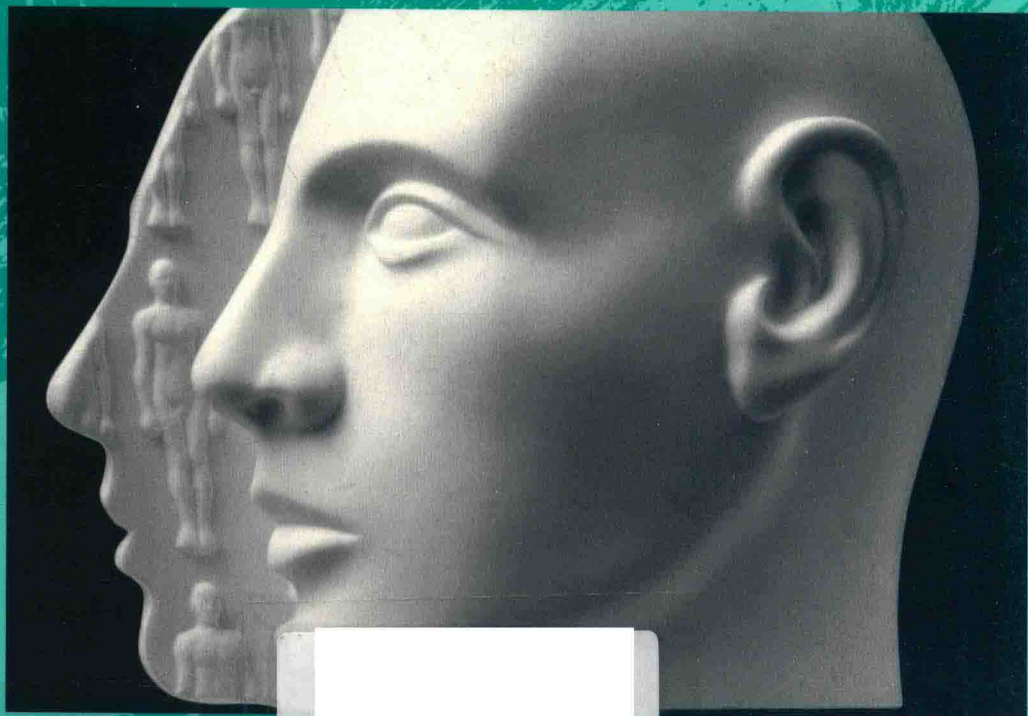


NEW DIMENSIONS TO RELIGIOUS ETHICS

The Ethics of

Gender



Susan Frank Parsons



The Ethics of Gender

Susan Frank Parsons

Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, Cambridge

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The Ethics of Gender



NEW DIMENSIONS TO RELIGIOUS ETHICS

Series Editors: Frank G. Kirkpatrick and Susan Frank Parsons
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Cambridge, UK*

The aim of this series is to offer high-quality materials for use in the study of ethics at the undergraduate or seminary level, by means of engagement in the interdisciplinary debate about significant moral questions with a distinctive theological voice. Each volume investigates a dimension of religious ethics that has become problematic, not least due to the wider climate of reappraisal of Enlightenment thought. More especially, it is understood that these are dimensions which run through a number of contemporary moral dilemmas that trouble the postmodern world. It is hoped that an analysis of basic assumptions will provide students with a good grounding in ethical thought, and will open windows onto new features of the moral landscape that require further attention. The series thus looks forward to a most challenging renewal of thinking in religious ethics and to the serious engagement of theologians in what are most poignant questions of our time.

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For Andrew

Preface

In the process of writing this book, I have been venturing to follow the trail of thinking with gender through its critical engagement with ethics and with theology. My interest has been held, initially by a rather vague discomforting sense that ethics, and in particular theological ethics, may have come to some kind of an end, and that thinking with gender has been the way in which that end has been encountered. These discomforts have arisen through my teaching of ethics, in which I became aware of such a concentration on the business of solving practical problems and learning the techniques of valuing, that ethics was in danger of losing this opportunity to investigate its own philosophical foundations and its place as a discipline of modern western thinking.

The more closely I considered what was being said in critical theories of gender, initially found in various kinds of feminism and in arguments about sex, the more profoundly I heard this discomfort articulated. For it seems that the discourse called "theory" has arisen in the weak spot of a certain kind of ethical humanism that has become comfortable and resistant, in places, to a self-critique. Thinking with gender is the practice of a hermeneutic of suspicion which renders vulnerable this humanism, and it is the call for reinterpretations and revaluations by which humanity may be set on its way again. Whether this is the way we should go is one of the questions with which this book is concerned.

In taking on this question, I found that a strong wind blew through my mind, generally wrecking the place, so that nothing has been quite the same as before. I have been thrown into the human situation, and into my own living of it, to find myself gripped by an anguish and upheld by a love that are both more profound than I would otherwise have known. For the question of gender reopens the fundamental issues of philosophy in a way that allows nothing to be assumed without thinking, and reaches

into the vocation of theology to attend to the things that most trouble humanity and turn them into the love of God. By locating the problematic, critical gender theory may return our philosophical thinking to the matter of truth, and our theological thinking to the cry for redemption as it is heard in the modern, and now postmodern, idiom.

This road is a hard one to take and, although I have tried to smooth out most of the bumps along the way, there are many that remain in my thinking, and thus also in this writing. There is so much I have come upon that I only begin to understand and to be able to articulate, so the text bears some awkwardness of speaking in ways that are new to me. I have tried simply to say what is coming to be known in this thinking today, and to put it into some kind of order for others to follow. If I may accompany those whose desiring of truth also takes them into difficult places, and asks of them that they too become the crucibles in which mercy is to be formed, then this writing will have served its purpose. May the poor pots in which such truth comes to birth be shaped into godly beings for the sake of love.

I am especially grateful to those who have befriended me on this way. My thanks are due to the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, Cambridge, for hospitality in providing a place of study and of prayer in the Lent term of 1998 during which this book began to form; to the Cambridge Faculty of Divinity for its welcome to seminars; to the Peterhouse Theory Group for such interesting discussions; to ordained women in the Church of England in whose various gatherings around the country I have been invited to think aloud; to students of the East Midlands Ministry Training Course and St. John's College, Nottingham for helping me to teach this subject; to Alex Wright (formerly) and Rebecca Harkin (presently) of Blackwell Publishers; to the anonymous reader for such thoughtful attention to the text; and to my friends who have discussed many of these matters with me, especially Chris Cottrell, James Hanvey, Laurence Hemming, Frank Kirkpatrick, Ferdinand Knapp, and Mark Parsons. The book is dedicated to our son, in hope, that his own adventure of living will bring him much joy, that his thinking will always call upon truth, and that his laughter and his tenderness, shared so generously, will keep him in the way of love.

Advent 2000

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Introduction

In many ways, the question of gender has become a troubled dimension of contemporary life. It is here that there is an ongoing wonder of our humanity, and in particular of what it is to be woman and what it is to be man. To begin to think about this dimension of our lives is already to anticipate trouble. Some of this is learned from experience. Those who raise questions about gender often find themselves in a place of serious discomfort as their comments are spoken and ramify through the dynamics of a group, and at great cost to themselves, they find that their own ways of life and integrity are placed on the line. Those who have not raised those questions often find that they are under attack for not having done so, and their presumptions and their complacency are challenged, so that their lives too are put at risk. We cannot seem to help the fact that our personal values and behaviour are deeply implicated in the questions gender raises. In addition, by now, few of the groups to which we belong or the institutions of our daily lives have been untouched by gender questions. Most of us live, work, study, and play within contexts that have been affected by some form of a critique of gender, and by a reaction to this critique as these contexts adapt to the challenging questions. Gender disturbs when it appears, and our lives have become shaped by this disturbance. We learn from experience the trouble we can expect from the question of gender, for in it we are asked to be reflective about who we are.

Some of this is learned through attention to contemporary culture. Representations of gender appear in all sorts of artistic expressions that find their way into the culture of our time, and thus into our consciousness as participants in that culture. Novels tell stories of the formation and discovery, of the hiding and blossoming of gender identity. Dramas enact the confusions, the breakdowns, the dynamics, the play of gender relationships. Films portray, paintings reveal, songs express, sculptures embody the issues

of gender, that is, those things that issue forth from the raising of the question of gender. These things indicate that gender has come to be an important and a common way of representing ourselves to ourselves. Gender has become an aesthetic avenue through which the human self is being expressed, human relationships are explored, and dilemmas of human living revealed. We absorb these things as we grow up and later become aware of ourselves as persons shaped by culture. What it is to be woman and what it is to be man features in our enculturation in a big way, so that part of the trouble we anticipate as we begin to approach this dimension for consideration is that our own becoming engendered persons within these cultural expressions is itself going to be examined, challenged, and opened to question, and thus also put at risk. For in the question of gender, we are asked to be reflective about who we have come to be as women and men within our common cultural life.

When we seek to examine this cultural phenomenon of gender representations in any depth, to attend to it critically, we encounter a tangled, multilayered and dense complex of issues. It is this complexity that has made gender studies such a richly variegated area for academic enquiry. The emergence of the human sciences, and more recently of critical and cultural theory, has enabled this enquiry in particular ways. By means of these investigative tools, we are encouraged to step back from our involvement in culture, to distance ourselves from what is all around us in the water we swim in, and to raise critical questions about the structures and the forces that determine the characteristic features of the culture to which we belong. Thus we may examine the path of its historical development, the role of its geographical locations, the workings of its ideological persuasions, the formations of its distinctive institutions, the functions of its economy – all of which help us to appreciate how our culture is situated in and amongst other cultures of the world. In each of these dimensions of culture, the question of gender has been opened for examination and critique, a fact to which the growing number of books on gender studies attests. Through these studies, the cultural construction of gender is impressed upon us. We begin to appreciate that we think gender in cultured ways, that we embody cultured gender ideals, and that we hold cultural political and social expectations of gender behavior. The trouble gender brings here is a critical awareness of our being made, of our fabrication, as products of our cultures.

The study of culture brings further trouble as there is a digging deep into the foundations of our ideas and practices. For critical and cultural theories are excavating the groundwork of culture, examining the roots of our thinking. In this archaeological work, we uncover the ways in which

present thinking about our humanity has been formed, exposing the underlying structures that support and shape our thinking about gender. We begin to wonder about the history of our understandings of gender, and about how it is that the ideas we now have have been formed, and about how it is that gender has come to be so important for us. In western culture, gender holds a particular fascination. Gender seems to be making itself known and demanding to be made known as a significant dimension of our humanity. Somehow, issues simply are not fully addressed until the matter of gender has been raised and resolved in some way. So gender is part of our contemporary intellectual scene, requiring visible signs of its presence, such that even when it is not declared to be there, or declared not to be there, our critical theoretical apparatus challenges us to uncover what is hidden from view. There is something of an expectation, that something fundamental, essential even, about our humanity will come to be revealed in gender. By means of questioning gender, we seem to expect a breakthrough to a true understanding of our humanness, a full revelation of ourselves to ourselves and to the world. Excavations follow the traces of these hopes that through the trouble of thinking with gender, we will come to know our humanity more fully.

With knowledge may come revaluations. Developing theories seem to promise that with this new critical thinking, we will be able to pry open our ideas and practices today. So we mine the past to provide the resources for changing the present. We examine how ideas and practices of gender have been formed so that we may discover the possibilities, the openings, the ways through into new formations in our day. We investigate the structures of gender thinking to help us to rethink how it is with gender, to find a supply of political and ethical resources for our use now. So, critical studies of culture have brought to our attention the texts of gender that seem everywhere to be scribbled over the fabric of our encultured lives. We weave our individual ways precariously through their traces. To ask about gender is to become aware of, but also importantly to reassess these gendered texts that have already been written. Gender thus comes to be as a sign of the emergence to power of the human person, power over determining texts, so that gender comes to be expressed as the taking of authority over, the right to author one's own texts. In this power, the capacity of human beings to transcend the given is being realized. Every enquiry into gender comes into being bearing this history, and every raising of the question of gender comes to exist in the presence of this question of power, and thus of disputes over power and of encouragement for an empowering. We engage in this enquiry, and are persuaded of the significance of so doing, because by means of it, we believe that we will be

enabled to make ours a better culture. Our anticipation of trouble as we approach the dimension of gender in our lives appears as a question about the power of revaluations, and as a question about how this association of gender and power has come to be.

So gender causes trouble in our thinking. It asks us to reflect on who we are as individual women and men. It asks us to consider what we have become in our common cultural heritage. It asks us to think about the ways we are fabricated as cultural products. It asks that we dig into the foundations of our ideas and consider how they have come to be important to us. It asks us to reflect upon the place of gender as the location of a promise for a better culture and a better human life. So Judith Butler was wise in selecting this word for the title of her book, *Gender Trouble*, and for understanding that in considerations of gender, there are subversions of our thinking at work.¹ For the notions of causing trouble and of being troubled are themselves indications that matters of gender lie in a place of brokenness in our culture. These words begin to signify a realization that all is not well in our understanding, that the difference of women and men has become the rift of gender into which modernity has plunged, rendering problematic the thinking of a common humanity. Yet these words signify a hope too, an expectation of a mediation, that in finding another way of speaking and thinking gender we might break through into something new. Gender takes the trouble to bring us to the edge of this promise by subverting our thinking.

Something of an examination of these subversions of our ethical thinking, and of the task of a theological ethics, is what this present book undertakes. For this is a book which seeks to investigate the interface of gender with ethics, and to consider the ways in which a Christian theological ethics informed by gender might come to be shaped. As a preliminary definition, we might suggest that ethics is a discipline of thinking that draws my attention to what might be called good. In so doing, it opens up a way of the shaping of my life in accordance with that which is deemed good, and asks that I play some part in that shaping, and that I give myself over to it. Gender questions challenge nearly every dimension of ethical thinking, and it will be part of our task to investigate these challenges. Thinking with gender puts a question mark over the content of ethical vision and recommendations for practice, by asking in what ways our notions of good are already shaped by assumptions about what women and men are. We are asked to examine these assumptions and to question

¹ Judith Butler: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).

whether they are themselves ethical. Thinking with gender challenges our modes of ethical reasoning by suggesting that women's ways of thinking may be different from men's ways of thinking. So we are asked to consider for whom ethical deliberation is intended. Thinking with gender calls into question our assumptions about what ethics is, and what the purposes of ethics might be, and thus about the role of ethics in our formation as women and men. We are asked to reflect upon the place of ethics in human life. In all of these challenges, gender raises questions about the ethics of ethics. One of our central concerns will therefore need to be – what is it to engage in a discipline of thinking that attends to what might be called good in such a time as this?

So too, there are subversions of our understanding of theology. Again, we may begin by suggesting that theology is a discipline of thinking myself into the faith I am given. Theology opens to me a way of understanding how it is that I come into a knowing of God, and how it is that in this knowing, there is a being-met by that which is beyond my knowing, and how it is that my life can be gripped by this knowing which will not let me go. As I engage in its ways of thinking, what I think about comes to matter in my life and the mysterious gracefulness of this coming together of humanity and God never ceases to amaze the heart of the theologian. Once again, gender challenges theology by asking in what ways our knowing of God is already a gendered knowing, and our faith already a thoroughly gendered phenomenon. In so doing, it asks whether and in what ways the divine has been made in the image of the human. Thinking with gender looks to the cultural formation of theology and investigates its entanglement with ideas and practices of gender. Thinking with gender excavates the underpinnings of theology to consider the roots of these ways of thinking, in the hope of opening up new ways for the contemporary world. Thinking with gender seeks a liberation of humanity into a more authentic relation with God in which each of us, woman and man, may find ourselves more truly reflected in the presence of God. In all of these ways, theology is challenged to ask whether its thinking about God can be purified of its idolatry through the hermeneutic of suspicion that is gender. These questions too lie within our task here, for another of our central concerns needs to be – what is it to engage in a discipline of thinking myself into the faith I am given through what is being said in the question of gender?

The interface of these two questions forms the matrix for this book. The disciplines from which they arise guide its proceedings. Our central concerns both have to do with thinking, with ways of thinking, with patterns of thinking – all of which is to presume that we cannot help ourselves thinking. Thinking happens. It is what human beings do, perhaps

it is even what human beings do best, and in a book which offers a thinking about thinking, we encounter both its unavoidability and its givenness at once. Our questions here have to do with the ways in which we will enter into this thinking. They have to do with believing that somehow in the clarifying of how we go about our thinking through the question of gender comes a sensitivity of friendship, a kindling of generosity, and a pastoral responsiveness to our neighbours. They have to do with risking that in an engagement with the question of gender, with what is so very troubled in our midst, a deepening of understanding may bring us to ourselves in our common humanity. They have to do with trusting that precisely in what we cannot help ourselves to do, the disciplines of ethics and of theology may be turned into their own best efforts. They have to do with hoping that in our thinking the way of a redeeming may come to be opened to us. These questions may thus awaken the vocation of our humanity in an other way, by calling us into what is a reflecting that finds its heart continually thrown open to the coming of God. So this book sets out to examine the interface of gender and ethics. It seeks to engage in a thinking of what might be called good through the enquiry that gender theory has undertaken, and it does so with a mind and heart of faith.

Outline of the Book

In the first chapter we take a preliminary look at the discipline of ethics and at the more recent discourse of gender theory. Some consideration of the key terms and assumptions of each will be needed. We may then become more attentive to what it is that is being said in these ways of thinking, to the strands of overlapping interest and concern, and to those difficult and challenging issues that emerge between them. In this way, the questions and themes of this book may begin to come into focus.

The next two chapters take up the challenges of gender thinking that emerged with the Enlightenment, in the time called modernity. In the first of these, we will explore the challenges of modern feminism, three forms of which have in different ways attempted to work within the terms of the discipline of ethics as understood within modernism. Liberal, naturalistic, and constructionist feminisms have made use of ethical vocabulary and ideas, in order to discover the particular meaning and place of women, and to propose changes that would be consistent with the best potential of ethics for guiding our attainment of the good for human life. A feminist ethics of gender provides one model of the relationship between ethics and gender, so it will be helpful to summarize the ways in which present

ethical debate involving questions of gender has been shaped by the trouble feminists have taken.

In the second of these, we will explore the question – Is ethics a man's subject? This question appearing in feminist thinking begins to unravel the modernist ethical project, and demonstrates that feminisms are already anticipations of postmodernity. The opening up of questions regarding the gendered subject of ethical thinking and acting begins to require of us some new thinking about our humanness which can no longer be woven within the fabric of modernism. Thus gender and ethics enter a new time of postmodernity, in which different questions of gender are posed.

Following that sketch of modern developments, there are three chapters which take up some of the changes being wrought within postmodern thinking. These have to do with our thinking about the body and embodiment, about language and subjectivity, and about power and agency. Each of these has to do with a fundamental dimension of our humanness that thinking with gender touches upon. In each of these areas of thinking, there is an overturning of the patterns in which modernity has conceived of these things, and the assumptions that have guided modern enquiries about them. So some investigation of what is being said in postmodern theory may illuminate our considerations of the ethics of gender.

In postmodern theory, there appears a question about what it means to say that the body is a natural biologically given reality, and an investigation of the ways in which the body comes to be as a social construction. In this reversal of modern humanist assumptions, the matter of the appearing of gender with the body may need to be thought in new ways. So too there is a questioning of the existence of a human subject independent of language, and an awareness that the subject may not be the speaker of language but rather the one that is spoken by it. Again this reverses a key dimension of modern humanism, and its implications for the subject of an ethics of gender will need to be considered. Thirdly, there is a challenging of the model of action which appears with the humanist subject, as a producer of deeds, an empowered being, a self as agent. Understanding ourselves to be ones through whom there are enactments taking place turns our thinking over in a way that requires a rethinking of what it is to act ethically.

With these developments, we may begin to appreciate the ways in which the issue of gender lies across the fault lines of the shift from modern to postmodern, in the midst of which we still have to think. The next chapter will consider three forms of an ethics of gender that have been proposed for this context. There is the new humanist universalism of Martha Nussbaum, which places gender into the broader context of human

capabilities and flourishing, where it may take its place and discover its guidelines. There is the ethics of transformative practice of Elaine Graham, which finds gender to be an important locus of the work of liberation for full human empowerment. There is the revised natural law ethic of Lisa Sowle Cahill, in which a premodern form of ethical reasoning is adapted and rendered flexible for our newer dilemmas and questions of gender. A comparison of these three forms of the ethics of gender, and a consideration of their different strengths and weaknesses, will help us to summarize some of the main implications of the gender critique of ethics in a postmodern context.

The final three chapters turn to our guiding questions. What is it to engage in a discipline of thinking that attends to what is to be called good in such a time as this? What is it to engage in a discipline of theological thinking through what is being said in the question of gender? It is a key assumption of this work that the event of postmodernity in which we are living opens up to us new ways of thinking for a theological ethics. Thinking with gender contributes to the disruption of modern metaphysics and the ethics derived therein. In so doing, it may free up our thinking in ways that are both more authentic to the human beings that we are and more open to the coming to be of the divine in our midst. The ethics of gender touches upon and brings us towards the three dimensions of a theological ethics – faith, hope, and love – as these have come to the surface in postmodern questions about origins, about subjectivity, and about what it is to interpret. In considering each of these in turn, we may attend to this event and begin to develop a way of thinking for a theological ethics that may faith the redeeming love of God into the hope of our lives.