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Analysis of Feminism IV

Yvon Provençal

Editor

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Author: Yvon Provençal, Editor

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This is the fourth in a 5-part series on an analysis of feminism based on the research of Yvon Provençal. Dr. Provençal has been teaching philosophy at the Cégep de Granby (Québec) for nine years. He received his PhD in philosophy from the Université de Montréal in 1979. Dr. Provençal is the founder of the Respect Project. The Project focuses on research related to the integral respect of cultures and persons, is the source of Dr. Provençal's work on feminism, and is located at http://pages.infinet.net/provyvon/index_eng.html. Dr. Provençal can be reached at yprov@videotron.ca. What follows is a slightly edited version of his work on feminism.

The Ethic of Respect in Feminism

The feminist movement expresses a wish to be acknowledged. It is concerned with women acknowledging themselves and being acknowledged as "independent persons, human beings in the full meaning of the term" according to Benoîte Groult's expression (1). It could also be stated that the feminist movement aims at the acknowledgment of women's identity in the numerical sense, that is to say, as an integrally respectable moral culture.

Feminist thought leads directly to an ethics of difference, that one could also call an ethics of respect for the difference. It happens that such an ethics is very similar to those of the Respect Project, except that the former gives priority to women groups over other groups. In contrast, the latter encourages women groups to not reprobate each other. Instead, they should respect themselves integrally--i.e., independently from all qualitative differences. This attitude contrasts strongly with what one finds everywhere else--including in the other progressive movements such as, for example, socialist and ecologist ones. The latter are composed of several distinct groups which, most of the time, do not and do not tend to respect others.

Feminism is a school of freedom and respect. It should be a model for the whole humanity. As an ethics, feminist thought differs from Kantianism and utilitarianism. It differs from Kantianism because it does not support a morality of duty and Utilitarianism because it does not aim at general utility or good. More basically, it differs from both these kinds of ethics because it is not universalistic--this word being taken in the context of classical rationality that neglects the separation between cultures. The feminist ethics transcends the "universalism" in the classical meaning because it takes into account the sexual difference and the difference between women groups in general. However, it is not universalistic in the meaning of the ethics of respect. While taking into account the difference between women groups, feminist ethics does not differentiate between groups in general.

Nevertheless, feminist ethics in some way furnishes a general model suitable to all groups because it takes into account the differences between all the women groups. Therefore, it would be enough that they become conscious of this generalization in order to make their way towards the ethics of integral respect. Certain feminists already do that--e.g., the case of Margaret Morganroth Gullette. In a more general way, it is possible to show that feminist thought constitutes the non-formal basis of a whole

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new kind of social criticism. ((1) Benoîte Groult. (1977). *Le féminisme au masculin (Feminism in masculine)*. Paris: Denoël/Gonthier, p. 13.)

IBPP Commentary. Dr. Provencal continues to note irony and paradox in feminist movements--here that respect for the self of a woman is attained by decreasing respect for other selves outside woman cultures. He then tries to effect a synthesis of the thesis of woman respect and the antithesis of obtaining this respect through decreased respect for others via a rather problematic route. The route is based on modeling the parallelism between the putative discounting of ethical differences between and among women and the Respect Project's discounting of such differences between and among all groups. In other words, feminist groups--specifically their own intragroup and intergroup stances--can be a model for the difference stances of all groups.

The problem with this position is that there is a demonstrable emphasizing of differences between and among feminist groups--often internecine in frequency and intensity. Themes of such discourses include what feminism really is, who are the real feminists, outing crypto-feminists, feminist pose as masculine protest, and so on. The offering of feminist ethics as a prototype for the Respect Project then becomes dubious. (See Archer, J. (1996). Sex differences in social behavior: Are the social role and evolutionary explanations compatible? *American Psychologist*, 51, 909-917; Hirschfeld, L. A., & Gelman, S.A. (1997). What young children think about the relationship between language variation and social difference. *Cognitive Development*, 12, 213-238; Lindbladh, E., et al. (1996). An economic and sociological interpretation of social differences in health-related behaviour: An encounter as a guide to social epidemiology. *Social Science & Medicine*, 43, 1817-1827; Reagans, R. (1998). Differences in social difference: Examining third party effects on relational stability. *Social Networks*, 20, 143-157.) (Keywords: Feminism, Provencal, Respect Project.)