

FEMINIST THEORY RECONFIGURED

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The request that one reconsider feminist philosophy makes at least two presuppositions: it presupposes that we know what feminist philosophy is and that feminist philosophy is in a position to be reconsidered. I believe, however, that both of these presuppositions are unwarranted. So rather than reconsider feminist philosophy, I propose first to investigate these two matters. What might 'feminist philosophy' be? The name 'feminist philosophy' suggests that a place for feminism within philosophy has been made—offered by philosophy and/or forged by feminism. Thus, it suggests the accommodation of philosophy to feminism. 'Feminist philosophy' in this sense would be like political philosophy, moral philosophy, or all the 'philosophies of' (philosophy of science, history, religion, etc.). Here philosophy is the master discipline that analyzes, criticizes, and thereby improves the practices of politics, ethics, science, history, religion, and feminism.

The name 'feminist philosophy' also implies that the proper place for feminism in academic practices and institutions is in the company of, perhaps even under the protection of, one of the traditional disciplines. Thus, 'feminist philosophy' also suggests the domestication of feminism by philosophy. In this respect 'feminist philosophy' would be like feminist literary criticism, women's history, sociology of gender, psychology of women—the feminine and the feminist may appear on the academic scene only when properly escorted by one of the established disciplines. Feminism in this way becomes the helpmate of the established disciplines by supplying what they have somehow been missing, by allowing them to do better what they have always done. Such a relationship between feminism and the established disciplines is also implied by the proliferation of 'feminist perspectives' in or on the established disciplines. Feminism thus becomes another

way of looking at what those disciplines have always looked at and another way of doing what they have always done; but always only one of at least several 'perspectives' that the discipline acknowledges and at least tolerates, if not embraces.

My concern with 'feminist philosophy' in these senses is not an empirical concern about whether philosophy really has accommodated and/or domesticated feminism. My concern is rather that to adopt the name 'feminist philosophy' is to assume that some combination of accommodation and domestication is and ought to be the relationship of feminism and philosophy. I want to argue instead that, at this moment, the relationship of feminism and philosophy is much less settled and stable than the name 'feminist philosophy' suggests. Feminism has tried to be both a counter-practice in resistance to established disciplines such as philosophy and an approach accepted on an equal footing with other approaches they acknowledge. This is in part a function of the ways in which, at this moment in the American context, feminism is neither a discipline, as these are traditionally understood in academic settings, nor a traditional political movement in the sense of a distinct, coherent view of the social and political field that motivates collective action on the part of a significant number of people. 'Feminist philosophy' therefore seems to me to name a position that is accommodated and domesticated by philosophy as well as a position that is resisted by philosophy, a position from which to resist philosophy and a position from which to demand inclusion in philosophy.

The request to reconsider 'feminist philosophy' also presupposes that the matter of 'feminist philosophy' has been considered and settled at least once, and implies that decisions reached previously about 'feminist philosophy' now need to be altered or modified. But 'feminist philosophy' cannot be reconsidered, precisely because the relationship of feminism and philosophy has never attained anything like the stability presupposed by the notion of 'reconsideration'. In addition, the request to reconsider 'feminist philosophy' makes certain presuppositions about the epistemological standpoint of its addressee. But an analysis of these presuppositions indicates that this addressee is not in a position to engage in reconsideration. Consider the circumstances from which this particular request for reconsideration was issued and the circumstances of those to whom it was addressed. This request was first articulated under the auspices of the American Association for the Philosophic Study of Society (AAPSS) and the Social Philosophy and Policy Center at Bowling Green State University, who proposed a panel on this topic at the American Philosophical Association's Eastern Division annual meeting, thus determining that this instance of reconsideration would have an audience composed primarily of professional philosophers. That the papers from this session were to be published in a journal sponsored by the AAPSS has a similar effect with respect to audience. In addition, the panelists are all Ph.D.s in philosophy who cur-

rently hold university teaching positions and have previously spoken and written about feminism and philosophy. Consider the history of my relationship to the profession of philosophy as evidenced by a set of credentials—Ph.D. in philosophy, job as an assistant professor of philosophy, position as executive secretary of an organization for women in philosophy. These circumstances and this history would seem to have the effect of stabilizing the position of feminist philosopher by institutionalizing it and in this way making me a feminist philosopher.

This particular request for reconsideration, however, also includes a demand for objectivity as this is traditionally understood by the epistemological paradigms of modern philosophy. This is suggested by the selection of two panelists well known for their criticisms of 'feminist philosophy'. It is also implied in the notion of reconsideration, which imputes epistemological agency to the knower who does the reconsidering, and leaves the object of reconsideration subject to the knower, who is unaffected by that which she reconsiders and who is in a position to validate, reconstruct, or entirely reject it. Thus, the request for reconsideration assumes the possibility and desirability of an epistemological standpoint entirely outside of feminism (if the request is addressed to philosophy or a philosopher as a demand that philosophy justify its accommodation of feminism) and entirely outside of philosophy (if the request is addressed to feminism or a feminist as a demand that feminism justify its desire for inclusion by philosophy). But, regardless of whether such standpoints are possible or desirable (and I think they are neither), a position outside of feminism and of philosophy surely cannot be the position of a feminist philosopher.

So not only is 'feminist philosophy' in no position to be reconsidered, but the position from which one could reconsider it seems to be indeterminate. Finding the request to 'reconsider feminist philosophy' addressed to me, I find myself contradictorily constrained. I am supposed to represent 'feminist philosophy' in some way, to discuss it knowledgeably, examine it critically, perhaps defend it; at least to make some sense of it. But I am also expected to 'reconsider feminist philosophy' from a position outside of both feminism and philosophy. Thus the request that I 'reconsider feminist philosophy' requires both that I be a feminist philosopher and that I be neither a feminist nor a philosopher.

For all these reasons, then, I am not going to discuss 'feminist philosophy' and I am not going to reconsider anything. Instead, I will discuss 'feminist theory' and suggest in place of reconsideration the concept of tracing reconfigurations in feminist theory. I prefer the term 'feminist theory' because it neither claims feminism's ownership by any of the established disciplines, nor dismembers feminism and parcels it out among them. By 'feminist theory' I mean a set of questions about woman, women, and femininity; man, men, and masculinity; about sex, gender, and bodies; about sex, gender, and other categories of identity; about sex, gender, knowledge,

power, and agency; sex, gender, language, culture, and history.

I intend the concept of tracing feminist theory's reconfigurations to represent the way in which I find myself both positioned within feminism and philosophy and called on to stand outside of both of them. From this perspective, feminist theory is not so much something that I do as it is something that moves me about, positioning and repositioning me in its shifting currents. In thinking of the development of feminist theory as a series of reconfigurations, I also hope to point to the instability of the position of feminism vis-à-vis philosophy, and the other established disciplines, that I have described. I argue that feminist theory's questions, the conflicting quality of its answers so far, and its insistence that the meanings and effects of these fundamental questions be continually reexamined are partly a function of the instability of this relationship. Finally, this notion of reconfiguration is meant to suggest that the instability of feminist theory is one reason why it has continued to generate debate about the issues it addresses and thereby to surface additional, more complex questions. Rather than reconsidering 'feminist philosophy' from the perspective of its failure to solidify itself in the same ways as philosophy and its sub-specialties have become solidified in academic settings, I want to argue that the instability of feminism's relationship to philosophy and the other established disciplines is a virtue.

In the following discussion, I focus on conflicts and tensions that criss-cross feminist theory itself. To do this, I map over the field of feminist theory a distinction of approaches. The first is a focus on the question of women's situation—what is it, how did it come to be what it is, how should it be changed, how can such changes be brought about? The second is a focus on the question of women's identity—what does it mean to be a woman, how is this best explained, how does one become a woman? I want to emphasize here the ways in which the positioning together of these approaches is disruptive within feminist theory. The responses proposed to each of these questions raise problems for those proposed in response to the other. While this may seem to be a disruption that entirely undoes the possibility of feminist theory, it is an instance of what I mean by a reconfiguration. And this particular reconfiguration is an extremely important moment in feminist theory, for it has generated a reappraisal of what feminist theory so far has accomplished, as well as what it has provoked, intentionally or unintentionally. There is no recent development in American academic practice that has been led, by sympathetic as well as unfriendly critique, to interrogate itself—its foundations, its implications, its results—as thoroughly as feminist theory.

So, in tracing these reconfigurations of feminist theory, I give in to conflicting impulses that are a function of the contradictory position I find myself occupying here. On the one hand, I give an account of feminist theory, explicating the meaning of its questions to show how the issues cur-

rently debated within feminist theory came to be so. But I also emphasize the points at which feminist theory's attempts to answer its questions break down, the points at which its answers encounter objections from within feminist theory. To the extent that I function as a philosopher here, I want to show that the reconfigurations of feminist theory have had the effect of surfacing better questions. To the extent that I function as a feminist here, I want to contribute in some way to the self-interrogation that I see ongoing in feminist theory. While I want to avoid as much as possible forcing any closure on these reconfigurations, I recognize that to give an account of feminist theory is to establish a framework for understanding it that in some ways forecloses possibilities for further questioning.

1. The Question of Women's Situation

In considering the question of women's situation, I want to trace one reconfiguration of feminist theory. This is the move away from the appeal to established political theories and traditions as sources for explanations of women's situation and toward the development of accounts of women's experience as foundations for theories to explain women's situation. A brief survey of feminist work on women's situation shows that explanations attempted so far have generated more resistance than consensus within feminist theory. This resistance has raised questions about both the project of appropriating established traditions in political theory for feminist theory and the project of explaining women's situation by appealing to some account of women's experience. By questioning what an account of women's experience assumes about experience and identity (about being a woman and having women's experiences), the project of explaining women's situation collides with the question of women's identity.

Appeals to most of the established traditions in political theory mark feminist theory's attempts to explain women's situation and develop arguments for changing social and political arrangements to improve it. And the presuppositions typical of political theory are at work here: for instance, that the defense of a particular set of political arrangements is best accomplished by appealing to a convincing theory of human nature and showing that these political arrangements are best suited to human persons so understood. In feminist theory, this approach has yielded a number of hybrid positions, such as liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, and socialist feminism.¹

The attempt to appropriate established political theories and turn them to this task of feminist theory, however, has shown that such theories usually cannot account adequately for women's situation without having to be so reconstructed as to be almost unrecognizable. Many feminist theorists have concluded that this is a function of gender bias in theory construction,

that is, that the 'human nature' or 'human situation' to which such theories appeal is actually a masculine subject, or the situation of the subject of masculine experience. For instance, some have argued that an analysis of human nature in terms of rational autonomous agency, such as that on which liberalism relies, is a convincing account of human nature only if one overlooks human embodiment and material needs and the need for emotional and psychological connectedness, aspects of human existence which are central to women's experiences as a result of a gender division of labor. Thus, liberalism's theory of human nature cannot account for much of women's experience and offers little basis for theorizing these aspects of human existence.²

Others have made similar arguments about Marxism. Marx's view of labor as a paradigmatically human practice understands labor as the transformation of the natural (the nonhuman) world in terms of human material needs. On this view, labor is always to some extent objectified in the product of labor, and the social organization of labor determines all other social relations. Such an understanding of the paradigmatically human, however, does not account well for women's experiences of pregnancy, birth, and child-rearing, of meeting the psychological and emotional needs of others and sustaining connectedness with others, or of sexual objectification and exploitation. These experiences cannot be adequately theorized as instances of labor as Marxism understands it.³

Thus, the appropriation and reworking of established positions in political theory for feminist purposes reveals gaps in these theories, and shows that these gaps are only barely concealed by the theories' avoidance of questions about women's situation. This account of gender bias in traditional political theory reconfigures feminist theory toward the development of explanations of women's situation that explicitly appeal to a feminine subject, or the situation of the subject of feminine experience. Various forms of radical⁴ or cultural feminism,⁵ more recently called 'difference feminism',⁶ make this sort of argument. Analyses of women's sexual objectification and exploitation have been developed to show that patriarchy, the domination of women by men, is the fundamental social relation that determines the nature and quality of all others, and that the liberation of women, as well as of all oppressed persons, requires dismantling patriarchy. Analyses of an ethic of care focus on experiences that women are more likely to have as a result of a gender division of labor, such as the experiences of mothering, of meeting the material, emotional, and psychological needs of others, or of sustaining relationships among persons. They also look to patterns of women's psychological and moral development or women's traditional subcultures within patriarchy for more adequate theories of human nature or human experience.⁷ Analyses of these experiences then provide grounds for a defense of social and political arrangements better suited than patriarchy to the human so understood.

Such arrangements would be based on traditionally feminine values or virtues such as empathy with and concern for others, attentiveness to the specificity of different contexts of human existence, and the priority of sustaining connections over maintaining boundaries among persons.

With this particular reconfiguration, however, feminist theory has become more conflicted over the question of how to explain and argue for changes in women's situation. Consider, for instance, the proliferation of feminist theories addressed to this question. In 1978, when Alison Jaggar and Paula Rothenberg first published *Feminist Frameworks*,⁸ they distinguished liberal, Marxist, radical, and socialist feminisms, and Jaggar argues for this same taxonomy in *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*.⁹ The 1984 edition of *Frameworks* adds, with some hesitation, the perspective of women of color, while the 1993 edition talks about overlapping lenses through which to see women's subordination, and pairs lenses and theories as follows: the lens of gender with liberalism; the lens of class with classical Marxism; the lens of sex, gender, and sexuality with radical feminism; the lens of gender and class with socialist feminism; the lens of race, gender, class, and sexuality with multicultural feminism; and the same edition identifies as 'global feminism' a perspective on "women's subordination worldwide." In *Public Man, Private Woman*, Jean Elshtain specifies radical, liberal, Marxist, and psychoanalytic feminisms before arguing for her own version of a feminist theory,¹⁰ which she elsewhere calls 'social feminism'.¹¹ Josephine Donovan's *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism*¹² offers accounts of Enlightenment liberal feminism, cultural feminism, feminism and Marxism, feminism and Freudianism, feminism and existentialism, radical feminism, and a "new feminist moral vision." Rosemarie Tong's *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*¹³ distinguishes seven forms of feminism—liberal, Marxist, radical, psychoanalytic, socialist, existentialist, and postmodern. Eliminating the overlapping categorizations, this represents eleven feminist theories developed in fifteen years!

This proliferation of feminist theories suggests both that feminist theory so far has failed to articulate an adequate position on women's situation and women's experience, and that the project of developing feminist theories itself should be called into question. For instance, each of these theories has generated objections on the part of or on behalf of specific groups of women, who argue that important aspects of their identities (race, class, sexual orientation, etc.) are not adequately articulated in these accounts of women's situation or experience.¹⁴ On this view, the already established political theories no more admit consideration of these aspects of identity than they do of gender, and the accounts of women's experience offered as foundational for feminist theory emphasize gender in such a way as to exclude consideration of other categories of identity.

But this reconfiguration of feminist theory has also surfaced several

important questions. It questions the relationship of feminist theory to established traditions in political theory, for instance, asking whether and how bringing different questions to the reading of these political theories enables them to be read differently. It also raises questions about the project of taxonomy itself. To what extent should feminist theory involve the neat and orderly categorization of itself? Is feminist theory mired in such work because it has taken up a stance of submission vis-à-vis the history of political theory? Or is such categorization the inevitable result of feminism's becoming a kind of theorizing? Finally, this reconfiguration in feminist theory raises questions about what is implied in the move toward thinking experience in terms of identity. Is specifying certain experiences as women's experiences, that is, breaking philosophy's traditional silence about such experiences by naming them and claiming them for women, a liberating gesture? Or is this to reconsolidate the traditional images of women that have historically been deployed with results oppressive of women? In this way, the question of women's situation encounters the question of women's identity.

2. The Question of Women's Identity

Ever since Simone de Beauvoir's argument that women are not born, but made,¹⁵ a central concern of feminist theory has been to explicate the processes through which women are made, to give an account of femininity. There are two points of departure here. The first is the view that femininity is not adequately explained by appeal to female anatomy and physiology, although feminist theorists disagree about whether—and if so, how—biology should be a factor in an account of gender identity.¹⁶ The second is the view that, at least in modern Western thought, theories of human identity formation, despite their claims to universality, tend to focus on masculinity or men's experience, to argue that some quality of masculinity or some aspect of men's experience is definitively human, and thus to yield accounts of women's identity as a deviation from that norm.

Here feminist theory intends to avoid both the deterministic accounts of gender identity that follow from equating gender and the body, and the flawed accounts of femininity as the deviation from a norm that follow from theories of identity formation that assume the masculinity of the subject of identity. Feminist theories of gender identity are intended to explain the persistence of the different and unequal significance of masculinity and femininity in social relations in the modern era, while also enabling a reconstruction of gender identities so as to end the devaluation of femininity and the exclusion of women from those activities and practices most valorized in modern social relations. A brief survey of recent work on this question shows that explanations of women's identity have proliferated, that

there has been considerable resistance to these explanations within feminist theory, including resistance to the very project of theorizing identity, and that this resistance further problematizes the appeal to women's experience as the foundation for an account of women's situation.

Feminist theory has looked to already established theories of identity formation, such as the sociology of roles, stage theories of psychological development, and psychoanalysis, as sources for explanations of women's identity. Here, too, feminist theory has become embroiled in debates about whether such theories adequately explain gender identity, or whether they can be reworked so as to address this question adequately. Feminist theory's ongoing engagement with psychoanalysis is perhaps its most thorough instance of such involvement. Feminist theory's relationships to psychoanalysis range from an insistence that it is irredeemably misogynist¹⁷ to a view that its adoption of the development of masculinity as its paradigm for human development is a serious but correctable problem for its use for feminist purposes.¹⁸ Thus, feminist theory has also included various attempts to rework psychoanalysis—for instance, by focusing on the pre-Oedipal period,¹⁹ or on the ways in which the question of femininity is disruptive of psychoanalytic texts, especially Freud's,²⁰ or by turning to other reworkings, such as Lacanian psychoanalysis.²¹ And feminist theory's preoccupation with psychoanalysis has also elicited resistance within feminist theory on the grounds that psychoanalysis provides little or no basis for theorizing other aspects of identity.²²

The question of women's identity has proliferated explanatory concepts in a way analogous to the proliferation of feminist theories addressed to the question of women's situation. Rejecting the view that gender is reducible to the body, but finding already established theories of identity formation inadequate to account for gender identity, feminist theory articulates the distinction of sex and gender. 'Sex' refers to the anatomical and physiological differences that characterize human males and females, and 'gender' refers to the psychological, social, and political meanings these differences come to have in social contexts.²³ Gender is thus the social and cultural encoding of the meaning of sex. On the assumption that bodily manifestations of sex are invariant, the sex/gender distinction points to the need for an explanation of how gender is constructed and how the social construction of gender is related to the different and unequal position of women in society.

The sex/gender distinction itself, however, raises difficult questions about gender and embodiment.²⁴ If gender is the social construction of the meaning of sex, then what is the sexed body? What are we knowing about bodies, in knowing that bodies have a sex, if sex is distinct from gender? And how do we know it? Here the body and its sex seem to be some sort of inert, raw material out of which gender is made or onto which gender is grafted. And knowledge of how sex becomes gender presupposes some

experience of the sexed body apart from gender, or at least some access to the un- or pre-gendered, but sexed, body. This is also implied by the view that an understanding of the social processes that construct gender will allow the reconstruction of gender identities, so that, while there will still be males and females, there might no longer be masculinity and femininity, or masculinity and femininity might have different meanings.

On the other hand, if gender is the social construction of the meaning of the body, then what is sex to the body? If the social construction of gender identity operates on the body in some way, what exactly is sexed embodiment? The argument that gender is the social construction of the meaning of the body raises the possibility that there is no necessary connection between sexual dimorphism and gender dimorphism, that is, that the body is susceptible to a multiplicity of socially constructed gender meanings. And the sex/gender distinction similarly problematizes the question of sexual desire. If sexual desire is socially constructed in a way similar to the social construction of gender, then there is also no necessary connection between sexual dimorphism and any dimorphism of sexual desire; sexual desire is also susceptible to a multiplicity of socially constructed meanings.

Thus, whether gender is the social construction of the meaning of sex (the sex of the body) or of the meaning of the (sexed) body, the question of sex remains intact. The sex/gender distinction, then, looks more like an explanatory triad—the body/sex/gender—with ‘sex’ as a pivotally unstable term. In feminist theory’s attempts to articulate the relationship of the body, sex, and gender, the category ‘sex’ is always poised on the verge of collapsing back into either the body or gender. Despite feminist theory’s intentions, then, the sex/gender distinction, or the body/sex/gender triad, seems to undo the possibility of accounting for that which it was developed to explain.

Feminist theory developed the sex/gender distinction to explain masculinity and femininity, to account for the persistent significance of gender identity in social relations, and to enable the reconstruction of gender identities. But it seems instead to have dispersed masculinity and femininity among a multiplicity of genders and sexual desires. This reconfiguration might do more than an explanation of the social construction of masculinity and femininity to enable the reconstruction of gender identities. But it problematizes any explanation of the significance of masculinity and femininity typical of social relations in the modern era.

In response to this reconfiguration, feminist theory has turned to the question of difference itself, especially as this is posed by various forms of post-structuralism, for some way of thinking the relationship of the body, sex, gender, and sexual desire without relying on the category ‘sex’ to function as it does in the sex/gender distinction. But with this move, feminist theory finds itself confronting a variety of challenges to the very project of

theorizing identity. Jacques Lacan's argument that the self's relationship to the desire of the other means that subjectivity is not only constructed within discourse but also fundamentally divided,²⁵ deconstruction's critique of the metaphysics of presence that grounds theories of identity,²⁶ and Michel Foucault's analyses of the ways in which being a subject is always also a subjection to normalizing discursive practices and regimes of power,²⁷ all throw into question the concept of identity on which feminist theory's project of theorizing women's identity depends. And, while some feminist theorists see these difficulties for theorizing identity as a challenge that feminist theory must engage, others have serious misgivings about surrendering the concept of identity, because feminism, if it is to be about anything, ought to be about women articulating and reconstructing what it means to be a woman.²⁸

At this point, the two approaches in feminist theory that I have distinguished—that which focuses on women's situation and that which focuses on women's identity—and considered separately, must be brought together. From the perspective of the present moment in feminist theory, it seems that these two sets of questions have been on a collision course. The attempt to explain women's situation, and to develop arguments for how to change it, has made explicit in established political theories and traditions a gender bias resulting from the failure to consider women's experience in its specificity. For this reason, feminist theoretical accounts of women's situation have come to rely on a more explicit appeal to women's experience, which presupposes some account of women's identity. But the attempt to explain women's identity has provoked difficult questions about the very concept of identity, thus undermining the appeal to women's experience that has become foundational to the project of explaining and changing women's situation. In short, this reconfiguration leaves feminist theory in the difficult position of wondering what can be said for, by, and about women when what it means to be a woman has become less rather than more certain. In other words, feminist theory faces a set of questions about what questions it might now ask. What other ways of thinking identity, experience, and situation might emerge here? How else might we theorize agency, action, and change? How else might we conceptualize the body, sex, and gender; or gender and other aspects of identity? What other sorts of critical encounters with what other established (or establishing) disciplines and theoretical perspectives can we anticipate? I do not know the answers to these questions. But I do recognize them as the sort of difficult yet compelling questions that philosophy is also thought to raise and address. Philosophy, I believe, would be a more difficult and yet more compelling academic practice if it were as thoroughly self-questioning and self-critical as feminist theory. Thus, the instability of feminist theory suggests to me, not that feminist theory ought to be reconsidered, but rather that feminist theory's very instability is one reason why it surfaces so many difficult yet

compelling questions. In this respect, feminist theory can serve as a model for philosophical practice, or a position from which to reconsider philosophy.

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