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FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY GETS PRACTICAL
DIFFERENTIATED PARTIALITY (PARTEILICHKEIT)
FOR COUNSELING WOMEN IN
VIOLENT RELATIONSHIPS

Herta Nagl-Docekal's philosophy has been an important basis for my feminist engagement from the beginning of my studies at the University of Vienna in the 1990s, during my work in different women's shelters, right up to the present day in my work in a feminist counseling center. In the following, I would like to outline some basic theses of Herta Nagl-Docekal's influential book *Feminist Philosophy*¹ and connect them with my practice of feminist psychosocial counseling, namely the principle of "differentiated partiality" ("differenzierte Parteilichkeit") in counseling processes with women who experience violence by their partner.

FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

One important aim of feminist philosophy is to overcome the hierarchical opposition of mutually exclusive gender roles that confront individuals with the norm to identify themselves as either male or female and develop a non-reductive conception of the human subject. How can we think differentially without polarizing and without creating a hierarchy between the two poles?

1) Feminist philosophy is motivated and initiated by feminism as a political movement. It is based on the critique of a patriarchal society

¹ See NAGL-DOCEKAL 2004.

and relations of dominance and the will to create equality between human beings, regardless of their gender.

2) The accusation leveled against feminist philosophy as “just another ideology” is not justified – quite the opposite: feminist philosophy means criticism of ideology, namely the androcentric ideology that masks itself as gender-neutral universal truth – this so-called neutrality is full of ideologies. Feminist philosophy is a critique of the ideology that has become the allegedly “normal” perspective, which disguises relationships of domination and discrimination. Feminist philosophy has developed the alternative concepts of the “situatedness of knowledge” (Harding) and the explicit “positionality of knowledge” (Haraway). There is no god-like point of view from “above and outside” possible for humans, the position of the researcher or speaker must be made explicit; motivation, interest, his or her social and cultural background, and experiences influence his or her perception and judgment.

We need to revise the meaning of the term “objectivity”: an argumentation based on the current, most plausible theories. For example, in the present state of philosophical discourse we have elaborate theories of justice and equality between all human beings, therefore a theory which argues that women are inferior to men would have to counter these existing theories and would fail because it would not produce better arguments for gender-based discrimination than for gender equality (or indeed suppression or exploitation).

Feminist thinking sharpens our view on society, it discovers the often-invisible gender-bias (for instance, the never mentioned but very effective male quota: “Look at this guy, he is white, heterosexual, middle class, he is like us, let’s give him the job!” – only this implicit and invisible quota renders an explicit female quota necessary). “Objectivity” in this new, non-scientific, non-reduced positivist sense does not mean the resignation and withdrawal of the original claim, but the quality of situatedness of thoughts and knowledge is reflected, in order to produce an even “stronger” objectivity than before. However, the term is rather loaded and we also could look for other terms before the process of resignification has been effective.

Parallel to “objectivity,” the “non-normativity,” freedom of values, ethical neutrality is not only an impossible aim, but also counterproductive. To be free of values is not desirable in philosophy, nor in any

other science.² When we are conducting research, we do not want mere neutral information; rather, we are looking for some kind of orientation, we want answers to important questions in our actual lives – as temporary and provisional as they may be.³

3) Feminist philosophy is not merely one new, additional part of philosophy – it questions the entire canon at its core, including its gendered categories and dichotomies. There are not just some blank spaces on the map of the history of philosophy, rather the whole system is distorted; for example, the ignorance of gender-based discrimination (the illusory meaning of “human beings,” which actually refers only to male beings and renders men as the subject of philosophy) or the pseudophilosophical “justification” of differences between men and women on grounds of their essence or biology (“women are less rational/ethical than men because of their different nature or brains”). Therefore, the whole history of philosophy has to be critically revised with respect to its implicit misogyny and androcentrism, masked as gender-neutrality.

Feminist philosophy is a philosophy aligned with the interest of women’s emancipation from discriminating conditions. “Feminist philosophy is thus philosophizing along the guidelines of interest in women’s liberation.”⁴

4) The importance of plurality: Feminist philosophy is not one homogenous philosophical position but lives from the differences between diverse concepts and positions – as there is not just one feminism (“the real one or the only right one”), but a plurality of many diverse feminisms. We should encourage the productive development of many different feminist philosophies by promoting a culture of open dialogue between the diverse positions and develop a politics of solidarity and alliances.

5) And last but not least, women philosophers throughout history must be recognized, studied, and included in the philosophical canon, rather than being hidden and forgotten.

² See NAGL-DOCEKAL 2004, 104–105; see also NAGL-DOCEKAL 1982, esp. 227–243.

³ I will explain below the practical relevance of this critique of the traditional use of the terms “objectivity” or “neutrality” for feminist psychosocial counseling.

⁴ NAGL-DOCEKAL 1990, 11.

The subject of rationality in Western philosophy has a definite male bias, resting on the equation of man as human being and human being as male. Western philosophy has separated the realm of the body, of gender, and of contingency from the implicitly male-connotated subject of rationality and ascribed these irritations to “the female”: “Man” and “the second sex” (de Beauvoir), logos and rationality versus body and emotions.

Who is this subject when we speak of man/human? Who is addressed and who is excluded? When the French revolutionaries wrote “Les droits de l’homme et citoyen,” Olympe de Gouges challenged their approach by publishing “les droits de la femme et citoyenne”: she was beheaded, a punishment of the highest symbolic significance; cutting the head off a woman who demands the same rights as a man and campaigned against the death penalty.⁵

The 18th and 19th centuries saw the rise of theories that claimed a fundamental difference between men and women. The belief in an essentially different “nature” or biology, a difference in body and soul, so to speak, became the recognized paradigm in Europe. Karin Hausen calls the result of this development “different characters of gender” (“unterschiedliche Geschlechtscharaktere”)⁶ – a form of polarization, with women and men being complementary to each other in the sense that woman is the other to the male norm. With the shift from the theological to the scientific paradigm, the differences between the sexes were constructed as completely opposite “natures” of body and soul, which resulted in the ideology of different tasks – women should be confined to the household, removed from the male public sphere of political life. Thus, a foundation and pseudoscientific justification for these different worlds and values was provided.

One of many examples is Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s theory of gender specific education. Rousseau, who developed decisive foundations for the contract-theoretical basis of the modern state with his seminal work *The Social Contract*, simultaneously designed a naturalistic concept of gender character – how gender-differentiated education should

⁵ Cf. ZEHETNER 2020.

⁶ HAUSEN 1976.

proceed was developed by Rousseau in his book *Emile, or On Education*.⁷ I would like to quote a famous passage from Rousseau’s *Emile*:

I would prefer a simple and roughly educated girl a hundred times over a blue stocking and aesthete who installs a literary court and make(s) herself the president. An aesthete is a scourge for her husband, her children, her friends, her servants, for the entire world. From the height of her genius she despises all her feminine duties and only thinks of becoming a man of the kind of Mademoiselle l’Enclos. Outside she always appears ridiculous and is rightfully criticized since criticism cannot stay away as soon as you desert your status and adopt a new one for which one is not made ... even if she would indeed have talents she would devalue them by her arrogance. Her dignity consists in remaining unknown; her fame is the respect of her spouse; her pleasure consists in the happiness of her family ... If there were only reasonable men, every educated girl would remain spinsters their entire lives.⁸

For Rousseau, it is a given fact that men and women are different in character and temperament. He developed his theory of gender character: men and women are not and should not be of the same essence, a position that perpetuates and reiterates the conventional misunderstanding or faulty logic of deducing a norm of ought from being (being-ought fallacy).

Rousseau develops a totally different theory of education for Sophie, the potential spouse for his protagonist Emile, consisting of literally the opposite principles for girls than for boys: The girl shall be educated in a way to please her future husband.⁹ What is the genuine role of a woman?

Thus the whole education of women ought to relate to men. To please men, to be useful to them, to make herself loved and honored by them, to raise them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to console them, to make their lives agreeable and sweet – these

⁷ See NAGL-DOCEKAL 2004, 128.

⁸ ROUSSEAU 1979, 447–448, as cited in NAGL-DOCEKAL 2004, 128.

⁹ Cf. ROUSSEAU 1979; see also SCHMID 1992.

*are the duties of women at all times, and they ought to be taught from childhood.*¹⁰

In many of today's counseling sessions I get the impression that these principles have been deeply effective and incorporated by men and women alike – "In every gesture lies the whole society."¹¹ According to this paradigm, man equals the human being, he is the center of thinking, the normative benchmark; woman, on the other hand, has to adapt herself to his needs – the female partner as mother of her husband which, in my view, is one of the most common causes for the failure of marriages.

GENDER SPECIFIC ASPECTS OF VIOLENCE AND VULNERABILITY

Only the separation of the female-connotated particularity allows the male philosophizing subject to define itself as universal. Only the denial of one's own finitude allows the subject to imagine itself as a thoroughly rational, autonomous, morally competent, sovereign being. This conception of the human being as sovereign subject eliminates the foundation of human relatedness and interdependence, including our vulnerability. I would like to confront this conception of man as sovereign subject with the foundation of human relatedness and interdependence, with our vulnerability.

Vulnerability is an essential part of the human condition. But the connotations of vulnerability are gender specific: phantasmatic impenetrability and the power to hurt are symbolically assigned to masculinity, the openness to being hurt, the need for protection are symbolically ascribed to femininity. Women are symbolically conceived as passive objects of (at least potential) violation and fear, men as active subjects with full (aggressive) agency ("Verletzungsoffenheit" and "Verletzungsmächtigkeit"). This is obviously a disciplinary discourse with the message to women: "For your own safety you should not walk

¹⁰ ROUSSEAU 1979, 477.

¹¹ KAUFMANN 1994, 293.

alone, without a male protector, at best you should let yourself be protected by a male partner who can defend you against the potential violation of other men." Of course, this is a rather paradoxical and cynical message, considering that for a woman the place with the highest risk to experience violence is her own home, her own relationship.¹² In the current right-wing discourse, sexism intersects with racism: "We," Western men, have to protect "our" women from aggressive and dangerous foreigners (for example at New Year's Eve in Cologne, Germany). This discourse is to distract from one's own violent structures and actions by projecting all the "dark sides" onto the Other, men of color, refugees etc. – thereby establishing white women as the property of white men.

So once again: The hegemonic construct of masculinity is marked by the denial of vulnerability (and fear), whereas the construct of femininity is essentially identified with violability (and fear). The emancipatory potential of a critical philosophy of gender can be realized in the psychosocial field by opening up perspectives of creating gender relations in a new way. How can we embody "masculinity" and "femininity" in a less restrictive, less violent way?

As background information, it is important to know that the forms and contexts of violence are not gender-neutral. Violence against women is mostly violence from male partners or ex-partners and is executed in most cases in their own home. Violence against men is mostly violence executed by other men and mostly in public spaces.¹³

"PARTEILICHKEIT" AS A PRINCIPLE OF FEMINIST COUNSELING

The German term "Parteilichkeit" is commonly translated as "partiality," but also as "commitment," "partisanship" or "bias." "Parteilichkeit" is an important principle of feminist counseling, understood as gender sensible or gender reflective counseling, or also emancipatory counseling.

¹² See FRA 2014.

¹³ See SCHRÖTTLE & ANSORGE 2012; FRA 2014.

Partiality as a principle of feminist counseling is based on a critical perspective of society, especially regarding structures of dominance and oppression. It involves explicit positionality and interest, with the goal of giving back the power of defining violence to the one who has been exposed to it and to strengthen, support and empower her in her own agency.

A common point of critique of feminist thinking is the accusation of partiality and the alleged subjectivity of its arguments – expressed mostly by those who want to declare their own standpoint as a universal one. To counter these accusations, we can point to the illusory quality of this demand of a god-like “objectivity” or “neutrality.”¹⁴ I want to show the necessity of a partial standpoint through the example of counseling sessions with women who have suffered violence by their partner.

In these sessions, the connection of structural, cultural, and personal violence becomes obvious; no problem of women who seek counseling is just an individual problem. It is always part of social, economic, and political relations and conditions. For example, economic dependency on one's husband due to an unjust division of unpaid care work furthers violence in the relationship and aggravates an autonomous decision to end such a relationship.

Women who experience violence from their partners often feel shame and guilt instead of their partners. A non-partial – allegedly “neutral” – attitude establishes the violent structure once more, as the phenomenon of victim-blaming clearly demonstrates (for instance, questions such as: “What did you do to enrage him like this?” Or: “Have you provoked him in any way?”). We have to differentiate between the illusion of agency (“If I do everything the right way, if I fulfill his wishes, then the violence will stop” – this is a completely wrong assumption, a trap, because the violent behavior of the partner is not a rational reaction to something that the woman has done “wrong”) and the fact that the violent behavior is most definitely a problem of the person who is acting violently, instead of using other strategies, such as verbalizing feelings of anger, fear of helplessness, or fear of losing one's partner. The urge to control and possess one's

¹⁴ See above pp. 84–85.

partner results from some sort of subconscious deficit in one's own self-esteem – too threatening if it ever were to become conscious. It is due to this unbearable unknown that the abuser acts out violently against his partner. Vulnerability and fear question the man's masculinity in our symbolic order. Obviously, it is necessary to change this double standard towards more openness, so as to develop the whole range of “human” behavior for all genders.

A partial attitude relieves the victim of guilt and stops her from blaming herself for the violence she has experienced. It is helpful and necessary to state this position very clearly: “Violence is the responsibility of the person who acts violently,” and “There is no justification for the violence that you have suffered.” “Every human being has the right to live a life that is not threatened by violence.”

The pseudoneutral assumption that violence is just an imbalance of power and that the woman could end the relationship any time is a misunderstanding of the difference between violence and power and the dynamics and effects of violence on the victim. Any kind of violence weakens a woman's self-esteem and the trust in her own agency; it limits her ability to change the situation, to act independently from her partner, and to live her own life in freedom. Violence is *not* a mere imbalance of power between two people. Power is something that demands affirmation and consent, it is an inter-relational process, open to negotiation, whereas violence is one-sided, it threatens and silences. There is no easy way out of a long-term violent relationship, because it weakens the victim in her self-esteem and her agency. She does not perceive herself as worthy or capable of living by herself any more, often a paradoxical dependence has developed. All of this is ignored by a so-called “neutral” or allegedly objective standpoint, which by ignoring the dynamic and the effects of violence stabilizes the underlying inequalities.¹⁵

“Reflective” or “differentiated partiality” does not mean supporting any aim of the person receiving counseling (for example, self-harming

¹⁵ Similar pseudoneutral assumptions are that everybody has the same chances in the labor market, that every person is treated equally with respect to his or her competencies, or the neoliberal myth that everybody can achieve everything if s/he only tries hard enough.

tendencies), but to be a serious and, if necessary, critical partner for a dialogue. The most important general aim of feminist counseling is to support the counseling-seeking person in the widening of her own range of agency, to develop new possibilities to think and speak about themselves and their situation (and situatedness) and to act in a less restricted way, to gain more freedom of acting.

CONCLUSION

Psychosocial counseling is not a repair shop or service center for better adaptation to stressful environments and economic demands. On the contrary, emancipatory counseling helps to develop a wider perspective in order to overcome the individualization of structural problems. Instead of pathologizing women in their role as victims, feminist counseling strengthens women in their agency and autonomy. Feminist counseling provides a space for critical thinking so as to expand the possibilities for all genders. I argue for a feminist attitude in psychosocial counseling with the aim of expanding the possibilities for all genders. I am arguing for a feminist attitude in psychosocial counseling, with the aim of liberation from the restricted perspective of gender polarization, i.e., of from the pressure to define oneself as *either* male *or* female. In this way, feminist philosophy as it has been developed by Herta Nagl-Docekal allows to establish an emancipatory practice in all areas of human co-existence. In the field of counseling, feminist philosophy must create an emancipatory practice of counseling, based on a non-reductive concept of human beings for the emancipation of all genders!

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This volume contains the proceedings of a panel on the feminist work of Herta Nagl-Docekal, organized by Gertrude Postl within the context of a conference of the Association for Philosophy and Literature (APL). It includes papers on the practical application of Nagl-Docekal's work for feminist counseling services (Bettina Zehetner), on the interconnection of moral philosophy and epistemology (Waltraud Ernst), on feminist aesthetics (Cornelia Esplanu), and on Nagl-Docekal's contributions to a feminist philosophy of religion (Brigitte Buchhammer). It concludes with a response by Herta Nagl-Docekal.

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