CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521462819 - Feminism and Christian Ethics - Susan Frank Parsons
Excerpt
More information

CHAPTER I

On Diversity

To enter the area in which feminism and Christian ethics interact is to enter a territory characterised by broad and deep diversity, a diversity which is challenging and creative to those who may take hold of the opportunity it presents. Careful observers of contemporary culture will have become aware of the very great number of belief systems and moral frameworks which are used by different groups and by individuals in making moral decisions and in settling major political and social issues. The contemporary world has been described as pluralistic, suggesting that there are a variety of frameworks available for justifiable and reasonable commitment, to which people are intensely attached, and which provide for them the essential foundation and rationale for the practice of their personal and social lives. The presence of these alternatives has been discussed and analysed by numerous moral philosophers and Christian ethicists, who have attempted in various ways both to understand the nature of the differences and to recommend a reasonable way through the alternatives for moral agents. This book shares in that task by engaging in an analysis of the interactions of feminism and Christian ethics, interactions which are themselves indicative of the complexity of current moral thinking.

Diversity of belief makes itself known in a number of ways, in academic teaching and writing, in political debate, and in dilemmas of daily life. The nature of this diversity is such that, while people are clear and certain about the decisions made within one of these frameworks, being able to be decisive in judgements about matters which come to their attention, there

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521462819 - Feminism and Christian Ethics - Susan Frank Parsons
Excerpt
More information

is confusion as people from within different frameworks talk to each other and try to work together. As people enter into moral and political debates, they come to the discussion with certain basic moral reference points which they take to be fundamental, with a set of definitions, with some understanding of matters on which there is uncertainty or which may be open to alternative interpretation and even compromise. They come with stories of lives which illustrate the effectiveness of their own moral framework in bringing fulfilment and, by contrast, the distressing or debasing impact of an alternative framework on human life. The presence of these different moral frameworks makes debate on any particular issue perplexing for participants and interpreters alike.

Several examples of this situation could be given to illustrate the nature of the complexity. Consider the debates being conducted throughout the western world over the matter of abortion.[1] There are some participants who believe that human rights are at stake in the debate. The kind of moral reasoning which is appropriate to a dilemma like this is reasoning which measures itself with reference to the universal and objective principles by which such rights are affirmed and enforced. The conflict within this framework of moral reasoning develops as a conflict between such rights, each of which is supported by principles that admit no exceptions in order that consistency in the moral life be maintained. Some support the 'right to life', expressed in a principle which requires protection of all human life however dependent and unformed, and in a set of definitions which asserts that the fœtus, at a certain stage in its development in the womb, is actually 'human life' and that anything which deliberately stops the growth and flourishing of that life to full-term birth is killing. Together this principle and these definitions are supported by illustrative stories from parents and from professional health carers and social workers, with photographs, which are intended to be persuasive and to draw people into this way of understanding the dilemma and its consequences.

On the other hand, some support the 'right to choose', and enter the debate with a fundamental principle of freedom

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521462819 - Feminism and Christian Ethics - Susan Frank Parsons
Excerpt
More information

which calls for treating persons as ends-in-themselves, together with a set of definitions regarding what constitutes 'consent' in sexual intercourse and the importance of being 'wanted' or 'chosen' in the flourishing of human life. This is accompanied with stories from raped or abused women, with illustrations of the unhappy lives, the increased poverty, and the continuing vulnerability of those who are deprived of freedom. In both cases are participants who understand the debate to be about principles and the human rights which such principles embody and justify, and who can disagree with one another from a common ground, for they share a conception of the nature of moral reasoning. The abortion debate is thus usually represented as a conflict within this framework, a conflict between those who are basically 'pro-life' and those who are generally speaking 'pro-choice'. To engage in the debate has required the acceptance of moral reasoning as a consideration of human rights. There is, however, considerable dissatisfaction with the terms of reference which this framework adopts. It may be argued that this view of moral reasoning generates exactly this kind of unresolvable conflict, for its presuppositions are inadequate to a full appreciation of the complexity of human life. It is clear that today the 'conflict of rights' description is not so helpful as a guide to the many interacting strands of argument that are actually involved.

Thus there are those who participate in this debate whose understanding of morality is not this, and who offer quite a different view of the project of moral reasoning itself. A second interpretation of morality emerges here. These participants use as fundamental reference points, not principles, but sharp insights into the operation of social structures, the apparatus of power by which these structures are sustained, and the resulting deprivation of genuine human moral agency. Their understanding of morality is set in a framework which considers the politically necessary striving for domination to be the key factor in any moral debate, and the history and present forms of that domination to be the central narrative underlying those debates. In the matter of abortion there are very powerful institutional pressures from the churches, from political groups,

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge
Cambridge University Press
0521462819 - Feminism and Christian Ethics - Susan Frank Parsons
Excerpt
More information

and from the medical establishment. These combine with forms of language, in which social ideologies are fixed, to constrain the discussion and to channel its results into enforced social patterns. The moral concern of the participants is to expose the motivations of those institutions which seek to retain their hold on public order through the ideology of the family, and to demonstrate that moral principles are merely the tools of the powerful to uphold oppressive social structures. This demonstration is effected by allowing the voices of the victims of such oppression to be heard, in their speaking to crack open the solidity of such ideological and institutional control of human life, and to discover the language of their own authentic moral agency.[2] The definitions and stories accompanying this moral case are themselves examples of such exposure and reclamation, for new and critical insights are offered as the family is redefined as a bourgeois capitalist necessity, sexual intercourse is redescribed as an assertion of phallic power, and abortion itself is viewed as a sacrament.[3]

Thirdly, there are those in the debate whose understanding of moral reasoning centres neither on human rights, nor on social critique, but rather on a description of the fundamentals of biology. In knowing how it is that life is formed, what contributes to its sustenance, and what physical realities are essential to its continued development, is to discover a law of nature binding upon that life. This law is understood to be the expression of the purposiveness of nature inherent in the make-up of all things, in obedience to which life is lived and fulfilled. What is needed in the moral debate is the description of these natural realities, descriptions which are value-laden with affirmation that life is good and which offer without recourse to other considerations compelling reasons for action. Moral decisions are thus to refer to the natural world in the midst of which what is good can be discovered, and this world is to be given priority over the world of universal principles of the first view or the psycho-socio-political world of the second. The point these participants make in the abortion debate is that, in arriving at a moral decision, we are to affirm the natural and avoid the unnatural, since this natural material is

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521462819 - Feminism and Christian Ethics - Susan Frank Parsons
Excerpt
More information

the stuff from which human beings develop in all their fullness of possibility and experience. The stories accompanying this account of moral reasoning are thus illustrations of the deeper meanings of our decisions which do not affect 'mere' matter, but which signify what we believe about the purpose of life, about pain and suffering, and about the potential of love.[4]

As this discussion has proceeded, it has been possible to detect all kinds of overlapping concerns and partial agreements between these frameworks, and to see ways in which temporary compromises have been possible in order to effect decisions. Those who are critical of the advancing power and control of medical technology in the name of free choice join hands with those of strong religious conviction whose loyalty to a divine power prohibits such freedom; and the second two frameworks, while differing significantly from one another, share in criticism of the insufficiency of the first. These have, however, not altered the fact that between these understandings of moral reasoning there are deep differences and incompatibilities. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that at times great rifts have opened up between them, making it difficult for a person within one of them to speak sensibly and coherently to a person from another, for the nature of their disagreement is profound.[5] They operate within different belief systems which are internally coherent, but which cannot engage with each other because their basic moral reference points may not be compatible, and their definitions are so different as to prevent in some cases even basic understanding of what another is saying.

A second and briefer illustration relates to present considerations of the nature and responsibilities of government, in which once again alternative moral frameworks run together head-on in offering different interpretations of the state, and incompatible proposals for present and future politics.[6] One moral framework sees in the modern state a minimalist approach to government, in which non-intervention is the principal consideration. The state is understood in a negative sense as that framework within which the full expression of individual liberty, in ownership, in work, in making choices regarding life style and use of wealth, is to be upheld and

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521462819 - Feminism and Christian Ethics - Susan Frank Parsons
Excerpt
More information

protected. Persons who live within such a structure are taken to be autonomous, separate beings who are basically and deeply alike; each has a will and a mind and a body independent of other persons, each owns the things accrued through their own activities, and each confronts other persons as potential competitors or suspicious allies in any social working. The principles for effective functioning of such a state posit the existence of 'human rights', which give expression to the basic requirements for living this kind of life without constant warfare, and which can be referred to in moral dilemmas and legal decisions as 'inalienable'. This approach understands moral discussions about the state to be a matter of conformity to, and application of, the appropriate principles that define and ensure the just distribution of these rights, so that the basic equality of persons may be sustained.

Another moral framework reads into this interpretation of the state a more insidious tale of the emergence of controlling institutions and ideologies. Underneath the rhetoric of *laissez-faire* is the reality of the colonialisation of the eastern world by the west, of the economic enslavement of peoples of colour by white people, and of the physical, spiritual, and emotional containment of women's lives by men. These realities are what the state actually embodies, and in its operations of governance seeks by whatever necessary means to preserve its power. People who live within such a reality may be defined as either oppressors or victims, as those who are dominant or those who are submissive, as part of the problem or part of the solution. What is important, as moral debate proceeds, is for that identity to be clear from the start so that decisions may be judged according to whose interests are served. In this approach, moral discussions about the state are a matter of unmasking ulterior motives, and of allowing the repressed to be expressed in whatever unpopular or disruptive forms that may take.

Yet another framework emphasises, in understanding the nature of government, that there is a true and natural order of things which the state embodies. This view expresses a positive concern for human well-being within that order, and encour-

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521462819 - Feminism and Christian Ethics - Susan Frank Parsons
Excerpt
More information

ages the state to be actively involved in the development of a society within which personal life may flourish. Here the moral reference points are not human rights and individual liberty, nor the awareness of hidden motive and structural power, but rather a description of the place and function of individual human life in an overall scheme of common human good. In this approach, persons are taken to be developing beings, whose lives are constituted by the interactions and relationships which social roles can provide, and who develop fulfilled and happy lives in appreciation of their differences and variety. The state is to provide the matrix within which these networks of relationship thrive, its existence being the embodiment of the purposiveness of human life. Accordingly, the state preserves meaningful social groupings, so that human life is lived in the best possible setting. In this case, moral discussions about the state are understood to relate essentially to an understanding of what is true order.

Once again the ideas that come together within each of these frameworks form clusters of interrelated notions, which are coherent, but between which are unpredictable relationships. Sometimes they exist separately, as when one is clearly taken up by a political party or forms the basis for some measure or other. Sometimes strands from one become tangled with strands from another, which results in a more unsteady state of affairs. Close examination of recent arguments regarding freedom of the press reveals both that these clusters form recognisable positions in relation to the debate, but also that there are frayed edges in which strands from different clusters come together. Thus each framework may have the strangest set of bedfellows, team supporters, and adherents, some of whom one would not have suspected of being sympathetic. We cannot therefore be entirely sure who will be taking which side in which debates, and which kinds of attachments will be made by various groups and individuals to particular causes. In political debate, the identity and the policy platforms of modern political parties have become confused, as people from different traditions and loyalties ally themselves in new ways.

The reason for concentrating upon this present state of

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521462819 - Feminism and Christian Ethics - Susan Frank Parsons
Excerpt
More information

culture and its ramifications in theoretical and practical moral concerns, is that it also describes the interrelation of feminism and Christian ethics. Contemporary feminism has developed out of one reasonable and persuasive belief system, in which certain principles are taken to be crucial to human life and necessary to any debate regarding social and personal justice, certain definitions are taken for granted as the essential cornerstones of moral argument, and narratives of the life recommended by this framework are provided. This belief system, broadly labelled as liberal and identified with the Enlightenment period of philosophical thinking, nurtured the growth of feminism. That would be altogether straightforward, not that everyone would agree with the conclusions pressed by feminists or believe that they were possible or practicable, but at least people would understand and broadly empathise with the framework in which these things were being proposed. Straightforward, that is, were it not for the fact that this paradigm is now deeply and seriously challenged by others which offer alternative explanations of the same events and problems, and which lead to different conclusions regarding the living of life within them.

The present state of feminism is thus far from being a straightforward matter. There are now a variety and diversity of feminists who operate within broad frameworks of belief that are fundamentally different from each other, such that it is now rather more difficult than it might have been at one time to define what a feminist is.[7] One may offer a general definition, that a feminist is one who takes most seriously the practical concerns of women's lives, the analysis and the critique of these conditions of life, and the ways in which women's lives may become more fulfilling. Each of these features is understood and analysed today from quite different theoretical and political stances. This confusion of alternatives suggests the need for some clarity in explicating these paradigms one by one, so that some broad schema may be mapped out by which we might be able to get our bearings in present debates.

Three different forms of feminism will be considered: the liberal, the social constructionist, and the naturalist. Each of

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521462819 - Feminism and Christian Ethics - Susan Frank Parsons
Excerpt
More information

these forms will be shown to be basically related to an overall framework of belief, shared with others whose concerns are not primarily feminist, but which gives the structure necessary for reasonable debate about moral matters. The setting of feminist thinking within these frameworks will aid the analysis of the basic moral principles, the significant definitions, and the stories of life upon and around which feminists construct the case regarding women. In addition it will be important to examine ways in which these frameworks have been challenged and criticised, and that will be a second task of this work. Each framework has been, and continues to be, assessed and questioned by feminists working within one of the others, and the material which is available for evaluation of the alternatives is now considerable. What is revealed by the criticisms is both a much sharper picture of the original framework, with its presuppositions and its implications, and an awareness of the underlying questions which are unresolved within that framework which any further development in thinking may need to take on board.

It has been suggested that between differing moral frameworks there is rivalry, that each is a fixed thing competing with the others for belief and commitment, and that there may be no common ground on which to form a unified or unifying set of concerns.[8] This understanding of diversity might imply that the moral agent must therefore choose which stance to cling to, like deciding which political party to vote for, and in that choosing will immediately distinguish between this view and those others. This, I want to suggest, is inappropriate as an understanding of the diversity within feminism. There is the obvious point that there exists already a unifying concern regarding the lives of women. There is the point already made about these frameworks being clusters with frayed edges. There is a personal point that individual feminists have lived through these frameworks, and have discovered in each of them something of significance which illuminates the nature of women's personal/political lives, and may now continue to draw from each of them important resources for understanding and action. This suggests that, through the diversity, there is a

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521462819 - Feminism and Christian Ethics - Susan Frank Parsons
Excerpt
More information

serious and critical commitment to understanding the meaning of human life, to gaining insight into the conditions in which life might be most fulfilling from this perspective and that one, and to discovering the creative potential for reordering the conditions of life. In these matters, conversation between moral frameworks is essential, as each is allowed to present the best possible case it can make, and each is encouraged to engage with the others at the most deep level of moral debate. This can only be a constructive effort out of which the future agenda and direction of feminist theory and practice may emerge.

The relationship of Christian thinking to all of this is again another matter of some complexity. For just as feminists work within these three frameworks of belief and practice, so it is the case that these frameworks provide the structure for certain understandings of the nature of the Christian life, and indeed definitions of the theological task itself. Christian thinking has both contributed to, and been influenced by, the Enlightenment, and the emerging liberal paradigm of moral thinking has been expressed in a theistic context in which its commitment to principles and its basic humanism have been enriched. Theologians have worked out the ethical consequences of this framework, and many believe it to be consistent with both the essence of the biblical record and the working of the Spirit in the world today.

There are also Christians who sympathise and work within the social constructionist framework, which presents itself in opposition to Enlightenment morality. The social construction of morality is a challenge to the form of Christian ethics which has adapted to the first framework, and thus it makes very particular demands to reconceive morality as the product of a community's life. Christian ethicists may claim that this paradigm refreshingly clears away the pretensions of a false universalism, and offers a more profound recognition of morality as a human task. Yet feminists and Christian ethicists alike are concerned about the implications which this framework might have for moral and political action, since to claim that moral guidelines are socially produced and manipulated may be to deprive them of the authority necessary for effectiveness in

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org