A Question of Silence: Feminist Theory and Women's Voices

ALICE CRARY

In this paper, I critically examine some recent trends in *feminist epistemology*, the study of whether, and if so, how our knowledge carries a masculine bias. The purpose of my examination is twofold: (i) to expose pitfalls in investigations within feminist epistemology and (ii) to shed light on promising methodologies for such investigations—methodologies that can lead to productive feminist thought and action.

I begin by exploring the point of departure of some feminist theory. Many feminist theories begin as responses to women's concerns about gender bias and then end by putting forward general epistemological claims about how a masculine bias *must* pervade our prevailing theoretical discourses. I will be critical of theories which, in so far as they take this form, might be described as involving a 'philosophical must'. In their insistence that the structure of our body of knowledge must be of a particular character (i.e., one which, in a specified manner, encodes a masculine bias), such theories make *a priori* claims about the structure of knowledge in particular areas. I will argue that this strand of feminist theory—like the putatively 'male' metaphysics which it calls upon itself to replace—ultimately discourages us from directing our attention primarily to an understanding of the role gender plays in the composition of particular bodies of knowledge, and that it thus in the end fails to be genuinely responsive to the concerns it first undertakes to address. I will close by considering two important moments in the development of feminist thought, both of which I believe are best understood from the perspective of a feminism which is free of the general theoretical claims advanced in the strand of feminist theory I want to criticize.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000432 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Alice Crary

1. A moment of silence

> One of the great powers of feminism is that it goes so far in making the experiences and lives of women intelligible. Trying to make sense of one's own feelings, motivations, desires, ambitions, actions and reactions without taking into account the forces which maintain the subordination of women to men is like trying to explain why a marble stops rolling without taking friction into account. What 'feminist theory' is about, to a great extent, is just identifying those forces (or some range of them or kinds of them) and displaying the mechanics of their applications to women as a group (or caste) and to individual women. The measure of the success of the theory is just how much sense it makes of what did not make sense before.
>
> —Marilyn Frye[1]

Investigations into whether or how knowledge is gendered often take as their point of departure what is described as a condition of *alienation*—women's powerful and often unanalysed sense of alienation from the dominant epistemic or linguistic practices of their society. Women sometimes begin a discussion of these difficult matters by focusing on what they take to be a symptom of this alienation—both their own and that of other women—a symptom which manifests itself, in the first instance, as a sense of unease only vaguely associated with gender identity.[2]

Women's articulations of such a sense of unease are some of the data which feminist thought—at least in its beginning stages—undertakes to organize and clarify.[3] Many accounts of the first awakening

[1] *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1983), xi–xii.

[2] To take this as a point of departure is *not* to ignore the fact that many women's experience of oppression is anything but vague. Many women suffer the violence of rape, battery, forced prostitution, incest, sexual harassment, forced maternity, etc. Since these horrors are often suffered in isolation, however, they sometimes seem—even to the women who are forced to undergo them—individual, even chosen. A woman may not view her particular experience as, in any significant sense, peculiarly that of a woman. Her original inclination to look to feminism for an understanding of her experience may therefore—even in these violent cases—take the form of a sense of vague unease; that is, a feeling which, for all its forcefulness, none the less presents itself to her only vaguely as one of oppression.

[3] Although this sketch of the beginnings of feminism is relatively uncontentious, some philosophers would dispute it. Richard Rorty, e.g.,

of a feeling of need for some kind of feminist theorizing begin with descriptions of a woman's sense of unease and then proceed to characterizations of this sense as linked to her feeling of dislocation between her experience and the resources she has for claiming it.

Some feminist theorists attempt to understand their own and other women's feeling of dislocation by analysing the structure of dominant theoretical discourses. One central topic of concern for feminists has been to uncover and articulate those areas of knowledge in which women's experience—experience which appears to be entirely pertinent to the variety of knowledge in question—has been treated as irrelevant even to the collection of data. Most conspicuous, perhaps, are the areas of women's sexuality and motherhood. In nineteenth-century American medical practice, an almost exclusively male profession found it acceptable to treat disease in women as generally linked to sexual organs. Thus a medical expert might treat a woman for consumption, indigestion or backache (conditions for which male patients received more specific treatments) with a 'medical assault on her sexual organs'.[4] One respected justification for this practice of disregarding women patients' felt symptoms was the widespread view that the ovaries (or other sexual organs) 'give a woman all her characteristics of body and mind'.[5] In this century,

[4] Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *For Her Own Good* (New York: Anchor, 1979), 123.

[5] Ibid., 120. This citation is taken from 'Dr. G. L. Austin's 1883 book of advice of "maiden, wife and mother"' (123).

---

wants to focus exclusively on a moment in the writing of some feminists at which feminist theory views itself, not as an attempt to respond to women's articulations of their needs and concerns, but rather as an attempt to bring women to experience things—things they do not now for the most part experience as severe injustices—as severe injustices. (Rorty is thinking of things such as marital rape which neither the law nor social mores consider egregious wrongs, things which women themselves therefore often do not feel entitled to protest.) For Rorty, feminist theory should be viewed as an attempt to 'create' unease or magnify kinds of unease which are muted. Thus he admires the work of Catharine MacKinnon because he thinks 'she sees feminists as needing to alter the data of moral theory rather than needing to formulate principles which fit pre-existent data better' (*Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 3, Cambridge University Press, 1998, 204). Rorty is right that there is a moment within much feminist writing which focuses on the ability of feminist theory to shape women's experiences of certain events. It is, however, difficult to find a major feminist author whose work fails to combine this moment with the moment I begin with (the moment in which feminist theory views itself as responding to women's articulations of their experience of certain things).

theorists have declared the vaginal orgasm a sign of 'sexual maturity'—thereby ignoring women's actual experience of the character of their sexuality. Medical professionals have also instructed patients with assurance and authority about what a healthy, well-adjusted woman will feel during pregnancy—their instruction being primarily related to current social norms and only secondarily to an understanding of what women most often actually go through.[6] In these cases, women's perceptions of the character of their experience are taken as at best tangential, and at worst irrelevant, to the development of properly 'objective' or 'scientific' accounts of matters—matters which are of pressing concern to them as women. It is in reference to cases such as these that feminists have suggested that a woman's feeling of dislocation may be traced in part to her sense that her own perceptions of what she undergoes are abnormal, unnatural or invalid; she may in such cases experience the clash between her own, often submerged, perception of something she underwent and the 'official version' of what should have happened as a kind of alienation or dislocation.[7]

Many feminists have pointed out, further, that even once the marginalization of women's experience in cases such as these is accounted for, women may be written out of theoretical discourses in yet another way. The words or concepts employed within 'official accounts'—although they may appear to be objective or universal—may themselves already encode a gender bias. Simone de Beauvoir, for example, draws attention to a historical pattern in which that which is called 'masculine' is upheld as a norm for all people and that which is identified as 'feminine' is characterized by its lack of certain positive qualities:

> The terms *masculine* and *feminine* are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality the relation of

[6] Jean Grimshaw discusses both of these cases in *Philosophy and Feminist Thinking* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 76–7.

[7] This feminist diagnosis is not undermined by the insight that our experience is mediated by dominant social norms. Although some women may in fact successfully rely on the norms of their society in their attempts to articulate their experience of, e.g., pregnancy, others may become frustrated or confused by their failure to make sense of their experience within the terms of those norms. It is not inconsistent to claim both that women's attempts to understand the character of their experience are mediated by prevailing social norms and also that, in some cases, those norms simply do not do justice to what women in fact experience.

> the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity.[8]

Women's experience, even when its relevance is acknowledged, may be portrayed in a way which is intrinsically biased.

Feminist epistemology tends to start by claiming to speak to, and for, the pathos of women's descriptions of their feelings of alienation. It wishes to go on from this starting point and take account of the fact that historically and for the most part, not only have women not generally participated directly in the production of our body of knowledge, but they have also not participated in activities of theorizing about our body of knowledge. They have not taken part in those second-order activities which bequeath to us our image of knowledge.[9] Women have, for the most part, remained theoretically and philosophically mute. Feminist epistemology (or feminist theory more generally) often presents itself as a vehicle through which women can come to find their own voices. It therefore naturally tends to take as its point of departure this sort of discussion of ways in which prevailing theoretical discourses have failed to engage women's voices.

Perceptions (such as those just touched upon) of the historical irrelevance of women's experience to prevailing activities of theory-construction sometimes get coupled with a more general epistemological insight which does not itself turn on feminist preoccupations: viz., that what a person takes from particular experiences is not written into the experiences themselves; that, from early childhood on, over the course of our cultural education, we learn to take experience as bearing on knowledge in many different ways. Feminist theorists have been particularly concerned to further specify the implications of this broad epistemological insight by bringing into relief the manner in which certain sorts of personal characteristics of knowers (such as gender, sexual

[8] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, H. M. Parshley, trans., (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), xxi, emphasis in the original.

[9] This has been the case even where the object of knowledge is woman. We can, e.g., recall questions Virginia Woolf wanted to get us to ponder: 'Have you any notion how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men?' (*A Room of One's Own* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, Inc., 1957), 26).

orientation, race and class) can affect the way in which experience is taken to bear on knowledge. They tend to begin therefore with the following *epistemologically* relatively innocuous perception:[10]

> As women, homosexuals, blacks, or members of the working class (etc.) we are socialized in ways which are specific to our 'group' or 'groups'; the manner in which we then incorporate our experience will reflect this difference in socialization.

It is at this point that the particular strain of feminist theory I am concerned with begins to depart from a genuine responsiveness to women's voices. This epistemologically innocuous perception is often taken to support the suspicious—but epistemologically still potentially quite innocuous—claim that instances of androcentrism in discourse constitute evidence that all our discursive practices only reflect ways in which men incorporate their experience.[11] It is in their manner of going on from this already suspicious claim that the feminist arguments I am concerned with diverge most dramatically from responsiveness to things that women say in recounting their experience and become driven by a kind of philosophical insistence. It is characteristic of these arguments to move from this

[10] I say *epistemologically* innocuous, because this perception is anything but *politically* innocuous. Thoughts about the way gender, sexual orientation, race, class, etc. affect our socialization provoke enormous political resistance (as the history of resistance in the U.S. to various policies of affirmative action aptly demonstrates). *Epistemologically*, however, it is innocuous in the sense of being relatively uncontested. Claims of this form can be traced back as far as Aristotle in the history of Western philosophy. Few philosophers of note have ever claimed that the particular ways in which we are initiated into our society have no bearing on how we conceptualize the world. (I rely on this distinction between what is epistemologically and what is politically innocuous throughout this paper. I am making explicit my disagreement with an unstated assumption of some feminist theory to the effect that only a philosophical position which is *anything but epistemologically innocuous* can avoid being politically innocuous as well—and therefore that only a form of feminist action connected to a theory which is sufficiently epistemologically radical can hold forth the promise of genuine progress.)

[11] I use the term 'androcentrism' here to refer to two phenomena of feminist concern touched on above: 1) the irrelevance of women's perceptions of the character of their experience to certain dominant discourses; 2) the 'male-as-norm-syndrome'—i.e., the upholding of what is 'masculine' as a norm for all people and the identification of the 'feminine' by its lack of positive qualities. The two phenomena may, of course, reinforce each other.

claim (which is consistent with the perception that ways in which we take experience as bearing on knowledge reflect differences in our socialization) directly—and without acknowledging that any philosophically momentous step is being taken—to the following considerably less innocuous claim:

> Instances of androcentrism in language and theory constitute evidence that our language and theories—and, ultimately, all of our dominant bodies of knowledge—only reflect *distinctly* male experience.

Some feminists who present themselves as beginning with the innocuous epistemological insight wind up advocating the claim that our current forms of knowledge are suited only to the task of incorporating the character of 'male experience', and that we currently lack a theoretical discourse at all adequate to the task of incorporating 'female experience'. It is an assumption of this claim that female experience is thoroughly and systematically different from male experience, where this means that women's and men's experience are in a strong sense incommensurable:[12] women and men should be understood as perceiving and inhabiting logically separate 'realities'; 'male' language expresses distinctly male experience to the exclusion of distinctly female experience.[13] This claim thus carries the suggestion that women should establish their own language (now one which would reflect distinctly 'female' experience), and it implies that this project will involve rejecting the concepts, theories and methodologies which have been integral to 'male' theory construction—including the very notions of objectivity, experience and rationality which are themselves thought by some feminist theorists to presuppose a masculine way of knowing the world.[14]

[12] Sheila Ruth, e.g., explicitly draws on this assumption. See 'Methodocracy, Misogyny and Bad Faith: The Response of Philosophy', *Men's Studies Modified: The Impact of Feminism on the Academic Disciplines*, D. Spender (ed.) (New York: Pergamon Press, 1981), 47.

[13] Liz Stanley and Sue Wise contend that 'women's experiences constitute a different view of reality, an entirely different ontology or way of going about making sense of the world … Women sometimes construct and inhabit what is in effect an entirely different social reality' (*Breaking Out: Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 117).

[14] Both Cora Diamond ('Knowing Tornados and Other Things', *New Literary History* (1991), 1001–16; see 1001–4) and Jean Grimshaw ((op. cit., note 6), esp. ch. 3) are critical of feminist argument which proceed on structurally similar paths to this conclusion.

Some theorists go on from this already less than innocuous argument to claim that there can therefore be no such thing as an impersonal theory of knowledge or language. What once looked like the possibility of such a theory must now be given up on the grounds that it illicitly presupposes a gender neutral standpoint from which the theory can encounter its subject-matter. What some theorists see as the necessary intrusion of personal characteristics of the knower into both the structure and content of what is known is taken by them to demonstrate the impossibility of any attempt to construct a theory of what others have thought of as the 'language which we (women and men) share'.

Andrea Nye, e.g., undertakes to demonstrate that the discipline which has traditionally been called 'logic' is grounded on a philosophical confusion (and can therefore, she wants to argue, play only a distorting role in social and philosophical debates).[15] Nye's argument opens with her fairly uncontroversial suggestion that it is possible to give commentaries on the work of major figures in the history of logic which centre, not on evaluating their logical achievements in isolation, but rather on assessing those achievements from within the context of their personal backgrounds, social circumstances, hopes and ambitions. (Nye calls this kind of understanding 'reading'.) She criticizes philosophers of logic for overlooking or obscuring the possibility of this kind of understanding, for assuming that '[a]dvances in logic depend on thought only, unrelated to any personal, political, or economic considerations'.[16] Nye's work is of value in so far as she reminds us that a thinker's presuppositions can surreptitiously inform 'his' logical work and that it is simple-minded to assume that the practical context of logical research cannot influence content. But Nye's criticism goes deeper than a recommendation for a more complete, human understanding of the achievements comprising the history of logic. She laments some philosophers' willingness to allow for the possibility of a discipline which (although it is susceptible of 'readings') is valued philosophically precisely because it allows us to abstract from the social context of thought in order to achieve a clearer view of the workings of thought. She moves from the philosophically innocuous claim that the social circumstances of a logician may influence the character of 'his' work to the hardly innocent conclusion that there can be no such thing as logic—no such thing as a discipline which, although its history can be 'read', can be conceived as

[15] *Words of Power* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
[16] Ibid., 3.

the laying out of the conceptual structure of the space of reasons which we share. In what follows, I isolate what I see as confusions in general theoretical arguments like Nye's—arguments which wind up denying the possibility of a space of reasons which women and men can fruitfully cohabit.

2. The nature of the silence

> The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.
> — Audré Lorde[17]

I am assuming that an understanding of the sources of women's sense of alienation from dominant linguistic and epistemic practices plays a central role in any satisfactory feminist theory. One sign of the adequacy of such an understanding will be that it occasions self-recognition in the women whose lives it aims to describe—that women may come to recognize it as at least in part a diagnosis of the character of the unease that they in fact feel.[18] Women's articulations of feelings of unease should thus continue, within the development of feminist theory, to be engaged and responded to. Investigations which do not aim primarily for this kind of responsiveness to women's voices will tend to overlook those avenues of thought and action which lead to a form of just and fruitful attention to different women's concrete positions with respect to particular epistemic practices. So, as long as feminist theory continues to aim for the development of lines of thought and action which women can identify as just and fruitful for women, it should continue to measure itself by its responsiveness to women's judgments about what is just and fruitful for women. Although the needs and concerns which women articulate will undoubtedly change as women enrich their senses of what it is to speak as women and for women, those needs and concerns articulated by women, however altered, should remain the primary data to which feminist theory is

[17] *Sister Outsider* (The Crossing Press feminist series, 1984), 110–3.

[18] Stanley Cavell (part IV of *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford University Press, 1979) and Cora Diamond ('Losing Your Concepts', *Ethics* **98** (January 1988), 255–77)) use the concept of *acknowledgment* to express such forms of self-recognition. In their terms, women's recognition of something about themselves in feminist theory might also be described as their 'acknowledgement' of an image or reflection of themselves in feminist theory—their acknowledgement of such an image as speaking to and for them.

responsible. It should be taken as a criterion of adequacy of an investigation within feminist theory that it occasions women's greater understanding of the sources of women's pervasive sense of dislocation—where it is a measure of genuine understanding that it enables the development of a coherent and productive feminist politics.

For these reasons I am suspicious of arguments, such as that sketched in the last section, which move from a general epistemological insight—one about the influence of individual characteristics on ways in which experience is taken to bear on knowledge—to the conclusion that all our dominant epistemic practices *must* be thoroughly pervaded by a masculine bias. In their insistence that all our prevailing discourses must have a certain structure (i.e., one which encodes a masculine bias), such arguments lapse into a distinctive metaphysical tone. Enthralled by a picture of the way things must be in the world, they lay down philosophical requirements on what our investigations can reveal about the character of knowledge. These requirements—putting aside worries about their internal coherence—may then serve to distort our perception of the experiences which originally suggested the need for feminist theory. They predispose us to insist that we already know what must be there (within a particular epistemic practice), so we come to feel that we don't have to *look*—or at least not further than a certain point. Within feminist theory, the invisible requirements of a 'philosophical must' can constrain what we see when we look at our lives, every bit as much as can the sorts of requirements imposed on us by our prevailing theoretical discourses. If a tendency to blind us to the character of certain experiences is characteristic of certain classical metaphysical theses, and if it is a dominant tendency of contemporary feminist theory to criticize such blindness in its traditional guises (and view it as a symptom of a masculine theoretical bias), it does not automatically follow that such feminist theory has already, in its gesture of rejecting 'male' metaphysics, succeeded in liberating itself from that metaphysics.

I want to emphasize that, in diagnosing the sources of a tone of metaphysical insistence which rings clearly in certain strands of feminist argument, my aim is to achieve a clearer view of the actual sources of women's sense of alienation. I am not arguing against feminist discoveries of *de facto* masculine bias in linguistic or epistemic practices or social institutions—no matter how systematic or widespread feminist inquiries reveal such bias to be—but only against the claim that such bias *must* be there, even in places we have not yet looked.

i. How 'male' is our language?

Consider how certain strands of feminist theory may encourage us to develop a distorted picture of women's relation to particular linguistic and epistemic practices. Feminist theorists have drawn attention to different ways in which linguistic expressions may encode a masculine bias. 'Exorcising'[19] or eliminating such bias from a particular expression may afford a woman a greater sense of the compatibility between her words and her experiences. She may also find that her first discovery of bias is systematically related to other instances of bias in her forms of thought and speech. Feminist investigations have revealed some of the deeply ingrained ways in which the uses of linguistic expressions encourage what might be called 'masculinist thought'. Once the practice of referring to all people with the expressions 'man' and 'mankind' had been uncovered, feminists uncovered expressions such as 'people and their wives'[20] and 'spousal consent for obtaining an abortion'. But such investigations depend for their possibility on our ability to use expressions in ways which are not 'masculinist'. Our recognition of the practice of using 'man' to refer to all people as a biased use of language depends on our being able to recognize other uses of 'man' as not biased.

When theorists respond to a woman's sense of 'not being at home in her language' by recommending the wholesale rejection of 'male language',[21] they presuppose that our most basic concepts of objectivity and rationality (which are seen as somehow precipitating the local biased uses of language) can, in the end, simply be rejected. They operate on the assumption that when we have gone deep enough—when we have fully corrected the masculine biases of language—we will wind up with a language which is no longer conceptually akin to our present 'male' language. We will then not merely have readjusted our forms of expression to accommodate certain feminist insights, but we will have, as it were, 'gotten outside of our 'male' skins'.

[19] In *Gyn/Ecology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), Mary Daly writes about the radical feminist 'journey' which 'involves exorcism of the internal Godfather in his various manifestations'.

[20] Ibid.,18.

[21] Where 'male language' is not just bits and phrases of our current language which can be corrected the way 'man' can be, but extends beyond concrete examples such as this to what are thought of as the metaphysical underpinnings of the whole of our current language.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000432 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Even in those cases, however, in which we can achieve a limited analogue of a wholesale rejection of things 'male' in favour of things 'female', such a gesture still will not accomplish what is intended. The affirmation of the negation of a metaphysical thesis tends to issue in another metaphysical thesis—one which participates in the same picture and hence bears the image of its opposing counterpart. The theorists I am concerned to criticize here reflect on traditional metaphysical renderings of our basic everyday concepts of objectivity, rationality and experience—and accept these renderings as successfully representing the structure of these concepts—and then turn on them and want to reject them as fully 'male'. This gesture of rejecting a traditional metaphysics of objectivity, rationality and experience is open to question from the following direction. Given that the theorists who make it want to distance themselves from confused or limiting metaphysical accounts of these concepts, we need to ask whether the gesture suits their purposes.

The worry is that, if our current metaphysical conceptions of rationality, experience and objectivity are understood as presupposing what is 'male' as a norm for all humans, and if we attempt simply to affirm the negation of these traditional metaphysical theses (imagining we are thereby exchanging 'male' basic concepts for 'female' ones), then we end up simply maintaining the structures of that 'male' metaphysics, reflected now in the mirror-image of its antitheses. Mere denial of the validity of what some philosophers have seen as the metaphysical underpinnings of our most basic concepts will not amount to a dismantling of that tradition. In simply denying some of the central tenets of traditional metaphysics, some theorists recognize it as advancing straightforward tenets which can be denied and thereby limit themselves to a space of alternatives whose dimensions are determined by that tradition. Denial of the correctness of a traditional metaphysical thesis in a sense simply rehearses a moment within the tradition.[22] Certain kinds of feminist arguments legitimize traditional ('male') metaphysics in their very attempt to reject it.

[22] By employing such a strategy, I want to suggest, some feminist thought runs the risk of simply repeating a traditional philosophical problematic of scepticism. Below (2iii) I argue that the feminist theorist may find herself arriving, together with the sceptic, at a traditional philosophical terminus of muteness in the face of the ineffability of what she wants to say.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000432 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ii. Tension between social constructivism and essentialism about gender

The arguments I am concerned with begin with an innocuous general insight about the social context of knowledge. They underline the fact that we are socialized into certain norms and describe ways in which our experience is mediated by these norms. This insight is then often elaborated into the thought that *gender* (as opposed to *sex* which is often taken to be biologically determinative) is socially constructed. This strain of feminist thought is at odds with another feminist position, one which does not take a sociological perspective on gender but rather embraces an essentialist view, a view asserting that women simply experience things differently from men (and vice-versa). Some feminist arguments that explicitly claim to embrace the former sociological perspective and reject the latter essentialist one are nevertheless implicitly committed to some version of the latter. Some theorists have wanted to build on a relatively innocuous version of the sociological insight to go on to argue that our current forms of knowledge are adequate only to the task of incorporating distinctly male experience. As we saw, it is an implicit assumption of this claim that female experience is thoroughly and systematically different from male experience—and this is just what feminists (and others, including various kinds of misogynist thinkers) who are essentialists about gender have hoped to show. This perception of ways in which our experience is mediated by social norms, when it is taken to show that our body of knowledge *must* be thoroughly and systematically pervaded by a masculine bias, thus becomes intertwined with an essentialist position with which it is deeply in tension. (Many feminist theorists whose work is threatened by this tension fail to notice it because they waffle between two senses in which one might understand the claim that 'female experience differs systematically from male experience'. They trade on the ambiguity between saying that women's experience tends to differ in systematic ways from men's experience (because women's and men's experience are both mediated by social norms which differentiate systematically between women and men) and saying that it is constitutive of women's experience and men's experience that they be systematically different (because it is essential to what it is to be a woman and what it is to be a man that each experience things differently).) These kinds of arguments therefore leave themselves open to criticisms that have been made of essentialist arguments about gender. In tacitly assuming that women's and men's experience are essentially different, they suggest that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000432 Published online by Cambridge University Press

there are some features of women's experience which cannot be influenced by socialization. And they incline toward the suggestion that women's experience (or 'women's intuition') is self-validating: it is unquestionably valid because beyond the reach of any social or individual forces.

Without some independent argument (i.e., an argument for why social differentiation with respect to gender is of an epistemologically privileged kind), this move, which places a fundamental division between women's and men's experience, threatens to make room for further fundamental divisions along lines other than gender—e.g., among groups of women from different backgrounds. It welcomes a splintering of what might be called 'women's reality' into numerous separate 'realities' for women of different races, classes, sexual orientations, ethnicities or religions (each of whom may, on this line of thought, be presumed to inhabit their own self-validating 'reality'). It suggests that there are *a priori* obstacles blocking communication between diverse groups of women as well as between women and men. This strain of feminist theory thus veers toward the conclusion that true communication between persons with significantly different personal characteristics is impossible.

Further, a thesis affirming the metaphysical separation of 'male' and 'female' experience undercuts one of the original insights which motivated feminists to complain about our prevailing theoretical discourses: viz., that they unjustly exclude the voices of women. If it is true that there are essential differences between women's and men's experience, then what feminists lament as the inadequacy of dominant theoretical discourses must be viewed, no longer as a reparable shortcoming of (and therefore a ground of complaint against) these discourses, but rather as an inevitable structural feature. If women's experience and men's experience are fundamentally incommensurable, then we must resign ourselves to the fact that no single set of concepts could serve the purposes of both women and men. Whatever concepts provide a man with the resources to lead a rich and fulfilling life will necessarily obstruct the possibility of such a life for a woman. So women's alienation from 'male' theoretical discourses is not primarily an artifact of their society's attitudes towards women, but rather an undeniable fact rooted in essential differences between the genders.

Leaving aside for the moment its despair at the possibility of formulating any positive conception of human flourishing (i.e., one which could equally inform the lives of women and men), the mere attempt to state this feminist position seems to invite the following worry. In describing this position, we seem to need to grasp some

notion of 'women's experience' which is prior to any concepts which could be used to make sense of that experience. We might well wonder what understanding we have of the notion of 'women's experience' if it is taken to refer to a phenomenon which precedes even our very first discursive stammerings.[23]

iii. What 'female thoughts' might not be

A number of recent feminist arguments champion some version of the thought that our prevailing discourses are thoroughly and exclusively 'male'. This thought is typically developed in conjunction with the claim that our most basic logical concepts—such as objectivity, rationality, experience, etc.—reflect exclusively 'male' ways of knowing the world. The idea is that, in order to avoid falling into 'male' ways of thinking, women must 'get outside' 'male' language (language which includes those concepts) by creating a fully 'female' language which reflects 'female' ways of thinking.

It is helpful to consider this sort of argument against the background of a well known critique, developed in Wittgenstein's writings, of a prevalent and very natural view of nonsense. Wittgenstein attacks views on which combinations of words fail to make sense because the thoughts that they (try to) express are taken to be in some way impermissible or illegitimate. He stresses that, in so far as such views represent combinations of words as failing to be proper units of language on account of the nature of thoughts they (endeavour to) impart, they presuppose an understanding of the very combinations of words they portray as nonsensical. These views waver unsteadily between representing certain strings of signs as having senses we can at least vaguely make out and rejecting those same strings of signs as lacking sense. They are at least tacitly committed to drawing on a problematic category of *nonsensical* yet somehow also *intelligible* strings of signs.

Wittgenstein's critique bears directly on the feminist arguments at issue here. It is a presupposition of these arguments that we are in a position to grasp the notion of 'female' thoughts although—situated as we are within a 'male' language—we are not yet in a position fully to articulate *them*.[24] It is at least implicit in them that there

[23] This strain of feminist theory thus recapitulates a recurring set of problems in philosophy often subsumed under the heading of 'the Given'.

[24] It is also a presupposition of such arguments that we are in a position to grasp the notion of 'male language' although—situated as we are within such a language—we as yet have no concept of 'some other kind of language' with which to contrast (and thus to make the relevant sense of) the notion of a 'male language'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000432 Published online by Cambridge University Press

are ('female') thoughts which, because of the limits of ('male') language, we are unable fully to say or think. When we formulate these ('female') thoughts in ('male') language, we necessarily fail to give full expression to their ('female') meaning. We are, nonetheless, somehow able to achieve a position from which we can discern what ('female') thoughts these as yet nonsensical sentences would be expressing if they could be properly formulated. Still we recognize that the limits of ('male') language confine us. Try as we might, we can't (as yet) fully express these ('female') thoughts. This way of understanding the significance of certain nonsensical ('female') combinations of words commits its proponents to an understanding of language as having a communicative function over and above that of saying what can be said. The nonsensical ('female') sentence does not express an intelligible thought, yet it imparts a 'meaning' in spite of its senselessness. It show us that there is something it is attempting to say even though it cannot be said—something which is, as of yet, unsayable. It is implicit in such arguments, then, that it is in some sense intelligible to discuss what a nonsensical ('female') thought attempts to express. Theorists who embrace such arguments resemble proponents of the view of nonsense Wittgenstein attacks in that they find themselves committed to a notion of intelligible nonsense. In saying that certain nonsensical ('female') sentences attempt to express things that can't be said, these theorists simultaneously use those ('female') sentences to impart something and deny that that something can be said. They tell us that the sentences are nonsense at the same time that they provide us with an apparently intelligible rendering of what it is the sentences fail to say.[25]

Wittgenstein represents the tendency to be drawn toward adopting this kind of internally inconsistent position as a characteristic, though often disguised, symptom of philosophical scepticism. This suggests an analogy between the epistemological ambitions of the sceptic and those of the feminist theorists I am considering.

Both the traditional philosophical sceptic and a certain kind of

[25] Liz Stanley and Sue Wise champion a version of this view of 'feminist thoughts'. In *Breaking Out* (op. cit., note 13), they claim both that 'female' thoughts are accessible to us even though such thoughts must be formulated in a language which is predominantly 'male' and also that 'male language' is language which is not even capable of expressing or rendering intelligible 'female thoughts' (117 and 183). A somewhat more sophisticated version of this view of 'feminist thoughts' is developed in the essays in Part I of Catharine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

feminist theorist aspire to achieve what they conceive as the wholesale rejection of the conceptual resources with which we make sense of the world. The sceptic wants to do so because she is impressed by what she claims is a disastrously important fact about our lives: viz., the fact that our conceptual resources may not be adequate to the task of accommodating our (i.e., women's and men's) experience. She accordingly insists that we should not blindly rely on our everyday ways of making sense of things. A particular kind of feminist theorist also aspires to fully reject our conceptual resources, but for a different reason. She holds that our current resources are inadequate to the task of incorporating women's experience.

There is a significant difference between the sceptic and this theorist. The sceptic tends to admit that we may never be able to articulate her insight fully appropriately or intelligibly. None the less, she holds that we have a grasp of *what* it is she is trying to say about our lives even if the conditions for saying it are never fully met. This theorist, in contrast, thinks that as we gradually develop a 'feminist language' we will better understand what (currently nonsensical) 'female thoughts' attempt to express. At the same time she also holds that right now we can somehow have insight into what such (currently nonsensical) thoughts are trying to say.

Despite this difference, there is a deep similarity between their positions. The feminist theorists I am discussing, like the sceptic, want to reject the very conceptual resources which they need to rely on to underwrite the intelligibility of what they hope to express. They put themselves, together with the sceptic, in a traditional philosophical position of speechlessness in the face of what they want to say, while at the same time insisting that their silence is pregnant with meaning.

iv. Recoiling in the wrong direction

There are important differences between my criticism of certain feminist arguments and charges brought against these same sorts of arguments by critics of *feminism*. One prominent and, for my purposes, representative critic is Janet Radcliffe Richards. Radcliffe Richards worries that women will have given up too much if they relinquish certain 'weapons' which, historically, have been controlled by men. She claims that 'the way to cope with men's treachery is not to outlaw the use of their weapons (especially since women cannot do without these themselves) but to become expert

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819101000432 Published online by Cambridge University Press

enough in their use to prevent further harm from being done'.[26] Here Radcliffe Richards is moved by her perception that women will continue to be dominated by men unless they come to terms with the 'weapons' which have been used to subordinate them. She is concerned that feminists who want simply to reject 'male tools' will be unsuccessful in their attempts to resist the instruments of their oppression. There is a valid worry somewhere here. But Radcliffe Richards goes on without a pause to declare: 'Women should be so adept in argument that they can see what is happening if men seem to have proved that black is white, instead of being driven into a baffled and furious silence'.[27] A paragraph later, she criticizes the feminist 'who thinks logic is something better ignored'. Radcliffe Richards embraces the idea that argument and logic are 'weapons' that women would be unwise to abandon. She thus buys into a central presupposition of the feminist arguments she wants to oppose: the assumption that there is something intelligible which women might do which would be 'a wholesale rejection of (male) logic or of (male) standards of consistency in argumentation'. She accepts the intelligibility of the recommendation—of someone like Andrea Nye—that women engage in a 'wholesale rejection of (male) logic'. But she chooses not to follow this recommendation on the grounds that it would be a tactical error.

In so far as Radcliffe Richards repudiates a feminist position like Nye's without questioning its presuppositions, her own view ends up incorporating its most problematic features. One might attempt to capture the respective positions of the critic of feminism (e.g., Radcliffe Richards) and the theorist who is a proponent of 'a wholesale rejection of male logic' (e.g., Nye) by relying on the slogan from the work of Audré Lorde: 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'. Adopting the terms of this slogan, we might say that a particular kind of theorist (Nye) thinks 'the master's tools' must all be thrown out, while a certain critic (Radcliffe Richards) thinks that they must all be kept, not as tools to build with, but only as weapons to fight with. The theorist is impressed by her perception that the character of many of our linguistic and epistemic practices has been shaped by their use in 'the master's' regime; she concludes that everything about them must, in the end, be rejected—they are hopelessly tainted. The critic is worried that women will never successfully resist oppression if they do not first learn to fight

[26] Janet Radcliffe Richards, *The Skeptical Feminist: a Philosophical Enquiry* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 24–5.

[27] Ibid., 25.

the adversary on his own terms. She responds that the theorist's plan is 'ridiculous' or 'unreasonable' because 'women cannot do without these [weapons]'. Both theorist and critic see themselves as forced to make a choice between what they see as two equally intelligible courses of action: either to reject all 'the master's tools' (where 'the master's tools' are taken to include not just certain applications of, say, logic, but all of our most basic practices of reason) or to keep them. But neither theorist nor critic is arguing a fully intelligible position in so far as they share the assumption that there is something like a choice to be made along these lines. In embracing Audré Lord's slogan, we are not thereby forced to take the theorist's side in this 'debate'. We are not forced to acknowledge this as a fully coherent debate at all. The slogan can be heard as expressing an epistemologically innocuous (though none the less critically important) feminist perception of the type I touched on above: namely, that certain structures of knowledge and language encode a masculine bias, and that, until we have recognized where and how bias is built into those practices, we will not have identified which are the tools that serve the purpose of the master. If we fail to recognize bias, then we end up trying to dismantle the master's domain with tools which only serve one purpose well, namely that of extending it.[28]

If the slogan is read in this epistemologically uncontentious way, then it seems to redirect our sense of where our central task lies: to discern which 'tools' the 'master's tools' are. On this view, one of the main tasks of feminist thought becomes, not throwing away the bulk of our current conceptual resources, but rather seeing where and how certain masculine biases have become encoded into what now seem to be natural ways of thinking and speaking.

[28] Lorde is concerned with the way the structure of the contemporary Women's Movement mirrors features of the sexist society it hopes to confront. She claims that as women we have been taught to view our differences (along lines of race, class, sexual orientation, etc.) as causes for 'separation and suspicion', and she argues that the Women's Movement will not be in a position to challenge sexism until it takes stock of the way intertwined threads of sexism, classism and homophobia have fuelled its own development.

3. Acknowledgment

> Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman?
>
> —Sojourner Truth

My criticism of a particular strain of feminist theory is not directed towards feminist discoveries of actual gender bias in our epistemic and linguistic practices. I have attempted, not to take issue with factual claims about the existence of such bias, but rather to diagnose the sources of a line of argument which some theorists have used to explain its existence. I have been concerned to trace the development of a tone of philosophical insistence which resounds within certain feminist arguments and to question a metaphysical claim which such a tone insinuates—the claim that a masculine bias *must* pervade our epistemic practices, even those practices we have not yet examined.

The work of feminist epistemologists should be valued for, among other things, bringing into relief roles that gender and other individual characteristics can play in the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge. Feminist epistemologists have drawn attention to aspects of the social context of knowledge. They have pointed out ways in which our socialization differs according to sex and explored the manner in which these differences are reflected in women's and men's contributions to knowledge in various areas. They have demonstrated that some of our sociological and natural knowledge (knowledge which sometimes strongly reflects society's demeaning attitudes toward women) at times fails to do justice to the character of women's experience. Further, in cataloguing particular ways in which gender biases are encoded in bodies of knowledge, feminist theorists begin to identify patterns. They develop skills for identifying similar kinds of biases in as yet unexamined bodies of knowledge. This is an important contribution of feminist thought. But even the existence of patterns does not warrant the inference to the conclusion that gender bias *must* pervade all forms of knowledge which represent themselves as impersonal—a conclusion which would excuse us from undertaking the kind of detailed investigation of particular practices which best further our understanding of the sources of women's sense of alienation.

In closing, I want to consider two moments within the development of feminist thought in the United States, both of which are best understood when considered from the perspective of a feminism which is free of the general theoretical claims put forth in the strain of feminist theory I have been criticizing.

i. 'Ain't I a woman?'

According to the record of Mrs. Frances D. Gage, a speech by Sojourner Truth was the occasion of a transformative experience for many women who participated in the 1851 Akron, Ohio Woman's Rights Convention. Truth—a woman who was freed from slavery in 1828 and began a career as an abolitionist, an activist in support of women's suffrage and an advocate for freed slaves—had a reportedly 'magical influence'[29] on the convention of white women (and some white men) when she spoke. In her speech, she described hardships she had faced as a black woman in the United States, and she regularly punctuated her narrative with the demand 'and ain't I a woman!' This refrain was aimed at an audience that had supposedly convened in order to consider and redress discrimination against women in the United States. On the one hand, Truth's speech addressed deeply interwoven currents of racism and sexism in nineteenth-century United States society: a black woman's status as a woman—something it might seem could not be taken from her—was something white society did in some ways try to deny her.[30] (A white man in the crowd stood up and yelled: 'I don't believe you really are a woman'.[31]) On the other hand, Truth drew upon the complex marginal status of her cultural, political and legal standing—partly falling under, and partly not, white society's concept of 'womanhood'—to bring into question the concept of 'woman' that many of the white convention participants unreflectively relied upon. 'Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles or gives me any best place, and ain't I a woman?'[32] Truth impressed upon her audience the fact that prevailing notions

[29] The words of Mrs. Frances D. Gage as cited in Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's *Man Cannot Speak For Her*, Vol. II (New York: Praeger, 1989), 102.

[30] One brutal way in which white society could deprive a black woman of the *legal rights* of a woman is illustrated in Melton A. McLaurin's *Celia: A Slave* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1992). McLaurin describes the trial of an enslaved woman, known to history simply as 'Celia', who in 1855 pleaded guilty to murdering the man who owned her—a man who repeatedly raped her. Celia's lawyer invoked Missouri statutes according to which 'any woman' was justified in the use of deadly force to defend her honor. The statute, however, was deemed not to apply to enslaved female persons such as Celia. It was judged that female slaves were not women in the eyes of the law. Celia was found guilty and hanged.

[31] Bell Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 159.

[32] Campbell, op. cit., note 29, 100.

of feminine vulnerability were optional, socially dictated delimitations of the concept 'woman'. 'I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ain't I a woman?'[33] Sojourner Truth's audience was composed largely of white feminists who—as the very event of the convention demonstrates—were struggling to articulate their knowledge of the condition of women. We can make perfectly ordinary and unmagical sense of 'the magical influence' her speech had on them if we suppose that those white women's understandings of themselves as 'women' encoded strands of the kinds of gender bias they took themselves to be organized to resist—and that Truth's speech brought this to their attention in ways that had previously gone unnoticed. Central features of their concept of 'woman' included attributions of personal characteristics such as vulnerability, meekness, dependence on male chivalry and generosity—characteristics which, when embodied in particular women, facilitate men's subjugation of them. These convention participants were women who came to see themselves as complicit in their own social subordination in that they took for granted features of their position in society which contributed to their disenfranchisement. Truth's speech helped them to recognize their use of the concept of 'woman' as a biased use—a recognition which makes sense against a background of possible uses of the expression 'woman' which are not biased, uses which do not involve attributions of vulnerability, meekness, dependence, etc. It was the fact that Truth to some degree meant the same thing by 'woman' as her audience that made her speech so powerful. She did not give 'woman' an entirely different meaning, but rather exposed certain prevailing uses of 'woman'—uses her listeners would have been likely to rely on—as in tension with some of the aspirations of the white convention participants. Mrs. Francis D. Gage's description of the overwhelming effect Truth's speech had on convention participants suggests that those women in some way recognized themselves in Truth's rigorously consistent and inclusive application of the concept of womanhood. Their admiration for Truth's speech turned on an acknowledgment of her words—that words such as these were somehow essential to their understanding of themselves, to the understanding they now took themselves to want.

[33] Ibid.

ii. Sexual harassment

I turn now to a second example, the concept of *sexual harassment*—a concept which, over the course of the past three decades, has assumed an increasingly prominent place in our public culture. Since the formulation of the *legal* concept of sexual harassment in the United States in 1976,[34] more women are in positions to rely on the idea of sexual harassment in making sense of their experiences. Many women who suffer the wrong of sexual harassment even today, however, find themselves unable to make sense of a painful and professionally or academically threatening experience—unable to achieve a clear view of what they were made to suffer. In such cases, women's silence should be understood, not as the silence of those with no political power to express and no forum to discuss some of their most pressing concerns (although women often also lack such political power and forums for discussion),[35] but as the silence of those who in some sense lack words to do justice to certain of their experiences.

The appropriateness of the expression 'sexual harassment' for naming a certain set of women's experiences is a function of the way the words 'sexual' and 'harassment' are used in other contexts. When feminists began talking about sexual harassment, they did not create a concept which had not previously existed, but rather insisted on a more consistent and inclusive application of concepts whose use was widely accepted only in other contexts.[36] The choice of the word

[34] See Catharine MacKinnon's 1986, 'Sexual Harassment: Its First Decade in Court', *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 103–16.

[35] This political and social deprivation should, further, be viewed as causally related to women's failure to develop rich conceptual resources for making sense of certain of their experiences.

[36] Catharine MacKinnon often writes as though feminists had created the concept of sexual harassment from scratch, thereby creating for the first time the reality of the wrong that women now suffer as sexual harassment. She writes, e.g., that 'there was a time when the facts that amount to sexual harassment did not amount to sexual harassment' (op. cit., note 34, 105). MacKinnon waffles between the relatively straightforward claim that feminists created the legal concept of sexual harassment (and thus in some sense also created what might be thought of as the 'legal reality' of that wrong) and the more suspect claim that feminists single-handedly fashioned all of the resources for an understanding of the moral concept of sexual harassment from scratch (and thus in some sense also created the reality of that wrong). Richard Rorty explicitly applauds the part of MacKinnon's work that contains this confusion. See note 3, above.

'harassment' constituted a proposal that society and the law view certain kinds of sexual attention women receive in the workplace, or in academic settings, as patterns of behaviour that are intrusive in the sense of having a tendency to threaten and impede. Feminists suggested that in these essential respects certain kinds of sexual attention are akin to forms of harassment which are not sexual or sex-related.

It does *not* follow from this suggestion that any form of sexual attention women receive in professional or academic settings must constitute harassment, or that no question can be raised about whether some transaction which is overtly sexual does in fact amount to harassment. There has recently been a tendency towards viewing as cases of harassment any uninvited sexual attention in professional or academic contexts.[37] But this tendency is not justified by the insight that first prompted feminists to talk about sexual harassment, and it in fact subverts that insight. In eliminating specific emphasis on those forms of sexual attention that threaten and impede, it represents the notion of sexual harassment as somehow conceptually independent of the notion of harassment. It thus plays into the hands of *anti*-feminists in two ways: (i) it inspires suspicion of sexual relations that are innocent from the point of view of harassment, thereby nourishing an image of women as sexually defenseless beings who need men's protection; and (ii) it distracts attention away from actionable forms of gender-based harassment that are not sexual in content.[38]

But recognizing that the idea of sexual harassment can be distorted—and, moreover, that there are powerful political pressures towards distorting it in ways that undermine feminist political aspirations—in no way casts aspersion on the critically sound suggestion that underlies feminists' original interest in it (viz., that some forms of sexual attention essentially resemble other forms of harassment which are not sexual or sex-related).[39] This suggestion is vindicated by investigations of women's experience. What we learn from such investigations is that we can recognize central features or images of women's lives in the concept of sexual harassment—or in

[37] See Vicki Schultz, 'Sex is the Least of It: Let's Focus Harassment Law on Work, not Sex', *The Nation* (May 1998), 11–15.

[38] Ibid., 12.

[39] Instead it highlights the simultaneously political and intellectual difficulties of determinations of sexual harassment—difficulties I myself encountered working as a counsellor at the Greater Pittsburgh Women's Centre & Shelter and also as a Sexual Assault/Sexual Harassment Tutor at Harvard University.

the enriched picture of human social life that this concept encourages us to form.

* * *

The kind of understanding which is facilitated by the consistent extension of a concept (such as 'woman' or 'harassment') is one which is available to both women and men. Such understanding draws on knowledge that is always already accessible to us—knowledge, that is, of the places different concepts currently have in our lives. A conception of knowledge which radically bifurcates epistemic practices into 'male' and 'female' species thus obstructs the kind of understanding that feminism most needs to underwrite, understanding of the nature of the discourse which comprises the lives that we, women and men, share.

The power of the work of many feminist thinkers is best understood from the perspective of a feminism which does not champion general theoretical claims about how a masculine bias *must* pervade our epistemic and linguistic practices and which does not involve us in an attempt to identify the ('female') thoughts that certain nonsensical sentences try but fail to impart. Many feminist thinkers direct our attention to places in our lives in which we may not have suspected gender bias could reside (e.g., in our use of the word 'woman', or in our failure to project the concept 'harassment' into certain contexts), thereby allowing us to make sense of experiences which, previously, may have been painful and disorienting as well as (perhaps at first only vaguely) unjust. The ways in which gender is at play in our knowledge are as complex as the lives we lead as gendered people. The challenge of feminist thought is one of bringing our attention back to the all too familiar everyday moments which form the fabric of these gendered lives.[40]

[40] This paper grew out of a set of provocative conversations with James Conant, Cora Diamond and members of a 1991–2 reading group on feminist theory in the Philosophy Department at the University of Pittsburgh. I am grateful to Elizabeth Anderson, Nancy Bauer, Stanley Cavell, James Conant, Cora Diamond, Nathaniel Hupert, John McDowell, Anthony O'Hear, Elijah Millgram, Naomi Scheman, Lisa Shapiro and Jennifer Whiting for helpful comments on earlier drafts.