

Ann J. Cahill

Rethinking rape

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The question at the center of Cahill's study is essentially this: what conditions bolster and support the robust, secure, self-possessed, expressive, integrated, effective, and empowered modes of embodied subjectivity jeopardized by rape?

In this lucid, circumspect, and original book, Ann Cahill focuses on the male rape of females, offering a trenchant analysis of rape's impact on women. Cahill addresses difficult questions: How do we reconcile the horror of rape with its "sheer frequency"? What are the crucial moral elements defining the distinctive kinds of violence rape represents? Can we characterize in general terms the nature of rape's moral wrongness or the implications it has for women, while remaining true to the specificities of sexual identity and culture that generate its many particular meanings in the lives of individual women? How do we honestly address rape's moral toll on women without reinforcing impoverished and unacceptable cultural construals of women as victims, or as culpable in their sexuality—without, that is, bolstering a conception of females as inherently vulnerable, fragile, endangered, or in need of male protection, on the one hand, or as wily temptresses—dangerous in their sexuality—on the other?

Rape is an abhorrent act, which often leaves rage, despair, and debilitating fear in its wake. As Cahill notes, it is not only the direct experience of rape but also the "persistent and pervasive" threat of rape that has a destructive impact on women's lives. "The possibility of rape," Cahill maintains, "shapes the space [we] inhabit" (1)—diminishing women's freedom of movement, provoking exhausting vigilance in place of trust, and enhancing women's dependency on male protection. Cahill's central thesis is that the male rape of females represents a distinctive form of sexualized violence, which, while carrying many different meanings for particular individuals, contributes in direct and forceful ways to the general construction of debilitating and degrading modes of "feminine" embodiment and self-understanding. This, in turn, reinforces a gendered hierarchy structured around presumptions of female vulnerability and weakness, which further intensifies women's susceptibility to rape. The wrong rape represents is not exhausted by the suffering of individual rape survivors, or the "persistent fear" the threat of rape provokes in many women. It is located as well "in the specific ways women experience their bodies and the internalization and materialization of the belief in feminine culpability" (10)—the view of the female body as "inspir[ing] the violence imposed on it" (203).

Against liberal feminist accounts (rooted in Brownmiller's ground-breaking claim that rape is violence, not sex), Cahill argues that rape must not be assimilated to other forms of nonsexual bodily assault. Nor, she claims, is rape to be viewed as the "logical extension" of a heterosexual culture that essentially involves the domination of women by men (as some radical feminists—most notably Dworkin and MacKinnon—have argued). While the first strategy obscures crucial ways rape functions as part of a broader system of sexual domination, the second falsely denies

women both the genuine possibility of self-possessed, uncoerced (hetero-) sexuality and of effective resistance to male sexual violence. We must acknowledge rape's distinctive role as a form of sexualized violence in the constitution of the embodied "feminine" subject without seeing any particular modes of feminine subjectivity, including those connected to women's victimization, as essential or inevitable.

Cahill rigorously develops and defends her position through a fascinating study of the body and its relation to agency and self-understanding. Offering a sharp critical discussion of modern philosophy's treatment of the body, and drawing deftly on sophisticated contemporary theories of the body rooted in continental feminism (the work of Butler, Grosz, Braidotti, Gatens, Irigaray, and others), Cahill sets out both to characterize modes of embodied subjectivity bearing the mark of rape and to explore the female body as a potential site of resistance.

While Cahill's discussion is framed by an insistence that rape's impact on women "holds a host of specific bodily meanings" (13), her optimism in offering a general moral analysis of rape lies in the potential flexibility of her analytical focus on the body: rape occurs only to individual bodies, but our bodies are always, she writes, "marked and constructed by larger discourses"; "every rape experience is unique, but each is bodily; therefore, we are capable of locating the various axes of bodily meanings that rape affects" (9). We need not resort to simple relativism in coping with rape's diverse meanings for individuals. Social and cultural analysis can enable us to discern broad patterns of disablement, constraint, and degradation it produces.

In a particularly compelling chapter, "A Phenomenology of Fear," Cahill invokes the work of Barthes, Young, Foucault, and others, developing a penetrating articulation of distinctively "feminine" forms of bodily self-understanding and "comportment." These range from experiences of the body as inherently "dangerous," "willful," and "hostile," on the one hand, to essentially vulnerable, "alien, unwieldy, weak," fearful, fragile, inhibited in the use of space and force, "hampered" in its mobility, on the other—both sides demanding "persistent vigilance" and "surveillance" (152–61). While acknowledging that rape produces different kinds of harm in different cases (including sleep and eating disorders, phobias, inhibited sexuality, the loss of a sense of control or fundamental safety), Cahill argues that both rape and the threat of rape powerfully contribute to "normalized" modes of feminine embodiment that render women "pre-victims." In contemporary society, Cahill writes, "the truth inscribed on the woman's body is [that] . . . biologically, all women are potential rape victims" (161),

Yet Cahill does not settle for a view of women framed by victimization. In understanding the body as a dynamic location for the negotiation of meaning and power, we can, she argues, find in the body a potential site of resistance to rape's damage. Cahill's final chapter unveils an account of such resistance in a utopian vision of women trained in the martial arts. Through a new "feminine" culture of the body rendering it physically powerful and capable of self-defense, we might subvert the forms of female embodied agency premised on delicacy, dangerous sexuality, vulnerability, and dependency that buoy and support gender inequality. Cahill's vision offers a dramatic contrast to current cultural norms of the "pre-victim" she analyzes: "Self-defenders" would enjoy a transformative sense of security, self-possession, and physical mastery, which in turn would enhance their safety, mobility, and self-sufficiency. Rape would be perceived as "worthy of retaliation"; the willingness to "strike back" would be an "acknowledgement that the

assault is unjust and unacceptable, and not the fault of the victim” (203). This would undercut the construal of female sexuality as culpable, of women provoking and attracting the sexual violence they suffer.

Cahill’s vision is a forceful one, particularly in its potential for individual women. The widespread training of women in martial arts is unlikely, of course; thus, the question arises whether a more realistic scenario, on which a greater, but still relatively small number of women master techniques of self-defense, could significantly contribute to the creation of a world in which “rape would be rare, and women’s lives would not be shot through with an assumption of danger, victimization, and culpability” (205). Crucially, the resistance to rape culture will need, it seems clear, to cut deeply into many aspects of contemporary culture and gendered practice, including some that celebrate the very forms of sexual domination and violence against which self-defense is needed.

The question at the center of Cahill’s study is essentially this: what conditions bolster and support the robust, secure, self-possessed, expressive, integrated, effective, and empowered modes of embodied subjectivity jeopardized by rape? Cahill acknowledges that her vision of resistance is alone insufficient in addressing how we will create and sustain such conditions (laws will have to change too, she argues), but her proposal offers an intriguing beginning. This is a courageous, creative, and hopeful book that casts bright illumination on a difficult, terrible, and deeply important subject.

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