Dr Elinor Mason

Feminism and philosophy

<u>Disclaimer: Whilst not explicit, this podcast does deal with adult themes.</u>

This is Forward Thinking, I'm Isabella Melking.

How can we understand and challenge the oppression of women using philosophy?

Here to explain is Dr Elinor Mason, a Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh.

Her research centres on ethics, including topics such as feminism and moral responsibility. Elinor has just finished a book on the connection between concepts of rightness and wrongness and moral responsibility concepts like praise and blameworthiness [forthcoming with Oxford University Press]. She is now working on another book, this one on feminist philosophy. This summer, Elinor is returning to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe after last performing there as a student in 1997. Her fringe show is part of the Cabaret of Dangerous Ideas, and explores the complexities inherent in women's sexual refusal.

Isabella:
Hi Elinor! Welcome to the Forward Thinking podcast.

Elinor:
Hi! Thanks for having me.

Isabella:
So, tell me what drew you into your specific research area of philosophy?

Elinor:
Well, when I was an undergraduate, the politics lecture was at 10am and that was too early so I went to ethics lecture at 11am instead at UCL, where I was an undergraduate, you could choose between those two. So I got very interested in ethics and I started thinking that consequentialism must be the right way to go.

So that means that when we are thinking about which things are right and wrong, which things are good and bad, which things matter, what we should take into account is what will happen if you do an action, rather than the principle you're following or the sort of action that it is. So, thinking about lying, "should I tell a lie?" the consequentialist says, "well, whether you should or not depends on what will happen? How will things turn out?". So if somebody comes into the room and says "where is Ellie? I'm going to kill her now", I think we should lie. I think we should say "we have no idea, we have never heard of her! What are you talking about?" But a strict deontologist, someone who thinks that we ought to stick to principals, no you should never lie, no matter what. And that example is actually Kant's example. And Kant realises that it's a challenge to his deontological view, his view that we

ought to stick to principles. And so, he addresses that and he says, "no, you really should tell the truth, even then".

So that seemed to me implausible and I starting thinking about consequentialism. I decided to do a PhD; I wrote a PhD on consequentialism. It gets a bit more sophisticated than the example I gave you but after a while I started to worry that this isn't really getting to the heart of the matter, that the things I'd really been interested in in consequentialism are more about what's good and bad; what matters.

And that there's something else going on in moral theory, which is that you're giving instructions to agents, which is just to say people who are normal people and act in moral ways and have moral reasons and think through what they are going to do. And so we need to give instructions that kind of make sense to them in some way, it's not just about what matters ultimately, what's good and bad. Avalanches are good or bad. It's about what people do.

And so that led me into thinking about moral responsibility and I really changed my research direction from thinking about consequentialism as a moral theory to thinking about the nature of moral theories in general and how they connect up with questions about praise and blameworthiness and responsibility which is what as you say I have just completed a book on. Meanwhile I was also interested in feminism, as a women in a very male dominated profession and I've been teaching feminist philosophy for years and I have become more and more interested in that as time has gone on and that's become more of a research interest too and in particular I'm interested in consent and sexual refusal in the context of a very patriarchal society and what goes wrong with those things.

Isabella:
Do your students get the chance to find out about this research in your lectures?

Elinor:
Yeah, so we do two kinds of teaching at Edinburgh. We've got first and second year lectures, which are very big lectures, up to 500 students. And there, by necessity, it's much more of a script, you've got to give the lecture, and you've got to pretty much say something that's on script. But in third and fourth year we teach in smaller groups and there it's much more unscripted and I'm chatting with my students about things and I'm much more likely to be teaching things that I'm interested in as research areas and I do also give my students my work in progress to read, and a couple of my publications actually thank former students who have read them and given really useful comments before publication.

Isabella:
Oh great, so your students really get a chance to get involved in your research as it's happening as well!

Elinor:
Yeah, I find it really useful to talk to my undergraduates in feminism, for example, about the things I am thinking about and get their feedback.

Isabella:
So going into the research area that you have discovered a passion for more recently, could you define, or explain, feminist philosophy?

Elinor:
Yeah, I mean I can try and do it without having to define the whole of philosophy, that's a tough one [laughs].

I mean, so philosophy is really just thinking clearly about things and it's what's left over when all the empirical work is done.

Philosophy is what's left when you have separated everything else out, well that's mathematics, that's science, that's religion. Philosophy is what's left, well what is there still to think about? And these tend to be these questions of well what do things really mean, what can we really know about things?

And it's the same with feminist philosophy. So it's not a particular method of doing philosophy, it's a subject matter. I think because philosophy and everything else has been so male dominated, we haven't paid much attention to things that are of particular concern to women and to the nature of oppression in general. And so feminist philosophy just turns the methods of philosophy, thinking clearly about things, to those subjects. So thinking about things like sexual harassment, for example, but also of course thinking about thinks like the family.

So, I think political philosophy used to be done ignoring entirely the family, as if the family was something within which there's no need to think any more. Just like "okay, well that's obviously fine, what does the head of family say?" But for women what's important is how the family works inside the family, not what the head of the family says. And so more recently, feminist political philosophers, have said, we need to look at how families function and how women's roles function and we need to think about the nature of oppression in general and the small things, the way that women's experience of the world is very different to men, that women are not listened to in the same way, for example. And what philosophers contribute is exploring those ideas, naming them, disambiguating them, that is to say, sorting them out so that we say, well here's two things you could mean, and let's separate that out clearly, let's give them different labels. And that way we can think more clearly about the everyday phenomena that we experience.

A very good example is sexual harassment itself. So, until the 1970s there wasn't even a label for that. It wasn't conceptualised as something abnormal or problematic, it was just the bread and butter of professional life for women, and indeed for men, that that's how you were expected to behave and everybody went along with it and nobody thought anything of it. Of course, it's not quite right that nobody thought anything of it, I'm sure both men and women found it uncomfortable in various ways - but it was normalised, it

seemed normal. And feminist activists on the ground started talking about "actually this is a problem, this is something we need to stop." And what feminist philosophers contribute is conceptualisation, so thinking about how to label that, how to pick it out, how to give the conditions, well what is it that makes something count as sexual harassment rather than flirtation or friendliness or mentoring or all those other things that sexual harassment gets confused with.

Isabella:

Do you think it's got something to do with gender roles? Could you maybe explain like from a philosophical perspective, how do these roles, gender roles, affect equality?

Elinor:

So the interesting thing about gender roles is that there's this pretty arbitrary set of rules that we're supposed to fit into. We're told this from very young, "here's what it is to be a little girl," "here's what it is to be a little boy." So little girls are pink, and pretty, and quiet, and obedient, and gentle, and good at reading, good at communicating, good at empathy. Whereas little boys are rough and tumble, you know, wear blue, like pirate ships, and fight with guns. And we, we don't realise that we are doing this, but we are instilling these roles.

And of course there is empirical work on this and there is empirical controversy about it. As an aside, of course, that's another philosophical issue, how you determine what counts as evidence, I mean that's just a general question in the philosophy of science. You hear people say, "well everybody knows it's innate! That boys are just rough and girls are not" and people will point to their own children and say, "well, you know, my experience is that the boy was rough and the girl was not." And of course, the right response to that is "well, look you have two children, two is not enough of a sample." Furthermore, there's all these other bits of evidence that we need to take into account like the way that we enforce gender roles as a society. So, from very young, from before birth, people are gendering their children.

So, my own reading of the evidence which I get partly through reading Cordelia Fine, who I recommend. She has this great book – Delusions of Gender – and a follow up, Testosterone Rex: she has great titles. She does a very good meta study, an overview of the empirical evidence on this and argues convincingly, I think, that there's really very little evidence for innate gender difference. So that's a philosophical approach to thinking about evidence.

And then we look at how we look at how gender roles affect us later on and of course there's just so many ways that our aspirations, our hopes, our achievements, are affected by the roles that we're supposed to fall into.

So think about discussions of the gender pay gap, people will say, "women choose those roles and it's not that women are paid less for the same job, it's that women do different work and they choose that different work." But if we think more carefully, if we analyse on , there's a lot more to be said than that.

So it's not true that those choices are freely made. So this is a philosophical investigation: what is a free choice? What's a choice that's unencumbered by social pressure? And of course our gender roles are part of a social structure that's putting pressure on us to make

some choices rather than others and it's not that we feel it as pressure, we feel it as normal; it's the air we breathe. We don't think to ourselves, "well, I would like to speak up more and ask for a pay rise" and "I would like to be a welder rather than a nursery worker," we don't think of it that way, it seems natural to us. But if you look at the bigger structures, you can see the way that systematically, from very early, girls and women are treated differently than boys and men.

Isabella:
Is there anything that you would say to help people tackle these unconscious biases, to help break free of the gender roles?

Elinor:
Well, it's not easy. And I think that's a first step in a way, recognising that. It's not just a question of coming to see that it's a problem and then you get rid of it. You know, it's not a simple factual mistake, it's deep in our emotions, it's deep in our makeup and we need to make a concerted effort, I think, to do things differently, to see the world differently.

So you need to have a little bit of self-doubt. You need to pause and think that maybe you are dismissing things that you shouldn't be dismissing. So, an example: people started talking about microaggression, that's a concept that's reasonably recently been introduced. And I've heard a lot of people say "microaggression; that sounds ridiculous, I'm not going to pay any attention to that" and it's worth pausing and thinking "well maybe that's just because I'm not subject to microaggressions, because I'm a straight white man and so nobody is 'microaggressing' me but maybe other people are being 'microaggressed'" and what it means is the tiny little things that seem too small to complain about but that add up to a pattern that's part of systematic oppression.

And so feminist philosophers are thinking about microaggression and what it means and other kind of similar concepts. I mentioned sexual harassment earlier of course, that's a massive one. But there are lots of these concepts that get introduced and show some intellectual humility, be willing to think, maybe there's something to these ideas.

I think another thing is thinking about the culture that you immerse yourself in. So there's really good evidence that who we're surrounded by affects what our ideas are. So people who live in racially mixed communities are much less racist than people who live in homogenous communities. It's basically because exposure to other people, whoever those other people are, dispels your prejudices, I mean that's a wonderful thing.

We can't always change where we live, but we can change the culture that we consume.

I saw this film quite recently, it's on Netflix, I don't recommend every second of it, just for the record, but I think it's a really good start. It's a French film called 'I Am Not An Easy Man' and it's about a man who suddenly wakes up as a woman. So of course that's a very cheesy premise but it's particularly well done and it's well done on the microaggressions actually. So the small things that happen to him, that he just can't believe this is happening, that are completely normal for women. And so when you watch it as a woman, you know, it's hilarious, because it rings true. I can't really imagine what it's like watching it as a man but,

you know, maybe some intellectual humility is required to see, to recognise, to believe that that's really what it's like… but yeah, so I recommend that.

Last night I was watching a comedy show, this is an Australian lesbian comic called Hannah Gadsby and her show is called Nanette, and she is talking about gender and identity and she's just brilliant and a lot of it is stuff that I know nothing about but it's incredibly interesting, and convincing, and sort of tragic, and funny. So that's the kind of thing, that you might think "I'm not the kind of person who watches Australian lesbian comics" but why not, you know, be that person, you might learn something.

Isabella:
Thanks Ellie, that's an interesting tip.

Moving on to your Fringe performance, so your performance at Edinburgh Festival Fringe, could you tell us a bit about what you'll be discussing in that show?

Elinor:
Yeah, so this is based on a paper that I have written or that I am actually still writing, which is about silencing sexual refusal. The idea is, one that I think is familiar to any grown up woman, that you can say no to sexual advances and something doesn't quite work.

In a first stage of feminism, women are just told, "we've just got to be more forceful, you have got to stand up for yourself, and you've got to slap him if he carries on like that." And a sort of later stage of feminism says "hang on, maybe we shouldn't be putting all the responsibility on the woman here, maybe this is something more systematic." So why is it that when women say no, when women try to refuse sexual advances it doesn't quite work? So there's a big history of philosophy about this and lots of interesting things have been said which I can't go into here, I talk about this in my course. And after years of teaching it and discussing it with students, I've come to write my own paper on it, my own ideas.

So this show is a, I hope, totally accessible and interesting version of this. The basic idea is that in our culture, for whatever complex reason, women don't really have the authority to refuse. So people don't really believe that you are allowed to refuse. So it's like when you say to somebody "excuse me" and you need to get by them, if they said no you'd be like "what?!" You know, the excuse me is just a proforma, it's just being polite.

But actually, of course you expect them to get out of the way, and I think that is a bit what it's like in some contexts for women trying to refuse sex.

Isabella:
Thanks Ellie! We look forward to seeing your show on the 24th of August.

Elinor:
Yes, so it is the 24th of August, the content may not be suitable for under 18s just to warn you.

Isabella:

Well, thank you very much for joining our podcast here today.

Elinor:

Thanks for having me.

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