Feminism and Philosophy

PERSPECTIVES ON DIFFERENCE AND EQUALITY

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Introduction

The alliances between feminist and other socio-political theories have often been uneasy. A detailed account of the points of tension in these alliances would require a careful analysis of each particular theory in question. Much feminist research has been of this sort: clarifying the points of tension in the relation between, for example, feminism and psychoanalysis[1] or feminism and Marxism.[2] However, until recently, little work had been done on the tensions *within* the methodologies of feminist theory itself.[3] The question, 'what is feminist theory?' is one that could not be answered without great controversy. There is not *a* feminist theory but feminist *theories*, and if one inspects these closely one finds not so much *feminist* theories as various theories which feminism makes use of or 'borrows', for example, egalitarianism, liberalism, utilitarianism, existentialism, Marxism and psychoanalysis.[4] The feminist theorist may be viewed as a kind of patchwork-quilter, taking bits and pieces from here and there in an attempt to offer an account of women's social and political being that would be adequate to basic feminist principles.

A fundamental premise of feminist theory is that socio-political life – and traditional accounts of socio-political life – are prejudicial to women. Part of the task of the feminist theorist is to offer an account of how the different treatment of the sexes operates in our culture and how the prejudices against women are maintained by economic, social and political arrangements. To this end feminists have attempted to apply Marxism and other theories of oppression or exploitation to the situation of women.[5] This task has been complicated by the fact that these theories were not specifically developed for the situation of women and are often marked by what has been termed a 'sex-blindness'.[6] Feminist theorists re-work these social and political theories in order to remove the sexual

biases introduced by male theorists. This approach to the utilization of existing socio-political theories is fraught with difficulties. It assumes that these theories are *essentially* sex-neutral tools that become sexist in their application, in the hands of a Rousseau or a Freud.

The argument of this book is that it is a primary weakness of much feminist theory that it engages with philosophy or theory only at the socio-political level. Such engagement implicitly assumes that metaphysics, theories of human nature and epistemology are sex-neutral.[7] This study will not assume that these areas are sex-neutral. On the contrary, it will be argued that they often provide the theoretical underpinning for the biases which become visible at the socio-political level.[8]

It is necessary, at the outset to clarify the ways in which this study differs from other feminist critiques of the 'sexism' of traditional theory.[9] It is not concerned with the influence of mere (conscious or unconscious) *personal* prejudice. Rather, this study is interested to explore the extent to which there is a cultural prejudice against women that obtains in the very formation of the categories of thought fundamental to modern philosophy. This shifts the accent of the enquiry from the question, 'does this particular theorist hold sexual biases that make their way into his or her system of thought?' to the question, 'do the sexual biases, present in socio-political theories, have their basis in more fundamental categories of thought assumed by political theorists?' If we assume, for the moment, an affirmative response to the latter question, the implications are far-reaching. For, in that case, feminists and non-feminists alike who make use of these theories are, quite independently of their intentions, predisposing their studies of society and politics toward conclusions that are prejudicial to women.

Many of the problems of feminist theory are connected to this tendency to be overly trusting of the apparent neutrality of the theory being used. Two texts which have been significant in the development of feminist thought, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, both entertain a philosophical dualism of the most orthodox kind that predisposes their work toward locating the source of women's inferior status in female biology. They both accept the mind/body and nature/culture distinctions, treating them as given rather than as social constructions that embody historical and cultural values. To fail to take note of the value-laden character of any particular theory is implicitly to perpetuate the values that have been constructed by a culture that devalues women and those aspects of life with which they have been especially associated, for example, nature and reproduction.

To accept the implicit value system of these theories is to accept the superiority of masculine values and occupations. This is precisely what Firestone and de Beauvoir do in the latter sections of their texts.[10]

Firestone wishes to replace women's reproductive capacity by technical means, claiming that pregnancy is, in any case, 'barbaric'. De Beauvoir also condemns the maternal role. Both theorists posit the necessity to transcend the female body and its reproductive capacities without questioning the ways in which the significance of the female body is socially constructed and its possibilities socially limited.

De Beauvoir sees female biology as a serious limitation on woman's transcendence of 'mere life' into the realm of projects and the creation of values. However, it is necessary to explore the implicit connections within the existentialist framework between attaining an authentic political and ethical existence and the kind of subject assumed able to do so. The politico-ethical stance of the existentialist needs to be examined in relation to the theory of human existence assumed by existentialism and the privilege it accords certain forms of being over others. If transcendence of the body and its immediate needs is accorded a high status then it is likely that women's association with the domestic sphere will disadvantage them in relation to those activities which existentialist politics and ethics take to be valuable.

A counter-argument could claim that de Beauvoir's use of existentialism demonstrates, not women's biological inferiority, but rather the implicit assumption, in the existentialist framework, of a connection between corporeality, immanence and inferiority. Applying this or that theory to women may be viewed as showing the root of women's oppression (for example, her biology), or as showing the limitations of that particular theory when it is applied to women. Existentialism could be understood as showing its limits as an account of *human* life in so far as it can be shown to be only a *partial* analysis of human life with an inbuilt masculine bias. This is to say that the theory can be taken to problematize *women* or women's interrogation of the theory can be taken to problematize the terms of the *theory*.

Thus, a particular theory may be seen, not as a means of explaining or understanding woman's social status, but another factor contributing to this status. In this case, the theory in question itself requires analysis. Much feminist philosophy in the last decade has taken this interrogative stance toward philosophical theories.[11] This stance involves a genuine interchange between feminist theories and past and present philosophies, where each may fruitfully act as interlocutor for the other.[12] Undoubtedly there is much for feminists to learn from epistemology, social theory, and so on, but it is becoming increasingly clear that philosophers who in the past would not have seen feminism as relevant to epistemology or theories of 'human' being are beginning to realize the depth of the prejudices of philosophy and consequently are taking feminist criticisms into account. This introduces the possibility of an ongoing, two-way, productive relation between feminist and other philosophers.

An alternative response to traditional accounts of women's association with reproduction and nature is to acknowledge the inferior value accorded to nature whilst insisting that this value is not an absolute but a social value. Carol McMillan's *Women, Reason and Nature* is a good representative of this approach.[13] She argues that many feminists – and in particular Firestone and de Beauvoir – are no less sexist than the culture they bemoan. She criticizes feminists for accepting the superior value accorded to scientific knowledge and traditional masculine activities and recommends a positive reappraisal of women's traditional roles. Yet McMillan is as uncritical as her antagonists in that she treats the social construction of women as wives and mothers as if these roles were given in nature.

This failure to address the assumptions implicit in socio-political discourses creates a situation where feminists using them are faced with the following choice. Either they affirm a necessary sexual difference resulting in different natures and roles but claim equal *value* for such differences, or they affirm an *essential* equality which will be actualized once women's connection to reproduction is controlled, or severed, by science. In a culture that is dominated by the notion that scientific knowledge provides the paradigm for all knowledge, it is not surprising that these latter theorists would look to science as able to provide 'the answer' to every problem and as promising progress and freedom from 'nature'. McMillan could be identified with the first response to the 'choice' posited above, and de Beauvoir and Firestone with the second.

For all their differences, these three theorists share the assumption of a common problematic within which they take up different positions. This problematic is one which has been constructed around the dichotomies which have dominated modern philosophy: mind/body, reason/passion and nature/culture. Undoubtedly, these dichotomies interact with the male/female dichotomy in extremely complex and prejudicial ways. Attempting to understand philosophical constructions of female and male subjectivities involves, among other things, some understanding of the history of ideas. Confusions and contradictions in philosophy are often the result of historical accretions to terms or conglomerations of terms which cannot be understood independently of their history. These terms can be likened to the mythical chimera whose impossible composition can only be understood if we dismantle its artificial unity and recognize its body as that of a goat, its head as that of a lion, and so on. The association of women with nature, corporeality, passion, emotion and domesticity has a complex history in legal, medical, theological and economic discourses and practices. Philosophy has informed, as well as been informed by, these disciplines. It is not possible to explore these relations here. It is possible, however, to clarify some of the most important connections within the field of modern philosophy between women and nature,

women and passion and women and the body. Since it is women who have been so frequently associated with nature and described as prone to the passions which stem from their disorderly bodies, it is crucial to examine the ways in which these associations have been drawn. The historical associations between women, nature, passion and the body are surprisingly influential in contemporary thought. For feminist theory to break and go beyond these associations, an analysis of the way they operate is required.

One of the tasks of this study is to expose the latent commitments in much feminist theorizing to the dualisms of modern philosophy. I am not implying that it is possible to occupy an Archimedean point outside of culture or that it is possible to construct a feminist value-free paradigm, but rather that it is necessary to develop techniques for exposing the latent values in this or that philosophy. The greater awareness one has of what the implicit cultural values of any philosopher's system are, the more power one has to decide what to accept or reject from that system and on what basis such acceptances or rejections rest.

Superficially, conceptions of human nature from the seventeenth century assume a unitary and universal subject. However, an analysis of the paths followed by modern philosophy shows the construction of at least two kinds of human subjects. The apparently sexually neutral human subject turns out to be implicitly a male subject whose 'neutrality' is conceptually dependent on the 'shadow' conception of the female subject. Briefly, we can list some features of these subjects here. The male subject is constructed as self-contained and as an owner of his person and his capacities, one who relates to other men as free competitors with whom he shares certain politico-economic rights. While he has rights to privacy and self-improvement, he relates to women as though they were a natural resource and complement to himself. The female subject is constructed as prone to disorder and passion, as economically and politically dependent on men, and these constructions are justified by reference to women's nature. She 'makes no sense by herself' and her subjectivity assumes a lack which males complete. She is indistinguishable from a wife/mother.

It is the male subject which is most familiar to the student of modern philosophy. It is this self which is most often presented in philosophical works as the *human* being because it is this self which is presented as, in essence, sexually neutral. The agency of this subject is closely connected to its ability to separate itself from and dominate nature. The domination and control of the human body and its needs and desires by the sexually neutral mind sets the terms for modern debates on sexual roles and functions.

From Mary Wollstonecraft through to de Beauvoir and up to the present time, many feminists have connected women's liberation with the ability to become disembodied and transcend 'mere animal functions' and

nature.[12] The necessity to be disembodied begs the question of the implicit maleness of the labourer, the citizen, the ethical person. Males can approach the achievement of these ideals only because of the sexed segregation involved in socio-political life. They are able to be 'disembodied' in the public sphere because 'natural' functions, childrearing, sensuality, and so on, have become the special province of women and are confined to the private sphere. The conflicts and compromises involved for women who 'choose' to be both wives/mothers and (paid) workers in the public sphere have no parallel in men's lives.[15] These issues will be treated by way of an examination of various philosophers' writings and the response of feminists (some of whom are also philosophers) to these writings. In presenting a study which looks at men's views on women and women's views on men's views on women, I am aware of the perversity of my position: I am looking at women who are looking at men looking at women. Even when a theorist is herself a woman, the classic structure of taking woman as the object of theoretical scrutiny remains. Women rarely theorize about, examine or look at men. I shall have more to say on this question throughout the book. In the final chapters I attempt to move beyond this classic structure and posit a space that is not dominated by sexual reflections, reversals or inversions. Perhaps that is an impossible space. Nevertheless, the evocation of impossible spaces can unsettle perspectives that have become entrenched, thus making new perspectives possible.

Chapter 1 examines aspects of Rousseau's political philosophy alongside his views on nature, culture and sexual specificity. In this chapter the critique of traditional interactions between feminist theory and philosophical theory will be introduced by examining Wollstonecraft's response to Rousseau. These two themes are continued in chapters 2 and 3 through the discussion of J. S. Mill and Harriet Taylor and of J.-P. Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, respectively. A primary aim of these chapters is to demonstrate that the feminist critique of the sexual biases apparent in socio-political theories derive their force from fundamental distinctions and assumptions which feminists often leave intact.

Chapters 1 to 3 reveal a variety of ways in which selected theorists have understood the category 'nature' from the eighteenth to the present century. It will be shown that Wollstonecraft, Taylor and even de Beauvoir accept the basic premiss that women are more closely associated with nature. This association encourages the view that the role of wife and mother is women's natural role. This assumption concerning the 'natural' foundation for the sexual division of labour has been challenged only recently by feminist theorists who claim that women's roles are dictated by social and political arrangements and moreover, that the category 'nature' is always constructed from a particular political vantage point. This insight has been significant in determining the directions taken by

feminist theory in the last decade and requires close analysis. Why did it take so long for feminists to challenge the so-called natural foundation of women's roles in society? Has this ancient justification been undermined or merely shaken? In the course of the first three chapters the influence of the work of John Locke on the six thinkers considered will emerge. Locke's views will be shown to provide the implicit underpinning to much that is assumed about women's relation to work, property and reason.

Chapter 4 considers the fact/value distinction and its use in feminist theorizations of natural versus social roles. This chapter also considers the thorny issue of the role of language in philosophical discourses by contrasting the work of Janet Radcliffe Richards and Dale Spender. Some appraisal is offered of the writings of Carol McMillan and Mary Daly and their assessments of women's role and status in society. Richards, McMillan, Spender and Daly will also provide contrasting examples of the attempt to *extend* philosophical theories so that they may be appropriate to women (Richards, McMillan) and the attempt to *create* new 'woman-centred' theories (Spender, Daly). Chapter 5 will argue that neither of these options is viable, though both pose problems concerning the methodology of feminist theory. This chapter presents an argument in favour of a dynamic and reflexive relation between feminist theories and philosophical theories, where each acts as interlocuter for the other.

Chapter 6 treats the contribution of psychoanalytic theory to questions of sexual difference, the body and language. In particular, the writings of recent French feminists on the body and sexual difference are considered. Rather than understanding their work as offering a *true* theory of the body, it is argued that their work should be read as offering an understanding of conceptions of the female and male body in *culture* which may be helpful in terms of challenging established associations between women and maternity, women and lack, and of establishing new ones. The aim is to create a terrain where an alternative relation or relations of women to their corporeality may be posited. This aim, in turn, is taken to be co-requisite to the development of a politico-ethical theory and practice that would be appropriate to the contemporary conditions of women's lives.

Chapter 7 considers the way in which the theoretical justifications for women's exclusion from the public sphere, and the consequent collapsing of familial and female interests, are circular or self-fulfilling. Women are constructed as close to nature, subject to passion and disorder, and hence excluded from the self-conscious creation of the body politic which is precisely where nature, passion and disorder are transcended (or, at least, *converted* into *public* goods). The body politic then constructs woman as its 'internal enemy' or, as Hegel phrased it, womankind as 'the everlasting irony in the life of the community.'[16] What a feminist consideration of the history of some of these philosophical conceptions of women and their

nature reveals is a basic plasticity or malleability of those conceptions. Conceptions of women are formed, and reformed anew, in accordance with the dominant conception of male subjectivity and its needs. This, of course, has been done from an almost exclusively male perspective, where woman has been conceived only in terms of her relation to man, that is, as wife/mother. This distorted and partial perspective must be challenged by women taking an active role not only in the public sphere of politics and employment but also in the task of theorizing and conceptualizing human life.

1

But for her Sex, a Woman is a Man

1 On 'Becoming Man': the Case of Mlle de L'Enclos

Rousseau was clearly disturbed by the behaviour of men and women in French society and by the influence of modern philosophy which he saw as condoning and encouraging this behaviour. He was particularly distressed by the breakdown of clear sexual differences and often referred to the feminization of men and the masculinization of women with a mixture of disdain and anxiety. Much of his work was directed at the institution of rigid barriers between the sexes in matters of education, social and political life and morals. The corrupting influence of culture he saw to result in a '. . . confusion between the sexes . . .' such that he considered it to be '. . . almost a miracle to belong to one's own sex'.[1] The end result of this trend, he argued, would be to deprive women of their specifically feminine rights, privileges and honours.[2] That he saw the influence of modern philosophy to be largely responsible for this confusion in sexual identities is clear from his remarks concerning a certain Mlle de L'Enclos.

Mlle de L'Enclos was said to have scorn for the specific virtues of women, rather '. . . she practised, so they say, the virtues of a man. She is praised for her frankness and uprightness; she was a trustworthy acquaintance and a faithful friend. To complete the picture of her glory it is said that she became a man.'[3] Rousseau's biting irony is here at its best, and for good reason. His obvious distress at the possibility of women, at least women of a certain class, being considered as equals to men and able to share in hitherto exclusively masculine pursuits fuelled many a sharp diatribe against the social habits and mores of his contemporaries. However, the nature of his writings on women cannot be described as diatribe

in toto. His work reveals a thorough and, for the most part, consistent line of argument concerning what ought and what ought not to be the function and province of women.

Unlike many of his predecessors,[4] Rousseau does not imply that sex is a mere contingency. Rather, it is one's sex which determines the entire nature and role of the subject, at least if one is female. 'But for her sex, a woman is a man . . .'[5] he writes, yet from her sex follows all else: a different morality; a different education; a different level of access to knowledge and truth; and, of course, an entirely different social and political function from that assigned to men.

Man for Rousseau is both man (on occasions) and the 'universal' subject. His sex does not always or necessarily interfere with his human capacities. Man's possibilities are not tied to time, place or particularity, rather he is able to transcend all these, including his sex, in the apprehension of abstract truths and principles. Woman, by contrast, is always a woman: she is confined by her place, her time, her particularity, her body and passion, in short, her sex. 'The male is only a male now and again, the female is always a female . . .' and, according to Rousseau, '. . . everything reminds her of her sex.'[6] An examination of the means whereby Rousseau lends philosophical justification to the exclusion of women from political life is of particular interest, given that he writes in an era of considerable social upheaval. The body politic of late-eighteenth-century France was undergoing a marked metamorphosis. As recent feminist scholarship has shown, stringent and often brutal methods were used to ensure that women were not admitted to this newly formed political body.[7]

Both Rousseau and Mary Wollstonecraft are commonly associated with the French revolution. Together they provide an interesting contrast concerning what men and women hoped the Enlightenment would achieve. Rousseau and Wollstonecraft will also provide us with an introduction to the historical interactions between philosophical theory and feminist theory. Wollstonecraft's response to Rousseau also provides material for the investigation of the ways in which feminist theory has made use of philosophical theories. What is evident in Wollstonecraft's attempts to challenge Rousseau's stance on women is her tendency to accept his conception of man as the 'universal subject' and to attempt to extend this conception to include women. She offers little by way of critique of Rousseau's philosophical system. Rather, her contention concerns only the place that women occupy within it. This tendency to view philosophical paradigms as sex-neutral will receive detailed comments later.[8] What will be explored in the latter part of this chapter is the attempt by Wollstonecraft, to reintroduce a notion of the sexually neutral subject as against Rousseau's careful specifications of sexual difference. It is significant that Wollstonecraft goes about this task by reiterating certain

basic Cartesian principles: that truth is unitary and the same for all;[9] that rationality is what joins women, no less than men, to God.[10] Her argument against Rousseau is that the human subject is, in essence, everywhere and always the same. It is educational and environmental influences which create apparent differences and the effect of these influences, she claims, are nowhere more obvious than in the case of women.[11]

2 'Will the bonds of Convention hold firm without some foundation in nature?'[12]

It is not at all clear from Rousseau's political works, for instance *The Social Contract*, what his views on the place of the sexes in the political and moral spheres are. To discern these views it is necessary to turn to the work he devotes especially to this question: *Emile*. This latter work not only offers valuable insight to the question of sexual differentiation, but is arguably the best summary of his entire philosophy. The answer Rousseau offers to the question which heads this section reveals the foundation for his views on women and men; on passion and reason; and on nature and culture. What I hope to demonstrate by the end of this chapter is that on Rousseau's model of social and political life it is women who are expected to provide the 'natural' foundation necessary for the security and legitimacy of the conventional bond of the social contract. It is the private domestic sphere that provides both materially and emotionally for the continuation of civic society.

Further, Rousseau argues that women should play the additional role of guide or guardian to men; that is, they should, like Ariadne, spin the yarn that guarantees that Theseus will neither come to harm nor lose his way in the maze of culture. Rather, man will retain his relation to nature via his relation to the private sphere, which on Rousseau's account is a kind of 'time-warp' where the 'primitive' and natural patriarchal family is 'frozen'. The retention of this relation to nature is crucial, for Rousseau, in order to avoid the possible development of the corrupting and artificial vices and passions attendant on a highly developed social organization. In other words, provided we do not stray too far from nature we cannot stray too far into error.

One of the most important terminological or conceptual shifts in eighteenth-century philosophy is that from 'God' to 'nature' and from conceiving reason as a hallmark of divine creation to conceiving of reason as a natural development. This shift is most important in the work of Rousseau. What it involves is a change in attitude concerning the influence of culture on the form and development of human subjectivity. Rousseau takes the influence of culture, environment and development