

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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Inquiries: Patricia D'Allura, Assistant to the Editor,  
INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.  
11367-0904, U.S.A. (718)520-7099

# Feminist Theory and Its Discontents

DARYL MCGOWAN TRESS

*Trinity College*

In the wide-ranging work of his late career, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud speaks of the malaise bred in the individual and in culture by the denial and suppression of the forces of irrationality. These instincts, aggressive and sexual, are experienced as dangerous and so are repressed. But, Freud insists, to repress these forces is not to eliminate them. What is denied and forgotten lurks beneath the surface of conscious and cultural life, constantly undermining and threatening to destroy the glorious constructions of self and civilization (see especially Chs. 6 and 7).

I would like to borrow in a limited way from Freud's lesson in *Civilization and Its Discontents* and consider what it is that feminist theory has come to perceive as threatening to its enterprise, what it is that feminist theory believes it needs to defend itself against. From the contemporary feminist point of view, it is not the forces of irrationality that are threatening, but instead reason and rationality are viewed as masculine and as the foes against which women must defend themselves. Increasingly, feminist theory fixes its attention on passion and power, on the nonrational, at the expense of reason. The history of feminist thought, along with a major current in history of ideas generally over the last two hundred years, reveals a growing tendency to draw positive significance and value from the irrational while looking to expose the full negative and threatening aspects of "the rational." But, as I hope to show, the denial of reason can be no more successful than the denial of the irrational; it inevitably leads to contradictions and instability, especially as feminism requires for its identity what it condemns and denies as oppressive. The inconsistencies and the discomfort they generate are signs of a serious failure in feminist theory's intellectual ancestry, and this is what I will trace.

Feminism has made some very valuable strides for women. The organized efforts of women to win the vote, for example, and to put an end to a wide variety of forms of legal and economic discrimination against women are most worthy of respect. The exposure by feminists of more private but nonetheless pernicious forms of maintaining women's subordination has been beneficial, even if sometimes disruptive and painful. Lately, though, feminism has fallen on hard times. One sign of this, surely, is the reluctance of many women today

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to identify themselves as “feminists,” even while they do support the promotion of women’s interests. (See Chadwick or Fleming for differing generational views of feminist ideals as presented in the general media.) For a movement that sees itself necessarily as a popular, broad-based political one, lack of popular appeal is a most serious problem. And while feminist theory has attracted a good deal of attention in academic and publishing circles, it is currently in internal disarray, experiencing disputes, for example, over liberal, integrating political strategies versus radical, revolutionary ones, and over efforts to reevaluate positively women’s traditional activities while simultaneously calling for radical reformations of social life that gave those traditional activities meaning. In addition to these deep differences regarding aims, the latest work in feminist theory adopts the very skeptical stance characteristic of some contemporary European philosophical movements and launches an attack on “logocentrism,” or, with its feminist twist, “phallogocentrism.” These are the pejorative terms applied to the philosophical tradition which claims the superiority of reason. According to feminist theorists, phallogocentrism, representing the reign of the phallus, i.e. masculinity, is in its insistence on rationality repressive, dominating, and violent. Rationality is seen from this new feminist point of view as the source of many, if not all, of the different forms of oppression in the modern world (e.g. sexism, racism, and imperialism) and so is viewed as a powerful threat to women’s safety and happiness.<sup>1</sup>

As a philosopher I have been both troubled and puzzled by the hostility towards reason in recent feminist theorizing, and the increasing erosion of the place of reason in feminist work. If, in trying to understand this development, one examines the genesis and growth of feminist theory, one discovers that this is not a new trend but is really the inevitable culmination of a long process. Feminist theory’s current troubling state springs inexorably from its problematic origins.

What I will try to show is that the development of feminist theory reflects the intellectual history of the past three centuries, i.e., feminist theory comes into being as a modernist movement and the course of its development mirrors the vicissitudes of the modern intellectual era. Especially evident in the history of feminist theory is the very unsteady state of reason and rationality in late modernity. (See the differing perspectives on this phenomenon of Strauss, MacIntyre, Cascardi and Lang.)

Two troubling general consequences of the elevation of passion and power and the reduction or elimination of reason can be noted at the start: the first is that appropriate aims for desire and political action cannot be determined and these areas of life become chaotic. A second difficulty is that the categories one looks to defend or revitalize begin to unravel, that is, they become internally inconsistent and their explanatory power is weakened (for example, the basic feminist concept of “gender” is currently coming undone. See “Editorial.”). Modernism makes feminism both necessary and possible, that is, the modern intellectual era provokes it into being and provides it with a set of intellectual

tools to construct itself. But at the same time, feminist theory is also heiress to all debts and problems of the modern intellectual era, and these have come to manifest themselves in the current confusion which riddles feminist theory.

Let me specify what I mean by “modernism” (and point out parenthetically what will soon become obvious: that I am working with very broad historical categories, and so I have simplified what are in fact very complex systems of ideas). I distinguish three major movements within it: early modernism, antimodernism, and postmodernism. “Early modernism” here designates the world-views originating in the West in the seventeenth century and maturing in the Enlightenment era of the eighteenth century which expressly repudiated reliance on the earlier classical and medieval-theological traditions. These traditions had been based on a divinely ordered cosmos and an immaterial human essence or soul which had its own natural ends. Early modern thought placed confidence not in the authority of tradition but instead in the knowing subject and in the subject-as-knowable. The subject can know, grasp, and conquer nature, and can come, as well, to know himself or herself with certainty because the subject now is regarded as secular and as operating according to scientific rather than divine laws. “Antimodernism” designates modernism’s turn against itself, its rebellion against the Enlightenment preoccupation with reason and scientific knowledge. The spirit of antimodernism is expressed in nineteenth century Romanticism’s embrace of the imagination and in the revolutionary political urging of praxis or activity as superior to theory. In the antimodern period, history and nature are regarded as surpassing rational, individual efforts at control. Finally “postmodernism,” the most recent intellectual current, is one that consciously defies definition; its spokespersons, Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, and Rorty, to name a few, set postmodernism in opposition to the values of both early modernism and antimodernism, in particular to the confidence the previous modernisms display in the solidity and self-sufficiency of the subject. For postmodernists, a fragmented subject moves in a denaturalized world where everything is a construction of language or an operation of power, and the denaturalization of which intellectuals and artists are obligated to express—and promote—in their work. (Jardine’s study is particularly illuminating on the “denaturalization” of postmodernism and on the sources of “postmodern” feminist theory.)

At these three modernist pressure points, certain features characteristic of the modern intellectual period can be detected: the rejection of tradition and the desire for “new” solutions, the overarching attitude of opposition and rebellion, the atmosphere of crisis, the priority given to analysis of power and its operations, the emphasis placed, on the one hand, on the defense of the autonomous subject independently willing and choosing his or her own ends, and on the other, a preoccupation with a political and/or sociological analysis of power groups and their dynamics, and finally, a disillusionment with and rejection of all these categories and the difficulties they represent.

These features of the modernist program, all of which mark feminist theory,

can be contrasted with the premodern, classical philosophical outlook. The classical view holds to the notion of human essence which is timeless in its nature. Because some aspects of human nature are timelessly true, tradition and its thinking are valuable for us; the problems we confront now are not so terrifyingly new, nor, perhaps, do they have the dramatic exigency that modernism insists upon. Classical philosophy focuses its concern on the human essence or psyche, and makes the object of its inquiry not discontent, power, needs, and preference but rather virtue, that is, what makes a person, or people, excellent, what is it that we do best to desire.<sup>7</sup> Since all human beings as human beings possess a similarly structured psyche, relationship and community are possible and desirable; we are neither atomistic individuals nor social constructions, according to this view. The classical outlook maintains that the ground of reality is stable essence or form or substance, and hence is intelligible and accessible, to some extent at least, by means of open dialogue and patient, rational reflection. It places priority on these rather than on willing, acting, changing the world.

Feminist theorists have been highly wary of essentialism from the start. "Central to feminism," Anne Donchin writes, "is the disavowal of the conception of *the essential self*" (p. 92). The allegiance of feminist theorists, almost exclusively, has been and continues to be to a view of women as constructed by social and historical conditions. Alison Jaggar, a feminist philosopher, succinctly states the reason for this allegiance: "Invariably, anti-feminists have justified women's subordination in terms of perceived biological differences" (p.21). The idea of an invariant feminine or human nature or essence, then, is regarded as grounding the injustices of the status quo and perpetuating women's subordination.

It is correct, of course, that essentialist models have been used against women. But the alternative, modernist model which feminist theory is founded upon is deeply problematic and will not yield a coherent theory of women. I believe that once the defects of modernism in all its versions are made plain, a reconstruction of feminist theory on a classical foundation can begin.

Let us now examine at greater length each of the three modernist stages in the development of feminist theory and consider its implications.

Mary Wollstonecraft, who lived her relatively short life at the end of the eighteenth century, generally is placed at the beginning of the lineage of modern feminism. Writing her bold *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, she faced the challenge of opposing the popular Enlightenment-era view that men and women have fundamentally different natures—a view developed, for example, by Rousseau in his best-seller, *Emile*—and using Enlightenment principles and values to undercut the Enlightenment notion of a basic and thoroughgoing distinction between the sexes.

Wollstonecraft saw Rousseau and others arguing on the basis of the apparent differences in male and female natures that different educational programs and different political entitlement were not only permissible but beneficial to everyone involved. What seemed obvious to Enlightenment thinkers like Rousseau and Edmund Burke and others was that women, while possessing some measure of intelligence and reason, are nevertheless more instinctual, emotional, and imaginative creatures than men are, and that women are constituted by nature for the domestic life of pleasing men and caring for children. What was decisive, of course, was women's deficiency with respect to reason, since entitlement to human rights (such as autonomy, freedom of choice, privacy) depended upon full possession of rationality.

The notion of different male and female natures posited by Rousseau and others can be seen as an expansion upon and intensification of the mind-body distinction elaborated by some philosophers in the seventeenth century. The split within subjectivity that is basic to some early modern intellectual models is externalized and applied to the sexes: mind is more and more strongly associated with men and masculinity, while body is consistently taken as the primary determinant of women and femininity (see Riley, Ch. 2). As this polarization becomes more vivid, and the superior regard for mind and inferior regard for the body become more boldly prominent in the writings of the eighteenth century, some intrepid women at least were bound to be provoked to response. The very easy, confident expression of women's subordination so popular at the time can be seen as the provocation which necessarily gave rise to the modern feminist response.

Mary Wollstonecraft, agreeing with her fellow eighteenth-century thinkers that, generally, women *appear* to be deficient in reason, employed standard eighteenth-century arguments—even Rousseauian arguments—to explain that appearance, namely that women have been *made* unequal, have been denied expression of their rationality and consigned to the body by corrupt public institutions and by debased interpersonal relationships. Her reformist plan was to restore women to their full status as rational agents by means of a substantial education which would be equal to that provided for men. The aim was to permit women to become free, autonomous, assertive individuals, the equals of men. The contemporary feminist theorist Carol C. Gould echoes and expands Wollstonecraft and the spirit of the eighteenth century when she writes her recommendation for feminism today:

I think the preeminent value that ought to underlie the feminist movement is freedom, that is, self-development. This arises through the exercise of agency, that is, through the exercise of the human capacity for free choice, in forms of activity undertaken to realize one's purposes and to satisfy one's needs. (P. 4)

In this contemporary expansion of the early modernist defense of women, the emphasis on the self, on free choice, on action to fulfill one's own needs

and create one's own life are all in evidence. What the self should choose, what it should do, who it should be would not be specified as part of this paradigm; values are to be freely and subjectively chosen. One can, to quote Gould once again, "appropriate *any* traits for one's own self-development, depending on one's free choice" (p. 15). There are, in other words, no natural limits to one's choices.

Wollstonecraft herself wrote courageously and eloquently to vindicate women and women's rights, and it is important to add, she herself was concerned about equality of reason as a path to equality of virtue in men and women. Her use of an Enlightenment notion of human nature to establish women's integrity could not succeed, however. I want to suggest that Wollstonecraft's failure to persuade stemmed in part from the fact that the split of subjectivity along sexual lines was already so deep by the close of the eighteenth century that it was no longer possible, strategically, to challenge it from within. The Enlightenment model of human nature and its ideal of political equality required a community of individuals who could think and judge coolly without the obstruction of prejudice or passion. It served the model importantly to displace such human tendencies—both in theory and in practice—onto a separate group. So when Wollstonecraft made her seemingly innocuous proposal, that women and men both possess minds so both require education, I believe she herself was aware, to some extent at least, of how implausible this would sound to her contemporaries. "Mind" had already become evidently masculine, in ways that the classical soul which it replaced had not been, and her proposal was bound to strike her audience as bizarre. A clue to Wollstonecraft's own awareness of the desperation of this situation was her own occasional sliding away from her basic commitment to the fundamental equality of male and female mind to the appeal in the *Vindication* that men, after all, will be happier with educated wives than with the delicate, superficial creatures whom she saw as the degraded feminine product of Rousseau's unequal educational program.<sup>3</sup> Doubtful about its persuasive possibilities, in other words, she let her argument become a plea.

Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* did not turn the modernist tide. Instead, due to its own internal dynamics, modernism turned against itself in the nineteenth century, as it would again in the twentieth with the advent of postmodernism. An intellectual shifting of gears took place in the nineteenth century which produced a wariness about Enlightenment ideals of human rationality and autonomy and a disillusionment with eighteenth-century political ideals of self-interested individualism. Some of the important values of the Enlightenment were preserved, such as equality and progress, but the notion developed that radical means were required for their realization. Other Enlightenment values, however, were rejected, for example the supremacy and independence of scientific reason. Could there be a more striking and appropriate symbol in this context of the souring of eighteenth-century optimism about reason and the

dream of progress and human control of the natural world than this: the classic nineteenth-century tale of the soulless monster created by the mad, megalomaniacal scientist, the story of *Frankenstein*, written by Mary Shelley, the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft?

Two major trends of great consequence for feminism flourished in the nineteenth century: revolutionary politics, especially Marxism, and Romanticism. These movements display the extremes of world-views dependent, on the one hand, on political power, and on the other on emotional subjectivity. Both oppose the ideals of the eighteenth century and particularly the early modern ideal of reason on the grounds that a hidden, privileged process (i.e., power or “life”), inaccessible to Enlightenment reason alone, is the true ground of reality.

A radical departure made by Karl Marx is his elimination of a natural substratum in human beings. Instead of having a basic nature which has been obscured and spoiled by social conditions—an eighteenth-century view—Marx’s proposal is that human beings are thoroughly determined, not by the tangle of their desires but by external social, political, and economic forces. The complete, thoroughgoing dependence of human beings on these forces means that their proper ordering is of the utmost urgency. Capitalism is the current exploitative arrangement that shapes modern life, according to Marx and Marxists; it is a system which requires a revolutionary overthrow.

This political model recommends itself as pledged to equality among people and between the sexes; it regards apparent differences in mentality as the effect of differing material conditions. Since there is no human nature prior to social influences in its view, there is no natural base in which significant mental or rational differences between women and men could permanently inhere. With the aim in mind of establishing women’s full humanity, this revolutionary political model might seem promising, and a large number of contemporary feminists, such as Nancy Hartsock, Juliet Mitchell, Evelyn Reed, and others, have followed the classic application of the Marxist approach to women’s condition, namely, Frederick Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. In this work he tells the story of the beginnings of the exploitation and oppression of women as coinciding with the beginnings of capital and private property.

The sources of all traits, according to this model, are external and can be made visible. Thus “sex,” the apparently inescapable biological determinant of male and female, is greatly minimized by way of this model and separated from “gender,” the social determination of masculine and feminine; “gender” becomes the concept basic to feminist discourse. And we can come not only to see the externally imposed sources of inequality but, more significantly, do something to change the situation of exploitation and subjugation. The principle

(answering perfectly to certain Enlightenment desires) is that what has been humanly produced can be humanly grasped, altered, overthrown.

There are, however, a number of serious problems generated by the use of this political model for understanding women. The first is connected with the Marxist concept of "ideology" (see Mah). The divided self of the early modern period, in Marxism, is realigned and mind and body are assigned a new hierarchy, namely, that mind and its output, theory, are effects of material causes. The material relations in the world, according to Marx, produce ideas. Ideas and theory are not, in this view, autonomous and dependable guides for arranging human worldly affairs, but instead are necessarily saturated with class interest and self-interest, as well as a measure of fantasy and wishful thinking typically permitted by abstract thought which holds itself aloof from specific, material conditions.

The concept of ideology thus articulated in Marxist work is a volatile one, however. It does allow feminists to claim that the reigning set of ideals of female inferiority are ideological, i.e., self-serving for the power elite and hence suspect, thereby challenging Enlightenment assumptions. But this "ideology therapy" kills the patient along with the disease. Ultimately, the implication of the concept of ideology is that ideas and theory cannot be trustworthy; they are always contaminated by class interest, always pretending to be superior to the world when they are, after all, only expressions of prior economic and power relations. By borrowing this concept, then, feminist theory in effect abandons any expectation of firmly establishing its ideas regarding women's full humanity. No set of ideas, no theory is immune from the charge of ideology. Ideas and philosophy are further disparaged in this model, since the aim, as stated in Marx's overquoted epitaph, is not to understand but to change the world. According to this view, one must be able, above all, to do and act; philosophy, which regards itself as nonpartisan inquiry, indulges in self-deception and lends itself as a tool of the oppressors. This sentiment is echoed by the contemporary feminist theorists such as Andrea Nye, who wonders resignedly whether feminist practice might have to be sufficient for feminism since theory has a sexist history which can never be eliminated, and Kathryn Pyne Adelson, who chastises feminists who have forgotten that feminist practice produces feminist theory, not the other way around, and that feminist practice has one goal: to change the material conditions of women. Given these principles, how an adequate theory could ever be available or what its real value would be if one could develop it is extremely hard to see. Indeed, in this world-view where power is reality and takes the form of conflicting interests, any disinterested inquiry such as philosophy is bound to appear useless at the very best, blindly and dangerously manipulative at worst.

One other feature of the Marxist model deserves attention in relation to feminist theory. This is that Marx's is a social theory rather than a theory of individuality. It is one which tells the story of class conflict, the story that the basis of the "real world" is the group dynamics of money and power, and that

this is a dynamic of conflict and exploitation. Thus, this world-view is one of groups pitted against one another under capitalism; the attention to large social patterns of oppression calls for women to unite and rise up against a common oppressor. By shifting attention away from individual experience of subordination and unhappiness to the common features of oppression, the Marxist political outlook allows women to unite against social injustice and or “feminism” as a political force to be born. A problem with this political or sociological lens is that it filters out personal difference and the texture of individual lives, or perceives the personal and intimate according to the categories of economics and politics. So, for example, Nancy Chodorow in her widely-read work *The Reproduction of Mothering*, talks of mothers “investing” in their children, (p. 187), and Paula Rothenberg speaks of the “political” nature of the relations between the sexes; by “political relationship” Rothenberg means one which “involves a struggle for control between individuals of unequal power and status, who confront each other with essentially opposed interests” (p. 205. The criticism of Chodorow is made by Elshtain, p. 292; see also Ch. 5 for a lengthy critique of radical, liberal, Marxist, and psychoanalytic feminisms.).

Trouble also arises specifically within Marxism when trying to conceive of women as a “class,” since women are members of every economic class. “Class” is basic identity in this model, and that it might be impossible to adequately identify women within Marxism has been disconcerting for its proponents. (Eventually, the notion of “the patriarchy” seemed to offer a sufficiently generalized antagonist for generating women’s political solidarity across all classes.)

This political outlook, in insisting that power is basic and that class conflict is everywhere, requires and deepens an adversarial and oppositional attitude and fosters a “conflict consciousness” of the world in general. Questions can certainly be raised about how comfortable most women are with a generalized adversarial sensibility and whether women believe themselves sufficiently defined by the rhetoric oppression, which allows women the narrow options of being either victims, victim-resisters, or collaborators. Finally, we can notice here, as we did with the Marxist concept of ideology, the corrosive effect this political, adversarial attitude has an open, philosophical questioning. Feminism becomes a “cause” that demands loyalty and can be criticized only with the utmost delicacy. One aims here, above all, not to understand but to act, to right wrongs, to air grievances, to avenge, to punish, to defend the oppressed and to deprive the oppressors of power, to promote the revolution, to change the world. In the bargain for political effectiveness, the price paid is a diminished respect and capacity for rational thought which is reflective and reserved.

The other major nineteenth-century intellectual trend of importance for feminist theory is Romanticism. Romanticism’s rebellion took this general form: discursive thought and scientific reason were rejected and replaced by emotion

and imagination. Romanticism turned its attention fully to the self, the subject in his or her personal experience. It valued achieving one's true home or identity, recovering oneself and the world at its most genuine. What was regarded as most genuine was "Life" or nature or passion in its wildness and spontaneity. The metaphor of the journey or passage inward took on special meaning for the Romantics, the arduous journey which can be undertaken only by the remarkable Romantic hero—or heroine—who is proud, smart, strong, defiant, and emotionally and imaginatively sensitive. The Romantic hero or heroine stands apart from and above others, but exactly as a result of his or her superior sensitivity is likely to be a social outcast, misunderstood and mistreated by the many out of their ignorance and envy. (We might note, parenthetically, in this outlook the longing to be "the other," the deep desire to be outside the dull routine of ordinary existence. Yack's book is of interest here.) The novels of the Bronte sisters offer examples of the Romantic heroine. We may appreciate the adroitness of the venerable heroines such as Jane Eyre, but we may also note, as others such as Virginia Woolf have, the resentment in these characters and the sense of grievance bred by their assurance of their own emotional and imaginative superiority, particularly when it is not validated by others or when they perceive that its full development is hindered by material conditions which do not match their natural entitlement (Thurman).

The Romantic attitude was absorbed into feminism as an alternative way of answering the problems, persistent since the early modern period, regarding male-female difference and the inequality bred by the associations of male-mind, female-body. What I identify as the Romantic solution to the problem is the acceptance of these different associations, and the claim, unlike that of the Enlightenment and Marxist approaches, that the masculine-mind, feminine-body associations are indeed "natural." The Romantic feminist strategy is to reevaluate positively the body, and the domains of emotion and imagination, and to assert the superiority of these to abstract, calculating, scientific reason. Women, according to this narrative, *are* different, but better.

Romanticism recommends itself in several ways: it endorses a distinctly feminine sensibility of intuition and sympathy, as the Enlightenment and Marxist models did not and could not. It upholds the ideas of women's subjective experience, of women's privileged access to the natural, powerful wisdom of sexuality and childbirth, of separate domains in which feminine nature takes precedence. Furthermore, since women are so different from men, according to this model, women are in a privileged position to speak for and about women's experience. Romantic feminism also provides an explanation for the rarity in history of great public achievements by women, insisting that women's work has been thwarted and suppressed consistently by the jealous, coarse, and aggressive nature of men.

The Romantic view of women as superior, sensitive victims has strongly influenced contemporary feminism. The victimization model has become very

familiar in feminist writing over the past twenty years: Susan Brownmiller, for example, in her book *Femininity*, analyzes the feminine as a form of constriction and suppression, and the feminist philosopher Sandra Lee Bartky writes:

Feminist consciousness is consciousness of *victimization* [sic]. To apprehend oneself as victim is to be aware of an alien force which is responsible for the blatantly unjust treatment of women and to be aware, too, that this victimization, [is] in no way earned or deserved. . . (P 254)

There is a branch of contemporary romantic feminist theorizing called “cultural feminism” which maintains that there is an essential woman. The nemesis of the essential woman, as Linda Alcoff writes, is “not merely a social system or economic institution or a set of backward beliefs but masculinity itself and in some cases male biology” (p. 408). Cultural feminists may be more or less adversarial in approach—one might contrast, for example, the gentle goddess-worship proposals of Carol Christ with the harder-hitting and sometimes hateful positions of Mary Daly or Adrienne Rich who hold (or have held) that male nature is in itself deeply defective. Despite differences in tone, what these feminists have in common is a vision of the future world deeply transformed and made true somehow by the recovery and release of the power of the feminine (Alcoff, p. 408).

Romantic feminism has been criticized by representatives of the liberal-Enlightenment, Marxist, and postmodernist views for positing a female essence and a static, immutable feminine difference. The trouble with the Romantic position as they see it is that it appears to undercut political drives for equality, particularly when experience shows that “different” so often means “inferior,” or that it is intellectually naive. My own concern, however, is with the valorization within Romantic feminism of the nonrational and the distrust this outlook displays towards rationality. It is not uncommon for feminists today to address an audience which has come to share their assumption that rational thinking, including conceptual categorization, logic, and an ordered progression of ideas is, in its severity, its demand for precision and control, and its subordination of feeling and particularity, a masculine form of thought and is inherently domineering and destructive. Jessica Benjamin, for example, can write about “rational violence,” which she and some other feminists believe has its roots in masculine gender formation of early childhood (p. 42. Also see Gilligan). The poet Adrienne Rich expresses the Romantic feminist denunciation of masculine forms of thought:

“His mind is too simple, I cannot go on sharing his nightmares” (p. 156).

Carol Gilligan’s interesting and influential work on women’s voice in ethics, *In a Different Voice*, regards as sufficient, and it seems, as preferable, the immediate living and the simple telling—or dramatizing—of one’s lived experience.

rience, rather than the more arduous and often less immediately satisfying tasks of analysis and explanation.

The serious shortcoming of this position, however, is that it precludes judgment and full assessment of oneself and one's situation. What is offered instead is an immersion in an aestheticized subjectivity, a supposedly feminine subjectivity of experience which is sometimes strikingly sentimental or self-congratulatory in conception, and presents, in its extreme forms, the danger of solipsistic self-absorption which feminists feared from technical, unfeeling reason. In this model where subjective experience is primary, the means to reflect upon and question the limitations of that experience are denied. Describing and defending the validity of one's experience becomes a substitute for inquiry into the benefits and shortcomings of one's way of experiencing. The result is that responsibility for one's views and actions becomes difficult to assign and accept.

Another and not unrelated liability of Romantic feminism is its encouragement of a certain set of emotional and attitudinal responses as the correct feminist ones. There is, for one thing, self-righteousness, as one sees oneself as the superior but deeply wronged and injured party. This attitude is not only fostered among women but becomes the posture of feminism itself as women's voice. Anger and resentment breed in this atmosphere; the tone becomes imperious and punishing. A smug "enemy-consciousness" is generated which filters into all aspects of life. The simplistic and reductive romantic categories—"woman" stands for goodness and purity, "man" stands for the envious, brutal aggressor—have the effect of precluding discussion or debate. A richer or more complex understanding of women and men than the one these simplistic categories allow becomes impossible.

Finally, there are problems in achieving the stated aims of feminism, such as social transformation, within this paradigm. Because of the priority it grants to the personal and because of its distrust of generalization, which it associates with dominating reason, there is no evident way to move effectively from subjective experience to the politically unified activism which feminism expects.

The most recent modernist alternative, embraced by a number of contemporary feminist theorists, takes the broad label "postmodern feminism." It is regarded by some feminists as a corrective which is nevertheless still faithful to feminism's ancestry, but other feminists see it as a deep threat to the movement. Postmodernism, I will suggest, is just the latest, decayed form modernist principles and values have taken. As such, it does not offer a solution to the problems vexing feminism since its modernist beginnings, nor does it represent a new threat. Postmodernism, emerging fairly recently from some crosscurrents in European intellectual life, refuses a single definition, but what is notable is its denial that there is any essence, any persistent identity to be found beneath

appearances or even below layers of social oppression. The social construction of the self runs all the way down, according to this view, and any attempt to posit a true, stable identity or authentic subject only has the effect of solidifying the illusion of self and the subjugation that this illusion permits and perpetuates. Not only are human subjects fully the byproduct of the forces of history and language, but reason too is seen as just one more constricting offshoot of social processes. Postmodern thinkers particularly call into serious question the conceptual structuring of rationality which depends, they claim, upon binary oppositions—good and bad, self and other, reason and emotion, and so forth—which always contain partially disguised value judgments and hierarchies of power (see Wilmore and Alcoff).

Male-female is, of course, one of the many items in the table of binary oppositions, and the postmodern style of thought is adopted by some feminist theorists primarily as a way of deconstructing the problems about male and female natures that propel modern feminist theory. Postmodernism is deeply anti-essentialist and skeptical, and so its approach differs fundamentally both from Enlightenment feminist theory, which preserves a notion of humanity of which women must be counted as full members, and from all varieties of Romantic feminism which universalize feminine traits. It also differs from nineteenth-century revolutionary politics in that it abandons expectations regarding the permanent liberation of an oppressed class. Postmodernism's insight of particular relevance to feminism is this: merely turning the conceptual tables by, for example, regarding feminine traits as superior rather than inferior or by wresting power away from men and giving it to women, is to agree to play by the same old binary rules. Postmodernism demands the highly radical move of dismantling entirely the categories of male, female, masculine, and feminine.

Postmodernism sets itself against the oppositional strategies of the nineteenth century in an interesting manner. It looks as if the postmodern approach, in this way, might be interested in eliminating the rigidly opposed categories of oppressor and oppressed, insider and outsider, us and them. Such an aim has led feminists such as Jane Flax, Luce Irigaray, Jane Gallop, Denise Riley, and others to engage in a postmodernist analysis in their feminist work. But in reality, postmodernism is much more deeply oppositional in its outlook than any of the earlier schools of modernism. Since deconstruction involves a destabilization of all concepts and identities, no notions at all and no political or ethical category is permitted to stand. The postmodernist program is to expose the instability of any idea that is presented as natural, obvious, or authoritative.

Feminist theory is now utterly cornered: it can neither affirm that women *are* something (since nothing *is* in any common, identifiable way), nor can it eliminate the category of "women" (since, in that case, feminism would be meaningless). All that's left is raw opposition, the intellectual attitude evident in nascent form in early modernism's rejection of the classical tradition that has, in postmodernism, become an end in itself. Julia Kristeva, speaking from this position, puts the matter succinctly:

It follows that a feminist practice can only be *negative* [my emphasis], at odds with what already exists so that we may say “that’s not it” and “that’s still not it.”  
(P 137)

This feminism that Kristeva offers subverts the self-assured positions taken by some earlier feminists, but does so only by developing one that is only and necessarily negative and oppositional. But whereas the earlier oppositional feminisms came to rest somewhere—in the vision of a realized communist state or a woman’s counterculture, for example—postmodernism proffers permanent instability without foundation of any kind. Postmodernism may appear to support the desire for a highly liberated, pluralistic feminism, one that is unbounded by the limits of earlier theory. But the desire for feminist theory to take such a formless form itself represents certain values and a certain conception of freedom which still fall within the compass of modernism. Unfortunately, by this point in its modernist descent, feminist theory has no positive vision and no genuine understanding or affirmation of women to offer.

Postmodernism not only fails to step beyond modernism as it sees itself doing, but is modernism in the extreme, the nadir of modernism. Postmodernism’s fragmentation of the self is the culmination of the early modern fracturing of the self into mind and body. Postmodernism’s destabilization of the world and knowledge of it is the outcome of the gradual modern erosion of substance and essence. Postmodern skepticism, which leaves one unable to sustain any level of trust in the world as one meets it, so that one must constantly create a new world, is the exaggerated fulfillment of the modern desire to have the past disappear. Postmodernism’s appeal to the “play” of language and of power is an extreme and twisted appropriation of the emphasis placed on freedom by earlier modern thinkers. In all these respects, postmodernism seeks to make a virtue of the internal collapse of the modern outlook. But as yet one more version of modernism, postmodernism is in no position to help feminism out of its modernist difficulties.

I hope to have shown the pervasiveness of a modernist sensibility of opposition, rebellion, crisis, and urgency, and a general distrust of reason in the ancestry of feminist theory, and to have indicated, albeit briefly, some of the shortcomings of this sensibility for developing a satisfactory theory regarding women. What would serve better than the modernist approach, in my view, is a commitment to intelligibility and stability such as is found in the classical philosophical approach. Basic to classical philosophy is an acknowledgment of the *nature* of things and in particular, *human* nature, its stable identity and ground of unification, along with an acceptance of the vulnerabilities of this nature. Only with this stability as a premise can there be a stability and truth to our speech, which in turn provides the basis for the meaningful discussion of

ethical and political goods. (This argument is developed by Rosen.) Classical philosophy lacks the exigent tone of modern intellectual work; its mode is one of patient reflection on and discussion of aims prior to action and change. Unlike modern philosophy, which makes human willing and choosing primary without being able to specify what it is best to will and choose and what the limits of human choice must be, classical philosophy recognizes human nature to have certain basic capacities—such as reason—with natural ends and excellences, and that the achievement of these ends is either helped or hindered by political circumstances. The intent of classical philosophizing, as I see it, is to speak about what would be the harmony of freedom and natural limitation, emotion and intelligence, equality and necessary hierarchy, desire and restraint, practice and theory, the subject and that which grounds the subject, male and female, as all of these manifest themselves in human life.<sup>4</sup> A complete theory of human nature, expanded and fully inclusive of women, would ground the commonalities of men and women in such a way as to permit differences in masculine or feminine style or position to be acknowledged without the imminent risk of devaluing or overvaluing one or the other, and thus dislodging one or the other from the realm of the fully human. A fuller account of male and female commonalities would also subdue the antagonism between the sexes, although, due to some ineliminable differences, there inevitably are elements of tension—and mystery—between women and men.

Women cannot afford to accept the fashionable rejection of reason as simply masculine and oppressive. Just as Freud held that the denial of the irrational led to a generalized malaise, the attempt to suppress or eliminate reason is similarly a morbid endeavor. Any “theory” which moves in this direction undermines itself, and any theory which tells women that the nonrational is their special province or exclusive obligation denies women their status as full human beings. A reconstruction of feminist theory, away from discontent, involves rehabilitating our understanding of reason and human nature.

## NOTES

1. For example, Diana Meyers indicates the opposing feminist viewpoints regarding the status of “the traditional woman’s life,” as either an oppressive, coerced state or a freely chosen, desirable way of life. Andrea Nye (1986) points out “the incompatibility between materialism and self-assertion” in the feminist work of Simone deBeauvoir without, however, commenting on the incompatibility of these larger trends within feminist theory generally.

The radical, thoroughgoing skepticism regarding reason is most evident in the “new French feminists” and those influenced by them. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron write, “Many women who refer to themselves as radical—Marguerite Duras, Christiane Rochefort, Claudine Herrmann—are convinced that the will to theory is the most pernicious of male activities” (p. xi). And, “Their own analyses [Cixous, Kristeva, Clement, Irigaray, and Herrmann] ‘of the status of womanhood in Western Theoretical discourse’ have led them to a variety of startling conclusions, among which the most frequently shared and propagated is that only one sex has been represented,

that the projection of male libidinal economy in all patriarchal systems—language, capitalism, socialism, monotheism—has been total; women have been absent” (p. xii).

Other feminist objections to reason are based on psychoanalysis or politics, or both.

The challenge to rationality based on psychoanalytical theory has been widely adopted by feminist theorists. The feminist interpretation of it, briefly, is that rational thinking is the outcome and reflection of masculine gender development in early childhood, i.e., the process whereby the boy distinguishes himself as “boy” and separates from the mother who is perceived as sexually different. The basic feminist statements of this view are Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein. This approach is applied to ethics in Carol Gilligan’s *In A Different Voice—Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*. It also has been applied to the history of philosophy, notably by Susan Bordo. Without dependence on the psychoanalytic model, Genevieve Lloyd argues that the ideal of reason has been a masculine one from the beginning of the history of philosophy. Lloyd’s reliance on Francis Bacon, a father of the modern intellectual era, to bring the masculine nature of reason into focus is telling in the context of the argument developed in this paper, i.e., of feminist theory’s own pervasive reliance on a modernist lens.

A challenge to the notion of objectivity and scientific reason is mounted on political grounds by Sandra Harding’s work in feminist philosophy of science. The political criticism of rationality looks at the differing interests that knowledge serves and differing class access to knowledge, asking “whose knowledge?” Also prominent in feminist philosophy of science, Evelyn Fox Keller leans more heavily on the psychoanalytic interpretation of gender development than on political arguments for making her case. For a critique of the attempted feminist revision of science and epistemology see Alison Wylie and the less sympathetic, “Feminist Philosophy of Science: A Critical Look,” by Margaret Levin.

The feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young, invoking Theodor Adorno, offers a politically-inspired criticism of reason as unrelentingly reductive of difference, and as inherently controlling and dominating: see especially pp. 60–63.

The American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy (March 1989) takes as its topic “gender and rationality” and contains several short articles as well as a bibliography on the subject.

2. The contrast between the classical focus on virtue and the modern focus on needs, desires, preferences, and ultimately, effectiveness is developed by Alasdair MacIntyre. See especially Ch. 5, “Plato and Rational Inquiry.”

3. Her argument about equality of reason and virtue is made forcefully, but frequently in the text she asserts that her proposals will make for more stable marriages; see pp. 29 and 34–35 for examples. For further discussion of Wollstonecraft see Korsmeyer, Rogers (pp. 181–86), and Tong (pp. 13–17).

4. Catherine H. Zuckert discusses the classical philosophical approach to problems of politics and power with special attention to the situation of modernity. Her discussion closes with a call to philosophical mediation between extremes (pp. 1–29).

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