

**THE GENERALIZED OTHER AND THE CONCRETE
OTHER : A RESPONSE OF MARIE FLEMING**

I

Marie Fleming's "The Gender of Critical Theory" repays careful study and I have considerable sympathy for much of what she has to say.¹ I also think that the objects of her exposition, elucidation and critique are thinkers of considerable importance who deserve careful and critical attention. That is to say, Jurgen Habermas's version of a critical theory and his attempt to articulate a communicative ethic plainly deserve much more attention than philosophers in the Anglo-American philosophical tradition have been willing to give them and Seyla Benhabib's critique, development and integration with feminist thought of Habermas's work seems to me of central importance to our understanding of social life and to our construction of a social theory with an emancipatory practice.² Fleming helps us to see the importance of that work including the way Benhabib builds and improves on Habermas.

My difficulties begin with Fleming's criticisms of Benhabib's laundering of Habermas. I am inclined to think that Benhabib's laundering is well done and that for the most part, and now speaking broadly and not of whatever finetuning might be required, Benhabib's account seems persuasive and importantly pushes social thought along. I am not convinced that it has the weaknesses and ill effects that Fleming believes she unearths

Received : 27-4-89

including its alleged conservative thrust. I shall proceed by inspecting her criticisms one by one.

II

Fleming finds it paradoxical that feminist theorists such as Benhabib and Nancy Frazer find much to learn and indeed to build on from Habermas's theory of modernity, given "his insensitivity to issues of contemporary concern to women." That does not seem puzzling to me in the least. There can be and often is general or at least different features of a person's thought that are available and important to others even where they sharply disagree with that person on other matters or find her thought radically incomplete. V. W. Quine is notoriously conservative but radical philosophers have found his holistic, fallibilistic anti-foundationalist theory of very considerable value indeed. C. B. Macpherson was an incisive critic of liberalism yet his own positive account importantly builds in important respects on liberalism. Sibyl Schwarzenbach and Susan Moller Okin are important feminist theorists who reveal gender biases in the work of John Rawls.² Yet they go on in important ways to develop basically Rawlsian accounts of justice and moral theory which overcome those biases and give us, within a broadly contractarian and Rawlsian framework, a genderless theory of justice. Similarly Seyla Benhabib both builds on and corrects Habermas. I see nothing surprising or untoward in this. Habermas could be blind to women's issues while his conceptions of communicative rationality, undistorted discourse and a communicative ethic could be of vital importance for feminist thought.

III

I also have difficulties with what Fleming says about Benhabib's treatment of the private/public distinction and with her

conceptualization of generalized other/the concrete other distinction and with her employment of the tricky 'false needs' distinction. What Fleming says about those distinctions themselves seems to me problematical and she seems to me to relate them, perhaps even run them together, in ways that seem questionable.

Fleming, as does Benhabib, rightly and importantly, points out that the public/private distinction has widely functioned as an ideological instrument in the oppression of women. Historically speaking, it has been a tool in legitimizing the segregation of men and women. Women were excluded from the public realm of justice : a political realm where history is made. They were instead relegated to the private, personal space of the household. The public/private distinction reflects a normative ordering of the lives of women and men in what in reality is an oppressive sex-gender system.

All this, as a matter of sociological fact, is sadly and ubiquitously true. That is, given the world as we have it now, this is the way things go. But it does not follow from this that in a genderless world, where relations between men and women would at long last be genuinely human relations (relations that among other things were fair and non-oppressive), that there would in such a circumstance be no need for a private/public distinction and that there would in such a circumstance come into being a human condition where law would wither away so that there would be no need for the notions of rights and entitlements. From the fact that contract theories get articulated, sometimes by sexist males against the background of the oppressive social reality of sexist society, it does not at all follow that contract theories cannot be genderless while still retaining the private/public distinction and some conception of rights and entitlements.

Carol Gilligan has well taught us that in moral reflection and moral action there are different strands.⁴ Some of our thinking centres on considerations of rights, entitlements and justice, but there is also a different strand concerned with care and responsibility and a sensitivity to human needs and aspirations. The latter strand tends to be more contextual and narrative. It worries less about an individual's rights and boundary crossings and stresses more the interconnectedness between human beings and the importance of such interconnectedness. Historically speaking at least in societies such as our own, the first strand has been more the concern of men and the second more of women. But this is a historical point. It does not say anything about how men and women *must* be in any society anywhere anywhen. It does not say anything about how, a distinctive socialization aside, men and women are constituted. Gender aside, these different strands are important elements in the moral life and in our pervasively male dominated society the second strand has among theoreticians until recently been extensively ignored and sometimes even devalued and the first, with its stress on rights, entitlements and justice gets identified with the public sphere and sometimes—revealing a not inconsiderable ethnocentrism—even with very taking of the moral point of view.

IV

Fleming commends Benhabib for historicizing the moral point of view and for introducing her conceptions of the generalized other and the concrete other. Yet she feels that these very distinctions also give rise to difficulties in Benhabib's account. To take the standpoint of the generalized other is to view each person as a rational being with entitlements to the same rights and duties as we claim for ourselves. What constitutes our moral dignity is not what differentiates us from each other but rather what we "as speaking and acting rational agents, have in

common." The concrete other, by contrast, is a perspective on human beings where we do not, in viewing them as moral agents, abstract from their concrete identities but view each and every rational being as an individual with a concrete history, identity and affective-emotional constitution. In viewing people from this perspective are concerned with them as specific individuals with specific needs, talents and capacities.

The moral categories associated with the generalized other are rights, obligations and entitlement, those with the concrete other are responsibilities, bonding and caring. So the generalized other and concrete other get associated with those distinct strands of moral discourse.

Fleming thinks, mistakenly I believe, that there is something incoherent about Benhabib's conceptualization of the concrete other. The at least putative incoherency is in our talk of abstraction from what constitutes our commonality. She does not think that it makes much sense to derive an abstraction from an abstraction. She does not believe that the concrete other has much in the way of content. Perhaps I am missing something but I do not see that. It is a common characteristic of normal human beings (infants aside) that they are language users. But very general feature may for certain purposes not be the thing on which we need to focus. We might instead need, or at least want, to be rather more concrete and to focus on the specific language at a specific time and how it is used by native speakers. Alternatively, we might wish to be more specific still and look at a specific individual's idiolect. Moving from the generalized other to concrete other is analogous. There is nothing incoherent about it, contentless or, as far as I can see, suspect. *At most* Benhabib has used the word 'abstraction' in a somewhat eccentric way. But it is, that possibility notwithstanding, perfectly clear what she is talking about.

It is important for us to recognize, as Benhabib does, that every generalized other is also a concrete other and to stress the importance, against the grain of most non-feminist moral theory, of moving in thinking about morality to thinking about the concrete other. (This, of course, does not exclude thinking 'the generalized other' as well). This helps us to see a way in which we can integrate the normative features of Habermasian critical theory with the concerns of feminists. Every generalized other is also a concrete other and both standpoints are important and indeed complimentary. And adequate feminist critical theory will enable us to mediate between the perspectives of the generalized and concrete other: synthesizing justice with care, autonomy with connectedness and thereby giving a more adequate picture of the moral life. Our moral images of the world are of central importance to us and Benhabib's focus on the concrete other in addition to the generalized other gives us a more adequate one than is characteristically given in orthodox moral theory. We have in Benhabib's account both contextuality and a more abstracted perspective working together in harness to yield a more adequate moral image of the world. There is, moreover, no need to abandon the assumption that morality requires *both* impartiality and caring. Again I do not see how or even that Fleming has undermined these rather commonsensical claims.

V

I want now to turn to a consideration of Fleming's worry about an alleged implicit, though surely unintended, authoritarianism once we subordinate rights to needs. Fleming is worried that if rights can be subordinate to needs that we can have no assurances that an anticipatory-utopian discourse will not, under the cover of liberation, actually be authoritarian. On the contrary, I would respond, we can have at least this assurance: among

our fundamental needs surely will be a need for autonomy and a need for some sort of self-realization. Moreover, the latter need requires autonomy for its satisfaction and there just is, as well, this need for autonomy. In a needbased ethics with such needs being as central and strategic as they are, there can be no genuine worry on that account about authoritarianism taking us down the road to serfdom. Furthermore, I do not see that from the fact that traditional morality and a not inconsiderable amount of moral theory has been, in effect, if not in intent, oppressive to women that we have good reasons for believing that critical theory, particularly a critical feminist theory, will be oppressive to women and authoritarian.

VI

However, whether authoritarian or not, Fleming thinks that on Benhabib's account there is a real worry about relativism, for in thoroughly naturalizing Habermas—taking the Apel out of Habermas—and in exposing what she calls the rationalistic fallacy, Benhabib has in effect, Fleming claims, undermined Habermas's important distinction between language oriented to reaching understanding and the strategic use of language. But that (or so I am inclined to think) is not so, naturalism or no naturalism, rationalistic fallacy or not, there is a distinction that we can recognize, and see a point in acknowledging, between undistorted and distorted discourse. The former is discourse whose underlying governing role or aim is that this discourse is to be constrained by what will, under conditions of equal autonomy, be agreed on by rational agents reasoning or deliberating in a certain way under conditions of unfettered inquiry. 'That certain way' is constituted by certain constraints on their reasoning. The sole admissible motive for discoursing, when reasoning under such constraints, is the search for truth where the deliberation so structured would be governed by what would be accepted under

those conditions on the basis of the best arguments or the most adequate deliberation.⁵ All other motives are excluded. Such discourse is contrasted with discourses—indeed our ordinary discourses—that do not meet those conditions. Such idealized discourses just are conceptually distinct from discourses which do not meet those conditions and have by contrast only a strategic aim or where the strategic aim is dominant. That the former is more utopian and occurs less frequently than we would wish is no news to Habermas and Benhabib and does not undermine the distinction. Indeed even if they never occurred—if the whole thing were counterfactual—it would not undermine the distinction. We have a conception, heuristically valuable, to put it minimally, between undistorted and distorted discourse. And that in turn helps us in sorting out what is ideological and what is not.

VII

Finally, let us consider the charge of conservatism. Benhabib's intentions to the contrary notwithstanding, her account, Fleming maintains, is in effect politically conservative. This is so because Benhabib, Fleming would have it, accepts too much state intervention and allows that a communicative ethic is intimately linked to the vision of the distinctively democratic, public ethos in late capitalist societies. But state interventionism in a thoroughly social democratic but also liberal society (say Sweden) need not be conservative and a transitional socialist society also *need* not, with its extensive role of the state, be conservative. That Habermas *starts* from the democratic ethos of capitalist societies (those capitalist societies that unlike South Africa or Chile are actually democratic) in articulating norms of communicative rationality does not mean he must remain there. Socialism builds on capitalism and all liberal beliefs need not be anathema to socialists.⁶ There will be superstructural parallels to the base. Benhabib's defense of a communicative ethic affords

one a model which shows us some of what is to be done if we are to transcend bourgeois individualism in the direction of a socialist society of the future. That is its emancipatory intent and there is nothing in it which undermines that interest or, in some other way, has a conservative thrust.

Department of Philosophy
The University of Calgary
2500 University Drive N.W.
Calgary
Alberta, Canada T2N 1N4

KAI NIELSEN

NOTES

1. Marie Fleming, "The Gender of Critical Theory," *Canadian Society for Hermeneutics and Postmodern Thought* (Windsor, Ontario: May 31, 1988).
2. Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* Vols I and II (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984); Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); Seyla Benhabib, "The Generalized and Concrete Other," *Praxis International* 5:4 (January, 1986); Nancy Fraser, "What's Critical About Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender," *New German Critique* 35 (Spring/Summer, 1985).
3. Sibyl Schwarzenbach, "Rawls and Ownership: Forgotten Category of Reproductive Labour" in Marsha Hanen and Kai Nielsen (eds). *Morality and Feminist Theory* (Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary Press, 1987), pp. 139-167 and Susan Moller Okin, "Justice and Gender," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 16 (1987).
4. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
5. Jurgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), pp. 1-69 and Kai Nielsen "Legitimation and Ideology," *Ratio* XXIX:2 (December, 1987), pp. 111-121.
6. Frank Cunningham, *Democratic Theory and Socialism* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL QUARTERLY PUBLICATIONS

Daya Krishna and A. M. Ghose (eds) **Contemporary Philosophical Problems : Some Classical Indian Perspectives, Rs. 10/-**

S. V. Bokil (Tran) **Elements of Metaphysics Within the Reach of Everyone, Rs. 25/-**

A. P. Rao, **Three Lectures on John Rawls, Rs. 10/-**

Ramchandra Gandhi (ed) **Language, Tradition and Modern Civilization, Rs. 50/-**

S. S. Barlingay, **Beliefs, Reasons and Reflections, Rs. 70/-**

Daya Krishna, A. M. Ghose and P. K. Srivastav (eds)
The Philosophy of Kalidas Bhattacharyya, Rs. 60/-

M. P. Marathe, Meena A. Kelkar and P. P. Gokhale (eds)
Studies in Jainism, Rs. 50/-

R. Sundara Rajan, **Innovative Competence and Social Change, Rs. 25/-**

S. S. Barlingay (ed), **A Critical Survey of Completed Research Work in Philosophy in Indian Universities (upto 1980), Part I, Rs. 50/-**

R. K. Gupta, **Exercises in Conceptual Understanding, Rs. 25/-**

Vidyut Aklujkar, **Primacy of Linguistic Units, Rs. 30/-**

Contact : The Editor,

Indian Philosophical Quarterly'

Department of Philosophy

University of Poona,

Poona-411 007.