

Clara Fischer

Gendered Readings of Change: A Feminist-Pragmatist Approach

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Reviewed by Susan Dieleman, 2016

Narrated by Theodra Bane

One does not expect to pick up a book to start reading about Parmenides, only to end up reading about Iris Marion Young. And one is even less likely to think that the missing links between these two thinkers are Aristotle and John Dewey. Yet in *Gendered Readings of Change: A Feminist-Pragmatist Approach*, Clara Fischer constructs a compelling genealogy of Western philosophy's metaphysical understanding of what change is and how it occurs, ultimately to develop a view of the feminist-pragmatist self that is capable of changing itself as well as the norms and institutions that constitute its environment.

Fischer's project contributes to ongoing debates about how to conceive of a self that is neither wholly stripped of its agency by the oppressive norms that constitute it, nor wholly free of those norms. This is a debate that has been explicitly examined (see, for example, debates about the possibility of a rapprochement between feminism and postmodernism in the 1990s, or more recent work on the concept of relational autonomy [Nicholson 1990; Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000]), but also often lurks in the background of much feminist philosophical work. These debates seek to answer some version or other of the following question: how can we explain the fact that selves are subject to and constituted by oppressive norms, but are also self-directed, autonomous agents capable of changing those norms and the institutions that support them?

In *Gendered Readings of Change*, Fischer tackles both of these issues, suggesting that they can be addressed by (re)turning to the pragmatism of John Dewey. By complementing his pragmatist account of how selves can change, and how institutions and norms can be changed, with a feminist account of oppressive, "half-submerged" norms, Fischer develops a pragmatist-feminist understanding of how change is possible by developing the pragmatist-feminist self. This project is motivated, as she puts it, by the feminist "requirement for the amelioration of dissatisfactory conditions" (1).

Part I offers us "Genealogical Reflections on Change." In this section, Fischer traces the development of change from the pre-Socratic thinker Parmenides, through Aristotle, and finally to Dewey and contemporary feminism. Though the connection between the genealogical and the reconstructive projects is a bit tenuous--the arguments that appear in part II could have been made without going back all the way to Parmenides and Aristotle--both projects are nonetheless valuable in and of themselves. The genealogical reflections presented in part I are reminiscent of, if more modest than, Genevieve Lloyd's similar exposition of the gendered nature of reason in Western philosophy. As such, it provides an excellent starting point for any (feminist) philosopher interested in the gendered nature of change in Western philosophy (Lloyd 1984).

In chapter 1, Fischer looks to Parmenides as well as two creation myths (the creation of Athens and the creation of woman, that is, Pandora) to uncover the ancient roots of apparent metaphysical connections between change and gender. Depending on who or what you're

reading, Fischer argues, "woman is categorized alongside change as inferior oppositional, or alongside immutability as inferior oppositional" (17). Thus, though the valence of "change" varies according to philosophical context, "woman" is invariably associated with the negative. For Parmenides, woman is associated with change as negative, whereas for Aristotle, woman is associated with permanence as negative. This insight leads to Fischer's development of the central, organizing theme of the opening chapters of the book: "gendered (im)mutability," according to which "she [woman] is portrayed as static, unchanging, when the male is engaged and transforming; while vice versa, she is unsettlingly unstable, changing, and transient, while man provides structure and reliability through permanence" (41).

In chapter 2, Fischer reads Dewey and Aristotle together, a pairing whose unlikeliness Fischer attempts to resolve by identifying them both as "friends of Bios [who] are inclined toward contingency and the relational" (46). Both thinkers present a metaphysical picture that accommodates both change and permanence: Aristotle through the distinction between matter and form (53-54), and Dewey through the distinction between structure and process (51-53). However, despite this affinity, Fischer suggests that Dewey moves beyond Aristotle by emphasizing that nature is open and in process, rather than closed and complete. Though Dewey can forgive Aristotle's leanings toward Mathema, because all philosophy is a product of its time, Dewey's faith in meliorism and reform prompts him to emphasize change over stability.

Having elaborated Dewey's and Aristotle's metaphysics in chapter 2, chapter 3 turns to Dewey's and Aristotle's views on the self. As with metaphysics, Fischer sees affinities between Dewey and Aristotle here, especially in their similar emphases on habit and habituation. Both thinkers suggest that character and action are mutually dependent and enforcing; this virtuous circle is how selves are constituted. Dewey differs from Aristotle, though, in two ways. First, Dewey thinks the environment (which includes other selves) plays a far greater role in constituting the self than does Aristotle. It does this via "transaction," the Deweyan concept that points to the dynamic interdependence of organisms and their environments. Second, Dewey thinks the self is more fluid and adaptable than does Aristotle, whose selves--or at least, the selves of women and slaves--are ultimately limited by their place in the Great Chain of Being.

Chapter 3, and therefore part I, finishes with the following thought: "having established the world as mutable yet stable, and Dewey's self as an agent capable of effecting change, it remains to be seen how the ethico-political changes sought by feminists can take hold in selves and in their environments" (103). The gap that remains to be filled at this point, and that needs to be attended to in part II of *Gendered Readings of Change*, is, I think, apparent: we know that the Deweyan self can change itself by reflecting on and altering its own habits, and we know that changes to the self require changes in the institutions that make up its environment if they are to take hold. However, we do not yet see how these institutional changes can be effected. Thus, in part II: "Feminist-Pragmatist Reconstruction of Change," Fischer engages in the positive project of constructing a feminist account of the self and of change that builds upon and improves the pragmatist account of the self and of change that was highlighted in previous chapters, to show how directed change in the norms and institutions that constitute society is possible.

Chapter 4 provides an account of the pragmatist-feminist self that is capable of change. This move is pivotal in terms of Fischer's argument since, as she puts it, "if one is to explain changes that feminists seek to instantiate, one must theorise a self capable of realizing change" (7). This self is presented as an improvement upon earlier accounts of selves as

developed by radical, social-constructionist, liberal, and poststructuralist feminist theories of the self, since these selves are "either too deterministic or too transient" (111). Fischer's pragmatist-feminist self is therefore, importantly, both stable and dynamic. The self is a pragmatist self insofar as it borrows the Deweyan idea of the self as a "fund of habits" (111) that is constituted "via transaction with its unique environment" (113). However, this Deweyan self, though it allows us to see selves as "ethically culpable beings, possessed of the capacity to effect change" (121), is insufficiently attuned to the role oppressive norms play in habit-formation. This is why Fischer's self is also a feminist self, who is capable of seeing the connections between specific habits and the sexist societies that produce and reinforce them. The possibility of change enters the picture because the fund of habits will throw up contradictions and discomfort: "it is the very juxtaposition of habits free from oppressive norms with habits contrariwise, that allows for change to occur" (136). The friction the pragmatist-feminist self experiences when the habits constituted by patriarchal norms meet up with nonpatriarchal habits leads to reflection upon and adaptation of those habits, often via feminist consciousness-raising.

Chapter 5, the final chapter, shows how this pragmatist-feminist self is capable of changing not only itself, but also its environment, including the formal institutions and the informal norms that constitute it. Fischer places Young's model of communicative democracy against the backdrop of the pragmatist account of change developed throughout the book, as a means for creating the sort of change feminists call for: "[c]hange as transaction thus becomes not a matter of (female) self impacting upon (male) institution, and vice versa, but rather a matter of selves constituting institutions" (161). In other words, Young's robustly inclusive model of democracy embodies change of the sort required to change selves, as well as environments through the transactions between selves and environments. At the same time, however, Fischer worries that Young's account is too "proceduralist," and she suggests that Jane Addams's account of democracy, as presented in *Democracy and Social Ethics* and elsewhere, provides a living example of what ethico-political activity on the part of a feminist-pragmatist self might look like.

Fischer helpfully concludes her text by reminding us of her methodology: expositing "change as it exists in the world . . . how it occurs in selves . . . [and] how it functions in connection with political systems" (187), as well as her findings: "systemic change is most effectively tackled by interpreting change as transaction, that is, by focusing on changed selves in their dialogical relationship with changed systems" (187). In short, the feminist-pragmatist self, which is constituted by habits that are formed via transaction with the environment, is the key to understanding the possibility of directed, ethical, and political change.

Despite the compelling narrative of *Gendered Readings of Change*, there are a couple of head-scratching moments in the book, which would have been well served by further examination. For example, Fischer highlights debates about the role of "growth" in Dewey's thought, writing, "'growth' has led to considerable confusion amongst interpreters of Dewey's work, as he equates growth with progress, and describes it almost like an inevitable, unfolding path toward improvement" (117). This is problematic, she suggests, in part because it leaves no room for the possibility of regress or "bad growth." However, Fischer ultimately leaves aside this problematic aspect of Dewey's thought, suggesting that it can be cleanly excised from the view of selfhood as stable-yet-dynamic that she wants to retain and use in her construction of the feminist-pragmatist self. The worry that this excision might not be so clean after all is compounded, it seems to me, when viewed in light of the project of chapter 5, "Democracy as Change and Transaction." Indeed, it resurfaces in the possibility that norms

and institutions themselves are recalcitrant or resilient and unlikely to respond to the changes that the feminist, transacting self demands or requires. The question of progress, therefore, cannot be so easily excised from or ignored in the account Fischer forwards. Moreover, given the challenges often presented to contemporary (neo)pragmatists by those who think that progress without foundations is impossible, this seems an important challenge to address.

However, the weakest element of this book is actually the title, which provides little in the way of suggesting the strengths of the content of the book. The title is accurate insofar as Fischer does present us with "gendered readings of change," but the value of the feminist-pragmatist self she constructs, as well as the picture of how such a self can change norms and institutions, far exceeds this description. My hope is that many feminist philosophers and many pragmatists--especially those concerned with the questions introduced at the beginning of this review--pick up Fischer's book to see the myriad resources presented therein, which will inevitably strengthen and enrich their own projects.

References

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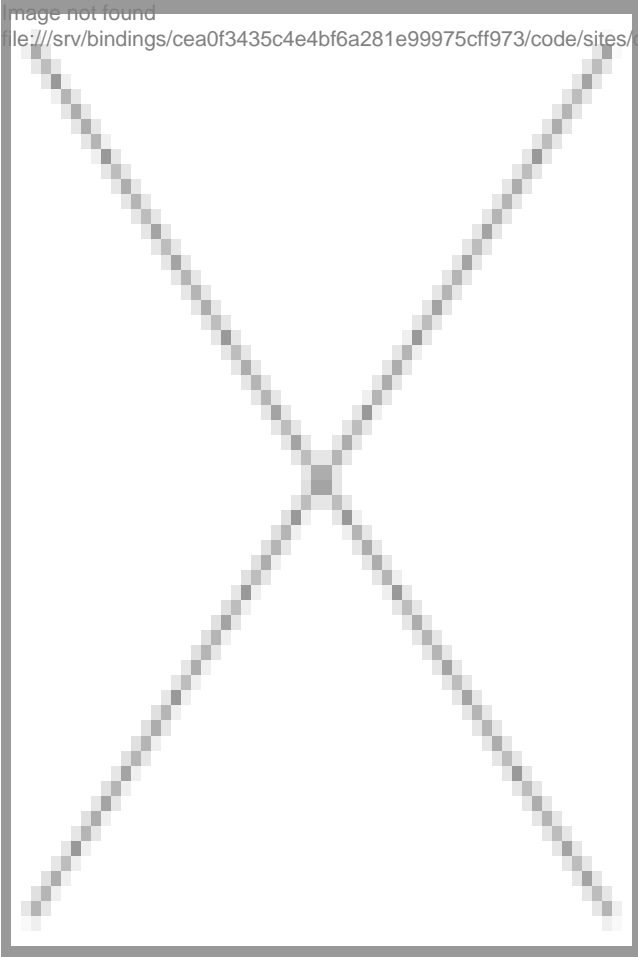
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