Review

An introduction to feminist philosophy

Alison Stone

Polity, Cambridge, 2007, 248p., £14.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0745638836, £50 (hardback), ISBN: 978-0745638829

Contemporary Political Theory (2012) **11**, e14–e16. doi:10.1057/cpt.2010.49

This book, which first appeared in 2007, is a textbook designed to introduce feminist philosophy to undergraduate students. Like other good texts, the writing style is clear and the tone is explanatory. There is a short section providing both student reader and specialist with suggestions on ‘How to Use This Book’. Stone also furnishes the reader with definitions of key technical terms (such as separatism, the imaginary body and binary oppositions), which are integrated into the text rather than presented in a separate glossary, and each chapter ends with a brief list of further reading. Moreover, the author knows her field well and throughout the book presents complex ideas in a lucid and comprehensible fashion. The material covered is reasonably comprehensive; though almost inevitably there are some exclusions because no textbook is able to cover everything. In this case, one of the most notable given the subject matter is the absence of any in-depth discussion of feminist critiques of the philosophical canon, although Stone touches on these critiques from time to time (see, for instance, the discussion in her introductory chapter of feminist approaches to philosophy). These are, however, largely secondary to her main concern, which is to establish the importance of feminist philosophy *as philosophy*.

Eschewing the more familiar procession through different species of feminism (from liberal to radical and socialist on, perhaps, to poststructuralist or deconstructionist) and the marginally less common chronological charting of the shifts from first, through second, to third wave feminisms, Stone sets out to show that feminist philosophy is a unique sub-field of philosophy, comparable to *but distinct from* logic, epistemology or philosophy of language, with its own sets of questions and concepts to do with sex, gender, sexuality, sexual difference, essentialism and birth. (The list itself is, of course, contentious.) It is this emphasis on the specifically philosophical character of feminist philosophy that marks this textbook out as different from other related introductory texts. This is sketched out in the introductory

chapter, appropriately sub-titled: 'What is feminist philosophy?' Here Stone surmises that, while feminist philosophy presumes – indeed requires – a political commitment to feminism, based on opposition to women's subordination, albeit variously expressed (feminist philosophy itself being inherently diverse), what makes it expressly *philosophical* is a specific mode of thinking, one that is 'open-ended and involves following the logic of arguments wherever they lead' (p. 4).

In order to demonstrate this mode of (feminist) philosophising at work, each of the next six chapters is devoted to the examination of one of the concepts noted above. Each explores how the particular idea in question developed within feminist work, across a range of disciplines not just in philosophy, and the debates that ensued. A lot of this material is familiar (somewhat inevitably given the aims of the text) but is often dealt with in a refreshing fashion: the overview of Judith Butler's thought in the chapter on gender, for instance, is a model of clarity; the examination of essentialism is thoughtful and wide-ranging; and, not surprisingly given Stone's own research interests, the analysis of the concept of sexual difference will be of particular use to those new to this material. In the final chapter, Stone turns to the question of feminism, seeking to consolidate her argument that what defines feminism, often implicitly rather than explicitly, is its stress on women's subordination.

More than anything, what I enjoyed about this book was *how* Stone engages with her material: the way she interrogates ideas, the original insights she deploys, and the always-evident enthusiasm she has for her subject matter. This makes the book an extremely absorbing read. Almost inevitably, there were times when I was made uneasy by some of Stone's arguments – less by her explication of the sources she is critiquing, though there are aspects of Butler's work, for example, that I would read very differently, than by the way some of her own ideas are presented. I had some reservations about the fact that even when noting the dates of their coinage, key terms such as gender or sexuality were often deployed in ahistorical ways, for instance, to make judgments about the failure of earlier thinkers to distinguish between them (see p. 86 and the discussion of inversion). Perhaps the aspect that most perturbed me, however, was the revised understanding of sex offered in the book.

At first glance, the idea that sex entails a cluster of different properties might appear to be an advance over conventional dualistic conceptualisations, particularly because it lends itself to the notion of sex as a continuum that appears better able to accommodate intersexuality and transsexualism. Yet, Stone's affirmation of the notion that the determination of whether one is male or female rests on the possession of a certain number of 'appropriate' sex-properties is surely problematic. Who, I want know, is to make the

determination of what is appropriate and on what grounds? Moreover, could such adjudication ever evade interpretation to rest solely on observation, as Stone suggests? Finally, why if sex is a continuum is it necessary to retain the idea of maleness and femaleness as the only two named sexes?

It is, of course, to the credit of this textbook that it raises such provocative questions. This is because *An Introduction to Feminist Philosophy* is far more than a primer *on* feminist philosophy. It is itself an example of feminist philosophy in process, enacting the very style of thinking that Stone characterises as quintessentially philosophical. And, because of this it deserves to be widely read – and not only by those unfamiliar with the field.

Moya Lloyd
Loughborough University,
Loughborough, UK