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A Brief History Of Feminism

Feminism Distinguished From Other Women's Movements

Women have been oppressed ever since the invention of human sin, and for nearly as long they have been engaged in the attempt to free themselves from oppression. The attempts made to end the injustices done to women, particularly when these injustices are institutionalized, may be called women's movements.

In this sense, Islam may be considered a women's movement, because it includes a divinely ordained program for the eradication of injustice done to women. Western women, however, usually fail to recognize Islam as a women's movement, and they restrict the term 'women's movement' to the products of Western culture designed to change the status of women in society.

The industrial revolution of the nineteenth century and the gradual process of urbanization brought women together in the labor force outside the framework of the family, whereas in agrarian society, women worked with family members. At the same time, women were excluded from politics.

The rights of man proclaimed by the French Revolution were limited to males. During the Enlightenment, women began to demand 'emancipation', freedom from dependency on men, educational opportunity and political rights.

Feminists would go on to make more radical claims, including among the most prominent of these: legalized abortion on demand, free love or sexual liberation, complete equality with men and the abolition of differentiation of the roles of the sexes. Feminism is often defined as a movement seeking full equality of rights with men, but it is important to emphasize that the equality of rights sought by feminists goes far beyond equality under the law.

Feminism aims at the eradication of any difference in social roles based on gender difference, and this is what distinguishes it from other women's movements.[1] Nevertheless, the feminist movement includes within its ranks writers and activists who differ on many fundamental issues in philosophy, politics and morals.

What unites them is the social ideal of the elimination of traditional gender roles. Feminism may thus be defined as a branch of the women's movement that aims at the elimination of traditional gender roles. However, confusion exists about the use of the term 'feminism', for there are writers who fail to distinguish feminism from the more general women's movement.

The focus of attention in what follows will be on feminist philosophy (including political philosophy) and feminist theology, however, among the important feminist writings there are also works on psychoanalysis, jurisprudence and literary criticism.

Feminism And Socialism

Perhaps the first use of the term 'feminism' was in the early nineteenth century by the socialist, Charles Fourier (1772–1837). The followers of another early socialist, Henri de Saint–Simon (1760–1825), introduced the androgyny principle, according to which there was a mixed male and female being at the beginning of history.

(Muslims will find it amusing to learn that Saint–Simon's disciples went to Turkey to seek the female savior after having lost hope of finding a truly free woman in Europe!) Socialist feminists advocated the abolition of any division of labor along sex specific lines, and called for quotas whereby half of all the positions in every field of employment are to be filled by women.

With the domination of Marxism among the various forms of socialism, socialist feminism also came to be dominated by Marxist feminism, first elaborated in 1844 by Engels in Der Ursprung der Familie (The Origen of the Family).

In this work Engels demands the abolition of the family, uniform integration of men and women into the labor force and the communal raising of children in order to achieve equality among all people and an end to the domination of one person over another.

Although socialism has lost popularity in recent years and Marxism, in particular, seems on the verge of extinction, a political left continues to survive, even in America, especially in academia. As the academic left has also welcomed feminism, so too, Marxist ideas continue to find expression in the writings of important feminist leaders.

Perhaps the most notable lesson feminists have learned from Marxists is their polemical style. Articles on feminism, even those printed in such reputable works as the Encyclopedia of Ethics and the Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy do not merely describe the work of feminists; they actively advocate the abolition of traditional gender roles for the sake of the liberation of women.

Like Marxists, feminists have also adopted an ideologically charged rhetoric with which to declaim their analyses and polemics. Often the language used is directly inspired by Marxist terminology, even when Marxism is itself explicitly rejected.

More orthodox Marxist and socialist feminists argue that the oppression of women has its roots in the class system, and that the system must be overturned in order to liberate women. Feminist critics of Marxist feminism have argued that men exploit the labor of women through housework regardless of the class system, so that the class analysis is insufficient and must be supplemented by an analysis of exploitation based on gender.

Feminist Philosophy

Certainly the most famous of feminist philosophers of the twentieth century was Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986). In 1949 she published Le Deuxième Sexe (The Second Sex) in which she elaborated an existentialist/Marxist analysis of the relations between men and women. As existentialist thought emphasizes the radical freedom of the individual to arbitrarily choose his essence, de Beauvoir makes the dramatic claim that one's gender is also a matter choice. To the extent that biology would seem to indicate otherwise, she finds biology degrading.

Biology gives men a freedom from reproductive processes that women lack, so she sees femininity as an obstacle to being truly human. Later feminists have criticized de Beauvoir for her disparagement of female anatomy and for advocating that women take men's roles in society.

Nevertheless, it is generally acknowledged that her work set out what would become major themes of later feminist writing: the difference between sex and gender (biological and social sexual characteristics), concern with autobiography seen as a political statement, and the need to draw upon various disciplines in the analysis of gender roles.

While de Beauvoir's feminism has much in common with the existentialism of Jean–Paul Sartre, more recent feminists have drawn from the philosophies of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida to apply the methods of genealogical analysis and deconstruction to issues pertaining to gender, including women's roles in society, women's psychology, and the political oppression of women.

Feminists, however, have not merely made use of philosophical trends for their own purposes; they have also elaborated positions in virtually all the major areas of philosophy. Hence, there are feminist readings of the history of philosophy, feminist philosophy of science, feminist epistemology, feminist social and political philosophy, feminist ethics and even feminist ontology. The Society for Women in Philosophy was founded in 1972 whose journal, Hypatia, publishes articles on feminist philosophy.

In the history of philosophy, feminists have concerned themselves with two major projects. First, a number of works have been written that aim to disclose bias against women or gender stereotypes in the writings of Western philosophers from Plato and Aristotle to John Rawls. Descartes has been a particular target of these sorts of critique.[2]

Second, there has been an attempt to emphasize the importance of women philosophers throughout

history. A major accomplishment in this program was the publication of Mary Ellen Waith's three-volume A History of Women Philosophers.[3]

Feminist philosophy of science and epistemology has for the most part sought to refute claims to the objectivity of science and knowledge, and to identify gender bias in the works of scientists and philosophers.

Modeled on the Marxist idea that culture is a superstructure that reflects class interests, feminist 'standpoint theories' advocates the idea that a specifically feminine view of the world is possible when science is practiced from a woman's perspective.[4]

A current topic of debate in feminist philosophy of science and epistemology is whether emphasis on the uniqueness of the female perspective implies relativism or a denial of objective truth.

Feminist approaches to ethics place a strong emphasis on politics. They are more concerned with power than goodness, and often provide criticism of the ways in which traditional ethics contributes to the subordination and oppression of women.

Allison Jagger, for example, suggests that feminist ethics should provide guides to action that will subvert the subordination of women.[5]

Lesbian feminists have proposed a feminist ethics based onthe proposition that women cannot enter a relationship with men without becoming victims of subjugation, and that lesbian communities should construct their own ethics on the basis of a quest for freedom and self-identity rather than the good, and choice rather than duty.[6]

Lesbians have played an important role in the feminist movement, and although not all feminists are advocates of lesbianism, feminists generally condone lesbianism as an implication of the attack on traditional gender roles.[7]

Feminists have also been critical of those who have proposed a particularly feminine ethics. For example, the renowned moral psychologist, Carol Gilligan, has proposed that an ethics of care is more suitable to explain the moral development of girls than the ethics of justice used by her mentor, Lawrence Kohlberg, to explain the moral development of boys.[8]

Feminists respond that Gilligan places too much emphasis on the virtue of caring for women because this may serve to support rather than undermine established gender differentiation.[9] Likewise, feminists reject the feminine ethics proposed by ethicists who focus on the moral insights to be gained through an examination of maternal relationships.

Feminists argue that by giving primacy to women's roles as mothers, feminine ethics fails to encourage women to gain the traits necessary to overturn patriarchy and gender bias.

An important part of the feminist polemic is the insistence that traditional gender roles based on sexual differences is wrong, that patriarchy is a form of oppression and subjugation of women, that women have been unjustly marginalized and ignored, that women's rights have been violated.

So, there is a moral demand in feminism for the subversion of patriarchal social arrangements, for the rewriting of history, for the critique of every element of culture dominated by a male perspective, including (to mention but a few) art, psychology, theology and ethics itself.

Feminist Political Theory

Feminist political thought begins with Marxism. According to Marx and Engels, it is the class system that lies at the source of all oppression, and the family is a social institution reflective of that oppressive system. The call for the abolition of the family is inseparable from the call for the abolition of the capitalist system and its replacement by communism.

While some feminists have endorsed a more or less orthodox Marxist view of the family, others have sought to place gender roles at the foundation of their political thought. Instead of seeing the family as a reflection of the underlying capitalist system of production, they view capitalism as a result of the oppressive nature of patriarchy.

Kate Millet, an activist in the 'Women's Liberation Movement' of the late 1960's, accordingly claimed that the most entrenched oppressive structure in human society is not capitalism, but male dominance.

The development of feminism is often divided into three waves, each of which is associated with a characteristic type of political demand. The first wave is said to include the emancipation and socialist movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In addition to Engels' The Origin of the Family (1884) and Mill's The Subjection of Women (1869), the writings and speeches of the Russian born American anarchist, Emma Goldman (1869–1940), are included among the major philosophical statements of feminist thought in this period, which is sometimes extended to include de Beauvoir's work, as well.

Feminism is thus foremost a social and political movement, and it is not surprising to find that its core philosophical expressions take the form of social–political philosophy.

The feminism of the 1960's and 70's is called 'second wave'. It is characterized by the radicalization of the movement. While first–wave feminists called for an end to legal discriminations against women so that there would be no legal difference between the status of men and women, second–wave feminists came to view the concepts of male and female social roles to be bound up with patriarchy and called for the elimination of both.

The third–wave feminism of the 1980's and 90's is marked by a rejection of any sort of essentialism.

Earlier feminists had made general pronouncements about women, their exploitation and how they should go about liberation. Third-wave feminists argued that a natural implication of the rejection of traditional ideas about gender is the realization of the diversity of feminine types among women of different races, classes, nationalities and sexual orientations.

Third-wave feminists promote a vision of liberation in which there is a wide ranging plurality rather than any single ideal of the liberated woman. Liberation is seen as diversity in the options available for sexual relations and gender roles.

Another division of types of feminism is fourfold: liberal, radical, socialist and postmodernist. Liberal feminism has its roots in the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft (1757–1797) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) who demanded equal rights for women.

In the 1960's liberal feminists in the United States fought for women's rights to abortion on demand, support for working mothers, the universal availability of childcare centers, and greater representation in government, business and the academy.

This led to calls for 'affirmative action', legal measures to promote the hiring of women and minorities in order to redress past injustices done to them. While liberal feminists emphasize the common humanity of men and women as a basis for equality of rights, radical feminists celebrate the differences between the experiences of men and women.

They argue that women's experiences have been suppressed and that as a result all aspects of culture, from literature and science to politics and law, betray the biases of and in favor of male sensibilities. Socialist feminism has been discussed already, and post-modernist feminism seems to be another term for third wave feminism.

Feminist Theology

Feminist theology began to establish itself in the 1970's. During that decade the journal Concilium was launched to promote feminist theology, the first conferences were held to discuss feminist theology in the U.S., the World Council of Churches held a conference in Berlin on sexism, and Mary Daly published Beyond God the Father.[10]

Like liberation theology, to which it is closely linked both historically and theoretically, feminist theology draws upon and criticizes Marxist thought. Religion is interpreted in such a way that its primary function is seen as liberation, liberation of the poor in liberation theology and of women in feminist theology. Feminist theology may be divided into moderate and radical tendencies.

The moderate tendencies advocate reinterpretations of the established religions to purge them of what are considered sexist or androcentric elements. The radical tendencies advocate a rejection of patriarchal religious thought in favor of the worship of one or more goddesses or even witchcraft.

One of the areas of scholarship to which moderate feminists have devoted their attention is the history of the church. Feminists such as Elisabeth Schlssler Fiorenza argue that the early Christians were egalitarians, but that as the Church hierarchy developed, bias against women became institutionalized, and infected many subsequent theological discussions.[11]

The method employed by Schlssler Fiorenza is broadly sociological, and draws upon liberation theology. The conclusions reached are relatively moderate: the feminist critique is to lead to Church reform.[12]

Feminists who focus on psychoanalytic methods draw more radical conclusions. Following C. G. Jung, feminists such as Christa Mulack hold that the unconscious, which is associated with the feminine, is primary, and that male dominated religion has suppressed the feminine in favor of the male. On this view, the Hebrew prophets are seen as rebels against "the Great Goddess".

Feminist theologians who concentrate on psychology tend to reject equality feminism in favor of a feminism in which the feminine is paramount, or gynocentric feminism. They also tend to reject Christianity rather than call for its reform. While the majority of feminist theologians appear to be comparatively moderate, the radicals constitute a very influential minority.

The most famous feminist theologian, a radical advocate of gynocentric feminism sometimes referred to as the 'foster mother of feminist theology', is the former Catholic nun, Mary Daly. She was the first American woman to earn a doctorate in Catholic theology at the University of Fribourg (in 1963).

Her first major work, The Church and the Second Sex,[13] echoes many of the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir, but applies them to Church history and theology. She calls for Church reform and a reinterpretation of Christianity along the lines of equality feminism. Her most famous work, however, is Beyond God the Father.[14]

In this work Daly argues that the Christian concept of God is irredeemably androcentric, and she coins the often-quoted slogan of feminist theology, "If God is male, then the male is God."[15] The male dominance in Christian thought is further demanded by Trinitarian doctrine, according to which the male Christ is 'God the Son', the second person of the Trinity, and the first person of the Trinity is 'God the Father'.

Instead, Daly proposes that God be considered in a non-personal manner as the ground of all being, as taught by Paul Tillich. Daly's next major work, Gyn/Ecology,[16] makes a complete break from Christianity with the rejection of God in favor of the Goddess and the glorification of witchcraft as the esoteric knowledge of an earlier matriarchal culture. She also reasserts her advocacy of lesbianism and rejection of the complementarity of the masculine and the feminine. This was followed by the publication of an even more radical work, Pure Lust,[17] in which lust is turned into a virtue through which 'complete empowerment' is to be achieved.

Perhaps the most famous French feminist who has written on theology is Luce Irigaray. She writes from

a postmodernist perspective critical of equality feminism. Her ideal is not a society in which gender differences are eliminated, but one in which a new femininity emerges from the experiences of women freed from male domination.

Liberation has theological implications. Like Mary Daly, she opposes Christianity for its masculine conception of God, particularly as expressed in the concept of the Trinity. Although she argues that women need religion and divinity, the idea of God presented in the revealed religions is rejected.

Respect for God is possible as long as no one realizes that he is a mask concealing the fact that men have taken sole possession of the divine, of identity, and of kinship. Once we give this whole issue the attention and serious consideration it deserves, however, it becomes obvious that God is being used by men to oppress women and that; therefore, God must be questioned and not simply neutered in the current pseudo liberal way.18

She claims that only a "God in the feminine gender" can maintain women's freedom and fulfillment "as individuals and as members of a community."19

While most feminist theologians do not advocate the goddess theologies suggested by Daly and Irigaray, they are moderate only in comparison to extreme views such as these. So-called moderate feminist theologians accept much of the general orientation of feminism: the rejection of gender complementarity, the acceptance of 'non-traditional families' consisting of homosexual partners with or without children and unwed mothers with children, and a hermeneutic based on the attempt to uncover gender bias.

They advocate the rewriting of religious texts in such a way that all masculine references to God are replaced by neuter or masculine and feminine references, so that where the Bible refers to God as "our Father", the feminists replace this by "our Mother and Father".

While this may seem superficial, moderate feminist theologians tend to interpret the basic message of Christianity as a call to struggle for liberation, particularly, the liberation of women from male domination, which entails the dismantling of the traditional family.

1. The Duden German dictionary defines feminism as a "direction within the women's movement that strives for a new self-understanding by women and the abolition of the traditional separation of roles." Duden 1, 20th ed. (Mannheim: 1991), p. 267.

Cited in and corroborated with other references to leading feminists in Germany in Manfred Hauke, God or Goddess? (San Francisco: 1995), p. 20-21. This article is deeply indebted to Hauke's book, and all the references to German feminists as well as much other material is taken from Hauke's citations or summarized from his discussions.

2. See A. Nye, Philosophy and Feminism: At the Border (New York:1995).
3. Mary Ellen Waith, A History of Women Philosophers 3 vols.(Dordrecht: 1987-1991).
4. See Sandra Harding, Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives (Ithaca: 1991).
5. Allison Jagger, "Feminist Ethics", in L. Becker and C. Becker, eds., The Encyclopedia of Ethics(New York: Garland, 1992).
6. Sarah Lucia Hoagland, Lesbian Ethics (Palo Alto: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1988).

7. See Christa Mulack, Natirlich Weiblich (Stuttgart: 1990).

8. Carol Gilligan, In a Different voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

9. Shiela Mullett, "Shifting Perspectives: A New Approach to Ethics", in L. Code, S. Mullett, C. Overall, eds., Feminist Perspectives: Philosophical Essays on Method and Morals (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1988).

10. Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation (Boston: 1973).

11. See Elisabeth Schlssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins (New York: 1983).

12. Other moderate Christian feminists are Elisabeth Grossman, Rosemary Reuther, Catharina Halkes and Elisabeth Moltman-Wendel.

13. (New York: 1968).

14. Mary Daly (1973).

15. Daly (1973), 19.

16. Mary Daly, Gyn/Ecology: The Meta-ethics of Radical Feminism(Boston: 1978).

17. Mary Daly, Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy (Boston: 1984).

18. Luce Irigaray, Sexes and Genealogies, tr. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), v.

19. Irigaray (1993), 72.

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