the moral issues there, in business and government, to the neglect of “private” or “domestic” issues. Jaggar claims, in fact, that this neglect perhaps has even resulted in, among other bad consequences, “the abuse of women and children, especially girls, [being] ignored” (1991, p. 85; 2000, p. 352).

Some replies here are needed. First, traditional ethical theories *surely* imply propositions about how one ought to conduct oneself within the domestic sphere and in family or interpersonal relationships. Identifying these propositions and discerning their truth-value might often be difficult, but is often quite difficult in “the marketplace” or “public sphere” as well. It’s just often not to see what ethical theories imply for any domain, including the “public” domain: since this is the case, I doubt, contrary to Brennan’s claim, that there *really is* “an ethics for the public sphere.” People have ideas for how society should be ordered, the function of government, and how commerce should proceed; and they sometimes try to rationally defend them. But there is much disagreement. If there really were a “public” ethic, there would presumably be much less moral disagreement, especially among politicians and businesspeople.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, the concerns Brennan raises only support the view that traditional ethical theories are often *unhelpful*, in the sense that believing one will not, in itself, give much guidance on how to conduct one’s life. But most traditional ethicists agree with that. For example, even if I am firmly convinced that utilitarianism (or another ethical theory) is true, that does not give me much of an idea *exactly* what I should do with my life in order to maximize utility. If I think that, whatever I do, I should try to promote human rights, it is still not clear whether this might best be promoted by my shopping at Wal-Mart and sending my savings to Amnesty, or whether I should buy only from often more expensive businesses that pledge to support a fair wage and workers’ rights. If I think my actions should be such that I can always will their maxim to be a universal law, there is still the difficult question of what the maxim of an action is and (if that can be determined) which maxims I can will, in light of the various maxims I might will.

In itself, adopting an ethical theory—i.e., accepting an explanation for what makes actions permissible and what makes them impermissible—provides little practical guidance. There is often too much relevant empirical information that we just do not know and cannot even reasonably guess. But these difficulties do not give reason to think that some ethical theory is *false*, which, I think is what feminist ethics need to argue if they want to advocate feminist ethical theories.

But perhaps I have been a bit too pessimistic. While traditional ethical theories are often unhelpful, it seems they sometimes are helpful, even when trying to understand the moral implications for family life. We are often able to accurately discern the consequences for all in the family who will be affected by some decision; sometimes answering the question, “How would you like that if someone did that to you?” can be morally illuminating. At the least, a traditional ethical theory can often clearly identify some things *not* to do. So, it just does not seem true that moral experiences of women are literally “impossible to make sense of” on traditional moral theories. And if they were, that would not give reason to think that traditional theories are false, just that they are unhelpful or have epistemic defects. But again, some traditional ethicists recognize this and so advocate various “rules of thumb”

for decision-making, and/or encourage the cultivation of virtuous character types, and/or advocate “multiple tier” models of ethics.

## **5. BUILDING AN ETHICAL THEORY BASED ON FEMINIST WOMEN’S MORAL EXPERIENCE**

In the remaining discussion of the requirement that a feminist ethical theory be based on feminist women’s moral experience, Brennan argues convincingly that this requirement will not allow a feminist ethical theory to be “relativistic.” Feminist ethical theories cannot “sanction” the abuse of women or the dismissal of women’s moral insights, even if local or near-universal custom dictates it. Brennan also asks some of the critical questions I raised earlier about what it is for a moral theory to be based on moral experience.

But, as far as I can tell, she does not discuss what a moral theory would look like if it were based on feminist women’s moral experience, so she does not address the issue she raises. How would this kind of theory be different from a traditional ethical theory that attempts to provide criteria for, and understanding of, right and wrong? What would it appeal to in order to explain what *makes* right actions right and what *makes* wrong actions wrong? This is what traditional ethical theories do, so if feminist ethical theories rival these, they will have to address this kind of question.

One answer, common in the literature on feminist ethics, is the “ethics of care.” If this is to rival traditional ethical theories, an ethical theory based on care will need to be presented as the hypothesis that what *makes* right acts right is the fact that they are what a caring person does (or would do) and that wrong acts are wrong *because* a caring person would not do them.

Perspectives in traditional ethics can, and should, agree that caring is often good and that doing what the caring person would do is right: they do not entail that one should be uncaring and mean. However, if there are plausible explanations for *why* these are so (and it seems that there are), this suggests that the ethics of care does not provide the *best explanation* of the nature of, and the difference between, right and wrong. The ethics of care would seem to be another version of an ideal-observer theory (like the traditional divine command theory or some kinds of contemporary virtue ethics). These theories might offer true necessary conditions for acts or persons having some moral status, they do not explain what it is about some acts or persons that *makes* them worthy of approval or the caring response. So, if the ethics of care is an ethical theory such that it rivals other traditional ethical theories (that is, it does not merely serve a function that is wholly consistent with, or even supported by, some traditional ethical theories), it does not seem to be a particularly good theory. Its association with feminists has nothing whatsoever to do with why it is not a good theory, however: it is not a good theory just because it does not seem to provide an adequate explanation of what makes anything with a moral status (acts, persons, intentions, motives, etc.) have the moral status they do. It might state truths, but ethical theories do more since they attempt to explain and illuminate.

So, I conclude that Brennan's second condition (and my refinements) for a feminist ethical theory, that it provides an account of morality that is based on feminist women's moral experience(s), is problematic. First, we do not know which women's experience are relevant and, second, we do know that that women's experiences, i.e., their beliefs and perceptions, would not *make* something have its moral status anyway, so these experiences are not the logical basis of a moral theory. Thus, if one wishes to advocate a feminist ethical theory, work needs to be done to explain the notion; this needs to be done also to successfully argue that a moral philosopher who is a feminist needs one and, perhaps, that non-feminist ethicists should become feminists and then adopt such a theory.

## 6. FURTHER ISSUES, BRIEFLY ADDRESSED

In my allotted space, I have made much progress, but my focus has been limited. To conclude, let me briefly set out some final issues that could be addressed. Feminists sometimes claim that it is positions on the issues below that separate them from non-feminists, but this is not true.

First, Brennan persuasively argues that the notions of "rights" need not presuppose or imply that we are solitary or adversarial selves. Many traditional ethicists agree: many think that there are "positive" rights to assistance or aid, not only "negative" rights to protection or non-interference. Insofar as some feminists object to the notion of "rights," Brennan's response addresses their typical misfiring objections.

Second, there is the question of the relationship between "reason" and "emotion" in traditional ethics. This debate is best seen in terms of what should influence ethical decision making and interpersonal moral interaction. Virginia Held writes that that, "Caring, empathy, feeling with others, [and] being sensitive to each other's feelings all may be better guides to what morality requires in actual contexts than may be abstract rules of reason, or rational calculation" (1990, p. 344; 1998, p. 100). But many within traditional ethics, at least of its contemporary variety, agree: consequentialists and virtue theorists would clearly agree, and Kant had a virtue theory and philosophy of moral education as well. Many would disagree with Held when she writes that traditional ethicists generally think that, "Emotional attitudes toward moral issues themselves interfere with rationality and should be disregarded" (1998, p. 98). This may be true for some, but not for all, and for those who disagree, they see the issue as much more complicated than the dichotomy suggested by Held: they argue that emotions *can* yield epistemic insight, but that they can also reinforce unjustified prejudices and the difficult challenge is to separate the former from the latter.

Another issue is whether traditional ethical theories presuppose or entail any particular picture for what person or moral agents are like, or whether they ignore empirical differences among persons. For example, Walker states that in traditional ethics,

The normative subject . . . is . . . “free, white, and twenty-one”—and a male. This is, “the” moral agent so envisioned is not (typically) a woman, a child, a person of disadvantaged or despised economic, educational, racial, caste, ethnic, sexual or religious identity or position, or a person with temporary, chronic, or progressive disabilities of body, mind, or spirit. (1998a, 364)

I do not think that traditional ethicists assume any picture of a typical “normative subject” (much less this picture) since most ethical perspectives are sensitive to empirical differences that affect what one is *able* to do. Thus, Walker’s claims are quite doubtful.

## 7. CONCLUSION: THE OVER-PROLIFERATION OF THEORY

In conclusion, I have argued that the most promising attempt to clarify the notion of a feminist ethical theory is unsuccessful. Perhaps this lack of success is due to my having an overly narrow conception of what an ethical theory is. But ethical theories are theories, and theories are supposed to explain. And for a feminist ethical theory to be an alternative to non-feminist theories, it must attempt to explain the same phenomena. But anything meeting Brennan’s first condition does not do this, and her second condition lacks adequate precision and anything meeting it would lack explanatory power, compared to the alternatives.

Thus, I have argued that feminist perspectives on ethics should not be characterized in terms of feminist ethical theories: feminist ethicists do not need a “feminist ethical theory.” My suggestion, which the “minimal model” captures, is that they should be characterized in terms of their substantive moral commitments towards women and girls. On this model, feminist ethics is an “ethics of care”: feminist ethicists are characterized in terms of what they believe about women, and also what they *care* about, what they find important and worthy to write about, discuss, teach, and, perhaps, act on.

In this feminist ethicists are similar to philosophers who work on ethical issues concerning non-human animals. Some philosophers who understand what happens to animals at human hands argue that, given the empirical facts, a wide variety of ethical theories and perspectives imply that the treatment of animals is seriously wrong. They care enough to write, teach, and even act on these issues. Like many feminists, they are disappointed that other philosophers (and people in general), do not seem to care. They might even sense that many philosophers are “fiddling while Rome burns” in the sense that there are much more important contributions they could, and *should*, be making to bettering the world than by attempting to solve highly abstract and unworldly philosophical, even *ethical*, puzzles; thus, they think that many “traditional” philosophers’ cares are misplaced or poorly ranked. Some philosophers of a more “activist” leaning consult with historical and social science research, and their armchair empirical knowledge, to attempt to, analogous to Brennan’s first condition, “achieve a theoretical understanding of animals oppression with the purpose of providing a route to ending that oppression.” So there is a parallel.

But this is all done without an “animalist” ethical theory. And analogous thought and action is done about the moral conditions of homosexuals, children, various racial, ethnic and religious groups, (some?) fetuses, and other groups, all without a corresponding type-specific ethical theory. The notion of a feminist ethical theory seems to suggest the proliferation of theories: a different ethical theory for every ethical problem or to address every group’s moral issues, that for each “ $\phi$  ethics” there should be a  $\phi$  ethical theory. I have argued that, at least for feminist ethics, the sense that there is an analogous ethical theory is unjustified. I suspect that analogous arguments could be developed to respond to suggestions that ethical theories exist, or should be developed, uniquely for other groups as well.

If traditional ethical theories are inadequate, we need adequate theory *simpliciter*. And a theory will be adequate only if it has the correct implications for these groups and for the right reasons. Hopefully, we all might agree on this and ask these questions of a particular ethical theory *directly*, rather than attempt to unfruitfully discern whether it is feminist or not.<sup>12</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. I assume that feminists would not find non-cognitive meta-ethical options attractive since non-cognitivism has a very difficult time making sense of moral objectivity. Feminists certainly would not accept relativism or subjectivism—cognitivist views that make the truth values of moral sentences depend on individual or collective approvals—since nothing in those kinds of views *necessarily* precludes the exploitation of women and the degradation of their moral status from being morally justified.
2. I do not know if a feminist ethicist needs to be committed to the view that *all* women, present and past, have been victims, oppressed, treated wrongly, etc., so I restrict myself to the safer quantifiers “some,” or, perhaps, “most.”
3. I do not advocate various Hobbesian and egoistic ethical theories as recommended “traditional” theories. Even many who do not explicitly identify themselves as feminists find these theories false and morally repugnant since they portray us all as ruggedly individualist and adversarial. Feminist writers (e.g., Jaggar 2000, p. 354; Annette Baier 1987, p. 55 [quoted in Jaggar 2000]) seem to take contractarianism to be representative of “traditional” ethical theories, which is a factual mistake.
4. Hilde Lindemann Nelson (2000) makes similar observations.
5. Something like the minimal model is mentioned in many writings on feminist ethics, but little attention is given to it. Some are said to hold it but their names tend not to be mentioned. One can easily get the impression that it is not a “live” option.
6. Some philosophers (e.g., Richard Fumerton in his *Metaepistemology and Skepticism* [Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995], p. 172) argue that much of “applied ethics” is, *strictly speaking*, not philosophy because it concerns discerning the empirical facts needed to feed into an ethical theory. This fact-finding is said to not be, strictly speaking, a philosophical quest, but rather an empirical-scientific one. This seems correct, but since, for *worse*, many scientists lack the conceptual and logic skills to competently work with

ethical theories and, for *better*, many philosophers, despite their lacking formal training, are competently able to find and assess the relevant empirical data. Thus it seems that philosophers are often the best people suited to think about pressing moral problems. If that is not “real” or “pure” philosophy, so what? Sometimes (if not nearly always!) there are more morally important activities to be done than “real” or “pure” philosophy.

7. It might be said to be normative in the sense that it pertains to what ought to be done, given a certain perspective and goals. But then any instrumental reasoning and strategizing is “normative” so, e.g., deciding how to bake a cake, how to best train for a marathon, etc. are normative issues. People can use the term “normative” however they like, but these senses are clearly different from those typically associated with ethics.

8. I presume that all or most feminists concede that there are or could be non- or anti-feminist women and that their experiences don’t “count” for the purposes of theory building from a feminist perspective. These women might be called (dis?)“honorary men,” as some feminist men are called “honorary women”?

9. This suggests: (2”) “an account of morality that is based on *some* feminist woman’s moral experience(s)” and (2”) “an account . . . that is based a *sufficient number or percent* of feminist women’s moral experience(s).”

10. Jagger (2000, pp. 354–355) seems to object to moral theories that supposedly entail that we should have a “readiness to sacrifice those we love to abstract principles and absent strangers.” It’s not clear that any theory entails that we should have a “readiness” or enthusiasm to do this. And is it that we should never do something because we think an “abstract moral principle” requires it, if doing so would result in some “sacrifice” of a loved one (in what sense of “sacrifice”)? Is it that we are *never* obligated to provide assistance to absent strangers so that, for example, we could never be obligated to provide famine or disaster aid assistance? Jagger’s claims are not precisely clear and it seems easy to interpret in a way that is suggestive of some kind of egoism. Objections to “impartiality” (for both ethical theories and moral decision-making procedures) are difficult to evaluate unless the constraints and limits to *partiality* are also identified in a principled way (which they, unfortunately, typically are not).

11. This would also cast doubt on Margaret Walker’s (1998b) claim that traditional ethics tests theory by appealing to “*our* intuitions” since there is no such thing as *our* intuitions. Non-feminist ethicists disagree about many important things.

12. A version of this paper was presented at the *Society for Analytical Feminism*, Central APA 2002. I thank Samantha Brennan for comments.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brennan, Samantha. 1999. “Recent Work in Feminist Ethics.” *Ethics*, pp. 109, 858–893.
- Baier, Annette. 1987. “The Need for More than Justice.” In *Science, Morality and Feminist Theory*, eds. Marsha Hanen and Kai Nielson. Calgary: University of Calgary Press.
- Held, Virginia. 1990. “Feminist Transformations of Moral Theory.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, fall supplement.
- . 1993. *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- . 1998. "Feminist Reconceptualizations in Ethics." In *Philosophy in a Feminist Voice: Critiques and Reconstructions*, ed. Janet Kourany, pp. 92–115. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- . 1999. "Feminist Ethics." In *Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy*, Vol. 1, *Ethics*, ed. Klaus Brinkmann, pp. 41–49. Bowling Green: Philosophy Documentation Center.
- Jaggar, Allison. 1991. "Feminist Ethics: Projects, Problems, Prospects." In *Feminist Ethics*, ed. Claudia Card, pp. 78–106. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press.
- . 2000. "Feminist Ethics." In *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, ed. Hugh LaFollette, pp. 348–374. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Nelson, Hilde Lindemann. 2000. "Feminist Bioethics: Where We've Been, Where We're Going." In "Symposium on Feminist Ethics," *Metaphilosophy* pp. 31, 492–508.
- Walker, Margaret Urban. 1996. "Feminist Skepticism, Authority, and Transparency." In *Moral Knowledge? New readings in Moral Epistemology*, eds. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons, pp. 267–292. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 1998a. "Moral Epistemology." In *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, eds. Allison Jaggar and Iris Marion Young, pp. 363–371. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers.
- . 1998b. *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics*. New York: Routledge.

