Recognition, Responsibility, and Rights: An Introduction

Robin N. Fiore

> Until we understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves.
>
> —Adrienne Rich

As Catharine MacKinnon famously declared: "a woman is not yet a name for a way of being human" (MacKinnon 1993, 91). That is, in defining what it is to be human, and thus what violates the dignity and integrity of such a being, women have been excluded as authors and as agents. If women are included in mainstream political and moral theory, it is derivatively—just in case they relevantly resemble men or figure in men's interests. The past two decades of feminist scholarship has convincingly established the failure of such ethics and politics to address the full range of human needs and interests.

However, the necessity for self-consciously feminist revisioning of moral theory goes beyond the fact that women's experiences and women's voices have been neglected. Standard philosophical conceptions are, as Robin Dillon puts it, "imbued with patriarchal poison" (Dillon 1995), their very ground inimical to emancipatory political goals. Feminist revisioning is thus "an act of survival" for women, according to Adrienne Rich, a refusal of "how we have been led to imagine ourselves" in a culture controlled by males (Rich 1979).

This collection advances the feminist project of remapping the moral in ways that emphasize feminist commitments to theory that acknowledges the diversity of women and engages "the living contexts of moral action"

(DiQuinzio and Young 1995). In what follows, feminists offer groundbreaking analyses of gender with respect to the key ethical concepts—recognition, responsibility, and human rights—and the social and institutional practices that are shaped by those concepts. My aim in this introduction is to prepare readers by briefly discussing the three title themes. I do not offer comprehensive analysis; that is for the individual chapters. I do, however, wish to call attention to the ways in which the concepts are intertwined. Modern Western philosophical efforts tend to focus on distinguishing core concepts and are apt to overlook conceptual interdependence (Hirschmann and Stefano 1996). In contrast, feminist moral theorizing takes as one of its basic tasks "seeing more clearly how the mesh between social positions, identities and responsibilities works" (Walker 1998).

RECOGNITION

The moral demand for recognition is associated with the dialogical model of human individuation, the view that practical identity is socially constituted in and through relations with other persons and with public institutions, by recognition or its absence, or by "misrecognition" on the part of others. Moreover, persons may be harmed by representations of themselves that are distorted, demeaning, or stigmatizing. To the extent that persons are unable to resist derogatory interpretations of their cultures or malignant misrecognitions of themselves, they risk being "imprison[ed] . . . in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being" (Taylor 1994).

The idea of recognition figures prominently in political theory, most commonly in connection with multiculturalism. While acknowledging the importance of the politics of recognition, feminist philosophers have argued for the need to make distinctions among different failures of recognition; problems of recognition in multicultural contexts are not analogous to the problems of recognition for women (Wolf 1994).

Axel Honneth distinguishes three forms of "disrespect" that can deprive persons of the recognition that is constitutive of human dignity and integrity (Honneth 1990). The first, exemplified by rape and torture, damages persons' "most fundamental form" of practical relationship to the self—their self-confidence in matters of control over their physical body. The second, according to Honneth, affects persons' "normative understanding of self." This form of disrespect consists in depriving persons of the equal right to participate in their society's "institutional order"—either by "the denial of rights or by social ostracism." A person denied legal rights that others possess is not recognized as being equally morally accountable, that is, capable of equal moral agency. The third

form of disrespect devalues certain patterns of self-realization—individual or collective lifestyles—denying individuals social acceptance and contributing to a loss of self-esteem. Moreover, according to Hilde Nelson, these latter two forms of disrespect can deprive people of opportunities to occupy roles or maintain relationships that are necessary to preserve crucial aspects of their identity. The "mother" identity, for example, is no longer available if one is denied custody of one's child on the grounds that one is a lesbian (Nelson 2001).

For feminists, due recognition is responding to others on the basis of their self-conception, attending to those features of their lives that they regard as identity constituting, rather than treating them according to one's own favored way of seeing them (Spelman 1977). Challenged by the diversity of the category "women" and the multiple forms oppression can take, feminists developed various approaches to "complex identities." Legal theorists working on civil rights issues were among the first to recognize the distortions imposed on identity as a result of regnant theoretical frameworks. Seeing the interdependence of rights and recognition led to the development of "intersectional" analytical frameworks that attempted to encompass the multiple burdens of Black women and lesbians, to name just two of the many possible intersections that are marginalized under homogenizing, single-axis analytical structures (Crenshaw 1991).

RESPONSIBILITY

Responsibility, as feminists deploy the concept, is not exhausted by traditional philosophical issues of free will and the possibility of moral judgments, of holding people accountable. For feminists, it involves human practices of responsiveness to particularity and context, of being accountable, that is, *taking* as well as *assigning* responsibility. Responsibility as feminists construe it is a more flexible analytical concept, better suited to pluralistic and socially stratified societies. As Margaret Urban Walker puts it, "We are not all responsible for the same things, in the same ways, at the same costs, or with similar exposure to demand or blame by the same judges" (Walker 1998).

Beginning with Carol Gilligan's influential work in moral psychology, *In a Different Voice* (1982), feminist ethicists have led the way in developing normative analyses that center on an ethic of responsibility, of interpersonal responsiveness rather than classic considerations of duty or virtue or the general welfare. Instead of construing personal moral responsibility solely in terms of reflective self-governance according to abstract principles, feminists understand responsibility as both relational and particular. "Specific moral claims on us arise from our contact or relationship with others whose interests are vulnerable to our actions and choices. We are

obligated to respond to particular others when circumstance or ongoing relationship render them especially, conspicuously, or peculiarly dependent on us" (Walker 1998, 107).

In Paul Benson's work on self-worth and moral agency (Benson 2000), responsibility is connected with recognition. Benson criticizes traditional theories of responsibility for their narrow focus on agents' powers, capabilities, and decision-making processes. In proposing a "self-worth condition" of responsibility, Benson argues that for persons to be held responsible they must be seen as having a certain moral status, of being eligible to participate in moral exchanges by giving suitable responses, such as giving reasons, admitting fault, and so on. People who have internalized oppressive norms that exclude them from recognition as fully accountable moral agents have been made to feel unworthy to answer for their actions. These socially instilled attitudes that damage self-worth constrict their ability to exercise their moral agency.

RIGHTS

In the dominant Western view, human rights are conceived of narrowly in terms of state violation of civil and political liberties. Abuses that women experience *because* they are women, or that are not directly the result of state action, are not counted as wrongs against humanity. Among these are "honor" killings, genocidal rape, female genital mutilation, dowry-related violence, forced prostitution, wife battery, rape, and denial of reproductive health care and prenatal care. Feminists continue to challenge the idea that explicit state sanction is a necessary condition of holding the state and public institutions accountable. That "law's absence" contributes to the abuse of human rights can be seen, for example, in the way that systematic nonprosecution of violence against women maintains their subordination.

Another problem with prevailing notions of rights is their typically androcentric construction. As MacKinnon succinctly expresses it, "What happens to women is either too particular to be universal or too universal to be particular, meaning either too human to be female or too female to be human" (MacKinnon 1993). Feminists have shown that human rights considerations have uniquely gendered implications for women. For example, in refugee camps, food is often distributed through men who are designated as "leaders," a process that allows them to gain sexual control over women in exchange for food (Bunch 1990).

I have discussed the conceptual cross-fertilization between rights and recognition; here I want to cite a little-remarked connection between rights and responsibility. Rights, as Martha Minow understands them, are

the outcome of continual renegotiation regarding what the law requires and allows in particular human communities. As "tools of continuing communal discourse," rights are the responsibility of the community that produces them. For this reason, Minow argues, a claim of rights effectively summons the "community" (Minow 1990, 309). For feminists, the community is inescapably global.

The chapters in this volume build on this body of feminist work and push it in exciting new directions. The first part of this collection presents new feminist work on recognition that responds to the challenges of intersectionality by reflecting on the usefulness of the concept of gender itself. The chapters in the second section speak to the possibilities of an ethic of responsibility as they address a variety of practical problems. In the final section of this volume, the global commitments of feminism are worked out in ways that transform and enlarge the idea of human rights to encompass living lives of dignity.

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ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Oxford

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.

Published in the United States of America
by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
A Member of the Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group
4720 Boston Way, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowmanlittlefield.com

PO Box 317
Oxford
OX2 9RU, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Recognition, responsibility, and rights : feminist ethics and social theory / edited by Robin N. Fiore and Hilde Lindemann Nelson.
p. cm.—(Feminist constructions)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-7425-1442-0 (alk. paper)—ISBN 0-7425-1443-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)
2. Feminist ethics. I. Fiore, Robin N., 1953– II. Nelson, Hilde Lindemann. III. Series.
BJ1395 .R43 2003
170'.82 dc21 2002011455

Printed in the United States of America

∞™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

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