

Mari Mikkola

The Wrong of Injustice: Dehumanization and its Role in Feminist Philosophy

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Reviewed by David Livingstone Smith, 2017

Mari Mikkola's new book is concerned with the question of what exactly the wrong of injustice consists in. In pursuing this question, she argues that feminist philosophy should not take the category *woman* as central, but should instead organize itself around the notion of the *human*, and proposes that the injustices that feminism seeks to combat should be understood in terms of violations of women as human beings. To develop this conception, Mikkola develops an ethically infused notion of dehumanization. On the account that she develops, a practice is wrong insofar as it does violence to one's humanity.

*The Wrong of Injustice* is an impressively thorough, clearly written, and very carefully argued book. The author's erudition is nowhere more evident than in her careful sifting through and critical analysis of the feminist philosophical literature in the first five chapters. The adventure begins with a discussion of what she calls the "gender controversy": the challenge to gender-based conceptions of feminism proffered by gender skeptics such as Judith Butler and Elizabeth Spelman. Mikkola's very thorough treatment of the controversy is organized around two puzzles. The *semantic puzzle* is the puzzle of determining who is included under the umbrella of the term *women* and who is excluded from it, and what criteria, if any, underwrite these. The *ontological puzzle* is the puzzle of what to make of the category *woman* in the absence of a univocal semantics of the term. What, if anything, makes it the case that one belongs to womankind?

Mikkola proposes that a conception of gender that meets the emancipatory aims of feminism needs to satisfy two desiderata: it must be sufficiently thick to be politically serviceable and to support feminist normative demands, and it must be sufficiently inclusive. It turns out that it is difficult if not impossible to articulate a theory of gender that does both of these jobs. Feminist philosophers for the most part address the challenge by developing social theories of gender. Some are nominalists, who deny "that there is some normatively and ethically significant feature that women qua women share" but who nevertheless hold "that there is *something* that unifies women's social kind," and realists who hold "that there is some (normatively) important feature that women qua women share" (46). Mikkola carefully documents and interrogates the main positions, shows that (as is virtually always the case among philosophers) there is no consensus about how the semantic and ontological puzzles are best resolved, and draws the radical conclusion that they are unresolvable. She concludes that there just isn't a conception of *woman* available that can do all of the work that feminism requires of it. Mikkola's extraordinarily thorough, nuanced, and systematic treatment of this topic resists summary. What is significant for the argumentative trajectory of the book is that she advocates jettisoning the gender controversy as "theoretically bankrupt and intractable" (6).

What, then, should displace *woman* as the central organizing concept for emancipatory feminist philosophy? To answer this question, Mikkola articulates a humanistic foundation for feminist thinking, and argues that within this theoretical context the concept of *dehumanization* can be used to undergird an account of the injustices that are perpetrated by patriarchy. To

accomplish this, she needs a suitable account of what it is to be human and a corresponding normative conception of dehumanization. Following Louise Antony's well-known critique, Mikkola eschews a normatively thick Nussbaum-style "internalist" approach to what it means to be human, but unlike Antony, argues that a thin "externalist" approach can provide the resources that a humanist feminism requires. Being human, in this sense, is just being a member of a certain biological kind including (but perhaps not restricted to) the taxon *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Members of this kind--including those described as "women"--can be said to suffer the wrongs of injustice insofar as they are dehumanized. What is dehumanization? On her view, "an act or treatment is dehumanizing if and only if it is an indefensible setback to some of our legitimate human interests, where this setback constitutes a moral injury" (145). An act is morally injurious iff it damages the realization and acknowledgment of the person's value. Importantly, moral injury is just one component--albeit a central one--of the definition of dehumanization. As Mikkola points out, "although all dehumanizing modes of treatment are morally injurious, not all morally injurious acts are dehumanizing (because a morally injurious act might be defensible, or might not set back a legitimate human interest).

Rape is Mikkola's paradigmatic example of dehumanization, and she devotes considerable attention to showing that her approach gives a better account of the wrongfulness of rape than other approaches do. She argues that the wrongness of rape cannot be accounted for either by its specifically sexually objectifying character because perpetrators of sexual violence in war (she specifically focuses on martial rape in the Democratic Republic of Congo) often "do not appear to use their victims for sexual ends but for fighting a war" (156), concluding that it is not the case that "women as gendered beings are wronged by rape" but rather that rape is "a wrong to women *as human beings*" (177; emphasis added).

Although I find this conclusion attractive, I am not entirely comfortable with the path that Mikkola takes to reach it. In an earlier footnote, she writes "for me, rape is about non-consensual sex," so if martial rape is to be considered rape, then it must be characterized as nonconsensual sex. But this is in tension with Mikkola's claim that martial rapists do not appear to use their victims for sexual ends, and presents her with a dilemma. Can a sexual act be an act that is motivated by a nonsexual end? If so, then martial rape is a *sexually* objectifying act and therefore does not work as a refutation of the view that the wrongfulness of rape lies in its sexually objectifying character, and if not, then the argument fails because martial rape does not count as rape.

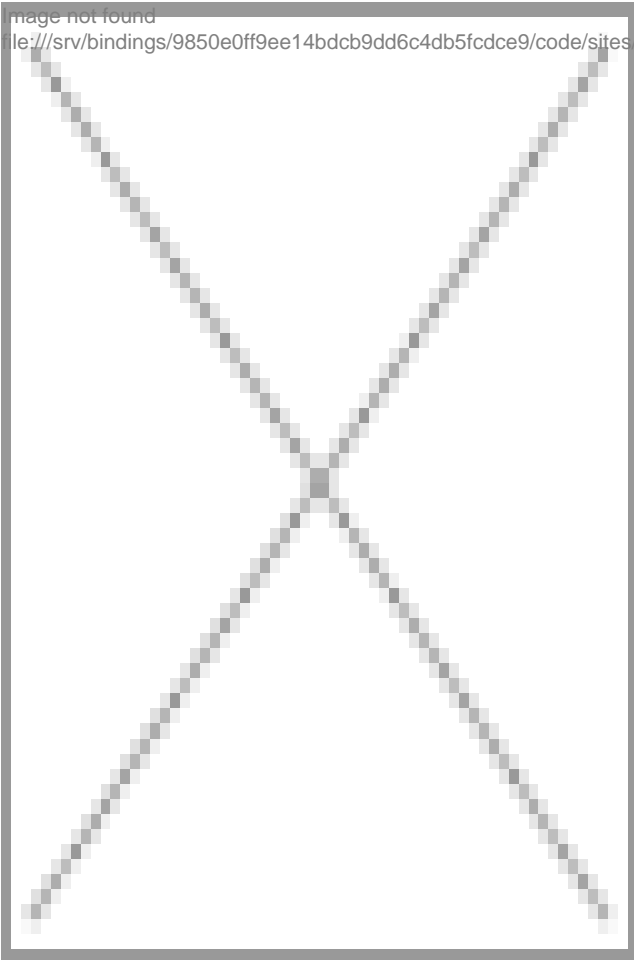
Mikkola's account of the wrongfulness of rape centers on what she takes to be its dehumanizing character. Her humanism thus serves the ends of gender justice not because it is concerned with harms inflicted on women *qua* women, but rather because the harms inflicted upon women (irrespective of how the concept of *woman* is understood) are, of necessity, harms inflicted upon human beings. In a nutshell: dehumanization is what makes social injustice, any social injustice, unjust. In the final chapters of the book, Mikkola uses her account to examine forms and contours of injustice and the task of overcoming dehumanization.

Presumably I was invited to review this book because of my research into dehumanization, so I would like to conclude this review with some comments specifically directed toward Mikkola's treatment of the concept of dehumanization.

It may surprise some readers to learn that there is remarkably little specifically philosophical literature dealing with dehumanization, although this is now beginning to change. Philosophers writing on dehumanization have, for the most part, treated it as interchangeable

with sexual objectification, and have understood it as a violation of personhood (as is nicely captured by the title of Linda LeMoncheck's book *Dehumanizing Women: Treating Persons as Sex Objects*, which, oddly enough, does not appear in Mikkola's bibliography). Mikkola's conceptual clarity is very refreshing in this connection. She explicitly rejects the equating of dehumanization with objectification, on the grounds that objectification is not necessarily morally objectionable, whereas dehumanization by its very nature is, and takes dehumanization to be a violation of humanness rather than a violation of personhood. Although very few philosophers have written about dehumanization, there is a substantial scholarly literature on the topic, written largely by psychologists--but also including work by historians, literary scholars, genocide scholars, and others. Although these writers sometimes disagree with one another about the details of exactly what dehumanization is, virtually all of them take a descriptive rather than a normative approach to the subject. They tend to see dehumanization as a psychological phenomenon: a way of conceiving of others. According to this paradigm, we dehumanize others insofar as we *conceive* of them as subhuman creatures (roughly, my view) or as possessing a lesser degree of humanness than oneself (the mainstream social-psychological view). As this is clearly quite a different sort of perspective than that adopted by Mikkola, whose notion of dehumanization is normative rather than psychological, the question arises as to whether there is any principled connection between her version of what dehumanization is and the versions that proliferate in the wider scholarly literature. Is Mikkola's notion of dehumanization of such a different order than these psychological views that they are incommensurable? Can they be brought into some sort of relation to one another? That dehumanizing attitudes have often played an important role in facilitating genocide, war, slavery, and other atrocities shows that dehumanization, in the psychological sense, is often causally responsible for dehumanization in the normative sense. However, it is also clear that dehumanization in the normative sense can and usually does occur in the absence of dehumanization in the psychological sense. It would be valuable for philosophers to clarify the nature of this interface and thereby bring the distinctively ethical conception of dehumanization, as exemplified by Mikkola's splendid contribution, into some relation with the rapidly developing empirical literature on this important topic.

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