

What Feminism Can Teach Global Ethics

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FOR AT LEAST TWENTY YEARS, feminist scholars have been wrestling with questions about difference and essentialism, similar to those that underpin current debates in global ethics. Yet mainstream philosophy and political theory rarely mention their contribution, seem to have learned little from them, and often appear to think that no one else has dealt with these problems before. Second-wave feminism has overcome its inward-looking psychoanalytical fixation on difference to reaffirm the possibility of struggle against injustice, enhanced by a realistic incorporation of difference where it really is something more than an excuse for maintaining the status quo. Particularly in practical areas such as bioethics, feminism's version of difference is not quietist but reformist: it does not view all identities and norms as equally valid, nor does it seek to return to a communitarian golden age.

I will qualify these strong assertions with some cautionary notes: to start with, we cannot just tack on postcolonial, multicultural, or global feminisms to mainstream feminism, any more than canonical writers can legitimately tack on feminism to their variant of philosophy by claiming that everything said applies equally to men and women (Narayan and Harding 2000, vii; Dickenson 1997b, 17). Rather, these feminisms make us examine underpinning analytical assumptions and concepts, just as feminism does with the supposedly universal concepts of canonical philosophy and political theory. Essentially, however, I argue that feminism can teach global ethics a counsel of action rather than despair. I do so in three stages:

1. By analyzing aspects of progress and sticking points in recent canonical ethics and political theory concerning questions of difference, particularism, and justice, particularly relating to the *possibility of ethical universals*, which I call *global ethics in the first sense*

