

[*Teaching Philosophy* 22, #2 (1999), pp. 411-16.]

Loose Women, Lecherous Men: A Feminist Philosophy of Sex

By Linda LeMoncheck

New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, ix + 310, \$45.00 h.c. 0-19-510555-9, \$19.95 pbk. 0-19-510556-7.

Linda LeMoncheck aspires to be the King Solomon of the feminist sex wars. In *Loose Women, Lecherous Men (LWLM)*, she explicates a radical feminism ("cultural feminism" [CF]), according to which women are pervasively victimized and oppressed by "individual and institutionalized male dominance" (5, 11, 102). She lays out this view as it applies to promiscuous sex, the sex industry (prostitution, pornography), "alternative" sexualities (sodomasochism, paedophilia), and sexual intimidation (rape, date rape). LeMoncheck also explicates a gutsy feminism ("sex radical feminism" [SRF]), according to which women are "self-determining sexual agents who freely choose the nature and value of our sexual lives" (6). Feminist philosophy of sex is "bogged down" (6) in the conflict between these polarized positions, and LeMoncheck's goal is to "negotiate the tensions" between them (v, 29, 102, 205): "both sexual victimization and sexual agency have a stake in defining women's sexual preferences and sexual desires" (205). In a parallel essay published the same year as *LWLM*, LeMoncheck attempts to reconcile the two views regarding sexual harassment. The essay's title refers to the positions: "Taunted and Tormented or Savvy and Seductive? Feminist Discourses on Sexual Harassment" (LeMoncheck and Mane Hajdin, *Sexual Harassment: A Debate* [Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997], pp. 1-96 [hereafter, *SH*]).

Some readers will plausibly read LeMoncheck as a cultural feminist, siding squarely with those appalled by women's oppression; others will plausibly read her as a (closet) sex radical, siding with those impressed by women's sexual agency. LeMoncheck *intends* to align herself with both camps, to capture both in a coherent philosophy of sex. But her reconciliation is trivial: each extreme view is (no surprise) in part right and in part wrong. "Neither women's sexual oppression nor women's sexual liberation alone is the dominant thread in the tapestry of women's sexuality" (6); "women [are] both victims of men's pervasive and institutionalized sexual violation and . . . willful agents taking responsibility for . . . our sexual lives" (209). She gets this result not by a painstaking analysis of "oppression" and "agency" and a meticulous empirical study of women's lives, but (in her own mind) by deriving it from her philosophical machinery, an epistemological principle called the "view from somewhere different" [VFSD], which "incorporates the tensions between [CF and SRF] into an inclusive feminist philosophy of sex" (108).

The VFSD (which she also calls, following María Lugones, "world'-traveling" [14-15, 19-20]) "asks a feminist philosopher of sex to attempt to gain an empathetic understanding of others from whose sexual experience, preference, and desire her own location differs ('What is it like to be them?') and to acknowledge the partiality of all such locations ('What is it like to be myself in their eyes?')" (22; see 29). "[W]omen who adopt such a perspective . . . recognize their sexual partners as 'the particular individuals they are' and . . . try to see the world from their point of view" (55). LeMoncheck recommends the VFSD because "my 'world' will always be partial" (20); "my perspective will always be partial to *my* needs and *my* interests" (150). We must travel to other "worlds" to get a more comprehensive view of reality. Philosophers, otherwise caught in their partiality, must listen to and empathize with, for example, women sex-industry workers, seeing things from their perspective. "[E]ach of us is partial to our own social perspective but . . . such partiality can be a source for recognizing and celebrating the differences among all of us" (8). Thus the VFSD provides "a more representative vision of women's sexual experiences, preferences, and desires" (20) than the presumptuous "view from somewhere better" (some locations have epistemic privilege [14-15]), the impossible "view from nowhere" (15-18), and the postmodern, politically

vacuous "view from everywhere" (18-19).

LeMoncheck extols the virtues of the VFSD for her project of reconciliation. "Adopting the 'VFSD' shows women how their choices can be both constrained by patriarchy and liberated by their own sense of agency and self-definition" (97). We might reply that their choices *can*, of course, be both. But which are they *mostly*? Isn't this the question that does (or should) divide CF and SRF? Further, how is this reconciliation produced by the VFSD? LeMoncheck seems never to explain, even though she is convinced that it does:

Such a perspective [the VFSD] will . . . recognize that . . . some women may be more empowered to determine the course of their sexual lives than others. It will acknowledge that any one woman's life is a unique, complex, and variable mix of sexual subordination and empowerment. (20)

From the "VFSD," a woman's promiscuity is . . . understood dialectically, as both encouraging her subordination by men ready to exploit her sexuality and facilitating her exploration of one among many different ways that she may give meaning and value to her erotic life. . . . [T]he "VFSD" . . . describ[es] promiscuous sex as dialectically situated in a world in which women are both the subordinated objects and active subjects of our sexual lives. (29)

[U]nderstanding sex work as a dialectical relation between commodified object and active subject can better represent women's participation in the sex industry than either anti-industry or sex radical perspectives alone. . . . [T]his dialectic reflects the "VFSD" by describing women's sexuality in terms that are neither exclusively oppressive nor unilaterally liberating. (117)

[A] feminist philosophy of sex from the 'VFSD' recognizes that one woman's sexual experience can vary widely over the course of her life. Sex can be scary, passionate, funny, unsuccessful, unsafe, painful, boring, publicly humiliating, privately beautiful, extremely personal, consciously political, cheerfully avoided, or regrettably absent, each in a different woman's life, or all in a single life. (23)

Despite the repetition of the claim, the VFSD is not obviously sufficient for the reconciliation: the VFSD is an epistemology of empathetic "world"-traveling, which seems to yield no substantive claims. Further, the VFSD doesn't seem necessary for producing the reconciliation (in *SH*, she asserts the reconciliation [42] without appealing to the VFSD), and LeMoncheck does not explain why the views from "somewhere better" and "nowhere" are incompatible with it.

LeMoncheck gets not only the reconciliation from the VFSD, but a host of other things:

Through such "world"-traveling, men will . . . understand the particular context of each woman's battle with sexual intimidation as well as her gender role socialization as the sexual object of men's institutionalized supremacy and control. (211)

[A] man [who "world"-travels] takes responsibility for his own sexuality by seeing his sexual desires and preferences as themselves rooted in patriarchal social institutions that can afford him an unfair advantage over women. . . . (211)

A feminist philosopher of sex who adopts the "VFSD" recognizes this oppressive environment and seeks to expose its injustices. (25)

It is not clear how such political musings flow from any epistemology, let alone an epistemology of empathetic "world"-traveling. Further, most of the women that men, and feminist philosophers, should be empathizing with do not view their own situations in terms of male supremacy. It has been the feminist employment of the views from "somewhere better" or "nowhere" that has delivered to ignorant (nonfeminist) women the truth about their situation, a truth they otherwise cannot see due to the very oppression from which they purportedly suffer.

When she describes men, LeMoncheck ignores her advice to "world"-travel, but issues claims that suggest she has adopted the view from "somewhere better" or "nowhere":

Asian American women are commonly typed outside their cultural community as docile, submissive, and restrained sexually, making them tempting targets for many Anglo men grown bored with more assertive or demanding playmates. (61)

How does LeMoncheck know this about men? She didn't ask "What is it like to be them?" or to treat men as the "particular individuals they are." Her calling them "Anglo" *de*particularizes.

Particularly in prostitution, part of the arousal [for a man] can come from feeling power over a woman who willingly accepts payment to be objectified. (130)

How does LeMoncheck know this about men, except by generalizing over the class? LeMoncheck suggests that women use the VFSD to understand better their abusers: "Even the behavior of her rapist or batterer can be interpreted from this perspective as an admission of his own weakness, his own pathos, his own dependence on her to satisfy his own complex emotional needs" (205-206). This use of the VFSD is patronizing; it also--in defiance of its purpose--homogenizes men. Yet LeMoncheck also homogenizes women. She writes that men must

realiz[e] that overt physical or sexual contact, sexual comments, jokes, or cartoons may offend a woman and not a man, precisely because she is sexualized by a culture whose economic and social climate makes it difficult for her either to transcend her identification of sexual object or to make that identification a positive feature of her life. (211)

Throughout *LWLM*, LeMoncheck describes women as members of a class; she does not, after all, view women in a particularizing way or look at things from their individual points of view.

LeMoncheck employs another piece of philosophical machinery in *LWLM* to achieve her reconciliation, the notion of "care respect" [CR] (borrowed from Robin Dillon). An ethic of CR "has value for uniting the otherwise disparate sexual ideologies of" CF and SRF (65); CR "can negotiate the tensions between cultural and sex radical feminists" (102). CR "includes (1) responding to others as 'the particular individuals they are' instead of merely generalizing over persons in search of some abstract capacity that all persons share; (2) understanding others by trying to see the world from their point of view; and (3) actively caring about the well-being of others by helping them pursue their own wants and needs" (44). Armed with CR, LeMoncheck abundantly moralizes: "a primary method of resistance against men's sexual intimidation . . . is to encourage women and men to treat one another with care respect" (215); "one of the ways that women can actively undermine . . . sexist attitudes . . . is to encourage men to do the 'world'-traveling required by the ethic of care respect" (210).

CR sounds like the VFSD: CR "requires that we treat each person with the kind of particularized care and consideration that asks us to treat each individual as special. . . . Care respect requires that we make some attempt to look at the world through the eyes of the other" (*SH*, 60). Indeed, LeMoncheck claims that CR is "derived from" the VFSD (66, 154; see 102, 151). This explains why CR and the VFSD involve asking the same two questions: "Treating a woman with care respect requires that a man ask, 'What is it like to be her?,' and 'What is it like to be me in her eyes?'" (211). But the logical relationship between CR and the VFSD, I think, is the opposite of what LeMoncheck says it is: CR entails the VFSD, since CR is the epistemology of the VFSD (particularized empathy) *plus* the normative assertion that we should promote the interests of others as they understand them. LeMoncheck apparently agrees: "By trying to see the world from the social location of my sexual partner, I can then begin to understand what my partner's sexual desires are *as my partner sees them* and seek to promote their satisfaction" (104; see 150).

LeMoncheck employs CR to reconcile CF and SRF on promiscuity. CF insists on intimacy and commitment in sexual relations; SRF allows women to have casual sex. She reconciles these views by claiming that "promiscuous sex can be committed and intimate" (40); "promiscuous sex need not lack the principled ethical stage of love and commitment" (53); a promiscuous woman "can communicate to all [her one-night stands] that she regards them as special" (45); it is not "a conceptual mistake to describe

some cases of promiscuous sex in terms of care respect" (45). The "can" in these claims about the caring capacities of the promiscuous woman is only conceptual; LeMoncheck never argues the more relevant thesis that CR in promiscuity is psychologically likely. This makes her reconciliation of CF and SRF shallow. Having made her conceptual point about the capacity of the promiscuous female to treat her casual partners with CR, she condemns "Don Juan": he "is an impersonal lover precisely because he does not love each of his partners for her own sake as a unique and particular individual" (47). Pray tell, how do loose women do this?

LeMoncheck's treatment of prostitution is facile: "sex workers can be understood as both the determining subjects of their sexual experience and the commodified objects of oppressive and institutionalized male dominance" (7). Of course sex workers *can* be understood both ways; but which are they, individually and collectively, *more*, oppressed object or free subject? Sex workers are subjects because "many self-identified sex workers enjoy what they do, agree to basic terms and conditions of work that earns them a supporting and sometimes superior income, and take pleasure in the personal satisfaction of a job well done" (145). What about streetwalking whores? They "remain subjects" because "even sex workers victimized by poverty or blackmailed into sex work are women whose eroticism derives in part from their being perceived as women whose wills can be subordinated and controlled" (145). But how are they genuinely subjects if they are merely perceived by the other as a subject? This means they are subjects for the other, not that they are subjects in and for themselves. They have already been reduced to object by their poverty, before they met the john. And how does LeMoncheck know that men perceive sex workers *this way*?

LeMoncheck admonishes: "What we need is more women talking *and listening* to each other, so that we will feel united, not divided, by our diversity" (152). It is progress if the proponents of CF and SRF "feel united," even if their positions cannot be, or have not been.