Philosophy and Aggression

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It is not uncommonly suggested that whereas men tend to have an aggressive or competitive style of interacting or conducting a debate or a discussion, women tend to be more co-operative. They listen better, are more supportive of other people's contributions; they are less prone to be assertive, more anxious to understand and to explicate another person's view than to prove it to be wrong. Something like this view of women's 'style' of interaction has been used, for example by the American philosopher Sheila Ruth, in a critique of the ways in which she sees philosophy as male. So, she writes:

> At a recent conference on feminist scholarship, a philosopher from an important university was asked how her work had changed since adopting a feminist perspective. She answered that it had changed in many ways including focus and method. Particularly, she said, she no longer felt it necessary to participate in 'the hunt'. There was a rustle of laughter in the room, shared recognition, assent. She had put women's 'names' to her experience of the situation. Female consciousness heard and knew. Someone reads a paper; he is quarry. The others, hunters, listen, waiting for a weak point, sniffing blood. They attack; the quarry defends. Combat. So male. Is this the way to do philosophy? Is this the way to do any investigation? [1]

This sort of thing, Ruth suggests, is just a power game; it seeks to gain power or status by defeating an opponent in an exchange which is undertaken precisely for that reason, rather than for any real engagement of the self with the views being defended or discussed. The feminist scholar should refuse to participate in these sterile power games; she should rather, Ruth suggests, trust her woman's consciousness and insights, resist the quest for the male seal of approval, and assert her right and need to do philosophy in what Ruth calls a 'therapeutic way'; a way that will enlarge and expand her insights into the female possibilities and realities that have largely been denied or marginalised by the often misogynistic male philosophy profession.

I have indeed been present at the sort of sterile academic power games that Ruth describes, and I have sometimes participated in them myself; there can be few people working in academic institutions who have not, at some time or another. I have also been present at meetings of women to discuss philosophical questions where, despite sometimes quite profound disagreements, there was a sense of mutual engagement and of concern to understand rather than attack other people's views, and absolutely no feeling of the need to 'score points' or validate oneself by notching up some sort of conceptual 'victory'. But a recognition of the sterility of academic power games is not a uniquely female one. I have talked to men who have shared the sense of 'recognition' that Sheila Ruth describes. I have also been at plenty of gatherings where the overt hostility and aggression has been largely female, and has not always been directed just at men.

But simply to quote counter-examples from my own experience in this sort of way is much too easy. What concerns me here is that it seems to me that a lot of different issues are getting badly conflated, and pushing in the direction of a conception of philosophy as 'therapeutic' or of philosophy as emerging from the deliverance of a self-validating female consciousness. Both of these raise immense problems. In particular, what is seen as an 'aggressive' *style* of conducting argument is, apparently, identified with the enterprise of trying to show that something is wrong, or with disagreeing, and what is seen as a more 'co-operative' and less 'combative' style of proceeding is identified implicitly with substantive agreement and with the recognition of a 'woman's point of view'.

In trying to sort out some of the issues that are involved in these questions, it is important to note, for a start, that there are, in any case, enormous difficulties in using very general words like 'combative' or 'aggressive' or 'co-operative' when describing such things as conversations or methods of conducting debate or argument. Deborah Cameron discusses the view held by many feminists that in conversation or social intercourse women are, in some way, 'naturally' less aggressive than men, better listeners, more co-operative, and so forth [2]. She argues that this belief is in fact an aspect of what she calls 'feminist folk-linguistics'. A great deal of research has tried to investigate the existence of sex-variations in styles of speech and conversation; the results have been inconclusive, contentious and very differently interpreted. Robin Lakoff, for example, suggested that women are more prone to qualify, to use tag-questions, and generally to speak in ways that tend to make their speech less forceful and effective than that of men [3]. The extent to which her generalisations about women's speech are even accurately descriptive has been strongly disputed. But even if there are such differences, it is not possible, Cameron argues, to see speech or conversation or argument as 'aggressive' or 'co-operative' *simply* on the basis of the presence or absence of particular features of speech, if these are considered in a decontex-

tualised way. The use of questions rather than assertions, the use of tag-questions, the request for an explication *can* indeed be used in ways that are supportive of other people and encourage them to speak. They can also all be used in 'aggressive' ways and experienced as a 'threat'. (In context, 'Would you like to explain what you mean' can be read as 'You are so incompetent that you couldn't explain it clearly in the first place,and I have grave doubts about whether you can at all'; this is how students all too often experience it in seminars, I think.) Similarly, interruptions, intrusions into someone else's speech, failure to continue listening, *can* be hostile; they can also be used to give opportunities to enter a discussion, to bring someone else in, to support them. Furthermore, the idea of 'co-operative' and non-hierarchically organised discourse which aims to facilitate the inclusion of everyone and avoid dominance by the more confident and articulate is, Cameron argues, a feminist norm rather than something which it is 'natural' for women to do. And it may often need quite strict rules of procedure to enable it to happen. Thus some feminist groups have adopted rules as to how many times a person may speak, as to what sorts of 'interruptions' are allowed, and so forth.

I think it is very important indeed that we attempt to develop styles of conversation and discussion that are not experienced by the participants as threatening or hostile. I also think it may well be true that women are quite often, though not always, better than men at this; or at least quicker to realise its importance. And if this were all that was meant by the idea that we should adopt a non-aggressive and non-combative style in philosophy, I would not dissent at all, provided it were recognised that there is no easy or automatic way of identifying speech styles or modes of conversation which are or are not 'aggressive'. But I do not think that this is all that is meant in some feminist discussion; and to explain further, I now want to look at a paper by Janice Moulton, called 'A Paradigm of Philosophy: The Adversary Method' [4].

Moulton starts by considering the concept of 'aggression', and she quotes a definition as follows: 'an offensive action or procedure, especially a culpable unprovoked overt hostile attack, often involving anger and belligerence' [5]. This is an account of a *psychological disposition*, coupled with a propensity to behave in certain ways. And it is usually seen in a negative light. However, Moulton argues, 'this negative concept, when it is specifically connected to males *qua* males or to workers in certain professions (sales, management, law, philosophy, politics), often takes on positive associations' [6]. In these cases, she suggests, aggression is equated with power, activity, ambition, authority, effectiveness and competence; and aggressive behaviour is taken as a sign of these things. It is also regarded as more acceptable, even desirable, that men should display aggression, than that women should.

Moulton then goes on to suggest that there is a particular paradigm in philosophy which incorporates aggression into its methodology, and she argues implicitly, I think, that the dominance of men in philosophy is one reason that this paradigm has been so commonly accepted. She calls it 'The Adversary Paradigm', and characterises it in the following way.

The Adversary Paradigm is based, she suggests, on the following view of philosophy: 'The philosophic enterprise is seen as an unimpassioned debate between *adversaries* who try to defend their own views against counterexamples, and produce counterexamples to opposing views' [7]. Philosophers make general claims, and other philosophers attempt to 'attack' or disprove these. If there is not a live opponent in the vicinity, then they will try to imagine one. A philosophical thesis will be subjected to the most rigorous possible hypothetical objections by an imaginary opponent, and will only be regarded as worth further consideration if it survives this test.

These 'conditions of hostility', Moulton argues, do not generate the best forms of philosophical reasoning. In particular, they ignore other ways of discussing philosophical theories and arguments; such as why they are important, the reasons why people hold them, the ways in which they fit in with other beliefs, whether there are good reasons for discussing a theory at all, whether differences in experience can provide reasons for accepting or rejecting it, and whether holding a certain belief might be beneficial to people in some circumstances.

Now I think perhaps the first thing to notice is that there is a real problem about Moulton's use of words like 'hostility' or 'aggression', or the notion of an 'adversary'. The first definition of aggression she offered equated this with a psychological disposition towards, or behavioural manifestations of belligerence or anger towards another person. And she talks of the 'conditions of hostility' in the 'adversary paradigm' of philosophy. But she *also* suggests that one feature of the 'adversary paradigm' is its *split*, between reason and emotion – its 'coolness', if you like; the way in which debate is supposed to be conducted in a logical and unimpassioned way. And it would indeed by absurd, I think, to suggest that most analytical exercises in finding counter-examples are conducted amidst an atmosphere of uncontrolled rage or anger. It would also be wrong to suppose that the sort of academic power games Moulton envisages necessarily involve any specifically personal animosities between the participants. Now it is true that hostility towards other people (or the desire to 'put them down' or to score a point) can of course be expressed in 'cool' ways, such as sarcasm, biting irony, exaggerated politeness and so forth. But Moulton's argument has shifted, in a problematic way, from a consideration of the relation between the *participants* in a debate or discussion, to a consideration of the relation between a person and some view or theory. And this shift is of considerable importance.

I think that Moulton is right that there are things that are very problematic about the 'counter-examples' sort of philosophical reasoning that she describes. The particular example she discusses is that of a well-known article on abortion by the philosopher Judith Jarvis Thompson [8]. In this article, Thompson suggests that we might make a pro-abortion argument as strong as possible by first conceding a great deal to a hypothetical opponent. So, she says, let's, for the sake of argument, *accept* that those who argue that abortion is wrong because the foetus is a person are correct in this assumption. Would it still follow that abortion was wrong? To pursue this question, Thompson asks us to imagine ourselves waking up one morning 'plugged in' to a famous violinist who will die if we unplug ourselves. Her argument that abortion is morally legitimate and acceptable on at least some occasions depends on an analogy between a pregnancy and this rather absurd-sounding situation.

Now I do not think that this sort of argument is well characterised by simply calling it 'counter-example' reasoning. It is indeed problematic; but the problem is that it regards as irrelevant to the discussion of a moral issue all the questions about the practical and material circumstances of women's lives which often make the abortion question such an urgent one. In an article, 'Abortion and the Golden Rule', Richard Hare offers an argument *against* abortion which, while it does not depend on the use of quite such vivid 'counter-examples' as that of Thompson, nevertheless is, in an important sense, 'abstract' [9]. Hare argues against abortion by appealing to a version of what he calls 'The Golden Rule'; if we are glad we are alive we are enjoined not to terminate or prevent the life of a potential person who might be glad that *they* were alive. Hare writes of 'we' almost as if both women *and* men bore children, and as if 'we' are a community of equals who simply have to make abstract moral decisions. Nowhere does he recognise the importance to the debate about abortion of such things as

the lack of an adequately safe contraceptive technology to many women, the problem for many women of poverty and of bringing up children on their own, the frequent male control of access to abortion.

So what is basically wrong with this sort of argument is not that it uses 'counter-examples'. There are plenty of other sorts of arguments (including some of the other sorts mentioned by Moulton, such as discussing the reasons why people hold beliefs) where it might be important or useful to consider 'counter-examples' to whatever view is put forward. What is wrong with arguments similar to those of Jarvis Thompson is that they regard human beings simply as decontextualised or 'abstract' individuals who simply have to make moral choices. The problem is not that they are, in themselves more 'aggressive' or 'adversarial' than other methods of arguing. And there is no reason, so far as I can see, why the other sorts of methods and questions that Moulton mentions, such as asking why people hold certain beliefs, or whether they need them, or what other beliefs they cohere with or would follow from, should not be conducted, in some sense 'adversarially'. *Any* philosophical question *can* be debated in a spirit of hostility, or be dominated by the desire to outwit an opponent or to prove oneself right. Whether or not this 'adversarial' ethos is present will depend not so much on personal animosity or hostility as on things such as the institutional context, the already existing relationship of the participants to each other, and the presence or absence of shared concerns among the participants. The importance of the institutional context is crucial; considerations such as modes of assessment and prospects of job security or promotion may lead people to feel a need to appear 'clever' or confident in argument, even if at a personal level they dislike doing so.

I think it is very important that we learn to develop modes of conducting philosophical argument and debate, whether within institutions (which may sometimes be very difficult to do), or outside them, which discourage such things as: competitiveness, hostility, anxiety about being 'shown up' or 'put down', the desire to pick holes in an argument just for the sake of it, the promotion of 'cleverness' in silencing or defeating an opponent. I have speculated that women tend to be rather better than men at doing this. I think that they may sometimes be quicker than men to recognise the destructiveness of these things; and I would guess that this is because they tend more often to be on the margins of institutional contexts where these things are rife, and therefore more able to see them from the outside, and because they are sometimes more often at the receiving end of hostile or 'adversarial' behaviour than men.

I think, however, that it is a mistake to identify the avoidance of these things with any of the following:

(a) with the belief that this is intrinsically more 'natural' to women, or intrinsically endemic in men;

(b) with the pursuing of one sort of philosophical question rather than another;

(c) with the existence of any sort of philosophical agreement or shared convictions, or with the avoidance of issues about the truth or falsity of theories.

Sheila Ruth, for example, whose view of 'the hunt' I discussed earlier, contrasts 'the hunt' with what she sees as the reliance of women on their female (or feminist?) consciousness. Moulton talks of the importance of taking *experience* seriously. And there are hints here which suggest that an implicit assumption is sometimes being made that the avoidance of a competitive or adversarial style implies the existence of some shared 'reading' of experience or of a consensually validated 'women's point of view'.

It seems to me wrong to suppose that a clear or consensual 'woman's point of view' can be identified on philosophical issues, which is based on any sort of self-validating female experience [10]. Feminism is located, not in a homogeneous female experience which is self-authenticating or self-validating, but in widely divergent experiences, including the experience of conflict and of contradiction. Some of these conflicts and contradictions are particularly endemic in the lives of many women, and attempts to resolve them are both materially and practically acute, as well as involving such things as crises of conscience or moral and philosophical dilemmas. I am thinking of such things as the constant tension in many women's lives between their commonly greater responsibility for the physical and emotional 'maintenance' of others and the conflicts this may create between the responsibility for others and their own needs, or the way in which this responsibility may create a particular need for a re-evaluation of the split between 'public' and 'private' life, and the priorities which should be attached to each.

Such concerns are not exclusively or uniquely female, of course. But I think it is this sense of not needing to *explain* why something is important, or be on the defensive about it, rather than any intrinsically greater female co-operativeness or any sort of agreement or consensus among women as to how to think about these questions, which explains why women quite often experience some sense of relief, of not always being put on the line, in groups consisting only of women. But this relief can itself sometimes be undermined by a too-easy belief in female co-operativeness or a feminist consensus; such a belief can itself be coercive.

I do not therefore think that, on any substantive philosophical issues, there is a clear 'women's point of view' which can be identified. Nor do I think that there is any style or method of doing philosophy which can easily be seen as 'female'. But I *do* think that women often share concerns which, if taken seriously, would change the face of philosophy a great deal. One of those concerns has been the ways in which intellectual debate can often become a power contest, in which the less articulate or influential or confident are at a severe disadvantage. And I think that radical philosophy should perhaps pay more attention to this issue than it has tended to do in the past.

Notes

1 Ruth, Sheila, 'Methodocracy, Misogyny and Bad Faith: The Response of Philosophy', in Spender, Dale (ed.), *Men's Studies Modified: the Impact of Feminism on the Academic Disciplies*, Pergamon, 1981.

2 Cameron, Deborah, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, Macmillan, 1985.

3 Lakoff, Robin, *Language and Woman's Place*, Harper and Row, 1975.

4 Moulton, Janice, 'A Paradigm of Philosophy: The Adversary Method', in Harding, S. and Hintikka, M. (eds.), *Discovering Reality; Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology and Philosophy of Science*, D. Reidel, 1983.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 149.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 149.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 153.

8 Thompson, Judith Jarvis, *'A Defence of Abortion', Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 1, 1971.

9 Hare, Richard, 'Abortion and the Golden Rule', in Baker, R. and Elliston, F., *Philosophy and Sex*, Prometheus Books, 1975.

10 I have argued this at greater length in my book *Feminist Philosophers: Women's Perspectives on Philosophical Traditions*, Wheatsheaf, 1986.