

Sabbatical Leave Application

- a. Peg O'Connor, Assistant Professor, Women's Studies Program
- b. I will have completed seven years of full-time service to the College at the end of the academic year 2002-2003
- c. I request a full year leave
- d. I have received no compensated leaves from the College

Detailed description of the proposed sabbatical leave for scholarly/artistic activities

In the description of my proposed sabbatical, I shall address the following topics:

- (1) preparation leading up to the sabbatical;
- (2) description of the proposed project;
- (3) relation of proposed project to previous research;
- (4) expected outcomes and future activities related to the leave;
- (5) value of the project to the individual and to the academic community and;
- (6) plans for public presentation of leave results

Background

At the formal defense of my dissertation in March 1996, I took the unusual tack of repudiating one of my central theses in my opening remarks. Needless to say, this took some members of my committee by surprise. After an invigorating discussion and examination, the committee unanimously passed me. What happened to the dissertation after that is not so unusual. I threw it on a bookshelf, figuring that my own repudiation of my work was as good a reason as any to let it just sit. With the exceptions of a few quick peeks and a few snips for other papers, I paid it no mind. My interests changed directions, and I wrote a book on oppression and responsibility, drawing much philosophical inspiration from Ludwig Wittgenstein (who had also played an important role in my dissertation). At the end of the book, a light went off. I finally understood what I was trying to do in my dissertation, and why I rejected a central premise of it. Stories such as this are not all unusual in philosophy. As a group, we are slow to reach our intellectual maturity (if, in fact, we ever do).

My proposed project involves returning to my dissertation on meta-ethics, which is concerned with the nature of morality. Meta-ethics has as its object questions about epistemological (regarding knowledge) and metaphysical (regarding what is 'real' or has existence) status of moral judgments. Meta-ethical questions are concerned with the possibility of moral knowledge and the existence and status of moral properties. These epistemological and metaphysical questions are fundamentally connected with the issue of objectivity.

Participants in these meta-ethical debates and discussions often divide into two different camps. On the one hand, the antirealist rejects the claim that moral properties exist independently of humans, which means that these moral properties are not objective but subjective. Due to their lack of an objective, independent existence, moral properties cannot be proper objects of knowledge. Moral judgments, for the antirealist, are subjective matters of feelings or emotions, which do not have cognitive meaning. This lack of cognitive meaning entails that moral judgments are not answerable to standards of truth.

The moral realist argues that moral properties or judgments can exist independently of human beings, though within the realist camp there has been sharp disagreement about what this involves. At minimum, this position involves the rejection of the view that moral properties are subjective in the way that the antirealist claims. Moral judgments do have cognitive meaning, thus making them proper objects of knowledge. As such, they are answerable to standards of truth.

My proposed project is to provide an alternative to these two positions, drawing philosophical inspiration from the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and feminist philosophy. The guiding questions of this project are those of my dissertation, though the conclusions I drew there

are no longer reflective of my philosophical views. During the course of sabbatical, I will work on several key chapters of what I could imagine becoming a book-length project.

Preparation

In preparation for my sabbatical, I have been reviewing more recent literature in the meta-ethical debates. I have also been reading literature concerned with naturalizing ethics, which most often claims that moral properties are somehow reducible to natural ones. Naturalizing ethics in this way means that moral matters are amenable to scientific inquiry, and it may then be possible to subsume ethics to various sciences. This naturalistic turn in ethics is not new, but it is a cause for concern with some ethicists because it threatens to take the normativity—the prescriptiveness—out of ethics and make it purely descriptive. Finally, I have been reading more work in feminist epistemology, though I am concerned that most feminist epistemologies are growing out of philosophy of science, and not ethics.

In fall 2001, I presented an overview of this project at the Feminist Ethics and Social Theory (FEAST) Conference. At the fall 2002 Radical Philosophy Association conference, I presented a paper arguing that feminist voices must be present in the meta-ethical debates in the more traditional venues of analytic philosophy. At the end of this January, I submitted a conference paper for the 2003 FEAST conference on a Wittgensteinian approach to naturalism that blocks the reduction of ethics to science, and that preserves the autonomy of morals.

Detailed description of project

Recent meta-ethics debates have largely revolved around issues of foundationalism/absolutism and relativism. The issue is approached along the following lines: either there are absolute foundations (which are often taken to be transcendental) or there are not. If one rejects a transcendental approach, then one must be a relativist, the argument often goes. One then loses or has given away the basis for making judgments about the rightness or wrongness, permissibility or impermissibility of other moral actions and beliefs. Given that feminism and feminist philosophy have such a fundamentally normative character, this seems an undesirable position in which to find ourselves. Embracing a form of absolutism isn't a very desirable option either because it might well come at the expense of difference. What, then is left for feminists to do? I argue that feminists must challenge the terms of the debate, identify and reject problematic assumptions, and open new avenues of exploration while closing off others.

One avenue that ought to be closed off is that which argues for a transcendental grounding of our moral lives. Rejecting a transcendental grounding does not entail that we abandon the search for a different grounding, however. Instead, feminists should seek a grounding that is immanent and rooted in our shared social practices but which is not vulnerable to criticisms directed at mere convention. Practices, I argue, are the immanent grounding to which feminist meta-ethicists need to look. They also provide the grounding for critical perspectives. One might say that the grounding is the same; criticism and dissent are moral practices themselves. Practices as the grounding are neither external to nor independent of human life nor are they reducible to or dependent on the particular individuals. I call the alternative I advocate stabilism, which questions the nature of what is supposed to be playing the role of the foundations of morality. This view is neither foundationalist nor relativist. The inspiration for this position comes from Wittgenstein's

observation in *On Certainty* that “one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house” (§248).

It is important also to note that recent debates in meta-ethics, while concerned with the nature of morality, rarely ask questions about the nature of the creatures that do morality. The question, “Who does morality?” may seem a trite and obvious one, but because of its obviousness perhaps, it has been ignored. Kant clearly did not take this to be a trite question and he addresses it explicitly in the *Grounding*. Contemporary theorists, other than feminists and radical philosophers, however, have not given this question the attention it warrants. Neglect of this may stem from a picture of morality whereby it is possible to discuss its nature separate from those who are engaged in moral activities.

I want to develop a form of naturalism and natural history that I detect in Wittgenstein’s later work. Wittgenstein understands naturalism and natural history to be concerned with the kinds of animals humans are and with the kinds of things we do. This is broader conception than what usually gets labeled as ‘naturalism’. On this Wittgensteinian view, there is no radical break between what we are and what we do. The importance of the embodiedness of humans cannot be underestimated for understanding the nature of morality. Morality, on this view, is created and maintained through the actions and interactions of humans with each other, other beings, and the physical and social environments. Morality can be understood as a complicated, not fully circumscribable, set of human social practices. In more Wittgensteinian term, we can say that morality is a large set of overlapping and crisscrossing set of language games. Some of the activities that can be included in the language-games of morals are engaging in moral inquiry, seeking justification for our beliefs and actions, formulating reasons for actions, making judgments, disagreeing with other people or dissenting from dominant norms, manifesting moral understandings, and taking and assigning moral responsibility.

Shifting the focus to moral practices or moral language games is significant in part because it broadens what can be included under the category of moral epistemology. The broader category of “moral understandings” is more appropriate to and reflective of what we do when engaged in myriad moral practices and activities. We show our understandings in what we say and do; moral understandings are unapologetically practical ones. This approach is one that is very amenable to and in concert with feminist purposes because it claims that practical understanding only exists in embodied individuals. And while it might be tempting to locate “practical understanding” entirely and only within individuals as mental processes to which an individual has private and privileged access, this practice-based approach blocks that move. Practical understandings or intelligibilities are constitutive of practices, which must always be public and shared. They link the actions, attitudes, beliefs, rules, and ends that comprise practices.

As feminists begin to reject the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions that have undergirded the realist/antirealist debates in meta-ethics, we find ourselves grappling with questions of objectivity. With the shift to the rough ground of our moral activities and practices comes a shift in our expectations for objectivity in morals. Moral understanding, like other forms of knowledge, requires stability while at the same time never being excluded in principle from criticism and dissent. On the view I am advocating, where there is no possibility for dissent and criticism, there is no possibility of moral objectivity.

Relation of proposed project to previous research

As I noted above, this project is not so much a new one as a newly rediscovered one. When I was finishing the book on oppression and responsibility, I realized that many of the normative claims I made there were, to a large degree, presuming that moral life is organized in a certain way. I just never made this ground explicit, and only hinted at it in a few footnotes.

This new project expands greatly discussion of the normative character of practices that I began in the book. The final chapter in that work is concerned with our practices of moral responsibility, especially as they relate to the exercise of privilege and the maintenance of systems of oppression. In this new project, I would like to more explicitly explore the relationship between practices of responsibility and moral objectivity.

Expected outcomes and future activities related to the leave

At the outcome of the sabbatical period, I would like to have drafts of three chapters of what may be a book-length project. One chapter will review the current state of affairs in the meta-ethical debates, and make an argument for feminist participation in them. A second chapter will focus explicitly on the matter of moral epistemology, which will be broadened to include moral understandings. A third chapter will examine an account of objectivity that is amenable to the practice-based approach that I am advancing. This will leave me with several other chapters to write, including one on the question of naturalism, one on the nature of practices, and one on the role of dissent and criticism within moral life.

Value of the project to the individual and to the academic community

This project is valuable both to feminist philosophers, especially feminist ethicists, and to more traditional and analytic ethicists engaged with meta-ethical questions. The field of meta-ethics is stagnating. The literature that has been published since the time I wrote my dissertation really does not push the field in many new directions. If anything, the positions have become even more ossified. Additionally, there are few very feminists who are participating in these debates. My own unscientific examination shows that there are only about five of us working in this area. As I have argued, feminists need to secure meta-ethical ground if we are to continue making the advances we have in normative ethics and in practical ethics. Part of my concern with this project is that feminists have bought into a false dichotomy between meta-ethics and normative/applied ethics, and that feminists have been dismissive of meta-ethical work. (I speak from experience; I was guilty of the same thing when I tossed the dissertation onto the shelf.) This is a cause for serious concern; feminists risk losing the very ground upon which we want to make many moral judgments. We leave ourselves vulnerable to charges of relativism. Additionally, there are very few philosophers—analytic or feminist—who are bringing Wittgensteinian insights into the realm of ethics. While Wittgenstein was remarkably reticent about ethics, his work has much to offer the field of ethics. It is very exciting for me to be standing at the edge of large uncharted territory in philosophy.

Plans for public presentation of leave results

I think that any one of the various forums that Gustavus offers is an appropriate place to discuss this work. As a philosopher who teaches courses like Racism and Sexism and Introduction to Women's Studies, I constantly encounter students who do assume there are moral

absolutes or make moral claims to knowledge without understanding that such claims need justification. I also encounter just as many relativists who want to reject any claims to moral knowledge or moral truth. A presentation that is part of the Controversy series would afford students a chance to engage with these questions in very intentional ways.

It would also be interesting to have some panel or co-presentation with a psychologist or biologist about questions concerning how we come to hold moral beliefs and how we act on these beliefs. There have been some interesting discussions concerning the relationship between cognitive science and moral psychology. This is the place where the move to put ethics on a more scientific footing has been most hotly contested.