

Feminism Postmodernism

Suzanne Paul

A central point of a recently published book by a feminist philosopher is the refutation of all feminist attempts to articulate a sense in which the history of philosophy reveals distinctively "male" perspectives on reality. All such attempts, the author argues, "do violence" to the history of philosophy and "injustice" to the "extremely variegated nature" of male experience.¹ Indeed, any attempt to "cut" reality and perspective along gender lines is methodologically flawed.

In the 1970s, the feminist imagination was fueled by the insight that the template of gender could disclose aspects of culture and history previously concealed. The male-normative view of the world, feminists argued, had obscured its own biases through its fictions of unity (history, reason, culture, tradition, and so forth). Today, many feminists are critical of what they now see as the oversimplifications and generalizations of this period in feminism.

Susan Bordo, a feminist philosopher, writes in *Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender-Skepticism* about the emergence of gender analytics and the difficulties into

¹ Susan Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender-Skepticism," in Linda J. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, Inc., 1990), 133-34.

which it fell.² In 1979, Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* burst on the philosophical scene in the United States.³ Its author, established and respected within the very traditions he had now set out to deconstruct, was uniquely situated to legitimate a simple yet subversive argument. That argument, earlier elaborated in different ways by Marx, Nietzsche, and Dewey, held that ideas are the creation of social beings rather than the representations or mirrorings of Nature. Rorty's presentation of this argument was philosophically powerful and influential. But it was not Rorty who was ultimately responsible for uncovering the pretensions and illusions of the ideals of epistemological objectivity, foundations and neutral judgment. That uncovering first occurred not in the course of philosophical conversation but in political practice. Its agents were the liberation movements of the sixties and seventies, emerging not only to make a claim to the legitimacy of marginalized cultures but also to unheard voices and suppressed narratives. Now those accounts could no longer claim to descend from the heavens of pure rationality or to reflect the inevitable and progressive logic of intellectual or scientific discovery. They had to be seen, rather, as the products of historically situated individuals with very particular class, race and gender interests. The imperial categories which had provided justification for those accounts—reason, truth, human nature, history, tradition—now were displaced with the historical and social questions: Whose truth? Whose nature? Whose version of reason? Whose history? Whose tradition?

Feminism, appropriately enough, initiated the cultural work of exposing and articulating the gendered nature of history, culture and society. It was a cul-

² *ibid.*, 133-53.

³ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

tural moment of revelation-for feminists and feminist Humanists. The category of the "human," a standard against which all difference translates, was brought down to earth, given a pair of pants and reminded that it was not the only player in town. It was a moment of revelation for me, as a student at the Humanist Institute, to read Carol Gilligan and gain this critical and empowering insight and learn that the language of "rights" is not the ethical discourse of God or Nature but the ideological superstructure of a particular construction of masculinity.⁴ As a female Humanist, what does one do with this information? How does this information impact on a female's status within Humanism? If Humanists, male or female, embrace the Enlightenment position of rationality and humanism at its word and as its starting point-common respect then is due to all people because they are rational. However, women have been unfairly excluded from the respect which they are due as human beings on the basis of an insidious assumption that we are less rational than men. "Difference" has been used to legitimize the unequal treatment of women. Difference will have to be repudiated theoretically and practically in order for women to assume their rightful place in society and in Humanism.

As male and female Humanists, we need to examine gender differences and when and if "difference" translates into "unequal." Since we live in a society in which men have more power than women, it makes sense to assume that what is considered to be more worthy of praise may be those qualities associated with men. This has certainly been the history of Western Humanism. It is very difficult, if not impossible, for female Humanists to find Humanist female role models. History argues that the thinkers of the Enlightenment brought truth and therefore need not be gender-specific. That has always been the sentiment

⁴ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982).

of the modernists. It has taken the postmodernists to say that the experience of gender has and does affect traditional philosophic underpinnings.

Postmodernism has offered feminism, and thus female Humanists, some useful ideas about method, particularly a wariness toward generalizations that transcend boundaries of culture and region. Postmodernism recognizes that objectivity and reason have reflected the values of masculinity at a particular point in history; this recognition by the postmodernists has opened the door to feminists who feel that postmodernism is an ally of feminism. The postmodern critique has come to focus on philosophy and the very idea of a possible theory of knowledge, justice, or beauty that excludes the female experience. As male and female Humanists, we also need to critique the Humanist philosophy that has historically and traditionally excluded the female experience. Jean Grimshaw writes in *Philosophy and Feminist Thought*:

The experience of gender, of being a man or a woman, inflects much if not all of people's lives. . . . But even if one is always a man or a woman, one is never just a man or a woman. One is young or old, sick or healthy, married or unmarried, a parent or not a parent, employed or unemployed, middle class or working class, rich or poor, black or white, and so forth. Gender of course inflects one's experience of these things, so the experience of any one of them may well be radically different according to whether one is a man or a woman. But it may also be radically different according to whether one is, say, black or white or working class or middle class. The relationship between male and female experience is a very complex one. Experience does not come neatly in segments so that it is im-

possible to abstract what in one's experience is due to "being a woman" or "being a man." ⁵

What postmodernism has done, to my way of thinking, is to point out that we live and have always lived in a world where we males and females cannot simply be "human." This is no more possible than it is possible that we can just be "people" in a racist culture. Our language, intellectual history and social forms are gendered: there is no escape from this fact and from its consequences on our lives. Some of those consequences may be unintended, may even be fiercely resisted; our deepest desire may be to transcend gender dualities, not to have our behavior categorized as male or female. But, like it or not, in our present culture, our activities are coded as male or female and will function as such within the prevailing system of gender power relations. One might think that postmodernism, which has criticized the liberal notion of the abstract human, would be an ally here. However, the postmodern critique of liberal humanism is mitigated by its tendency to insist on the correct destabilization of general categories of social identity-race, class, gender, and so forth. Practically the most powerful strategies against liberal humanism have been those that demystify the human through general categories of social identity which give content and force to the notions of social interest, historical location, and cultural perspective.

My research into feminism/postmodernism has uncovered a myriad of information-almost all of it conflicting. What I truly have come to believe is that, at this moment in history, feminists need both the Enlightenment and the postmodernist agendas-but we don't need the same ones for the same purposes or in the same forms as do white, bourgeois, androcentric Westerners.

⁵ Jean Grimshaw, *Philosophy and Feminist Thinking* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

As Humanists we need both the Enlightenment and postmodernist agendas: both will create an environment in which we can develop what I will call the "ideal of community." The ideal of community concerns itself with unity over difference. Community is an attainable dream, but it is something that we as Humanists have never done well. Perhaps when we truly begin to celebrate our gender differences-as different but equal-we will learn the ideal of community. Postmodernists of various inclinations will point out that the world is a confusing place to live in right now, that it is marked by a series of events which challenge our ability to make sense of our world and ourselves, to normality and the future. I ask, when wasn't the world a confusing place to live in? It has always been a challenge and will continue to be a challenge. As Humanists-both male and female-I think we ought to welcome it.