

Procreation, Power, and Personal Autonomy: Feminist Reflections

Chapter 7

Symbolic Struggles and Personal Identity: Desiring Children

"There is need to recognize that infertility is a disease, that it denies to millions of our citizens the dignity of one of life's most fulfilling experiences, the adamant desire to bear a child." Gary Hodgen (1984)

"The desire for children must be among the most basic of human instincts, and denying it can lead to considerable psychological and social difficulties." Robert Edwards (1971)

Our desires are in excess of any object's capacity to satisfy them. (Adam Phillips)

Where they (men) love, they cannot desire, and where they desire they cannot love. (Sigmund Freud)

Call it a cosmic spark or spiritual fulfillment, biological need or human destiny—the desire for a family rises unbidden from our genetic souls. (Quoted by Sara Franklin in 1990, 207)

Western culture is pervaded by narratives that see deep hidden meanings in the most common and visible activities. From Plato's construction of Eros as a powerful and mysterious force to Freud's obsession with sex as the profound key to the hidden meaning of a vast range of practices, the desire to mother has taken on the vestments of a profound compulsion. 1

As we have seen, such pronouncements from prominent reproductive biologists are typical of claims commonly made by advocates for the fertility industry—frequently accompanied by pleas for social support and public funding. Pharmaceutical manufacturers offer to "give nature a helping hand." Lobbyists on behalf of infertile women pressure legislatures to mandate health insurance coverage for infertility treatment. Buttressing their case is an influential faction of the legal community that argues that the desire for a child generates a *right* to satisfaction.²

The plausibility of this view rests on the commonly held assumption that the desire for a child is, in fact, given by nature. This belief is so widely held that it cannot be summarily dismissed as a mere artifact of folk psychology. Scholars often take it for granted too. Some construct elaborate schemes of social

1 Hubert L. Dreyfus, Michel Foucault, 1983. *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. University of Chicago Press, p. 107.

² Prominent representatives of this legal view are constitutional scholar John Robertson and American Bar Institute spokesperson, Lori Andrews (see also Uniake and Warren).

organization resting on this supposition without pausing to distinguish the species-specific need for replication from the desires of individual members. The urge to procreate, they assume, belongs to a natural realm, little affected by cultural customs and norms.

As we have also seen, feminists have, in response, pointed out for at least the last century that if these claims were true, there would be no need for laws against contraception, infanticide, abortion, and infant desertion, nor for literature and art to emphasize the pleasures of motherhood, ignoring the dangers and risks of childbirth.

Recent developments in the fertility industry shift and recontextualize debate about such mind-bending social constraints. Underlying the pleas of reproductive researchers is a curious paradox. For throughout the present century, as women have continued to gain access to more socially valued forms of work, the historic stigma surrounding childlessness seemed to be lifting. But, at the same time, as we saw in chapter 1, with the advent of new fertility technologies, social pressure to reproduce is again intensifying. Appeals to reproductive freedom, commonly associated with termination of an unwanted pregnancy or protection from involuntary sterilization, are now being invoked to gain access to medical services and the use of other people's fertile bodies.³ This state of affairs invites reexamination of the allegedly urgent need for a child, the social context that abets and fosters it, and the personal interests at stake.

My aim here is to disentangle certain strands of argument underlying conflicts about the impact of new reproductive techniques on women's interests insofar as they are tied to desires for children. I will discuss and critique four models that have been used to account for this desire: the instinctual, the social constructivist, the voluntaristic and the psycho-dynamic. Though my emphasis is largely theoretical, my interest is practical as well. In fact, both theoretical and practical dimensions are closely intertwined.

All of the models I discuss incorporate explicit or tacit assumptions about gender specific differences that have implications for public policy. For instance, is there a social obligation to provide medical services to the involuntarily infertile? If so, who should be the beneficiaries of such services and at whose expense? And how should potential conflicts of interest (provider/patient, researcher/therapist, male/female partner) be resolved? Such questions all relate back to speculation about the status of the desire for children and connections between this desire and female gender identity. Hence I will focus predominantly on the merits and weaknesses of competing models and consider public policy dimensions only in the concluding section. Since distinctively different issues come into play when attention turns to why *men* desire children, I will take up gender-specific differences at the outset and then focus principally on the significance of *women's* desire for children.

How Gender Influences the Desire for a Child

³ As we have seen, framing the issue within a market model of health care delivery implicitly extends commodification beyond services alone to the fertile bodies sought by infertile patients, as exemplified by the aforementioned [Nova](#) video, "High Tech Babies" which included scenes from a presentation to potential donor ova. A spokesman for the company reassured the audience that fertile women were available to provide their ova in "cost effective abundance."

Patriarchal religious and legal traditions tied to the ideology of biological continuity (e.g., my child is my flesh) have in many cultures and historic epochs contributed to a tendency to imbue genetic offspring with symbolic and mystical properties. Fantasies of transgenerational survival are traditionally couched in male metaphors (biblical allusions to seed, for example) and throughout most of history the control and transmission of property has been principally a male prerogative. So inevitable does it seem that men are destined to pass on their seed that many cultures do not even acknowledge the possibility that a man may be infertile.⁴ Accounts of men's desires for children circulate around the fantasy of having a genetically related child.⁵

Fatherhood is virtually never taken to be the central organizer of men's personality in anything like the way motherhood has traditionally defined women's identities. Men's gender identity has been linked directly with their sexual potency, the capacity to impregnate women and a desire for self-replication, so that the child itself may be anticipated principally as evidence of this capacity and/or as a means to perpetuate the blood line.⁶ Men may fulfill themselves through a diversity of different activities, but the worldly endeavors central to men's identities are deemed only second hand substitutes for women whose destiny consists in that single unitary occupation, motherhood.

The reduction of women's identities to their childbearing function is deeply etched in language too. There is no corresponding masculine locution for any of the commonly used expressions that characterize women's identity. Categories that mark women's nature—like "barren women," "childless women," or even "child-free women"—are all tied to fulfillment of the biological capacity to bear children. But women who talk about their own desire for children seldom stress biological capacity alone. Instead, they tend to emphasize the continuity of relationship joining the experiences of bearing, birthing, and rearing. This emphasis is hardly surprising considering that within most cultural contexts becoming a parent structures women's subsequent self-development far more fundamentally than a man's.⁷ Mothering immerses her in activities that are likely to occupy a good portion of her life, a point that has not been lost on those who appeal to women's instincts to secure women's complicity in confinement to the domestic sphere of human activities.

Women have been particularly vulnerable to claims that certain desires belong to nature, that they are not the effects of their own agency but of forces that impinge on them, a presumption which contributes

⁴ See Handwerker. On the putatively innate urge to reproduce one's seed (claimed by sociobiologists) see Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories about Women and Men* (NY, Basic Books, 1985, Ch. 5) and Janet Sayers, *Biological Politics* (1982).

⁵ Considering the diversity of cultural traditions surrounding men's desires for children Michael Bayles' (1984) willingness to entertain the view that the desire to beget may be wholly instinctual seems highly implausible.

⁶ On the symbolic significance of blood ties as a symbol of permanence in personal relationships, see Stanworth (1987, 19). For an argument demonstrating that emphasis on blood ties is not biologically given but culturally and historically specific see Edholm (1982) and Turtle "The unnatural family," in E. Whitelegg et. al, eds. *The Changing Experience of Women* (Oxford, Martin Robertson, (1982 Ch. 5, 75). On differences between fathering and mothering and men's biological tie to children see Rich (1976), particularly 12 and 60 and de Beauvoir (1953,82).

⁷ See particularly Adrienne Rich (1976) on the complex interconnections between the experiences of bearing and rearing children.

to a view common within liberal traditions that women are bound to nature and men are representatives of culture.⁸ Tied to this view is often another related claim that women have no distinctive sexual desire beyond satisfying men's desires.

The Diversity of Women's Desires for Children: Voluntarist Accounts

Rosalind Coward in her witty and insightful work: *Female Desires: How They Are Bought, Sold and Packaged* (1985) notes some of the many different meanings associated with the urge to have children:

Some speak of a sense that a child might fill up a feeling of loneliness, some of a sensual desire for a child's body close to their own, some of a desire just to have the experience, some of a desire for a 'normal' family, some of a sense that having children has just got to be better than being pushed around in rotten low paid jobs, and some of the desire to have a particular person's child.

Others have extended the range of possible motivations still further. Angela McBride in *The Growth and Development of Mothers* (1973) speaks of the desire to experience the sense of fusion with another being or the anticipated gratification in meeting the needs of another who is totally dependent on you. Or one may be seeking to re-experience one's own childhood vicariously and by reliving it, overcome the blunders one tripped over the first time through.

It would be overly hasty to leap directly from the plethora of reasons women might give for desiring children to the conclusion that the desire (or at least the decision to act on it) are solely matters of individual choice, that there is no common underlying pattern tying women's desires for children to either a biology propensity or social determinants. As we have seen, there is need to recognize, too, that comparatively few women are ever called upon to give any account of their desire for a child, even to themselves. Undoubtedly, many who find themselves pregnant were never aware of the promptings of desire. Others may not have intended to have a child at all. So those who do speak of the desire might be viewed as a distinctive subset of women. Any account that seeks to explain the desire for a child will have to concede that growing numbers of women never acknowledge experiencing such a desire and many who do, do not act on it.

Taken together with the great diversity of explanations for the desire, these observations indicate that even if the desire is taken to rest on a common biological capacity, it is likely to have vastly different meanings in changing historical contexts,⁹ (since different societies use a multiplicity of devices to mark women's bodies with representations of women's reproductive potential) and even within the lives of similarly situated contemporaneous women. Social and economic status, undoubtedly, influences the desire to mother too. For teenage mothers the thought of a child of "their own" may represent an opportunity for

⁸On the tendency within liberalism to associate reason with men and desire with women see Nicholson, and Elshtain, p. 9. Of course, appeal to instinct has not been directed solely to women. But appeal to men's instincts often serves very different purposes, justifying anti-social practices such as rape by redefining them as instinctual expressions of men's sexual desire.

⁹ See Mahowald (1993, 244) on differences in motivation to mother among different classes and races.

agency, adulthood, independence.¹⁰ Alice Miller relates the fantasy of one of her subjects who told her: "I want to have someone whom I can completely possess, and whom I can control (unlike my own parents); someone who would stay with me all of the time."¹¹ The less social power and fewer options one has the more having children may represent the only path toward adult agency. In contemporary Western societies that offer virtually no other way of representing women's reproductive potential and few alternatives to biological connection for developing relationships that support these girls' needs for self-affirmation, it is not easy to dismiss their desires as impractical or selfish. The meanings that attach to the desire for a child may depend largely on the availability of other opportunities to experience a sense of personal agency. Thus women who are advantageously positioned within established social hierarchies and have ample opportunity to perceive themselves as people worthy of respect and recognition are the most likely to defer childbearing to later years or forego it altogether.

Thus even granting biological roots, the options through which a desire might be satisfied will inevitably depend on social arrangements within a specific social framework, on how the society structures needs and shapes technologies to satisfy them. Consider, after all, how distinctively different cultural arrangements (workplace structures, transportations) vary in response to basic human needs such as nutrition, shelter, or clothing.

Contrary to the claims of traditionalists, there may be no genuine desire to be discovered hidden beneath its degenerative forms and contrary to the claims of some feminists there may be no real choices lurking behind the seemingly illusory ones. The actual issue is likely to be far more complex and difficult. For how do vaguely undifferentiated desires intersect with socially and historically structured gender differences to allow a recognizable desire for a child to emerge? And how can all the indefinite indeterminate ways in which such a desire can be expressed be compressed into the very few available options?

Feminist Responses to the Fertility Industry

As we have seen, one influential group of feminist activists have pressed their way into public forums and confronted the medical authorities directly. "If our desire can only be satisfied by yielding control of our bodies to you," they insist, "we'd prefer to remain unfulfilled!" They call attention to the self-serving motives underlying the avowedly altruistic intentions of those whose economic and professional interests are bound up with creating a market for infertility treatment. They emphasize how organized medicine's involvement with women's reproductive health has led to such problems as the increasing medicalization of childbirth and the deleterious side-effects of hormonal and barrier contraceptives, connecting these technological failures to the likely long term side effects of ovarian stimulation drugs and the intrusive interference of reproductive endocrinologists into the most private details of sexual relations. If the medical establishment were truly committed to alleviating the sufferings of those whose procreative desires are frustrated, they contend, resources would not be concentrated on

¹⁰ See, for instance Beatrix Campbell's *Wigan Pier Revisited* (London, Virago, 1986). I am indebted to Jean Grimshaw for calling this point to my attention and directing me to Campbell's discussion.

¹¹ Cited by Alice Miller in *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (New York, Basic, 1981), 79.

treating patients affected by the symptoms of infertility. They would be investigating such underlying causes of infertility as environmental pollutants and hormonal contraceptives. Submission to medical "technocrats," these feminists argue, does not return control of their bodies to infertile women; instead control is transferred into the hands of the male medical profession.¹² They call on women to resist the new technologies in order to safeguard the choices of women as a *social group*.

Others, claiming to represent involuntarily infertile women, dispute their contentions.¹³ Some challenge the conclusion of those who have concluded that women's collective interests require the infertile to forego the opportunity to pursue their desire for a child, questioning why protection of the interests of women as a "social group" should be bought at *their* own personal expense. Many infertile women feel that feminists who oppose these technologies either do not understand the magnitude of a desire that, at least to them, seems perfectly natural and spontaneous, or doubt the authenticity of their motives in seeking medical assistance to conceive. Unqualified opposition to reproductive technologies, they believe, not only sacrifices the present interests of individual infertile women for the sake of some dubious future benefit to women collectively, but also denies them the protections from abuse of medical powers that might be secured to them if women worked cooperatively for effective regulation and oversight of medical practice.¹⁴

The exaltation of female difference is a common theme within the discourse of both opponents and supporters of medically assisted procreation. The contested issue revolves about the locus of female difference, whether it is the capacity to bear children or to participate in a distinctively female-centered community. Hence the source of the desire for a child is elevated to a focal issue, whether the desire is a natural manifestation of female difference or a product of patriarchally constructed norms and expectations. Advocates for infertile women tend to speak as though this desire were so natural as to be wholly determined by instinctual impulses or drives. On the other hand, opposing feminists advocate unqualified rejection of new infertility interventions, emphasizing the extent to which the desire for a child, or at least any distinctive expression of it, depends on cultural conditioning. They frequently cite Andrea Dworkin's declaration that within reigning patriarchal institutions "(the) individual woman is a fiction, as is her will."¹⁵ Only by separating themselves from institutionalized forms of social control can women possibly reclaim their wills as their own.

¹² The term "technocrat" is borrowed from Gena Corea (1985) and has subsequently been appropriated by other members of this group. Representative of this point of view have published a number of anthologies and single authored volumes including Arditti (1984), Corea (1987), and Rowland (1987). In recent years they have extended their critique to encompass a number of other medical interventions including the abortion of impaired fetuses and therapeutic uses of fetal tissue. See, for instance, Raymond's *Women as Wombs* (1993)

¹³ See, for instance, Lasker (1987), Salzer (1986) and the publications of RESOLVE, a national organization for the infertile.

¹⁴ Some have pointed out that even if the desire to have children is socially induced, as the resistance feminists claim, its strength and persistence may be as intense as if it were an integral part of human nature (Chadwick 1987, 14).

¹⁵ Corea, *The Mother Machine* (1985, 228). Corea is quoting (approvingly) from Andrea Dworkin's 1983 book, *Right Wing Women*.

Within both groups is a strong tendency to lean toward one or another version of gender determinism. Women are shaped--either by biology or culture. Either the desire for a child is so inevitably bound up with women's identity that those who fail to satisfy it are doomed to suffer the effects of an unfulfilled life, or recourse to technology cannot be counted as an exercise of personal choice at all; it is solely evidence of cultural conditioning.

Both views are vulnerable to criticism on several grounds. Insofar as proponents of either purport to be making factual claims, they are easily refutable. Countering the contention of the fertility industry are many women who claim to have chosen childlessness voluntarily.¹⁶ And contrary to the universalizing stance of those calling for resistance to medically assisted procreation are many women's voices denying that these opponents speak for all women. However, to read their claims only at the descriptive level is to ignore their normative force. The fertility industry's appeal to instinct works to naturalize, essentialize, and extend a feminine norm permeated by the sanctity of religious and cultural tradition. The opponents' appeal to social conditioning aims to mobilize resistance to that norm. Both seek to influence public policy; the fertility industry by pressing demands for regulatory measures and funding that would support new conceptive techniques; the opposing group by calling for resistance to medicalized infertility services.

At a practical level, of course, this parallelism cannot be sustained. There are notable differences between the two groups. The balance of social power weighs heavily in favor of the medical and pharmaceutical establishments. The political position of opposing feminists is considerably weaker. Their potential power depends in large part on their success in persuading policy makers and those with influence over them (conference organizers and the media, for instance) that they do, in fact, represent "women as a social group."

Both the views of supporters and opponents of the view that desire for a child is natural might, of course, be summarily dismissed as variants of a reductionist determinism. Within the binary terms in which such nature/culture debates are commonly cast, these alternatives are exhaustive and irreconcilable. However, both claims are suspect: that any human motives are transparent to instinct and that social conditioning can wholly obliterate instinct. Nonetheless, the central issue: how to understand the desire for children and how to assess claims to the satisfaction of this desire, merits closer scrutiny, if only to dislodge the issue from such naturalizing and essentializing constructions. As noted earlier, actual women's professed desires are far more diverse, complex, and conflicted than the polarities of nature and culture represent them to be. Moreover, these polarized alternatives obscure the diversity of ways different cultures organize and differentiate whatever may be the biological raw materials out of which gender specific desires are constructed and obliterate the subjectivity of individual women whose desires they happen to be. Hence it would appear, at least at first glance, that there is a voluntarist element in the desires of individual women for children.

The appeal of voluntaristic accounts of the desire stems from the recognition that neither the instinctual nor the social conditioning explanations are able to account for certain features commonly present in expressions of the desire. Unlike some instinctual accounts of the sexual drive portraying it as a blind quest for release, the desire for children has a concrete aim and specific direction. The instinctual account fails to explain the distinctive routes such desire takes in quest of satisfaction, the choice of some to renounce the aim altogether or the absence in others of any recognition of such a desire. Some versions

¹⁶ See, for instance, Ireland (1993) and Reti (1992).

of the instinctual account explain away *lack of desire* for a child as a pathology attributable to negative parental experience. But since perceptions of the adequacy or inadequacy of one's parenting are as often a motive for having children as remaining childless, such accounts lack explanatory force for they fail to explain why the option to remain childless should be viewed as a pathology.

The social conditioning account has a hard time explaining the persistence and tenacity of many women's desires for children. It is implausible to assume that patriarchal institutions have such a tight hold on power that personal agency is squelched so completely. The analysis of power relations on which the social conditioning view rests assumes a monolithic conception of power, that views all power as emanating from a single central site and takes its exercise to be deliberately and invariably repressive. Analyses of power relations influenced by the thought of Michel Foucault challenge that assumption by showing (for sexual desire, in particular) how power is often decentered and defused and operates by inciting and channeling desires in ways that make specific constructions of them *seem* natural. Though the social constructivist thesis has a certain plausibility lacking in instinctual accounts of desire, it suffers from two interrelated weaknesses: an overly simplistic conception of the coercive power of patriarchal institutions and an inadequate account of intrapsychic reality. Thus it fails to capture the sense of the political devices and strategies that naturalize the exclusionary practices through which subjects are constituted. Similar flaws contribute to the implausibility of voluntaristic accounts. None of the three options considered to this point have the capacity to integrate both the social and psychic dimensions of desire in a way that makes it plausible to attribute personal agency to the desiring subject. Both the instinctual and the social conditioning accounts obliterate subjectivity. Voluntaristic accounts reduce it to arbitrary choice devoid of both natural and social determinants. Clearly, an account is needed that offers a richer more multi-dimensional construction of the significance of such desire within psychic life.

Reconfiguring Desire: Psychodynamic Accounts¹⁷

Psychoanalytic thought has tried to explain why cognitive awareness alone is not likely to be effective in remapping one's desires, particularly insofar as they take shape during infancy and early childhood in conjunction with a gendered identity. Psychoanalytic theory, like feminism itself, has been centrally preoccupied with how sexual difference is constituted. Nonetheless, many feminists have shunned this approach to theorizing and turned exclusively to social arrangements to explain the connection between maternity and female identity. They call attention to weaknesses within Freud's own account and the revisionist accounts of many of his followers, particularly their phallogentrism—the splitting of women into two types (good women who marry and mother and whores who supposedly do not), identification of normative female identity with mothering, and the presumption that maternity is the goal of adult female development. Hence, apart from recent French feminists and those coming under their influence, feminist scholars have seldom turned to psychoanalytic accounts to understand women's desire for children. Yet the tenacious hold of desire would not be possible were there not something distinctive about men and women's early childhood experiences that lays the groundwork for desiring children.

17 LP: AD writes here: “Incorporate from Grosz book (1994) her notes on p. 222 and 261; also her account of agreement/ disagreement among feminist commentators on Freud, 57-58, 60, 182, 199, 202.” I suspect that she is referring to note 15 on p. 222, which discusses two traditions of the concept of desire, the negative (traceable to Plato) and the positive (traceable to Spinoza). Elizabeth Grosz (1994), *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Indiana University Press). The reference to p. 261 must be a typo, as there are only 250 pages in the book.

Working within the conceptual framework of psychoanalytic thought Jessica Benjamin tries to account for how the cultural image of women has been constructed from the perspective of male desire. Following on the work of Nancy Chodorow and others who draw on psychoanalytic sources to understand the propensity of women who have been nurtured by women to become mothers, Benjamin explores how Freudian interpretation may be utilized more fully to uncover other facets of prevailing images of women and move beyond them. Though competing object relations theorists provide an alternative explanation of a significant part of the developmental story, it is still incomplete. Benjamin shifts the focus of attention from the subjective perspective of the early infant who has not yet come to distinguish the mother as a separate being to the adult mother who is herself a subject with her own distinctive desires, not all of whom are directed toward the child. Benjamin considers aspects of the mother's identity that play no direct part in nurturing activity.

This shift in perspective creates an intrapsychic "space" between the mother's and daughter's identities that can be occupied in a myriad of different ways depending on particular family experiences and that provides source and support for different subjectivities. The way Benjamin constitutes the relation between mother and child contrasts notably with theorists who see this relationship as continuous, leading them to the conclusion that girls cannot develop the sense of mutuality and mutual recognition that is available to boys who are motivated by the intervention of their fathers to separate from their mothers. She remarks:

Admittedly, we have no female image or symbol to counterbalance the monopoly of the phallus in representing desire. Though the image of woman is associated with motherhood and fertility, the mother is not articulated as a sexual subject, one who actually desires something *for herself* (my emphasis)—quite the contrary. The mother is a profoundly desexualized figure. And we must suspect that this desexualization is part of a more general lack of subjectivity in society as a whole. Just as the mother's power is not her own, but is intended to serve her child, so, in a larger sense, woman does not have the freedom to do as she wills; she is not the subject of her own desire. (1988, 88).

Benjamin links two points here that are centrally relevant to the matter at hand: the desexualization of mothers and the denial to women of a subjective sense of self. For on the standard account, once sexuality is cut loose from reproduction, once woman is no longer mother, we have no way to represent women's agency as a sexual subject. 18

The tendency to desexualize mothers to which Benjamin refers has been much discussed by feminists¹⁹ who have connected it to the fantasy of the perfect mother, wholly altruistic, desiring nothing for herself, infinitely caring and nurturing, invested solely in meeting the needs of others. Paradoxically, the mother who most embodies these idealized attributes is just the person most lacking in the marks of sexual agency Benjamin stresses, control over her own future and power to act on her own wishes and impulses. Admittedly, idealization of motherhood does bring women a certain kind of symbolic power, but it is constituted by exclusionary practices that hide their political origins. Insofar as women accommodate to their submission, taking comfort in the idealization of mothers, their dependence on the primary masculine

18 See also Grosz's (1994) discussion of Benjamin on asserting women's desire, p. 82.

¹⁹ Such as Chodorow (1989), and Chodorow and Contratto (1980).

monopoly of power cannot be dislodged. Object relations theorists who overemphasize the role of the mother in the developmental process disregard another of Freud's principal tenets that is needed to give an adequate account of the cultural genesis of sexual difference: that *women lack a desire of their own*. For as gender relations are actually constructed in modern life, desire belongs primarily to the male. Females are in the dependent position where she can only recognize the other. The wholeness of reciprocity is broken down.²⁰

The eclectic analysis of the desire for a child that comes out of Benjamin's synthesis of object relations and Lacanian interpretations of psychosexual development contribute to the construction of a unitary account that incorporates both women's desire as sexual beings and their desire for children. It tries to explain how both of these manifestations of desire are rooted in a common gender system, and it envisages for both a common corrective. Benjamin sees her project as an effort to uncover the cultural roots of this tradition and their hidden dynamics so they can ultimately be counteracted. Her ultimate aim is to learn how biological potentialities have been twisted by culture into this distinctive shape and to reconfigure them in a way that allows women to become subjects of desire, sexual agents with a greater measure of control over their own destinies.

Her use of a psycho-dynamic account of the desire for children captures and extends Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) characterization of the central problem for feminism: displacement of the construction of woman's identity as the "other." She grasps certain features of the grammar of desire and incorporates them within a central narrative. In linguistic construction of desire the description of the desire as an indeterminate psychic phenomenon assumes central importance. Contrasting this retrospectively to the fully determinate material phenomenon that counts as fulfillment of the desire brings the psychic space between desire and fulfillment to the forefront. Like other psychoanalytic theorists, she seeks to characterize that space and explain how it is created.

Such accounts inevitably raise Diotima-like questions about the origins of speech itself. Were there no gulf between desire and fulfillment, language would be unnecessary. Desire is founded on loss and is tied to the origin of the signification process.²¹ The intrapsychic space created provides a source and support for possible subjectivities.

Benjamin develops a model of autonomous individuality with fluid ego-boundaries that are not threatened by otherness.²² The image of desire she sets before her readers stands in marked contrast, both to the voluntaristic paradigm of desire that has dominated liberal individualism's "economic man" that regards subjective preferences as arbitrary and the model that takes subjective preferences to be fully determined by social constructions.²³ I will return to the latter theme shortly.

²⁰ This point still plays a significant part in the account of gender differences given by feminists working in the Lacanian tradition, for whom the phallus is taken to be the central organizer of gender.

²¹ See Laura Mulvey on this point.

²² On this point see Benhabib (1993), particularly her discussion of differences between Benjamin and Butler, 230.

²³ Note Benhabib's critique of Butler, (1993, 216-217).

Toward a Pluralistic Perspective

Mardy Ireland's (1993) study of 105 childless women utilizes this space to account for the distinctively different responses of her subjects to their childlessness. Her analysis reveals significant differences in the subjective meanings childlessness has for these women and invites a distinctively different turn in feminist politics than the perspective articulated by the activist feminist group discussed above.²⁴ It is not so clear within the narratives of Ireland's subjects that reproductive choices (if they can appropriately be regarded as choices at all) can be fitted into a unitary framework that would permit any global conception of what is good or bad for "women as a group."

Ireland sorts her 105 subjects into three different groupings which she applies to these women's desires toward children: the traditional, the transitional and the transformative women. For women in the first group maternity is an organizing element of their personalities, integral to their feminine identity, how they understand their embodiment and project themselves into the future. Though transitional women have not disavowed this dominant conception of gendered identities that tie maternity to femininity, their desires are more diffuse. The subjects who fit into this classification have not deliberately renounced childbearing but delayed it to focus on other interests first. When they turn their attention back to childbearing they find impediments blocking their way. For some it is an inability to find a suitable partner; others with partners decide that this is finally the right time to become pregnant, but pregnancy does not come. Like the traditional woman the desire for a child is still present, but unlike her, their sense of agency is not contingent on fulfilling this desire. The third group, transformative women, include those who have organized their identity in another way. Some may have come to this juncture through the path taken by transitional women, others through a somewhat different sense of lack; a realization that the desire for a child is absent. For both, Ireland thinks, a generative space is opened up within which these women can meet their creative needs which takes the place of the desire to mother in configuration of their identities. Each of these modes of desiring represents a different subjective point of view toward life experiences. For the traditional woman maternity is an essential component of identity; she cannot say "no" to it. The transformative woman's identity is in this sense, at least, complete as well. Transitional women cannot avoid the self-reflective process of rethinking their identities and reorienting their perspectives toward themselves and their social world.

Ireland's account of women's desires supplements Benjamin's. Both resist the tendency to replicate the totalizing gesture that has so pervasively marked masculinist constructions of "woman." Ireland tries to resist totalization by distinguishing within specific individual narratives the different paths desire for a child might follow. Both recognize the limitations of any single route to the reconstruction of the genesis of *all* women's desires. Search for such a universal account is misguided because women's self-identities are

²⁴ I am much indebted to Ireland for stimulating my own curiosity about the subject positions of women who do not desire children. However, I have many more questions than she answers. Her account is silent on the situation of women whose male partners are infertile or instances where it is not possible to attribute the infertility to either partner alone. Also, all of her subjects are presented as though they grew up open to becoming mothers and only gradually came see that this was not for them. Where are the women who never saw themselves as potential mothers at all? Lastly, and probably most troubling, is her reification of femininity. Though her subjects come to recognize that motherhood is not essential to femininity, one is left wondering why the issue needs to be formulated in this way.

shaped not only by gender categories, but also by interlocking identities including race, culture, social and economic class and sexual orientation.²⁵

Ireland's account incorporates prominent features of the narratives of many involuntarily infertile women including their experience of being out of control. Though this kind of experience is familiar to everyone who falls outside the dominant social group, infertile women speak of it in a distinctive way by virtue of their inability to exercise a capacity that they and the society surrounding them see as central to the acquisition and social recognition of personal agency. For at one level, they lack social recognition as an agent who can make things happen, a sense that they are desiring subjects, not merely objects of others' desire.

Benjamin's account affords insight into these women's narratives, e.g., that due to their inability to fulfill their desire for a child, their agency, autonomy, and identity are compromised. Her account aims both to disentangle the connection between agency and the desire to mother and to pursue alternatives to such "phallic structures." These include unmasking the psychodynamics of infantile development within the traditional nuclear family, the devices through which the father has been used as a vehicle for children's psychic separation from the mother and the father's internalization as representation of agency and desire.²⁶

Unmasking presupposes not just a symbol to replace the phallus, but a more comprehensive reorientation, an alternative model for structuring the psyche. Benjamin sketches the kind of conditions under which women might come to acquire "a desire of one's own" which she sees as a wholly different relationship between self and other than prevails in contemporary Western society, a relation in which the daughter's wish—as well as the son's—to be like the powerful father and be loved by him is acknowledged and supported. This can only happen, she insists, where the mother is acknowledged as a sexual agent, herself.

If Benjamin is right, the desire for a child is not readily accessible to conscious change. It's rooted very deeply in the psyche and cannot be readily dislodged. It is not an isolated feature of psychic life either but is closely intertwined with such related marks of female identity as heterosexuality and a myriad of other personality traits that support the aims of reproductive sexuality. Benjamin implies that by coming to understand how the desire for a child is shaped in psychic experience, women can make the unconscious conscious; thus overcoming bondage to this desire and acquiring a sense of their own agency. But the sense of agency she speaks of can only take root where women collectively band together out of a sense of common cause. Both social and psychic structures would need enough plasticity to allow the unravelling of the basic structure assigning systematically different meanings to "mother" and "father." Individual transformation would not suffice; what's needed is a restructuring of basic social institutions, the family and profusion of other social relations that contribute to the identification of personal agency with phallic power.

Conclusion

25 LP: As well, it seems to me, by their specific, idiosyncratic experiences during their early years.

²⁶ On this issue see Diana Meyers (199?).

The program I have sketched here for unraveling the social sources of women's desire for a child may not offer much comfort to infertile women individually. My argument incorporates one of the principal criticisms of the desire for children implicit in the view of feminist activists whose program calls for women to resist reproductive innovations, the view that the desire is the product of culturally constructed arrangements. But what I have tried to show is, first, that such social constructions are not readily accessible to change by an act of will alone and, second, that the socially derivative character of desire is not unique to infertile women. The presumption that there are two forms of desire, an authentic and unauthentic one, is as misguided as is the naive presumption that the desire for children itself has some instinctual form. These presumptions are connected to the same sexual polarities that shape the sexual identities of *all* women. Until we are able to recreate social structures, particularly family structures, that afford women opportunity to develop a "desire of one's own," a sense of active agency that is not borrowed from masculinist culture, we should not so peremptorily dismiss the frustrations of women who seek the experience of children without success.

What kind of claim then do involuntarily infertile women have on society? How strong is that claim? What level of services are they in a position to demand as their right? The frustration of infertile women imposes, I believe, a special claim on society, though not by virtue of any of the specific descriptions of the desire for a child (as power or agency). Rather by virtue of the condition of all women within a social system which still allows too little other space for expression of women's desire. Even if the desire to mother affords only a truncated sort personal agency, unless it can be shown to actually contribute to the prevailing system of dominance, it ought not to be withheld.²⁷ Under some circumstances, the use of technological routes to conception might actually contribute to the subversion of dominant structures. So before concluding that the desire for a child is unworthy of social support, there is need to examine more comprehensively the gender structures that continue to permeate social and cultural life. There is need, as well, to look again at the institutions through which family life reproduces women who find their fullest expression of personal agency in mothering and that affords many women too few options for achieving personal agency apart from that role. Until our efforts to transform the present world have borne fruit, we ought not to summarily foreclose presently available options.

Appended Material²⁸

Some feminists adopt an egalitarian approach that involves suppression of one or the other of these terms, so both women and men are compelled to take on a uniform set of those attributes customarily attributed to either one or the other sex. Depending on how these attributes are apportioned we are all reborn as either thinking minds or nurturing bodies. Out of such utopian schemes a plethora of feminist science fictions has been constructed. But the most obvious displacement strategies involve reversal and revaluation. Take the privileged term, flip over the attributes that apply to it, and assign them to the subordinate term. This strategy draws on a mental process reminiscent of the figure-ground images so

²⁷ LP: I would argue that this position is supported, as well, by the continuing lack of respect—indeed, often contempt—for women who do not become mothers. Obviously this is a difficult issue as there are situations where it is wrong to cave in to such harmful social pressures. However, each of us has only one life, and we have to make the best of what is available to us.

²⁸ LP: Below is some material appended to chapter 7 in AD's drafts. Unlike the notes to herself prefacing some of the other chapters, it is a good deal fuller, and some very interesting points are developed a bit here. So it seems reasonable to me to add it here, despite its unfinished nature.

cherished by psychologists and philosophers. Roy Schafer's application of this imagery to gender relations captures the central problem succinctly.²⁹ The figure is identified as such. It has definition, boundaries, and structure. The ground or milieu is amorphous, unbounded, unarticulated, unstructured. It is anonymous, receding, set back, behind. Whatever identity it has is conferred by its relation to the figure, the way the figure bounds it. But the figure-ground relationship is reversible. By a shift of perspective the duck can become the rabbit; the goblet can be transformed into the woman's silhouette. The terms by which we understand relations between the sexes are inverted.

But this change in content leaves the basic structure untouched. Only when it is realized that these are not transparent visions of reality but mutually exclusive interpretations--seeing the figure as a duck or as a rabbit--does it become possible to challenge the structure itself, to call into question the terms that define it and the agency of those who do the defining. Schafer applies the analogy to the problem of agency, particularly the cultural propensity (replicated in psychoanalytic writing) to view women as a passive ground to be acted on and men as active figure—to see male desire as figure and female desire as ground. [Include discussion of alternative feminist psychoanalytic accounts of the construction of women's desires all maintaining that the desires we have are the effects of configurations of power and the institutional practices and discourses in which power is embedded. They offer these alternatives: (see Wittig on this)]

1) Recover pre-linguistic identity as women

2) disavow gendered identity and invent another (on this see Diana Meyers' paper)

3) Go though and beyond this cultural construction. This could have subversive implications for feminism itself, since it puts the feminist movement in danger of losing its subject altogether, calling into question the foundation of feminist politics. Need to distinguish between a gender identity that is a constitutional feature of personality and social attributions tied to gender that structure social relations. Feminist politics has focused predominately on the latter. But as long as the category of gender remains integral to predominant forms of social subordination. . . .]

TRANSITION

To better understand the part desire for a child places in perpetuating traditional gender dichotomies we will also need to extend feminist scrutiny of cultural differences between male and female sexuality, to explore interconnections between conceptions of women's sexuality and their desire for children. For it cannot be merely coincidental that the same women have been characterized both as *passive* sexual partners and *active* bearers and nurturers of children.

Though Freud was by no means alone in believing that femininity was characterized principally by passivity, he could not help but observe that women were active in the care of their children. In trying to reconcile his theoretical doctrine with his observations he fell back on the assumption that the desire for children was not really a primary desire at all in the way that he took sexual desire to be, but actually a substitute for what women lacked, the most conspicuous symbol of active striving desire in both his culture and ours, the phallus.

²⁹ I am indebted to Schafer's use of this analogy in Ch. 5 of his *Retelling a Life* (New York, Basic Books, 1992). But my interpretation strays away from his.

Freud has been justly criticized by feminists, not only for his male chauvinist view that femininity is defined by reference to women's lack but also for fostering the general psychoanalytic tendency to see separation and individuation as the primary goals of psychosexual development. Nancy Chodorow (1980) has tried to show how idealization of the phallus and idealization of separation are interconnected in Freudian thought. According to Freudian theorists the child can only achieve separation from h/er primary bond to the mother through the intrusion of the father's phallus, the embodiment of the law. Juliet Mitchell has aptly summed up the implication of this account for women in the motto: "No phallus, no power, except those winning ways of getting one" (1975:96). Chief among the winning ways, of course, is to become a "feminine" creature who accepts the desire for children as a fair trade-off for lack of the phallus. Presumably, by resigning herself to this bargain, she will eventually get vicarious access to phallic power by attracting the man who will father her child.

Mitchell's initial acquiescence to this view has been the target of much feminist criticism, as have a whole set of Freudian assumptions about relationships between individuality and separateness.³⁰ Critics have argued that Freud took as a universal given, the patriarchal mode of separation prevailing within his own cultural milieu, that he failed to recognize other paths to self-identification, and that the formation of feminine gender identity need not require the intervention of the father's phallic power. Its development can be explained alternatively on the basis of the girl child's initial identification with the mother. This would yield a reconceptualization of individuality detached from its traditional association with separateness. In the new account the girl child's self-identification does not depend on the break in identification with the mother but instead develops out of that identification.

But in Chodorow's account the daughter's identity is not represented as separate from the mother's. It is assumed that daughters will inevitably assume their mother's places. The relation between mother and daughter is patterned in a very different way than the father-son relationship. The son inherits from the father a lineage that he transforms. Mother-daughter relationships are circular. The daughter learns from the mother how to become just like her, so that she when she grows up she can return to the original starting point and reproduce mothering. Chodorow's problem, of course, is how to get out of this circle. The only solution, she surmises, is for men to become mothers too. But this might not appear so obviously to be the only solution if the mother were granted a distinctive individual identity of her own. Chodorow's account of how maternity is reproduced from generation to generation is not unlike the account provided by some other object relations theorists too--all of whom view the mother's perspective predominantly through the child's experience.

Feminine or masculine (does she ever say this?). Consider position of Diana Meyers: what's needed for a full blown account of women's agency. Expand on Benjamin by distinguishing between subjective and objective senses of one's personal agency. Objective sense: one's agency is recognized and acknowledged, that effective choices are actually available giving access to social goods and benefits. Subjective agency: the felt sense that one is in control of conditions that shape one's future, that there are alternative courses of action available that one has the power to grasp (see Meyers on this). Either subjective or objective agency may exist without the other. Where one has objective agency but no corresponding felt sense of power (a common condition among those suffering from psychological depression) internal constraints prevent one from acting on options that may actually be available. Where there is a felt sense of agency but external conditions preclude its exercise one is caught in a tension that can only be resolved in two ways: by

³⁰ See particularly Benjamin, (1986:81 ff.) and Chodorow (1978:141 ff. and n. 2, 235).

withdrawing to a mental world that perpetuates the self-deception or through action to remove the external constraints. Actually the alternatives are not so clear cut. Consider the situation of a woman who is subjectively mired in the sense that no alternative is open to her but to remain as she is, a victim of spouse abuse, perhaps. The observer may see that options are indeed open to her if only she could perceive them. It may look as though the problem is in her head until we take into account the cultural conditions that have shaped her perceptions--all those who have served as models and authorities for her who either perceive themselves as devoid of agency or who have continually reminded her that agency belongs solely to men.]

Emphasize need to hold opposing claims in relation of tension to one another. Look to Janet Sayers article on urge to relax tension between opposing tendencies (review what Sawicki says about using tensions to subvert structures of dominance). One position speaks out of our past, the other speaks to our possible futures. Neither should be neglected for only by recognizing that past as our own can we create a future responsive to our needs.

Is there room for a dynamic between the sex-gender system she describes and the social-economic system with which it interacts?

Some feminists are likely to question whether social structures can be so readily bent into different forms, particularly within societies where women's reproductive services are still valued more highly than any of women's other contributions to social wellbeing (particularly as it is defined in masculinist terms). Others might be more likely to speculate about the sorts of alternative psychic structures that could emerge, given the developmental path that has already marked the psyche--whether this move is likely to lead back to earlier psychic structures or beyond to some indeterminate future mode of psychic life.

Some French feminists, most notably, Julia Kristeva and Monique Wittig, have argued that discursive language is already so indelibly marked with phallic power that it cannot serve as the vehicle to transport women beyond their captivity to the bonds of sex. Wittig claims that "men" and "women" are themselves political categories and not natural facts.³¹ Gender is not a substantive thing but an activity that is not fundamentally tied to sex. Nor is sex a natural category but a political one serving the purposes of reproductive sexuality. "Sex" is itself a name that enslaves. Thus, in speaking, we inevitably participate in the very terms of our own oppression.

EXPAND: go to Butler, p. 112; see Benhabib criticism of Butler

Wittig, herself, resorts to a kind of deus ex machina to extricate her own critique from the relativity imposed by her characterization. The "I" in speaking, it turns out, transcends language, presupposing both the totality of language and the unity of being. Butler's book makes it easier to dislodge category women from its ontological moorings by avoiding to mention features of women's bodies that most resist representation as historical/political artifacts, those bodily processes that thought admittedly shaped differently in different cultures yet transcend particularities of any specific culture, processes such as menstruation, pregnancy, birth and menopause.(Consider moving to nature chapter.)

Critique here: See Butler and also Meyers article in Bartky & Fraser volume.

³¹ See particularly "One is not Born a Woman" in *Feminist Issues*, 1, 2, 1981, 17.

Kristeva, rather than leaping to a subject beyond language, moves under its literal signification seeking to recapture and reemploy its imagery and metaphor. In doing so she believes she is returning to a dimension of women's psychic life that has been repressed, a relation of continuity that precedes desire and the subject-object dichotomy that desire produces, separating mother from daughter through the imposition of paternal authority and its symbolic abstraction and representation: univocal linguistic discourse. The primary dimension of experience (which she equates to maternal drives) can then only be recovered through displacements of the symbolic that are sanctioned within its structures. Principal among them are the use of poetic language and the act of giving birth, which for her, like Plato, are expressions of pure generativity.

By giving birth, the woman enters into contact with her mother; she becomes, she is her own mother; they are the same continuity differentiating itself. She thus actualizes the homosexual facet of motherhood, through which a woman is simultaneously closer to her instinctual memory, more open to her psychosis, and consequently more negatory of the social, symbolic bond. (Kristeva, 1980)

Wittig and Kristeva's strategies each suggest alternative routes to a recovery of women's agency, Wittig's by leaping over the symbolic norms that structure sexed identity to a non-gendered mode of being, and Kristeva by withdrawing behind them to an antecedent gender identity, from which the desire to mother is viewed as the expression of a wish to re-experience the bond to one's mother prior to initial separation from her and emergence as an autonomous subject (subject to the prohibitions of the paternal law).

Though both strategies are framed within a discourse influenced by Simone de Beauvoir and the French psychoanalytic school stemming from Jacques Lacan, they also share affinities with strategies employed by feminist scholars within the Anglophone tradition. Wittig's move suggests the possibility of transcending linguistic structures to achieve an Archimedean vantage point from which the structures of gendered identities are visible in their entirety, a move implying that such a subject would be without gendered identity altogether. Kristeva's move seeks to recover a univocal conception of the female sex, a sex-specific biological constitution prior to linguistic structures. Each of these alternative strategies share some common features with tendencies within English speaking feminism, Wittig's with . . . and Kristeva's with such cultural feminists as Mary Daly, Susan Griffin and, possibly, Adrienne Rich. Though they do not depend so heavily on psychoanalytic modes of explanation, they and the many feminists who have been influenced by them look to a future women's culture that bears close affinities to Kristeva's account of the early relationship between mother and daughter. (Note: look up critique of this view in Janet Sayer's *Sexual Contradictions*.)

Unfortunately neither of these strategies—at least in the forms expressed by Wittig and Kristeva—are sustainable in practical life. Judith Butler in her ponderous and insightful work: *Gender Trouble* (1990) shows how both defeat themselves. Regarding Kristeva, she questions whether the primary relation to the maternal body that she affirms is a viable construct or even a knowable experience (p. 80). She also calls into question a problem—acknowledged by Kristeva, herself—lodged in her claim that this maternal-like relationship can be re-experienced only in certain culturally sanctioned forms but cannot be maintained within the terms of the culture without leading to psychosis and the breakdown of cultural life, itself (by breaking its founding law, the incest prohibition). Moreover, in describing the maternal body as a bearer of meanings that are prior to culture itself, she preserves the notion of culture as a paternal structure and delimits maternity as an essential precultural reality. According to Butler: "Kristeva understands the desire to give birth as a species-desire, part of a collective and archaic female libidinal drive that

constitutes an ever-recurring metaphysical reality." (p. 90) "Her naturalistic descriptions of the maternal body reify motherhood and preclude an analysis of its cultural construction and variability" (p. 80).

Butler is convinced that a strategy far more likely to lead to displacement of the paternal law and the proliferation of the field of cultural possibilities is to seek to understand these desires as effects of a social practice instituted through kinship relations (rather than a cause prior to them). She endorses Gayle Rubin's reading of Lévi-Strauss' analysis of the exchange of women as prerequisite to the consolidation of kinship bonds. Unlike Kristeva's reading within which the exchange of women represses the maternal body, for Rubin this exchange serves as the mechanism imposing an obligation on women's bodies to reproduce. Kinship effects a sculpting of sexuality such that the desire to give birth is the *result* of social practices which require and produce such desires in order to effect their reproductive ends (1975:182). Butler is able to turn Kristeva's analysis on its head. By recasting Kristeva within Foucault's framework (see prior chapter) which interprets the notion of sex as an artificial unity -- made up of anatomical elements, biological functions, conduct, sensations and pleasures -- that is tied together and cast into a kind of historically specific fictitious unity (1980:154). Maternal instinctual drives are not a *cause* of culture but an *effect* that by reifying maternity "both extends and conceals the institution of motherhood as compulsory for all women" (Butler 1990:92). Transvaluing the desires that maintain the institution of motherhood as a pre-paternal and pre-cultural legitimated institution yields stabilized structures requiring the female body to be characterized primarily in terms of its reproductive function. Kristeva's theorizing, in characterizing maternity as a kind of subversive operation preceding paternal law, contributes, Butler argues, to conceal that law from view, perpetuating the illusion of its inevitability. What is repressed, then, may well be produced by the very same forces by which the law, itself, manifests its power. Any subversion of the law will come about through the law's own terms.

Criticism of Butler: Does she share the postmodern suspicion of the subject, so that instead of seeking out women's (repressed) subjectivity *all subjectivity* is called into question? For if as she maintains, gender identity is a performance and not an interior condition since there is no transcendental subject underlying experience then. . . Is it only a certain version of a masculine self that is problematic? Why this global attack on subjectivity now just when women are beginning to claim an agentic subjectivity (see Flax on this, pp. 87 and 90 in Nicholson (1990) and her own book. Also Wendy Brown's "Where is sex in political theory?" in *Women and Political Theory* I, 3-23, 1987.

Agency issue: Develop three positions: (see de Stefano in Nicholson (1990) for scheme)

- 1) Deny that gender identity makes a fundamental difference, aim for equality;
- 2) Reify gender identity as an *internal* state (see June Jordan's "Declaration of an Independence..." in *Civil Wars* Beacon Press, 1981);
- 3) pluralize it and argue that women cannot develop agency of their own without decentering the dominant male conception of agency since they are not independent of one another; their opposition depends on one another.

Argue for a conception of agency so agent is a locus of experience with a past and a future, bounded by memory and imagination, neither of which is fixed and immutable—who acts out of formulated intentions, weaving plans, retelling the past, responsive to her own actions. She is a being in *process*, not a unity in Kristeva's sense.

On social construction of desire, see Allison, very terms of our own oppression. Naomi Scheman and Jan Raymond; also Jeffrey Weeks on Foucault and F's afterword in Dreyfus and Rabinow.

The desire for a child might have a very different significance in any agricultural economy, for instance, where the labor of children contributes significantly to the family's economic well-being or where support for the non-working elderly falls principally to one's children. In such societies having children contributes critically to survival needs. But in most industrialized countries children are valued more for their psychological contribution to their parents' well-being than their economic contribution to the family economy. As some social critics have pointed out recently this psychological contribution. . . . (Discuss intimacy, see Bellah (1985)).

Stress social pressures, in Romania, for instance that influence women's desires, to choose *not* to have a child can express resistance to an oppressive political regime. Under these social conditions disavowing the desire for a child may be an effective strategy of subversion. Consider example of religious communities (Oneida??) that prohibit sexual activity depending on proselytizing to replenish their numbers. There the obvious "choice" of women, insofar as their choices are constructed by their social environment, is to choose *not* to have children. Pregnancy for these women would be destabilizing to their identity insofar as it is tied to their participation in the community.

Dorothy Burlingham, the psychoanalyst who pioneered work with blind children, was struck by the fact that their questions were so predominantly directed toward the acquisition of visual knowledge. What was reported to them about the visual world seemed so much more important to them than their own experience. The laborious effort they made to construct this "false self," a cosmetic front for the sighted world, drained their energy from the self-identity they experienced and plunged them into fantasy and make-belief and thwarting their normal development. This awareness led her to an understanding of the enormity of visual deprivation and the extent to which the mothers of blind children inadvertently tend to compound the problem by their withdrawal and failure to recognize the real achievements of their children (reported by Michael Burlingham in *The Last Tiffany*, Athenaeum, NY, 1989, p. 298) There are some parallels here to the situation of involuntarily infertile women who take themselves to be living handicapped lives and see medical intervention as their only hope to overcome their handicap.

Prevailing conceptions of agency—even feminist accounts—are deficient on other grounds, as well. They all replicate traditional gender dichotomies, either by confining women to a traditionally feminine sphere of nurturance or mimicking the established male model of agency.³² The dichotomies that mark the gendered conception of agency—self/other, dependence/independence, socialization/individuality, egoism/altruism, dominance/submission—remain intact. Borrowing from Jessica Benjamin (1988), what women in our culture still lack is a desire of their own, a sense of their own subjectivity that is grounded in their own bodily and psychic experience and not borrowed from reigning conceptions of gender. Still lacking is a vision of agency powerful enough to transcend deeply imbedded conceptions of a gendered self and incorporate both women's relational capacities and individual self-affirmation within a unified framework.

Psychoanalytically oriented feminists believe that our present inability to transcend gendered conceptions of agency is tied to an inability to tolerate psychic and social tension. Women, particularly, tend to repress aspects of the self that are not compatible with their gender identity. Jean Grimshaw (1986)

³² See Meyers (1992) on this issue.

offers a number of examples drawn from feminist discourse that illustrate how feminists, instead of holding tensions within and among women in suspension, develop conceptualizations that relax tension, thereby replicating prevailing gendered patterns of dominance and subordination. The derision in which some feminists hold women who use fertility technologies is but one example of this inflexible use of theory. Failure to fix our attention on such tensions impedes opportunities to learn from them and overcome their hold on us. Some women who have used reproductive technologies have spoken in retrospect of their obsessive preoccupation with infertility treatment (Bartholet 1999). Few have explored the psychic dynamics of such an obsession, its relation to other obsessions to which women are particularly vulnerable, or interactions with prevailing disciplinary practices in fertility clinics.

Reference to voluntaristic model: suggests this may be a degenerate form of the desire. I referred earlier to Caroline Whitbeck's (1991,61) observation that "another reason that a woman might wish to have a child is that she, at least unconsciously, believes St. Paul's message that she is innately inferior to a man and achieves worth only by producing (male) offspring." Though Whitbeck's point is well taken, she warns that such examples show that children may be wanted for reasons more likely to lead to their deformation rather than the development of both the child and the family. The fact that a child may be wanted does not settle the issue of whether it is responsible to have that child, or to use technology to conceive it. Karen Horney speaks of the tendency among women who have as children been sexualized and objectified by men and devalued by women to seek adult refuge in what she calls a "compulsive femininity." Where these conditions are present the wish for a child may represent a wish to fulfill the ideal of femininity. Her drive to have a child may take on a compulsive quality becoming more like an external goal to be attained than an interpersonal relationship. This way of regarding the quest for a child as a goal to be work toward may lead to fetishization of the biological child as the object of desire. There is no assurance that anyone will get the child they desire nor can they claim that child as their right any more than they have a right to possess any other person. The "perfect" child that is desired may be grow into the "monster" child created by Doris Lessing in *The Fifth Child* (who incidentally found her mother's love nonetheless).

On agency: see Wendy Benson in *Hypatia* 5, 3, 1990

On connections between agency autonomy and identity see Sawicki book

Note Sawicki's point that it is difficult to give any account of gender specific subjectivity. Note Ireland discussion of the capacity for subjectivity (124) that it is tied to the undoing of repression—opening up to early experience prior to the consolidation of gendered identity around mothering; use to critique Ireland. What is specifically "feminine" about the space that is opened up? In what way is this feminine creativity any different from the creativity Plato speaks of? Appeals to women's "innate desires" are reminiscent of Freudian dogma, yet Freud himself did not hold it in so crude a form; his own view is reminiscent of Plato's account according to which the desire for children is linked to creative intellectual activity, though Freud applied the analogy far more literally than Plato. He often urged creative women to sublimate their sexual drive in order to maximize their intellectual creativity. (From Burlingham book, check Shafer and O'Brien)

For Chodorow's theory of self vs. Irigaray's aspect theory see Ferguson, p. 49 and Butler. Is it true that Chodorow's theory of self is structured around patriarchally constructed "instinctual" desires? See Butler on distinction between selfhood and agency (not so saturated with gender specific connotations); see also Diana Meyers' critique of Chodorow (Fraser and Bartky, 1991); Sawicki (1991). Need self-understanding as subject to both historical and contemporary social constructs and more emphasis on individual's relation to group norms, see Ferguson, p. 66.

Since we do not have access to any ultimate essence beyond or behind prevailing gender arrangements, the only viable alternative is to try to understand how we come to be shaped as men and women with distinctively gendered senses of our identities whose conceptions of personal fulfillment are mapped along sex specific lines; particularly, how the distinctively male and female manifestations of desire come to be so radically opposed to one another and how we might move beyond the binary construction of gender toward a fuller humanity.