

# Feminist Philosophy

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In spite of regular reports about the end of feminism as a social movement, at the start of the third millennium feminist philosophy is going through an astonishing period of renewal and growth. The diversification and expansion of feminist philosophies, fuelled by a brand new generation of post-postfeminists, is both supported by and productive of a significant growth of institutional practices, some of which happen outside the strict confines of academic philosophy, mostly in new trans-disciplinary areas like gender, race and postcolonial studies, social theories of globalization and migration, and philosophies of new media and biotechnology. This theoretical vitality raises a range of methodological questions about the uses and the limitations of interdisciplinarity in feminist philosophy and more specifically about the criteria of classification, the use of analytic categories and the canonization processes. As a result, the need for a systematic meta-discursive approach to the interdisciplinary methods of feminist philosophy is among the top priorities for philosophy today as well as women's, gender and feminist studies as an established discipline. If it is the case that what was once subversive is now mainstream, it follows that the challenge for feminist philosophers today is how to achieve more conceptual creativity<sup>2</sup>.

In a globally connected and technologically mediated world that is marked by fast changes, structural inequalities and increased militarization, feminist scholarship has intensified theoretical and methodological efforts to come to grips with the complexities of the present, while resisting the moral and cognitive panic that marks so much of contemporary social theories of globalization<sup>3</sup>. With the demise of postmodernism, which has gone down in history as a form of radical scepticism and moral and cognitive relativism, feminist philosophers tend to move beyond the linguistic mediation paradigm of deconstructive theory and to work instead towards the production of robust alternatives. Issues of embodiment and accountability, positionality and location have become both more relevant and more diverse. My main argument in this essay is that feminist philosophy is currently finding a new course between post-humanism on the one hand and post-anthropocentric theories on the other. The convergence between these two approaches, multiplied across the many inter-disciplinary lines that structure feminist theory, ends up radicalizing the very premises of feminist philosophy. It especially results in a reconsideration of the priority of sexuality and the relevance of the sex/gender distinction. I will analyze the different aspects of this convergence and attempt to work out some of its implications.

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<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* Paris 1991.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Jurgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, Cambridge 2003.

## The Legacy of Feminist Post-Humanism

As starting premises, let me add a few remarks: feminist philosophy builds on the embodied and embedded brand of materialism that was pioneered in the last century by Simone de Beauvoir. It combines, in a complex and groundbreaking manner, phenomenological theory of embodiment with Marxist – and later on poststructuralist – re-elaborations of the intersection between bodies and power. This rich legacy has two long-lasting theoretical consequences. The first is that feminist philosophy goes even further than mainstream continental philosophy in rejecting dualistic partitions of minds from bodies or nature from culture. Whereas the chasm between the binary oppositions is bridged by Anglo-American gender theorists through dynamic schemes of social constructivism<sup>4</sup>, continental feminist perspectives move towards either theories of sexual difference or a monistic political ontology that makes the sex/gender distinction redundant. I shall return later to this crucial aspect of my argument.

The second consequence of this specific brand of materialism is that oppositional consciousness combines critique with creativity, in a ‘double-edged vision’<sup>5</sup> that does not stop at critical deconstruction but moves on to the active production of alternatives. Thus, feminist philosophers have introduced a new brand of materialism, of the embodied and embedded kind. The cornerstone of this theoretical innovation is a specific brand of situated epistemology, which evolves from the practice of ‘the politics of locations’ and infuses standpoint feminist theory and the debates with postmodernist feminism throughout the 1990s .

As a meta-methodological innovation, the embodied and embedded brand of feminist materialist philosophy of the subject introduces a break from both universalism and dualism. As to the former, universalist claims to a subject position that allegedly transcends spatio-temporal and geo-political specificities are criticised as being dis-embodied and dis-embedded, i.e., abstract. Universalism, best exemplified in the notion of ‘abstract masculinity’<sup>6</sup> and triumphant whiteness is objectionable not only on epistemological, but also on ethical grounds. Situated perspectives lay the pre-conditions for ethical accountability for one’s own implications with the very structures one is analyzing and opposing politically. The key concept in feminist materialism is the sexualized nature and the radical immanence of power relations and their effects upon the world. In this Foucauldian perspective, power is not only negative or confining (*potestas*), but also affirmative (*potentia*) or productive of alternative subject positions and social relations.

Feminist anti-humanism, also known as postmodernist feminism, critiqued from within the unitary identities indexed on phallogocentric, Eurocentric and normative standardized views of what

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<sup>4</sup> J. Butler/J. Scott (eds.), *Feminists Theorize the Political*, London 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Joan Kelly, *The Double-Edged Vision of Feminist Theory*, in: *Feminist Studies*, 5 (1979), p. 216-227.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Hartsock, *The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism*, in: S. Harding (ed.), *Feminism and Methodology*, London 1987.

constitutes the humanist ideal of 'Man'. Feminist anti-humanism resonates with analogous but other(wise) situated post-colonial and race perspectives, which critique humanism or its racist connotations and racialized bias, and oppose to the biased Western brand many other cultural and ethnic traditions of non-Western humanism. This alliance between Western post-humanist and non-Western anti-humanist positions converges on the impossibility of speaking in one unified voice about women and other marginal subjects, thus stressing issues of diversity and differences among them. The pivotal notion in poststructuralist thought is the relationship between self and other. The notion of 'otherness' functions through dualistic oppositions that confirm the dominant vision of 'sameness' by positing sub-categories of difference and distributing them along asymmetrical power relations. In other words, the dominant apparatus of subjectivity is organized along a hierarchical scale that rewards the sovereign subject as the zero-degree of difference. Deleuze calls it 'the Majority subject' or the Molar centre of being. Irigaray calls it 'the Same', or the hyper-inflated, falsely universal 'He', whereas Hill Collins calls to account the white and Eurocentric bias of the subject of humanistic knowledge.

Furthermore, in European philosophy, this 'difference' has been predicated on relations of domination and exclusion: to be 'different from' came to mean to be 'less than'. In the dialectical scheme of thought, difference or otherness is a constitutive axis which marks off the sexualized other (woman), the racialized other (the native) and the naturalized other (animals, the environment or earth). These others, however, are constitutive in that they are expected to confirm the same in His superior position and thus they are crucial to the assertion of the power of sameness.

The fact that the dominant axes of definition of the humanistic subject of knowledge contribute to defining the axes of difference or of otherness has another important implication. They engender simultaneously the processes of sexualization, racialization and naturalization of those who are marginalized or excluded but also the active production of half-truths, or forms of partial knowledge about these others. Dialectical and pejorative otherness induces structural ignorance about the others who, by being others, are posited as the outside of major categorical divides in the attribution of subjectivity. Power produces through exclusion: the others are included in this script as the necessary outside of the dominant vision of what it means to be human. Their reduction to sub-human status is a constitutive source of ignorance and falsity and bad consciousness for the dominant subject who is responsible for their de-humanization.

Post-humanist feminist epistemologies proposed radical new ways to look at the 'human' from a more inclusive and diverse angle. As a result, the dominant vision of the subject in politics, law, and science is abandoned in favour of renewed attention to complexities and inner contradictions. Feminist anti-humanist philosophies are committed both to a radical politics of resistance and to the critique of the simultaneity of potentially contradictory social and textual effects. This simultaneity is not to be confused with easy parallels or arguments by analogy. That gender, race,

class and sexual choice may be equally effective power variables does not amount to flattening out any differences between them (Crenshaw, 1995). By extension, the claim to universality by scientific rationality is challenged on both epistemological and political grounds<sup>7</sup>, all knowledge claims being expressions of Western culture and of its drive to mastery.

Throughout the 1990s the recognition of the normative structure of science and of the partiality of scientific statements, as well as the rejection of universalism and the recognition of the necessarily contingent nature of all utterances, involved two polemics which retrospectively appear symptomatic of great anxiety. One concerned essentialism and the other, relativism. One of the worst lasting effects of the politically conservative backlash of that period was that the affirmative and progressive potential of feminist critiques of the dominant subject position were reduced to and dismissed as being merely relativistic. What I value in those radical feminist positions is precisely the extent to which they allow for a productive critique of falsely universal pretensions. As a consequence, they enact the desire to pluralize the options, paradigms and practices of subjectivity within Western philosophical reason. The recognition of the necessarily situated and hence partial and contingent nature of our utterances and discursive practices has nothing to do with relativism and all to do with accountability, or situated perspectives.

For example, whereas the deconstruction of masculinity and whiteness is an end in itself, the non-essentialist reconstruction of black perspectives, as well as the feminist reconstruction of multiple ways of being women, also has new alternatives to offer. In other words, some notions need to be deconstructed so as to be laid to rest once and for all: masculinity, whiteness, heterosexism, classism, ageism. Others, need to be deconstructed only as a prelude to offering positive new values and effective ways of asserting the political presence of newly empowered subjects: feminism, diversity, multiculturalism, environmentalism. All claims to authenticity need to be subjected to serious critical enquiry, but not left hanging in some sort of theoretical undecidability, as Butler would have it<sup>8</sup>. The affirmation of robust alternatives is what feminist philosophies of the subject are all about.

### **Matter-Realist Feminism**

The legacy of this classical but neglected philosophical tradition of high poststructuralist anti-humanism sets the backdrop for the shifts currently taking place in the work of a new generation of feminist scholars. A range of positions has emerged that bridge the gap between the classical opposition 'materialism/idealism' and move towards a non-essentialist brand of contemporary vitalism, or thought on 'life itself'.

This movement of thought gathers the remains of poststructuralist anti-humanism and joins them

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<sup>7</sup> Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason. Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge, MA 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, London 2004.

with feminist reappraisals of contemporary techno-culture in a non-deterministic frame. They converge on discourses about 'life' and living matter/bodies: be it under the guise of political reflections on 'bio-power', or in the form of analyses of science and technology, they bring us back to the organic reality of 'real bodies'. After so much emphasis on the linguistic and cultural turn, an ontology of presence replaces textual deconstruction. This return of a neo-realist practice of bodily materialism is also known as: 'matter-realism', radical neo-materialism or post-human feminism. One of the main reasons to explain these shifts concerns the changing conceptual structure of materialism itself, under the impact of contemporary bio-genetics and information technologies. Feminist scholarship here falls neatly in two interconnected areas: new feminist science studies and epistemology on the one hand and political critiques of globalization and its economic and military violence on the other. They converge on the notion that what matters about materialism today is the concept of 'matter' itself. The switch to a monistic political ontology stresses processes, vital politics and non-deterministic evolutionary theories.

For instance, Karen Barad's work on 'agential realism'<sup>9</sup> stresses the onto-epistemological aspect of feminist knowledge claims today. Barad's agential realism builds on but also radically expands the redefinitions of objectivity and embodiment that took place in high feminist poststructuralism and thus also reshapes the forms of ethical and political accountability that rest upon them. By choosing to privilege neither the material nor the cultural, agential realism focuses instead on the process of their interaction. It accordingly redefines the apparatus of bodily production as material-cultural in order to foster both the interrogation of the boundaries between them. This results also in specifically feminist formulations of critical reflexivity and a renewed call for the necessity of an ethics of knowing that reflects and respects complexity.

One of Karen Barad's most astute commentators, Iris van der Tuin, claims that this materialist reconfiguration of the process of interaction between the material and the semiotic, also known as the onto-epistemological shift, constitutes anew paradigm that ends up displacing both its poles of reference. What gets redefined in the process is the process-oriented, relational and fundamentally affective structure of subjectivity and knowledge production. According to van der Tuin this approach encourages the constitution of a trans-disciplinary perspective that combines feminist science studies, postcolonial studies and Deleuzian feminism in a new brand of Third Wave feminist materialism.

Luciana Parisi also emphasizes that the great advantage of Spinozist monism is that it defines nature/culture as a continuum that evolves through variations, or differentiations. Deleuze and Guattari theorize them in terms of transversal assemblages, or transversal lines of interconnection. At the core of the 'chaosmosis' proposed by Guattari lies a mixed semiotics that combines the virtual (indeterminate) and the actual domains. The non-semiotic codes (the DNA or

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<sup>9</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Half Way*, Durham 2007.

all genetic material) intersect with complex assemblages of affects, embodied practices and other performances that include but are not confined to the linguistic realm. Parisi strengthens this case by cross-referring to the new epistemology of Margulis, through the concept of endosymbiosis, which, like autopoiesis, indicates a creative form of evolution. It defines the vitality of matter as an ecology of differentiation, which means that the genetic material is exposed to processes of becoming. This questions any ontological foundation for difference while avoiding social constructivism.

The implications of this argument are twofold: the first point is that difference emerges as pure production of becoming-molecular and that the transitions or stratifications are internal to the single process of formation or of assemblage. They are intensive or affective variations that produce semiotic and a-semiotic practices. This is not just about dismissing semiotics or the linguistic turn, but rather an attempt at using it more rigorously, within the domains of its strict application. It is also important to connect it transversally to other discourses. The second key point is that primacy is given to the relation over the terms. Parisi expresses this in Guattari's language as 'schizogenesis' – or the affective being of the middle, the interconnection, the relation. This is the space-time where the differentiation occurs and with it the modifications. The emphasis falls accordingly on the micropolitics of relations, as a posthumanist ethics that traces transversal connections among material and symbolic, concrete and discursive, lines or forces. Transversality actualizes an ethics based on the primacy of the relation, of interdependence, which values non-human or a-personal Life. This is what I call Zoe itself<sup>10</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued in the previous section that sexuality de-territorializes the actual gender of the people it involves in the process of becoming. An important question that can be raised here is: what happens to gender if sexuality is not based on oppositional terms?

Let me pursue this discussion with an example taken from the legendary relationship between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West – as a complex, multi-layered and highly sexualized encounter that produces affects, relations and texts of all sorts. Virginia and Vita propose an ethical model where the play of sameness-difference is not modelled on the dialectics of masculinity and femininity; it is rather an active space of becoming that is productive of new meanings and definitions. In other words: here is sexuality beyond gender.

This cuts two ways: firstly, the homophobic assumption that same-sex relationships cause fusion and confusion, in so far as they fail to establish sufficiently strong boundaries of alterity is flatly rejected by the experience of high-singularity and intense definition, which emerges from the encounter of Virginia with Vita. The fact that Virginia and Vita meet within this category of sexual

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<sup>10</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*, Cambridge 2006.

'sameness' encourages them to look beyond the delusional aspects of the identity ('women'), which they supposedly share. This proliferation of differences between women and within each one of them is evident in the outcomes and the products of their relationship, be it in the literature which Virginia and Vita produced, or in the many social, cultural and political projects they were engaged in. These included marriages, motherhood and child-rearing, political activism, socializing, campaigning, publishing and working as a publisher, gardening and the pursuit of friendships, pleasures, and hard work.

Secondly, the assemblage composed by Virginia & Vita as blocks of becoming is post-gender but not beyond sex – it is actually deeply embedded in sexuality and can be best understood in relation to non-unitary subjectivity and neo-vital politics. The disappearance of firm boundaries between self and other, in the love encounter, in intense friendship, in the spiritual experience, and in more everyday interpersonal connections, is the necessary premise to the enlargement of one's fields of perception and capacity to experience. In pleasure as in pain, in a secular, spiritual, erotic mode that combines at once elements from all these, the decentring and opening up of the individual ego coincides not only with communication with other fellow human beings, but also with a heightening of the intensity of such communication. This shows the advantages of a non-unitary vision of the subject. A depersonalization of the self, in a gesture of everyday transcendence of the ego, is a connecting force, a binding force that links the self to larger internal and external relations. An isolated vision of the individual is a hindrance to such a process.

It is also important to stress the extent to which sets of interconnections or encounters constitute a project, which requires active involvement and work. Desire is never a given. Rather, like a long shadow projected from the past, it is a forward-moving horizon that lies ahead and towards which one moves. Between the no longer and the not yet, desire traces the possible patterns of becoming. These intersect with and mobilize sexuality, but never stop there as they construct space and time and thus design possible worlds by allowing the unfolding of ever intensified affects. Desire sketches the conditions for the future by bringing into focus the present, through the unavoidable accident of an encounter, a flush, a sudden acceleration that marks a point of no-return. Call it falling in love, if you wish, but only if you can rescue the notion from the sentimental banality into which it has sunk in commercial culture. Moreover, if falling in love it is, it is disengaged from the human subject that is wrongly held responsible for the event. Here, love is an intensive encounter that mobilizes the sheer quality of the light and the shape of the landscape. Deleuze's remark on the grasshoppers flying in at 5:00 PM on the back of the evening wind also evokes non-human cosmic elements in the creation of a space of becoming. This indicates that desire designs a whole territory and thus it cannot be restricted to the mere human persona that enacts it. We need a post-anthropocentric theory of both desire and love in order to do justice to the complexity of subjects of becoming.