

CONFERENCE REPORT

Who cares?

'Gendering Ethics/The Ethics of Gender',
University of Leeds, 23–25 June 2000

The Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies, University of Leeds, did a superb job in organizing this conference, accommodating over 150 papers and drawing philosophers from analytic and continental camps alike, in dialogue with political theorists, sociologists, literary theorists, gender theorists, feminist theologians, policy-makers and academic administrators. 'The Ethics of Gender' was left open to interpretation; papers freely ranged over diverse topics from Ethics after Levinas to 'Sibling Love and Queer Subjectivity'. However, the most common theme, especially in uniting empirical and theoretical studies, was 'care'.

The thirteen plenary papers – all by women – offered everything from hard-core philosophy to accounts of empirical studies, shedding light on how philosophical perspectives on ethics fit in with empirical research. Joan Tronto and Sabina Lovibond opened the conference by thinking about how we deal with the past, as well as the future. Lovibond forced philosophical reflection upon critical questions concerning gendering and the sorts of devalued feminine characteristics that might deserve our valuing. Participants were led to ask, 'When is it, or not, desirable to think as a woman?', 'What is it to be a woman?', 'What elements of our thinking are imposed?', 'When do qualities of care contribute something of value?' Feminists necessarily make ethical commitments – but how, then, do they avoid the charge of 'moralism'?

There were a variety of reports from the plenary speakers about how gendering has an impact on people's thinking and acting across the world. Selma Sevenhuijsen reported on policy-making and an ethics of care in the Netherlands; Fiona Williams and Carol Smart discussed implementing a politics of care on disability issues and on children and divorce in the UK, respectively; Cynthia Cockburn reported movingly on women struggling to make sense of their war-torn lives in Bosnia; Nira Yuval-Davis struggled to make sense of the successes and failures of a 'transversal' ethics which crosses borders – seeking support for a major research project on imagined borders and boundaries; Lynette Hunter offered intriguingly difficult stories by (and about) Somali women in Sheffield.

Short papers, panel discussions and parallel sessions filled every spare minute. Many paths could be followed through the labyrinth of intersecting issues. A topic could be followed in ethical or gender theory, according to philosophical perspectives or practical applications. Gendering did not only mean feminist perspectives on ethics: queer theory and multiculturalist approaches existed alongside more strictly feminist agendas in philosophy and ethics. Perhaps a core of feminist philosophy (the well-known debates on justice and care) helped to shape the interdisciplinarity. Although there was often a disturbing deferral to 'the philosopher' from those disclaiming philosophical expertise in ethics or epistemology, there were also attempts to demonstrate the relevance of the ethics of gender for the different branches of philosophy, including philosophy of science, technology and bioethics. At the same time there were papers defending continental ethics on Levinas, Derrida, Irigaray, Kristeva and Lyotard. It is difficult to assess the state of the debate in gendering ethics. The most that can be said is that the debate unites the disciplines in their convergence on the gendering of everyday living. Perhaps this convergence tells us something about the nature of interdisciplinarity.

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