

Maren Behrensen / Göran Collste

Feminist Ethics and the Question of Gender

Report from the 54th Societas Ethica Annual Conference 2018 in Louvain-la-Neuve

From August 23 to 26, 2018, Societas Ethica held its 54th annual conference in Louvain-la-Neuve in Belgium. This was the last conference organized under the presidency of *Hille Haker* (Loyola University Chicago). Hille Haker was the first woman to be elected president of Societas Ethica, and this conference marked the first time that the society considered feminist and queer ethics as an independent topic of philosophical and theological reflection. One issue that was considered in many contributions was the issue of systemic sexual harassment and abuse and the *#metoo-movement*. This issue in particular emphasized the renewed urgency of feminist interventions.

Societas Ethica is the European society for research in ethics and is open for scholars in philosophical ethics, theological ethics and applied ethics; it draws its members from various traditions within these fields. Consequently, this conference in particular became a forum that brought together very different perspectives, sparked controversial debate, and became a source of (hopefully) productive irritation for many participants.

The conference had 21 paper presentations, two special invited papers, four keynote presentations, and one concluding panel discussion that reflected on the progress of and the challenges to feminist ethics over the last 25 years.

In the introductory keynote lecture, “Sexual Subjectivity and Sexual Violence”, *Linda Martin Alcoff* (Graduate Center of the City University of New York), an internationally recognized specialist on the philosophy of race and feminist epistemology, problematized the established legal discourse on sexual violence. This discourse centers on the notion of consent, however, there is a long-standing feminist tradition of critiquing consent as a moral and legal standard of sexual relations. Sexual relations are often embedded in power relations, and so someone may consent to sex that – as a matter of fact – is not in accordance with their

real will. Emphasis on consent runs the risk of transforming the intimate relations between people into a neoliberal legal and contractual relation. Mártin-Alcoff also reflected on the conceptualization of rape, arguing that the shame that often accompanies the violation can be overcome by viewing victims as survivors.

Veerle Draulans (KU Leuven) gave a key note speech entitled “Feminist Ethics: How to Avoid Imprisonment in an Ivory Tower”. She argued that feminist ethics is a broad concept covering many different stories and relating to many academic disciplines. Draulans elaborated on four substantial focus points: the body as battlefield, intersectionality, power and principle and the political as personal; the last one of which calls for an integration of political convictions into one’s personal life.

Marina Calloni (Milano-Bicocca) gave a keynote speech entitled “Unveiling the Unspeakable: Combating Sexual Abuses and Domestic Violence”, in which she spoke about sexual violence and child abuse. From a feminist point of view, Calloni argued that recognition of women’s agency and respect for human dignity are crucial norms in combating domestic violence.

The two invited papers, by *Dietmar Mieth* (University of Tübingen) and *Maren Behrensen* (University of Münster) focused on theological and philosophical aspects of gender(ed) debates, respectively. Behrensen gave a paper on „Precarious Recognition” that focused on the German debate around the upcoming introduction of a third legal sex. Behrensen argued that this development will not offer a stable form of recognizing intersex and genderqueer people. Dietmar Mieth reflected on gendered aspects of natural law.

The title of the final keynote, delivered by *Yannik Thiem* (Villanova University) was “We are not a zoo!: Methodological Reflections on Queerness and Gender”. Thiem’s speech focused on how contemporary commercials use porous sexual and ethnic identities and thus reinforce rather than undermine neoliberal, racialized patterns of exploitation. Through this commercialization of queer identification, the search for recognition by queer persons is seriously hampered.

Paper presentations covered a wide spectrum of topics, like feminist ethics and abortion, the *#me too-movement*, ethics of gender transition and domestic violence, as well as the relationship of the concept of gender to the Catholic Church and to moral theology.

Selected contributions to the conference will appear in the journal *De Ethica*, which is published in association with Societas Ethica.

The 2019 conference will address ethical aspects of digitalization. It will take place in Tutzing in Germany, June 27 to 30, under the new presidency of *Arne Manzeschke* (Nürnberg).

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