

Ruth Abbey

The Return of Feminist Liberalism

MONTREAL: MCGILL-QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2011

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978-0773539143

"[...] Abbey's book is a significant and welcome addition to the ongoing debate in feminist and liberal circles about the viability and coherence of feminist liberalism."

Can liberalism provide the theoretical resources to meet the feminist goals of identifying and remedying women's oppression? It seems reasonable to think so. After all, liberalism and feminism share many of the same core ideals and commitments: the moral equality of persons, individual rights and liberties, equal opportunity, the rejection of arbitrary power structures and socially based hierarchies. However, many feminist thinkers have questioned this possibility. As Catharine Mackinnon, one of liberalism's most vocal critics, has asked: "why [has] liberalism as a whole, long ruling ideology, needed feminism to notice the humanity of women in the first place . . . if liberalism 'inherently' can meet feminism's challenges, having had the chance for some time, why hasn't it?" (Mackinnon 2001, 709). Ruth Abbey's *The Return of Feminist Liberalism* provides an excellent and clear-headed discussion about the potential of liberalism, suitably reconfigured along feminist lines, to identify the source (or sources) of women's subordination and to recommend strategies for ending it. Abbey doesn't offer a novel account of feminist liberalism, but instead clarifies and defends three of the most dominant feminist liberal views offered by Susan Okin, Jean Hampton, and Martha Nussbaum.

Abbey speaks of *feminist liberalism* (and not *liberal feminism*) for the following reasons. First, Okin, Hampton, and Nussbaum did not see themselves as "qualify[ing] their feminism with liberalism" but instead regarded "their feminism [as] an extension of their liberalism" (8). Second, unlike liberal feminism, feminist liberalism doesn't hold that "equality means sameness," nor does it hold that liberal values apply only in the public sphere. Indeed, feminist liberalism denies that the private sphere is or ought to be normatively distinct from the public sphere (212), so gender inequality in *any sphere* is important from the point of view of justice. Last, feminist liberalism signals that the insights and questions it raises should be debated among *liberal theorists*, not simply among feminist thinkers (9).

Abbey begins chapter 1 by introducing the long-standing feminist critiques of the liberal tradition: its dependence upon a sexual, not merely social, contract; its reliance on an "analytical and normative" distinction between the public and private spheres (12); its being gendered male, and thus not universal as it claims; its inability to identify systemic power structures; and its inability to account for, or accommodate, an ethics of care. One line of criticism that isn't listed in this framing chapter, but that is rightly given close treatment throughout the text, is whether liberalism can meet the challenges raised by the intersectionality debate. Women have different self-understandings and are differentially located, and so don't experience the world or oppression in the same ways. This being the case, can we generalize about women for theoretical and political purposes, while still acknowledging deep differences along race, class, and ethnic lines, among others?

In her defense of feminist liberalism, Abbey is even-handed in her treatment of the three thinkers. She reconstructs their views charitably and sympathetically but also acknowledges the shortcomings and tensions in their arguments. Abbey's goal isn't merely to persuade those who reject feminist liberalism to rethink their position. She wants those not convinced by feminist liberalism to be clear about where their opposition to the view rests. To this end, Abbey reveals and rejects caricatures of the position and employs a keen eye for identifying the arguments over which theorists are polarized, offering clear-eyed assessments of these disagreements. I cannot hope to discuss every single argument that Abbey makes, but I make the following brief observations.

One notable discussion concerns Okin's essay *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* Whereas many theorists labeled Okin as insensitive and her arguments as simplistic, relying on the worst aspects, even stereotypes, of minority groups, Abbey offers a novel perspective on how to understand Okin's aims and arguments in her divisive essay (87-94). Nevertheless, Abbey faults Okin for, among other things, seeming to *talk at* female members of minority groups, and not *talk with* them (94). Another important discussion concerns Hampton's feminist contractarianism; the inclusion of Hampton in this volume will hopefully spark more discussion of her work among theorists. Abbey contends that Hampton's contractarianism relies normatively upon the idea that persons regard themselves and others as ends-in-themselves, and not upon the metaphor of the contract, as Hampton suggests (128). Abbey's argument concerning Nussbaum's human capabilities approach (HCA) gives close consideration to the problem of adaptive preferences and feminist liberalism. One of Nussbaum's central claims is that the HCA is consistent with all women's self-understandings: women everywhere want to have the capabilities identified by HCA, especially women in developing nations, whose rights are often dismissed as incompatible with religious or cultural traditions. However, as Nussbaum acknowledges, some women in developing nations have adaptive preferences: they have internalized their subordination, and their preferences reflect their commitment to their unequal and subservient position. Suppose women with adaptive preferences preferred to alter HCA, so that women were denied certain capabilities, for example, the right to religious freedom or sexual functioning, or even rejected HCA outright. What then? Although Nussbaum is committed to the importance of individual choice, she also stipulates that only *informed* preferences can be given weight (174-75). Clearly, this proviso stands in tension with her claim about the universal relevance of HCA and her "professed respect for individual choice" (175). Abbey offers a revision of HCA that is "a more prescriptive and perfectionist reading than Nussbaum might feel comfortable with, but it aims to avoid some of the conundrums currently ensnaring her thinking" (182-83). This line of thinking brings me to make the following observations about Abbey's defense of feminist liberalism.

Abbey's arguments suggest that Nussbaum's feminist liberalism does not (and perhaps cannot) rest upon normatively thin grounds. Indeed, Abbey goes on (rightly, to my mind) to cast serious doubt on Nussbaum's claim that she endorses a political liberalism, or a theory that justifies political principles on the basis of widely shared political values, such as political autonomy or political equality (see chapter 13). Furthermore, she offers a clear account of why Okin's and Hampton's feminist liberalisms are partially comprehensive, that is, they justify political principles on the basis of moral ideals or conceptions of the good life, such as autonomy (see chapter 14). Abbey (following Mark Button) refers to the views of all three thinkers as "transformative liberalisms": they are grounded in a "shared commitment to the formation of civic character and the cultivation of forms of political self-understanding and ethical sensibility upon which a liberal political order depends" (261, quoting Button). In other words, feminist liberalism is concerned with "the ethical formation of liberal subjects not just as citizens, but also as friends, familiars, and intimates" (261). So one important aspect of feminist liberalism is the cultivation of feminist liberal values in all spheres of life, consistent with respect for individual autonomy; it also acknowledges that "state involvement is no panacea and that considerable wariness is warranted" (262-63). Even with these caveats about the reach of feminist liberalism, however, it is a normatively robust position. As a result, it's not clear how this squares with the intersectionality debate.

As noted earlier, feminist liberalism aims to make room for a diversity of women's self-interpretations. Some women, including those in Western liberal states, claim that women ought to be subordinate to men. Can women with this preference accept feminist liberalism? Certainly, none of the thinkers Abbey discusses denies this is possible. Abbey notes that Okin and Nussbaum want to preserve the possibility of women choosing ways of living based on gender hierarchy provided they form this preference under just conditions (180). But it's not immediately clear that accepting both gender inequality *and* feminist liberalism is possible, at least from a psychological perspective (and perhaps conceptually as well). For example, can a person endorse (in Hampton's words) "a non-negotiable . . . belief that each individual has equal intrinsic worth, which should be respected" (129), while at the same time believing that women are intrinsically inferior and should be subordinate to men? If it is not possible, women who hold this preference cannot expect feminist liberalism to *alter* its fundamental commitments to accommodate their self-interpretations, as the discussion of Nussbaum makes clear (174). If feminist liberalism will not change its commitments, this seems to suggest that women themselves must change theirs. I can sum up my worry in plain terms: feminist liberalism seems to require women to take on board a range of substantive liberal ideals, so it isn't inclusive of the diversity of women's self-understandings. Although I am sympathetic to feminist liberalism, I need to hear further arguments about the range of conceptions of the good women can endorse while accepting feminist liberalism. Moreover, it will be interesting to hear how theorists who defend a feminist political liberalism respond to Abbey's arguments (Hartley and Watson 2010). Nevertheless, Abbey's book is a significant and welcome addition to the ongoing debate in feminist and liberal circles about the viability and coherence of feminist liberalism.

References

Hartley, Christie, and Lori Watson. 2010. Is a feminist political liberalism possible? *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 5 (1): 1–22.

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