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# FEMINIST REASONING ABOUT REASON

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## *Abstract:*

In this paper, I focus on the postmodern feminist criticism of reason. I argue that postmodern feminism is in part a response to political concerns over valuing women's differences but that the philosophical ideas it propounds cannot fully address these political concerns. Moreover, postmodern feminism branches into two directions, partly in the face of criticisms directed at it. The one becomes a form of intellectual play, the other becomes imbued with ethic of care assumptions. I recommend that feminism of sameness may provide a better vehicle than either postmodern or ethic of care feminism for addressing the 'masculinist biases' of Western reason.

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Feminist scholars have suggested that reason, as it is articulated in traditional Western thought, is imbued with a 'masculinist bias'. This bias is far-reaching, as reason is construed as having various epistemological, moral and political dimensions. Reason is concomitantly characterized as: (1) an abstract, universal and transcendental entity found in nature (including human nature) which reveals to humans the order of the universe and allows them to apprehend truth and to pursue knowledge; (2) a method of the sciences, associated (particularly since the Enlightenment) with logical positivism and with an impartial, objective and neutral method of acquiring knowledge and truth about the human and the physical world; (3) a faculty found in human beings which distinguishes them from animals and which enables them to govern their emotions and bodily passions; (4) a capacity tied to moral deliberation, judgement, and action, including the capacity to apprehend and discover universal moral truths; (5) a capacity tied to political deliberation and participation in public discourse.

Three strands emerge in feminist theorizing on reason. According to the first strand, what I call a 'feminism of sameness', the 'masculinist bias' of Western thought rests in the failure of some of its key thinkers to recognize that women and men are basically the *same* in their faculty and capacity for reason and that women *do* have the reason to govern their emotions, to engage in moral deliberation, to participate in political life, to apprehend universal truths and to pursue scientific knowledge. This 'masculinist bias' has had an impact on women—making it more difficult for them to have access to the realms associated with reason—science, philosophy, and politics.<sup>1</sup>

According to a second strand of feminist theorizing, a 'feminism of difference', the 'masculinist bias' of Western thought rests in the failure to *acknowledge* and *value* women's *differences* from men, differences which derive from women's experience (and not necessarily, though possibly from women's nature).<sup>2</sup> Women's experiences, associated with the realm of the family, reproduction, and private life, (as well as with their experience of being oppressed) may engender or at least be more compatible with a different means of arriving at or pursuing knowledge and truth which have been overlooked or undervalued by Western thinkers.<sup>3</sup> For example, if women are closer to the experience of ordinary, everyday life, this ought to be considered a valuable basis for knowledge, rather than as something that must be left behind or abstracted in the pursuit of universal knowledge. Moreover, to simply assert, as feminism of sameness does, that women can reason as well as men, is to accept the devaluation of women's experiences.

Carol Gilligan's analysis of moral reasoning is often cited as an example of this kind of feminism.<sup>4</sup> Her work suggests that women feel more at ease with a kind of moral deliberation based on their experience in the private realm which emphasises assessing the particular circumstances of the situation and which aims at avoiding harm to others. Men's experiences in public life incline them to a kind of moral deliberation which entails applying universal moral principles of justice to moral dilemmas and which aims at the protection of individual rights. Gilligan refers to the former as an 'ethic of care', the latter as an 'ethic of justice'. Indeed, feminism of difference, I want to suggest, is dominated by the 'ethic of care' paradigm. I call it a paradigm because it is so pervasive, because it associates women with characteristics which Gilligan herself does not necessarily ascribe to and because it extrapolates from Gilligan's work on moral reasoning to other realms—political and scientific reasoning. The ethic of care paradigm assumes that women are more concerned than men with not harming others; that they feel more responsible for the welfare of others; that they emphasize connection rather than separation in human relations; that they are in general more benevolent and more caring towards others; that they are reluctant to exercise power over others.

A third strand of feminist theory is influenced by postmodern and post-structuralist ideas. Although there is an extensive debate over whether the principles of feminism are compatible with postmodern and post-structuralist 'tenets' and whether there is indeed a 'postmodern feminism',<sup>5</sup> I suggest that there is a shared set of ideas expressed by theorists who want to make a case for such a feminism and that it makes sense to talk of a postmodern feminism (although feminists like Judith Butler eschew as modernist and exclusionary the very practise of classifying feminist theorists in the way I am doing). The postmodern feminist critique of Western reason is by far the most comprehensive one. It is directed to the ends towards which reason aims—truth and knowledge itself.

In this paper, I shall focus on the postmodern feminist criticism of reason. I want to argue that postmodern feminism is in part a response to political concerns over valuing women's differences but that the philosophical ideas it propounds cannot fully address these political concerns. Moreover, postmodern feminism branches into two directions, partly in the face of criticisms directed at it. The one becomes a form of intellectual play, the other becomes imbued with ethic of care assumptions. In the last part of the paper I recommend that feminism of sameness may provide a better vehicle than either postmodern or ethic of care feminism for addressing the 'masculinist biases' of Western reason.

According to Jane Flax, a self-proclaimed defender of postmodern feminism, postmodern discourses are deconstructive—"they seek to distance us from and make us sceptical about beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, power, the self, and language that are often taken for granted within and serve as legitimation for contemporary Western culture."<sup>6</sup> Postmodern feminism challenges the idea that reason is a universal and transcendental entity found in nature and that reason in the form of the scientific method can provide an objective and universal foundation for knowledge about the natural and the human world. In addition, it challenges the depiction of the individual who is deemed to possess the faculty and capacity for reason and to wield it in the pursuit of scientific, moral and political knowledge. The 'knower' assumed by Western (in particular Enlightenment) views on reason, it is argued, is assumed to be impartial, objective, interchangeable, separate from others and detached from the object of his study. In Lorraine Code's words this 'knower' is "the abstract, interchangeable individual whose monologues have been spoken from nowhere, in particular, to an audience of faceless and usually disembodied onlookers."<sup>7</sup> 'He' is deemed to speak from an Archimedean point outside of history, from which (supposedly) object judgements can be made about political, moral, and scientific truth.

What is so problematic about this picture of the 'knower'? In what ways is it a 'masculinist construction'?

Postmodern feminism provides three answers. (1) The picture of the 'knower' assumes a stable, coherent natural self. (2) The picture reflects the experience and ideals of a privileged white male elite. (3) The 'knower' is the figure of someone who exercises power over others. I want to suggest that it is the third concern which seems to be most important to feminist theorists.

According to postmodern feminism, there is nothing 'natural' about the human self, including the capacity for reason. On what basis then can one propose that the human self has "a form of reason capable of privileged insight into its own processes and into the 'laws of nature'?"<sup>8</sup> Unstable, fluid, open, and infinitely malleable, the self is an artificial construction with no grounding in 'nature'. Indeed there is nothing intrinsically 'human' about it. Donna Haraway presents the postmodern self as a cyborg—part-human and part-machine (the faculty of reason seems to be supplied by the machine).<sup>9</sup>

Both the ideal of the 'knower' itself as well as the pronouncements made by 'him' about truth and knowledge reflect the experience of the privileged elite who have formulated it, it is argued. Although the claims about truth and knowledge made by the 'knower' are presented as being neutral (including gender-neutral) and universally applicable, in fact they "are created by and address the situations of only a small group of men: affluent, educated, culturally Eurocentred, usually Christian, white men."<sup>10</sup> Part of being in a privileged position is being able to hide one's privilege under the guise of universalism. The claims of truth and knowledge of the 'knower' are in fact partial, subjective and grounded in his own limited historical experience, but they are presented as being the opposite. Most worrying to feminist theorists is that they cover up the exercise of power over others.

For postmodern feminism, what is really 'masculinist' and therefore undesirable about the universal standpoint of the 'knower', I want to suggest, is less that it is formulated by white males but that the universal standpoint can so easily be used (it is assumed) to do this: exercise power over others, by excluding them from what it promises (such as emancipation) or by making judgements about truth and knowledge which fail to take into account or capture the experiences of the less privileged. As Susan Hekman writes of Western conception of the moral dimension of reason—"the masculinist construction of moral theory that has dominated the West, particularly since the advent of modernity, is hierarchical and exclusionary. It marginalizes and silences the moral choices not only of women but, as Kohlberg's categories reveal, of any one who cannot attain the ideal of moral knowledge: the disembodied application of abstract universal principles."<sup>11</sup> Postmodern feminists do not make the same charges of 'masculinist bias' against the formulations of postmodern theorists such as Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan, (also white, European, educated privileged males) but rather draw on them extensively for a critique of universalism.<sup>12</sup> The problem then cannot be that the ideals are articulated by white males. The problem rests, not even in the ideal itself, I suggest, but in what the ideal allows one so easily to do—marginalize and oppress those whose lives, experiences, and situations are not included in the theoretical formulations of the 'knower'.

The concern for the harm caused by Western ideals of reason is also at the heart of postmodern feminist rejection of feminism of sameness. The latter proposes that the ideal of the 'knower' is applicable to women. But in the hands of women (feminists or non-feminists) it is argued, the ideal can be used in a similar fashion—to hide the privilege of the few and to oppress the many—"In recent years, poor and working-class women, women of colour, and lesbians have finally won a wider hearing for their objection to feminist theories which fail to illuminate their lives and address their problems. They have exposed the earlier quasi-metanarratives, with their assumptions of universal female dependence and confinement to the domestic sphere, as false extrapolations from the experience of the white, middle-class heterosexual women who dominated the beginnings of the second-wave."<sup>13</sup> Avoiding harm to others and taking care not to exercise power over them seems to be the most important element in postmodern feminist criticism of the ideal of the 'knower'.

The idea that Western reason has been formulated by a male elite also emerges in Genevieve Lloyd's analysis.<sup>14</sup> Lloyd maintains that the issue is not merely that the major thinkers of the Western canon have considered women themselves to be incapable of governing their emotions through reason, engaging in moral reason, apprehending universal truths, or using the methods of science, but that the more abstract formulation of Reason as a transcendental entity which discloses to humans the order of the universe has been construed as resting on the repression of 'femaleness' and the 'feminine'. For example, maleness is often associated with the imposition of order; femaleness with disorder and chaos. Moreover, reason is construed as being compatible with maleness and with having to leave behind what is female (disorder and chaos). For the Greeks, "Maleness was aligned with active, determinate form, femaleness with passive, indeterminate matter, and "femaleness was symbolically associated with the non-rational, the disorderly, the unknowable—with what must be set aside in the cultivation of knowledge."<sup>15</sup>

But Lloyd warns against the attempts to counter the 'masculinity of Western reason with a 'feminine' or 'female' reason, which takes what has been defined as the 'feminine' in Western thought as something to be valued and redeemed. The reason she gives is that we cannot necessarily equate the 'feminine' with the experiences of real women. Drawing on the work of Irigaray and Derrida, Lloyd emphasizes that she is showing how Western thought is imbued with the *metaphors* of the 'feminine' and the 'masculine' in the realm of the *symbolic*—"The content of symbolic gender can be appropriated by men and women. but even though people can identify with symbolic maleness or femaleness, their proper subjects are not men and women but concepts. The maleness of reason belongs in this category of the symbolic."<sup>16</sup> Yet, Lloyd does imply that there is something about the 'feminine' that has a connection to real women when she proposes that, besides practical reasons, there might be "conceptual ones for the conflicts many women experience between Reason and femininity."<sup>17</sup> She links the repression of the symbolic 'feminine' to the discomfort real women may feel with the methods and ideals of Western reason.

Another reason Lloyd warns against appropriating for feminism the 'feminine' of Western thought is that it has been constructed by men—"the absence of women from the philosophical tradition has meant that the conceptualization of Reason has been done exclusively by men. It is not surprising that the results should reflect their sense of Philosophy as a male activity."<sup>18</sup> But why is philosophy not a female activity as well? Lloyd counsels against a feminism of sameness which recommends that the ideals of Western reason can be extended to women—"Women cannot easily be accommodated into a cultural ideal which has defined itself in opposition to the feminine."<sup>19</sup> Is this because there is something in the 'feminine' that genuinely speaks to women? Lloyd does not want to take the feminine of difference route. Implicit in Lloyd's analysis is the idea that the 'feminine' ought to be shunned because it is part of a dualism. What is masculinist about Western reason then is not only that the 'feminine' is suppressed but that a binary opposite between the feminine and masculinist is constantly assumed. What emerges in her analysis however, is that it is difficult to designate something as 'masculinist' without assuming a standard of what is 'feminine' by which to judge it. Even if one rejects such dualistic thinking as 'masculinist' then one seems to be implying that non-dualism is more compatible with the 'feminine'. Indeed postmodern feminist has been criticized on just those grounds—for opposing plurality or multiplicity to duality, and therefore engaging in just the kind of dualistic thinking it promises to be moving away from. (I shall return to this point.)

As Lloyd's analysis suggests, part of postmodern feminist theorizing is a criticism of feminism of difference for (1) assuming that there is something essential about the female self or that there is a women's nature; (2) setting up a dualism between a 'feminine' and a 'masculine' way of reasoning; (3) failing to realize that dualist thinking is itself masculinist and; (4) failing to embrace plurality, multiplicity and differences. Susan Hekman's re-reading of Carol

Gilligan is instructive in bringing out these themes.<sup>20</sup> (I am not addressing whether her re-reading of Gilligan is indeed an accurate one. What is interesting is that, as well as illustrating key themes of postmodern feminism, her analysis of Gilligan also highlight how postmodern feminism becomes imbued with ethic of care assumptions in response to feminist political concerns.)

Hekman writes: " If, as many feminists have contended, the search for objective, disembodied, historical truth is by definition masculinist, then feminists must redefine this search, in ethics as in all other areas."<sup>21</sup> But to search for a feminist alternative that assumes universal principles, albeit 'feminine' ones is to replicate the masculinist model. Feminists who seek to "get it right", who want to discover a feminist ethics by seeking a unitary moral truth are taking on the masculinist assumptions tied to Enlightenment reason which have hitherto excluded women. Moreover, Hekman asserts, to formulate an alternative that is based on dualist or binary thinking, such as a model where an ethic of justice is opposed to an ethic of care or where a masculine voice is opposed to a feminine voice, is to engage in equally 'masculinist' 'dichotomous modernist thought."<sup>22</sup> According to Hekman, Carol Gilligan's work on moral reasoning is compatible with a postmodern perspective because it challenges not only unitary conceptions of reason but also dualistic ones and provides support for a theory of a "plurality of moral voices." Hekman proposes that Gilligan's work has wrongly been read as providing support for a distinctive 'woman's voice in moral reasoning—"I have argued that it is possible to interpret her work differently, as advocating an approach to moral theory that is pluralistic and nonabsolutist, that seeks the "truths" of morality, not a single "truth."<sup>23</sup> (Paradoxically, Hekman's recommendations for a multiplicity of moral theories, are imbued with ethic of care assumptions compatible with a more 'traditional' reading of Gilligan.) Most important for Hekman is that Gilligan's work is valuable in providing an account of plural voices that responds to feminist political concerns for acknowledging diversity among women. Hekman says "we need many ethics to reflect the different situation of different women, not only true "feminist" ethic."<sup>24</sup> (I am going to suggest, however, that the postmodern framework which Hekman draws on is incapable of providing a way of fully meeting those political concerns.)

Hekman advocates the use of narrative as a method of paying attention to and discerning the multiple voices. A consistent theme in postmodern feminism is that the (local) 'narrative' is a useful way of capturing the multiple voices of oppression and the diversity of women's experience because it does not rest on universal assumptions about women's nature or experience. Narratives are specific. They tell about the particular experiences of a subject. They can take the form of first-person stories or a 'telling where you are coming from'. (Indeed, the latter, as Lorraine Code notes, has become part and parcel of feminist academic writing. This no longer means just establishing ones' position in the theoretical canon; it also means giving autobiographical details about one's personal background.<sup>25</sup> ) The appeal of local narrative, postmodern feminists maintain, is that it does not require that feminist theorists engage in the sort of grand theorizing that assumes universalist ideas about human nature, women's nature, truth, and knowledge. It does not push the feminist theorist to take on the position of the historical 'knower'. By listening to individual stories, the feminist theorist can avoid this danger in the study of women's situation. I have suggested earlier, of utmost concern to postmodern feminism is that this 'knower' ends up exercising power in an insidious fashion. 'He' or 'she' marginalises and oppresses by ignoring or excluding differences in his theoretical pronouncements about what is true and what constitutes knowledge about women.

Judith Butler is particularly cogent on this issue.<sup>26</sup> Much feminist theorizing on women, she says, does indeed reflect and constitute 'conceptual mastery.' It may not consist in grand meta-theorizing about woman's history of oppression from the beginning of time. But it does consist in the smaller scale enterprise of classification, labelling, categorizing and sorting out of experiences and of differences. In other words, it engages in the *ordering* of things (which recall Lloyd has identified as a trait associated with maleness and with reason in Western thought).

This constitutes a form of oppression. To set up a category, whether that category is 'human', 'woman' or 'black woman' or 'poor black lesbian woman', and to define its content is to exclude and marginalize those who do not fit the definition. To take a certain set of assumptions or ideas and artificially tie them together to form a whole which is then presented as fitting together naturally is to engage in power (the most common example of this, which Butler explores extensively in *Gender Trouble* is when it is determined that a particular set of bodily traits add up to a 'female' or a 'male').<sup>27</sup> To place theorists into the category 'postmodern feminists' (as I am doing here) is to engage in an oppressive act. Butler writes: "In a sense, this gesture of conceptual mastery that groups together a set of positions under the postmodern, that makes the postmodern into an epoch or a synthetic whole, and that claims that the part can stand for this artificially constructed whole, enacts a certain self—congratulatory ruse of power. It is paradoxical, at best, that the act of conceptual mastery that effects this dismissive grouping of positions under the postmodern wants to ward off the peril of political authoritarianism... From the start we must believe that theories offer themselves in bundles or in organized totalities."<sup>28</sup>

Criticisms of postmodern feminism can be divided into two kinds: (1) those that focus on the philosophical and logical contradictions of some of its arguments and (2) those that focus on the political inadequacies for feminism of its arguments. I argue that (a) in response to the first, postmodern feminism easily becomes a form of intellectual play; (b) in response to the second it takes on (or reveals its) ethic of care assumptions (c) but postmodern feminism cannot fully address the political concerns of feminism.

A common criticism of postmodern feminism is that it replicates what it criticizes. For example, by defending historical or moral or epistemological relativism against universal truth, it sets up the duality relativism/universalism while criticizing duality itself. Or, as Susan Bordo argues, postmodern feminism removes the ideal of the impartial, objective 'knower' who stands outside of history but replaces it with the ideal of the multiple self who can take on an infinite number of positions and perspectives.<sup>29</sup> The 'knower' who is nowhere simply becomes the 'knower' who is everywhere.

Furthermore, relying on local narratives or stories may entail falling back into the traps postmodern feminism wants to obviate. Stories can resemble meta-narratives in the *form* they take. Stories are linear. They assume a plot which moves in a logical progression from beginning to ends and unfolds in an ordered fashion. And if the feminist theorist has to put together these individual stories in a way that abstracts what is general or common in each, the end result may mirror a kind of universal theorizing. In the end, various stories and voices and experiences have to be sorted and ordered to make sense. And according to Lloyd it is precisely the imposition of order that is masculinist about Western reason. It seems that in ordering experiences, someone else's or one's own, one is compelled to make use of a method of reason that is imbued with a 'masculinist bias'. And what happens when postmodern feminists recommend disorder and chaos, as Jane Flax does—"If we do our work really well, reality will appear even more unstable, complex, and disorderly than it does now. In this sense, perhaps Freud was right when he declared that women are the enemies of civilization."<sup>30</sup> They take on the qualities of the 'feminine' that Lloyd warns is a 'masculinist' construction.

Postmodern feminists defend postmodern approaches as being appropriate to contemporary times of flux and uncertainty—"The postmodern condition is one in which "grand narratives of legitimation" are no longer credible."<sup>31</sup> Foucault is right, Hekman says—"we *do*, in fact live in a different world from that theorized by the moderns, not that we *should* live in such a world or that we should do thus and so to achieve that world."<sup>32</sup> Yet these statement on where history has taken us sound like generalizations which assume grand-scale theories of history. One might counter this assessment with the following one: we live in historical times where postmodern discourses hide absolute truth from us. How can this be refuted? Are there empirical grounds to support either

assessment of the postmodern political condition? How can one take a perspective that recommends openness to multiple truths and possibilities (as postmodern feminism does) yet be closed to the possibility that there are universal truths which have yet to be discovered?

Finally, it seems almost impossible for feminist theorists to avoid engaging in exclusionary theoretical practises. Any kind of theorizing it appears can entail the kind of oppressive practises that postmodern feminism is so keen to avoid. No matter what, the theorist is always engaged in the act of power, in the act of excluding someone else or speaking for someone else. One can acknowledge the contradictoriness of being a feminist academic theorist who speaks from a privileged position about the dangers of speaking from a privileged position. But then what? The desire to avoid taking a position that excludes and thereby oppresses can lead to extreme cautiousness, paralysis, and in the end silence. Or it can lead to treating theorizing as intellectual play. Hekman's distinction between what she calls an 'apolitical postmodernism' and a 'political postmodernism' is useful.<sup>33</sup> She describes the former (which draws on Derrida) as leading to form of intellectual play where theorizing is not taken seriously and where the formation of identity is viewed as a game—"To advance a theory is, first, to fall back into the epistemological errors of modernism and, second, to incur the coercion and tyranny that characterize absolutist thinking."<sup>34</sup> If one takes this route, Hekman says, then "everything is fiction, fantasy, play."<sup>35</sup> Hekman's description of 'apolitical postmodernism', is an accurate assessment, I think, of the direction that postmodern feminism is liable to move if it takes seriously the numerous philosophical and logical inconsistencies it is charged with.

But most postmodern feminists shy away from this direction. Most move in the direction of a postmodern feminism which, in response to political concerns over acknowledging differences among women, takes on 'ethic of care' assumptions. This kind of postmodern feminism advocates the avoidance of harm caused by excluding or marginalizing differences. For example, Hekman recommends that postmodern feminism reject the kind of 'apolitical postmodernism' that leads to play and embrace the second kind, the 'political postmodernism' which draws on Foucault. The reason she gives is that "this Foucaultian view of politics as the freeing of difference is the basis for my claim that a Foucaultian politics is particularly appropriate to contemporary feminist politics. Most of those within the contemporary feminist movement would agree that their goal is not simply to replace the "error" of masculinist theory and politics with the "truth" of feminism. Rather, they recognize that there is not one "truth" for women, but many: that women's situations vary widely and that to impose a single "woman's truth" would result in marginalizing some women and privileging others. Feminist are also coming to realize that the oppression that women face are varied and multiple; they require a specific (local) resistances designed for the particular situation that different women face."<sup>36</sup> Most striking is that the result is a kind of postmodern feminism which resembles Gilligan's 'ethic of care' feminism. Hekman may replace dual voices with multiple voices. But the admonition to care is not removed. It is simply multiplied. It now extends to as many voices as possible.

The postmodern emphasis on the plurality of voices, experiences, and oppression does not challenge the care paradigm. It expands it to a directive that counsels avoiding harm to everyone. No one's differences ought to be excluded. No one ought to be oppressed. And almost everyone can potentially be oppressed by having their differences excluded. Women become responsible for the well-being of not only other women, but of everyone. Hekman suggests that both Sara Ruddick and Nel Noddings, well-known for having formulated 'feminine' ethic of care theories, are now embracing a more pluralistic and relativist position. But this may show care being extended not subverted.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, built into the exhortation to value whatever voices one hears is the assumption that valuing them will not be problematic because these will be benign and benevolent voices—the voices of women, the voices of those reluctant to exercise power over others. They will not be the voices of the serial rapist or the sadist.



Perhaps postmodern feminism has split into a 'masculinist version' where play or even destruction are the main themes and into a 'feminine' 'ethic of care' voice where being concerned for the welfare of others, being concerned above all with avoiding harm, and being reluctant to exercise power over others are the main themes. Most postmodern feminists, it appears, prefer the 'ethic of care' voice to the other one. Or one could apply a sort of Gilliganesque reading (one that distinguishes between the ethic of care as a woman's voice and the ethic of justice as a man's voice) to feminist theorists grappling with postmodernism in contrast to mainstream male theorists grappling with it. A main concern of male theorists is that postmodernism leads to a disintegration or the fragmentation of the individual self.<sup>38</sup> For feminist theorists, the worry is that the fragmented self undermines community among women.

A common criticism of the political impact of postmodern feminism is that it subverts political agency. An agent who can engage in politics aimed at liberation needs to be an agent who can stand apart from the social situation, make judgements based on reason about the oppression of women and bring forth proposals aimed at alleviating or removing women's oppression.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, this subject must be able to identify 'women' as the subjects of liberation. Yet, it is argued, postmodern feminism undermines the possibility of such a self, or implies that such a subject does not exist, when it counsels that "Postmodern-feminist theory would dispense with the idea of a subject of history. It would replace unitary notions of woman and feminine gender identity with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among others, attending also to class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation."<sup>40</sup>

Postmodern feminism in turn defends the political usefulness of its philosophical approach for acknowledging differences among women. Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson observe that "the practical exigencies inclining feminist to produce quasi-metanarratives have by no means held undisputed sway. Rather, they have had to coexist, often uneasily, with counterexigencies which have worked to opposite effect, for example, political pressures to acknowledge differences among women."<sup>41</sup> And— "Thus, as the class, sexual, racial, and ethnic awareness of the movement has altered, so has the preferred conception of theory."<sup>42</sup> Postmodern feminism *does* seem attractive as a way of increasing awareness of differences and of avoiding ethnocentrism. Yet its philosophical directions, I suggest, are inadequate in fully addressing the political concerns about difference.

First, one could say that the political project of *acknowledging* differences might be helped along by a theory which posits (or assumes) that there are indeed differences among women and that these differences ought not to be overlooked. But postmodern feminism is not able to provide a theoretical explanation for why these differences ought to be *valued*. It may even hinder the political project of doing so. Charles Taylor's cogent discussion of the 'politics of recognition' captures an important dimension of the political demands of the expression of difference.<sup>43</sup> What groups and individuals want and need is to have their differences deemed as *valuable*. In contemporary discourse, moreover, this takes the form of a desire for 'recognition'. And the desire for recognition is tied to the desire to have one's differences considered to be of equal worth. Indeed Hekman says that she wants different moral voices to have "equal standing and does not want to accept hierarchy."<sup>44</sup> But this seems to require more than drawing on the principles of plurality. It may require drawing on principles of equality, in particular political equality. And these have their roots in universalist assumptions about the fundamental importance of equality and about the universal respect that is owed to individuals (as individuals or as members of groups) on the basis of their shared humanity. It calls up a liberal language of foundational human rights resting on the faculty of reason.

Second, it seems that the project of *valuing* these different voices entails that one assumes that there is a deep sense of self, or an 'authentic' self which must be allowed to emerge. Yet, this idea is incompatible with

postmodern feminist emphasis on the artificially constructed self. Hekman suggests that individuals can piece together and fashion moral voices or languages—there are "multiple moral language games within any culture and [that] moral agents are capable of piecing together elements of the various moral language games available to them in order to fashion new moral discourses."<sup>45</sup> Yet she also has to maintain that some moral voices are more 'authentic' to the moral agent than others. If moral voices are artificially constructed and if they have no ties to any 'deeper self' then they may be considered interchangeable. The rationale for maintaining their distinctiveness is then weakened.

Third, to *value* diverse voices requires, I think, that one take these voice to be *true*. Indeed one must deem a person's account, or their story of their experiences (of oppression or lack of oppression, for example) to be *the truth*. The political requirements of the use of narrative or stories to attend to differences is that the truth they tell has to be unchallenged. To challenge someone as not telling the truth is to deem them unworthy of respect. Yet the philosophical pull of postmodern feminism is to challenge not only universalist claims to truth but any claims to truth. For example, Lorraine Code says, "Stories, even first-person stories, are not necessarily *truer* either than stereotypes or than standard philosophical analysis."<sup>46</sup>

Finally, the ethic of care assumptions that permeate postmodern feminism may not help to value differences. They may elide them by universalizing the directive to care about differences. Postmodern feminism emphasizes that the most insidious form of oppression or harm consists in excluding and not valuing the difference of another. It also advocates that all types of this form of oppression must be avoided. In other words, all differences must be valued. But if all differences count, then none counts. One must be able to distinguish between differences that matter and ones that do not. Otherwise one trivializes and undervalues the differences themselves.<sup>47</sup> For example, differences based on sex, race, ethnicity must be deemed to be *important* differences, more important than say differences based on the length of one's toes. Or we might say that when care is directed to everyone then no one is cared for.

In the final part of this paper, I want to propose that a feminism of sameness might be more useful to feminist theorising in addressing both its political concerns and the 'masculinist biases of reason.' I cannot here give a comprehensive account which undertakes to respond to the numerous criticism directed at feminism of sameness. But I want to briefly list some factors that I think make it important to give feminism of sameness further serious consideration.

First, a feminism of sameness does not criticize as 'masculinist' universal ideals about reason. Thus it is more able than ethic of care or postmodern feminism to make legitimate use of the universal principles of justice and the language of liberal rights in a way that allows for the valuing of differences as worthy of equal respect. I am suggesting that, paradoxically, the directive to care when extended to all loses its ability to value differences, but that universal notions of equality when applied to differences can allow them to be valued. This paradox needs to be further explored. I think Charles Taylor is right to suggest that these paradoxes propel the politics of recognition and of difference.

Second, the language of liberal rights has of course been subject to extensive criticism by feminist theorists. Carole Pateman has cogently argued that the rational right-wielding individual formulated by liberal theory is assumed to be a man.<sup>48</sup> One might concede that such liberal notions as right to govern one's body, for example, are imbued with 'masculinist assumptions' in the sense that they were initially formulated by white Western males (Hobbes, Locke) who envisioned them as applying to men or who did not adequately consider the implication of extending them to women who have different reproductive capacities. Yet, the original intent or oversight, does


not seem to prevent the notion from being applicable to women in a way that is beneficial. In fact, it might well be that women now need the liberal language of universal rights, when they take the form of the right to govern their own bodies for example, more than men do. The same can be said for reason. It may well be that feminist theorists now need these western concepts of reason more than other theorists.

Third, I want to suggest that a feminism of sameness might be the most radical response to the masculinist biases of Western reason. It does not tone down (as does feminine of difference and postmodern feminism imbued with ethic of care assumptions) the potential power that can accrue to women in the use of reason, whether it be the power of politics, philosophy or science.

### *Notes*


1. For example, Susan Moller Okin makes this kind of argument about women's exclusion from the political dimensions of reason in *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) and in *Justice, Gender and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989). And what Sandra Harding calls 'feminist empiricism' is compatible with this sort of view on the use of reason in the sciences, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 111-118. 
2. The work of Nel Noddings and Sarah Ruddick attributes to women these characteristics. See Sarah Ruddick's "Maternal Thinking" in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. Joyce Trebilcock (Totowa: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984) and Nel Noddings, 'Ethics from the Standpoint of Women' in *Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference*, ed. Deborah L. Rhode, (Boulder: Westview, 1990). 
3. For an example, see Sandra Harding's discussion of standpoint feminist theories of scientific inquiry, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*, 119-137. 
4. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). There is an extensive literature on Gilligan. A useful collection of articles can be found in *An Ethic of Care*, ed. Mary Jeanne Larrabee (New York: Routledge, 1993). 
5. For an example of these debates, see the collection of articles in Linda Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions* (New York: Routledge, 1995). 
6. Jane Flax, "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory", *Feminism/Postmodernism*, 41. 
7. Lorraine Code, *Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on Gendered Locations* (New York: Routledge, 1995), xiv. See also Iris Marion Young, "Impartiality and the Civic Public" in *Throwing Like a Girl* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 95. 
8. Jane Flax, "Postmodernism and Gender Relations", 41. 
9. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Theorizing Feminism*, ed. Anne Herrmann and Abigail Stewart (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994). 


10. Code, *Rhetorical Spaces*, 174. 
11. Susan Hekman, *Moral Voices, Moral Selves* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State Press, 1995), 159. 
12. Christine Di Stefano makes this point indirectly in "Dilemmas of Difference", *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Nicholson, 75. 
13. Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, 33. 
14. Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). 
15. Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*, 3, 11. 
16. Genevieve Lloyd, "Maleness, Metaphor, and the 'Crisis' of Reason" in *A Mind of One's Own*, ed. Louise M. Antony and Charlotte Witt (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 71. 
17. Lloyd, *Man of Reason*, x. 
18. Ibid., 108. 
19. Ibid., 104. 
20. Susan J. Hekman, *Moral Voices, Moral Selves* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State Press, 1995). 
21. Ibid., 63. 
22. Ibid., 61. 
23. Ibid., 64. 
24. Ibid., 66. 
25. Lorraine Code, "Responsibility and Rhetoric" in *Rhetorical Spaces*, 1. 
26. Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of "Postmodernism" in *Feminist Contentions*. 
27. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990). 
28. Butler, "Contingent Foundations", 38. 
29. Susan Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender Skepticism" in *Theorizing Feminism*, ed. Anne Herrmann and Abigail J. Stewart (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 460. 


30. Flax, "Postmodernism and Gender Relations", 56-57; see also Jane Flax, "The End of Innocence" in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992). 


31. Fraser and Nicholson, "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism" in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, 22. 


32. Hekman, *Moral Voices, Moral Selves*, 145. 


33. Hekman, *Moral Voices, Moral Selves*, 179. 

34. Ibid, 142. 

35. Ibid, 143. 


36. Ibid, 152. 


37. Ibid., 65. 


38. For example, see the collection of articles in *Theories of Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. Bryan S. Turner (London: Sage Publications, 1991). An overview of the extensive literature on postmodernism (distinguishing the malestream approaches from the feminist one) would be needed to pursue this further. I suspect that such an investigation would support my hypothesis. 

39. For example, see Seyla Benhabib, "Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance" in *Feminist Contentions*. 


40. Fraser and Nicholson, "Social Criticism Without Philosophy", in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, 35. 

41. Ibid., 27. 


42. Ibid., 33. 


43. See Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition' in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) and *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto, Anansi, 1991). 

44. Hekman, *Moral Voices, Moral Selves*, 159. 

45. Ibid., 129. 

46. Code, *Rhetorical Spaces*, 200. 

47. I draw here on Charles Taylor's discussion on the importance of a 'background' of significance in making choices and defining one's differences, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 35-41. 

48. Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988). 

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