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Ontological (Re)Articulations: Drawing on Feminism, Moving Toward a Culture of Peace

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Abstract

This essay focuses on how the pervasive understanding of ontology as immutable and stable has led to problematic understandings of gender that work against the creation of a culture of peace. I argue transitioning to “feminist ontologies” will lay the foundation for a more peaceful society. More specifically, I begin by defining a culture of peace, and then indicate why attention to gender in the context of peace is critical. Next, I move to literature focusing on feminism and the body in order to clarify the need for moving away from epistemological concerns toward ontological ones. I then offer justification for, and characteristics of, feminist ontology. Finally, I argue how feminist ontology can help us move toward a culture of peace.

Peace is an unfamiliar and poorly understood concept and reality. Perhaps it has been too seldom experienced—or in the case of some people, hardly tasted at all. (Fox, 2011, p. 16)

1. Introduction

As we read the news, watch television, and talk with our colleagues, family, and friends it is quite obvious the prevalence of violence and war in our world. Each day world leaders debate and confer about the ways conflicts could and should be handled. In each case, the issues involved are complex and require vast knowledge of the histories that have led to the current state of affairs. While these conversations, plans, and efforts are critical, so to is the need for research, options, and recommendations that focus on the way we come to this information. In other words, exploring what we assume to be true, and how those assumptions shape our interactions and expectations, offers a unique opportunity for moving toward a culture of peace. As such, in this essay I will focus on how the pervasive understanding of ontology as immutable and stable has led to problematic understandings of gender, and then argue that transitioning to “feminist ontologies” will lay the foundation for a more peaceful society. More specifically, I begin by defining a culture of peace, and then indicate why attention to gender in the context of peace is critical. Next, I move to literature focusing on feminism and the body in order to clarify the need for moving away from epistemological concerns toward ontological ones. I then offer justification for, and characteristics of, feminist ontology. Finally, I argue how feminist ontology can help us move toward a culture of peace.

2. Defining a Culture of Peace

Sarah Macharia (2007), draws on the United Nations’ definition of a “culture of peace” and explains that it is “a set of values, attitudes, modes of behavior and ways of life that reject violence and prevent conflicts by tackling their root causes to solve problems through dialogue and negotiation among individuals, groups and nations” (p. 9). This definition is particularly valuable from my perspective as a Communication scholar because it highlights the power of dialogue and the importance of interaction in changing the world. To further clarify, Macharia (2007) offers a definition of peace from a feminist perspective. She claims peace is effectively defined by the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies as “not only the absence of war, violence and hostilities, but also the enjoyment of justice, equality and the entire range of human rights and fundamental freedoms within society” (Macharia, 2007, p. 9). As a result of seeking the fullness of life, not just the absence of misery, this definition of peace emphasizes the extent to which a peaceful culture can positively shape existence.

Day to day life entails a reliance on common beliefs about femininity and masculinity. Often we move through interactions without questioning the gendered roles we fill or that we expect those around us to fill. In much of the discourse on war, conflict, and hostility the presumption is that women’s involvement in such things is atypical, unusual, or a symptom of defect. On the other hand men’s role in these things are naturalized and presumed part of appropriate masculinity. In fact, Michael Fox (2011) argues that in order to get to a more peaceful society we must get past “some pretty formidable and influential ideas” such as “that war brings out the best qualities in men; that it is a ‘manly art’; [and] that it makes men out of boys; [. . .]” (p. 17). While Fox makes

explicit the discourse commonly surrounding men's role in violence and war, Macharia (2007) explains how women's involvement in preventing conflict is typically articulated. She writes, "reports from the field are categorical that involving women in peace processes improves the chances of achieving and sustaining peace. Numerous theorists interpret this observation as a propensity for peace innate in women, and a tendency toward violence in men" (Macharia 2007, p. 9-10). Both Macharia (2007) and I agree that this is a problematic interpretation that leads to "unsupportable generalizations" (p. 10). As such, a more valuable way to understand these reports is to examine "what it is about understandings of masculinity and femininity in each society that sanction, promote, and indeed make acceptable the attitudes and practices that lead to discord, violence and injustice" (Macharia, 2007, p. 10).

3. Feminism and the Body

While theorists have often delved into the epistemological debate about why societies maintain gendered expectations, the research fails to address ontology. Claire Colebrook (2000), in her discussion of the ways feminists have struggled to improve society, argues first wave movements seek equality, second wave movements work to identify and foster respect for differences, and third wave movements claim the body as a tool of identity articulation rather than an indication of consistency across individuals (p. 76). What becomes clear when examining the various waves of the feminist movements is that the body's ontology remains unspoken while the struggles waged center on epistemology. Suffragists and liberationists work to create change based on an identifiable subject position labeled "woman," hence the body has an intrinsic place in their claims. Nonetheless, the ontology of the body and what it entails goes unquestioned. Members of the first and second wave often fear that unless they can identify commonalities that exist among women they will be unable to create larger social change.

Although first and second wave feminists typically focus on commonalities and a unified notion of woman, third wave feminists turn their attention to a critique of "woman" as a category constrained by sexuality and identity. While these critiques are assuredly epistemological and valuable in bringing the body to the forefront, third wave feminists fail to break away from their predecessors' ontological footing. As gender identities multiply in the third wave, and woman is no longer a unified construct, so too should their ontological moorings. Consider that third wave theorists highlight the ways that women's bodies have historically constrained woman's agency, yet in their critique, the body itself is not the immutable locus of such constraint. In other words, women vary, but women vary throughout the confines of bodies always-already marked "woman". And, while efforts to change women's constraints allow feminists to engage epistemological questions of gender, they do not examine the relationship between their own ontological assumptions and epistemological (im)possibilities. Thus, working to change these constraints allows feminists to reinterpret the epistemology of gender constructs. They also encourage us to question what we know as a result of the prescribed relationships between the body and gender, but reshaping bodily constraints does not trouble the dependency of these relationships on a stable ontology. Clearly, members of each wave of the feminist movements have relied on the body to make arguments about how we should understand and treat one another, but they fail to question what we understand the body to be—what its essence is—as well as how our constructions of it shape our epistemologies.

Colebrook (2000) also brings to our attention the effects that representations of similarity and difference, derived from a normative male standard, have on the idea of a pre-representational body (p. 77). Ultimately, the question of a pre-representational body seems to be the result of scholars incorporating post-structural and postmodern theory into feminist theory. As post-structural and postmodern theory began to refocus our attention on the role of discourse in shaping and/or establishing what we perceive as material, the need for feminists to question the presumptions surrounding the body became preeminent.

This struggle is deeply rooted in the discourse and practice of the academy. Specifically, theory across academic disciplines and throughout history establishes woman's subjectivity and agency in relation to man. Traditionally, academics construct man as the measure of all things (Tavris 1992). As such, constructions of woman relegate her to an often invisible, secondary, and inferior position. In explaining resultant implications, Michelle Ballif (2001) posits woman as symptomatic of "male desire." She writes,

Starting with a deprived relationship to the symbolic, Woman's fading begins before she appears. She is the impossible and absent subjectivity, the impossible and absent signification. Lacan tells us that *the* woman does not exist (*Feminine Sexuality* 137-61). That is, Woman has no essence, and thus, no presence. She "is" only in absentia in the fold of the Real, as a symptom of Male desire and subjectivity (*Feminine Sexuality* 170). (p. 16)

With this awareness of woman as man's other, feminist scholars from multiple disciplines ask whether we can ever adequately account for subjectivity if we construct identity based on the bodyⁱ. Because the female body is defined as that which lacks, some feminists fear the construct of women's bodies will continue to limit and oppress them. According to Ballif (2001), constructing women as "man's other" is not just simple differentiation; rather, it is a violent act waged against women in an effort to maintain the status of patriarchy. She writes, "this phallogocentric thought has required a particular representation of woman: as the dialectical other to sustain the self-identity of the same (Man)" (p. 21). Because those ideologically aligned with patriarchy perpetuate the construction of woman through phallogocentric rationality, many feminist scholars argue that we must move away from viewing the body as an absolute and determining material construct.ⁱⁱ In this move away, feminists contend that we can attain a less oppressed subjectivity and/or identity. This is clearest when Colebrook (2000) writes,

As [Moira] Gatens argued, feminists tended to position themselves on *either* side of this presupposed divide: either sex was an ahistorical and determining essence *or* sex was merely the effect of an entirely arbitrary and disembodied representation (Gatens 1996, 4). [Genevieve] Lloyd also diagnosed a similar dichotomy in theorizations of gender: "For one approach, the body exists independently of anything social; for the other, it is itself a product of mind and its operation of mind and its operations with symbols" (Lloyd 1982, 19). The distinction between sex and gender, therefore, regards the body from the dividing line between materiality and representation; what is not questioned is the nature and force of this division. (p. 78)

In essence, Colebrook, Gatens, and Lloyd demonstrate how artificial distinctions create difficulties in theorizing gender. As such, feminists have perpetuated the materiality/discursivity divideⁱⁱⁱ and reinforced problematics associated with the body in identity production. Having provided a brief overview of struggles within feminist scholarship focusing on the role of the body in identity construction, the question that emerges as this stage deals with how ontology has been characterized.

4. Justifying Feminist Ontology

Two scholars from the Communication discipline represent well the general perceptions and beliefs associated with ontology. James Hikins and Kenneth Zagacki (1988) write, “while it is important to account, sociologically, for how people define and redefine what is or is not real, it should be kept in mind that the ontologically objective state of affairs at any given time is what it is. People may debate the existence of Santa Claus, but their arguments will not bring him into existence” (p. 213). Hikins and Zagacki reaffirm the importance of, and emphasis on, that which is material, physical, natural, and tangible. Their essay critiques, and attempts to discredit, the generative nature of discourse, thus participating in the perpetuation of the materiality/discursivity divide. From a perspective such as this, there is no room for offering up alternative ontologies of any kind because “one” already is; interpretation changes nothing about existence. Because ontology is essence, there is no call for (re)investigation, and as such, no possibilities for re(articulating) ontology as fluid and malleable.

Although the position that Hikins and Zagacki take is consistent with the philosophical tradition and common understanding of ontology, work done by scholars such as Robert Hariman (1986) questions the “ontology of the verbal world” (p. 48). Hariman (1986) argues that rhetoric can situate “ontological claims within a social history of discourse and a dialectic of authority and marginality” (p. 51). As such, ontology would be “reformulate[d]” within the “activities of the *logos* as understood through the concept of *doxa*” (Hariman 1986, p.51). Hariman’s (1986) arguments bring to our attention “the process of being constituted by the perception of the other” (p. 51). Accordingly, Hariman opens the door for questioning what we understand ontology to be. Hariman’s position identifies the discursive nature of existence and clarifies the importance of building a feminist ontology. To the extent that Hariman recognizes the role of authority, privilege, status, logic, and reason, in creating ontology, he gives us the opportunity to investigate how traditional theory and scholarship in the academy have constructed a limited notion of ontology. Given the history of patriarchy that shapes the world we live in, we must reinterpret constructions of bodies—both the material/physical existence, as well as the discursive explanations.

Rather than an unquestionable, stable element of existence that precedes thought, experience, and discourse (our common understanding of ontology—often thought of as the body), ontology has actually always been the result of philosophical thought. Importantly, Hariman calls to our attention the role of the values of the philosophers who have theorized ontology up to this point. As is clear from the debate among feminists mentioned above, the gendered expectations of society have had significant impacts on our way of being in the world. Further, this understanding of ontology highlights the interdependent relationship between ontology and epistemology. The evaluative nature of *doxa* illuminates that how we express ontology

necessarily shapes epistemology and brings to the fore how critical (re)articulating ontology is in an effort to create a culture of peace.

5. Characteristics of Feminist Ontology

Because scholars have historically assumed ontologies of woman and man to be stable categories, offering feminist ontologies that acknowledge multiplicity destabilizes the categories of woman and man, and can potentially reshape our epistemological claims, how we interact with one another, and help us move toward a culture of peace. As Fox argues, “[. . .] we can try to move forward with the insights we’ve achieved and the tools we have for understanding and promoting the factors that make peace possible, with the aim of stimulating new and different thought and feeling processes that may promise better choices than those made in the past (2011, p. 18). As such, feminist ontologies should be articulations of possibility. While there are a myriad of constructions that can be articulated ontologically, I offer three characteristics in order to clarify how feminist ontologies can function as liberatory and create the possibility of peace: (1) critical self-awareness, (2) instability, and (3) relationality.

(1) Critical Self-Awareness

Feminist ontologies entail critical self-awareness. As Hannah Rockwell explains, “[. . .] contestation and radical engagement are essential conditions of feminist scholarship – among feminist scholars as well as with scholarly paradigms that undermine gender equity” (Rockwell, 2008, p. 22). They are necessarily situated within lived experience while simultaneously exploring theoretical implications. Through self-awareness and critical reflexivity, a feminist ontology allows individuals to construct varied relationships with and to their bodies. The relationships we have with our bodies change how we interpret or “come to know” gender, gendered behavior, subjectivity, and agency. Because we can reflect on experience and explore how we interpret our bodies, the potential for new understandings of ontology emerge. This process encourages us to recognize the fluidity of ontology and rearticulate our epistemologies that have sedimented into stable notions of being.

(2) Instability

Feminist ontologies assume instability in subjectivity, and as a result, allow for multiple interpretations of agency, articulation, and identity. Rockwell explains, “[. . .] that speaking and writing subjects presents points of view that are always linked to an embodied life and historical social circumstances” (2008, p. 22). Because feminist ontologies are rooted in experience and focus on the power of discourse to construct and reconstruct, they are not limited by biology and gendered constraints that are perpetuated by individuals who subscribe to biological determinism. The instability that I am articulating may best be expressed as ontological contingency. From Aristotle to Derrida, the notion of contingency has received a great deal of attention. To be clear, I mean contingency to imply a focus on possibilities rather than certainty. My contention is that this experience of contingency is consistent with a feminist ontology because feminist ontologies are necessarily malleable.

(3) Relationality

Finally, feminist ontologies draw on notions of relationality. Feminist ontologies understand that materiality and discursivity work relationally to construct ontology. By recognizing the connections that exist between and among people and things, feminist ontologies perpetuate an individual's ability to interpret connection not as weakness, but as awareness and commitment to community and self. "While feminist research begins with concern for the basic rights of women, its influence expands well beyond the bounds of male/female power relationships. This expansion addresses marginalization or political oppression of all humanity with regard to the materiality of language and bodies" (Rockwell, 2008, p. 23). Thus, feminist ontologies presume variations in the social structure and our location within it. Feminist ontologies encourage us to read these changes as indicative of ontological change, not merely surface-level transformations. Feminist ontologies move and change not only in response to what is needed or wanted as an individual, but also in response to those around us. Working with, as well as against, the conditions in which we live is indicative of strength and openness. It is recognition of the contingent nature of a world that is too often constructed as predictable, stable, and some how predetermined.

6. Toward a Culture of Peace

In the end, my position is that in order to create a culture of peace we must (re)articulate ontology from a feminist perspective. Because we live in a culture that often allows gendered constructs to go unquestioned, starting here means starting at the root of how we understand existence. Victoria DeFrancisco and Catherine Palczewski (2007) explain, "hegemonic masculinity does not require all men to engage in overt toxic practices, but it does encourage men to remain silent to protect their own masculinity when others commit such practices. In doing so, they become complicit in the violence" (p. 147). Furthering this idea, Harry Brod asks, "How can we strengthen the mechanisms of resistance by which nonviolent men have avoided acting on society's prescriptions for male violence, and how can we eliminate such prescriptions? (pp. 52-53)" (DeFrancisco and Palczewski 2007, p. 148). The answer to his questions may well be avoiding the trap of interpreting these kinds of issues as solely an epistemological problem and instead focusing our attention on (re)articulating ontology from a feminist perspective. In this shift we create the possibility of changing the problematic ontologies of men and women, and allow for the development of a culture of peace.

Nina Lozano-Reich and Dana Cloud (2009) discuss "real world agency" and posit that, "what is missing is any analysis of systemic obstacles to individual agency in the context of oppression and inequality" (p. 222). Thus, by constructing feminist ontologies we make possible individual agency and create the possibility for a culture of peace because, as Rockwell (2008) contends, "[. . .] research on communication and gender focuses a critical eye on the powerful, and grants genuine empathy toward Others who suffer" (p. 23). Feminist ontologies work to maintain this awareness of "systems of obstacles" and empathic orientation. Thus, as we recognize the interdependent natures of embodiment and reflection, practice and theory, experience and articulation, and substance and ethereality we can propagate feminist ontologies that no longer fall prey to traditional, logocentric theory. In the move away from oppressive gender constructs we take an important step toward peace.

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ⁱ See, for example, Linda Alcoff (1988), Judith Butler (1993, 1995, 1999), Moira Gatens (1991), Elizabeth Grosz (1994) and Genevieve Lloyd (1982).

ⁱⁱ In brief, phallogocentrism highlights the dominance of the phallus in social relations. It emerged from the work of deconstructionists who question the centrality of the logos. Most importantly, my use of the phrase phallogocentric rationality in this essay is an effort to call to the fore the ways language perpetuates sexism and female oppression through its structure, reliance on fixed/stable categories, and presumptions of what constitutes knowledge.

ⁱⁱⁱ In *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler (1995) offer their perspectives on the relationship between materiality and discursivity. For Benhabib, postmodernism has encouraged scholars to move in what she believes are potentially dangerous directions (p. 20). Benhabib's scholarship, which is indicative of materially oriented feminists, warns that individuals lose the ability to transform their realities and create larger social change if we fail to understand the body as corporeally indicative of identity. In response, Butler offers an explanation of the subject's agency deriving from iteration (p. 30). Her concern is that presuming a subject position that exists prior to discourse limits one's ability to question subjectivity at all. What becomes clear is that this debate is grounded in an understanding of ontology as immutable, and materiality and discursivity as oppositional. While Benhabib contends that we can transform epistemology but not ontology, Butler argues that we should focus on the power of discourse to construct both. Rather than recognizing that ontology is both/and, not either/or, both theorists cling to their own understanding of ontology and make epistemological claims bound to their individual perceptions. Clearly, Butler recognizes the malleability of identity, subjectivity, and agency, but she sees the body as limiting possibilities rather than contributing to the multiplicities, that discourse provides. Likewise, Benhabib's work to recuperate the body in feminist theory is valuable, but limits the role of discourse because she fears it destroys generalizable identities.