

Feminism and Modern Philosophy

An introduction

Andrea Nye



Understanding Feminist Philosophy

FEMINISM AND MODERN PHILOSOPHY

A feminist approach to the history of modern philosophy reveals new insights into the lives and works of major figures such as Jean Jacques Rousseau and David Hume, and is crucial to an appreciation of the advent of feminist philosophy. *Feminism and Modern Philosophy* introduces students to the main thinkers and themes of modern philosophy from different feminist perspectives, and highlights the role of gender in studying classical philosophical texts.

This book shows how the important figures in the history of modern philosophy have been reinterpreted by feminist theory, including:

- feminist critiques of Descartes's rationalism
- Locke's "state of nature" as it relates to the family
- the charges of misogyny leveled against Kant.

In addition the book introduces lesser-studied texts and interpretations, such as:

- the metaphysics of Leibniz's contemporary, Anne Conway
- Annette Baier's recent presentation and defense of Hume.

Feminism and Modern Philosophy: An Introduction is written in an accessible and lively style, and each chapter ends with a helpful annotated guide to further reading. It will be appropriate for philosophy as well as gender studies courses looking at the development of modern Western thought.

Andrea Nye is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin–Whitewater. Her recent publications include *Philosophy of Language: The Big Questions* (1998) and *The Princess and the Philosopher: The Letters of Elisabeth of the Palatine to René Descartes* (1999).

UNDERSTANDING FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

Edited by Linda Martin Alcoff

This major new series is designed for students who have typically completed an introductory course in philosophy and are coming to feminist philosophy for the first time. Each book clearly introduces a core undergraduate subject in philosophy, from a feminist perspective, examining the role gender plays in shaping our understanding of philosophy and related disciplines. Each book offers students an accessible transition to higher-level work on that subject and is clearly written, by an experienced author and teacher, with the beginning student in mind.

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PREFACE

Living in time

Humans are temporal beings. Whether you think of time as eternal cycles of recurrence, progress toward an ideal state, decline away from Edenic perfection, or simply unprogrammed change, we know who we are and what we are in time and in relation to time. Without a past—regional, cultural, ethnic, national, familial—we are nobodies, anonymous shifting consciousness without identity or location. Without a future, we are bare subsistences, without intention or purpose.

In contemporary Europe and North America, we leave the material past of our species to sciences like archaeology, evolutionary biology, and anthropology. The study of human ideas, however, is traditionally given to philosophy. How we think (the way we organize our concepts, pattern our reasoning, validate our inferences) and what we think (the principles we take as self-evident, the basic truths we take as given, the ideas we reject as backward and superstitious) are idealized, rationalized, and given a history in philosophy. Philosophy in the present projects back in time the significant steps that led to the current state of our thinking; philosophy in the past foreshadows the successes of the present. As a result, history of philosophy courses can play an important role in university curricula, both in philosophy and in liberal arts programs where they provide part of a required core of general education. “Educated” Westerners, enlightened modern persons not given to religious fanaticism, unscientific spirituality, or prelogical thought, are presumed to know something about the origins of philosophy in ancient Greece. If only dimly aware of medieval thought, they are well versed in the drama of modernism that displaced those “dark ages.” They have followed the story of intellectual revolution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They know about the “Enlightenment” that overthrew the authority of the Catholic Church, drew back the obscuring curtain of

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dogma and superstition, and established rationality as the standard for all humanity. They have rehearsed critical arguments that cut deeper and deeper into unfounded theological and spiritualist speculation to leave experimental science as the key to knowledge. They know the makers of those arguments. First, the great rationalists of the seventeenth century: Descartes, crusader against archaic Aristotelianism; Spinoza, the persecuted lens grinder with geometric proofs of austere anticlerical pantheism; Leibniz, the statesman, with his logical calculus foreshadowing the age of computers. Then the British: Locke marking out the limits of human knowledge; Berkeley ruling out the material world to sustain his rigorous empiricism; Hume, the skeptic who in the name of reason denied any power to reason. Finally comes the crowning achievement of modernism: the German Kant's masterful fusion of Humean skepticism with rationalist certainty in his *Critique of Pure Reason*.

The excitement of reading these modern masters draws students, men and women, into the field of philosophy. The topics addressed are profound, the reasoning close, the drama of struggle with church censorship and political repression inspirational. No matter one's sex, it seems a grand thing to tear down the antiquated house of medieval knowledge and rebuild it again with Descartes, to map the limits of human understanding with Locke, to take on the contradiction between scientific determinism and moral responsibility with Kant. In the process it is we who take form, not we insignificant animals, but we modern humans, free thinkers whose history culminates in the industrial revolution and the democratic welfare state. The *Treatises* and *Enquiries* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries illuminate a "human" understanding, "human" nature, "human" rationality, supposedly shared by all, an ideal for all, a template for Descartes's community of scholars, for Rousseau's liberated republic of free citizens, for Kant's community of ends.

Some of us who were students of philosophy in the 1950s and 1960s paid little attention to the fact that the modern philosophers we studied were all men or that the professors who interpreted their philosophies for us were all men. We tried not to notice the fact that there were very few women among our classmates. Later with the coming of the women's movement the lack of women was harder to ignore. We were aware of the blank stares that would result if we called attention to the masculinity of philosophy. We knew the dismissive questioning that would come if we persisted. Was there any outright misogyny in the reading we were assigned? And even if we were able to find passages in the modern masters that asserted women's inferiority, would not a "rational" person pass over these references as a historical oddity?

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Were such passages relevant to responsible philosophical inquiry into the nature of knowledge, morality, or God? Isn't dwelling on the sex of a philosopher reducing philosophy to the level of personal relations or partisan politics?

Nevertheless, women in philosophy were experiencing a growing discomfort. Was this a field we could make our own? Was this our thought that was defined as enlightened modern rationality? Was the history of philosophy our history? We knew the official answer. Yes. Yes, as long as we could keep up with the logic, as long as we could present arguments and debate properly with our male colleagues. Yes. As long as we behaved as professionals, we could be philosophers. Hadn't we heard of Miss Anscombe at Oxford? Or Phillippa Foot. Respected philosophers. And women after all.

The uneasiness persisted. That a few women were respected as philosophers did not do away with the lack of women philosophers in the past. Philosophy is a discipline with a past, established in the past with historical roots, but established apparently by men for men. We had devoted ourselves to a train of thought whose couplings were critical and rational, but also fraternal. The men we studied wrote for and to each other, they met for discussion, they responded to each other's queries. For all their disputes, they were bound together in a common cause. If there were women involved, they played, as far as we could see, supporting roles as patrons, friends, and publicists. If now women were invited to join in the discussion as equals, that did not change philosophy's history. Nor did there appear to be any escape from that history.

Thinking necessarily uses concepts with roots in the past. Always in language, thinking is a reshaping, never an original creation. This is especially true in a text-based tradition such as philosophy. Philosophers are people "of the book." Their Bible is a canon of texts some of which appear on every reading list, texts that define the problems of philosophy. What is philosophy if not Descartes's *Meditations* or Locke's *Treatises*? Without these, it seems, there is no modern philosophy, perhaps no philosophy at all. No matter how warmly we might be welcomed as colleagues in a new liberal age, we women, it seemed, would have to begin philosophizing from men's thoughts. We would come to philosophy as outsiders, subject to an interloper's awkwardness and lack of finesse.

And we were beginning to see that the problem was not just with gender. How can members of any group—faced with a history not their own, a history they did not make, a history from which they have been explicitly and

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purposefully excluded because of some factor such as class, race, or ethnic origin—how can they make history their own in a way that establishes a viable and non-alienated identity? The problem is compounded when the history is of a tradition as revered as philosophy. An exclusive archaic craft or alchemical science might be expendable, but if the history of philosophy is rejected or disowned, not only are you not a philosopher, you are not a modern, heir to the great revolution in thought that gave birth to science and democratic theory.

Some of the ways feminist philosophers have approached this dilemma are surveyed in the chapters that follow. One obvious first step is a critical rereading of texts. A vast body of feminist critique now exists documenting not just the exclusion of women from the ranks of philosophers, but outright misogyny and racism expressed in many of the canonical works of the Western tradition. Even when there are no explicit remarks about women, tacit presuppositions of gender and other inequality often support superficially neutral accounts of rationality or justice.

A second, more positive, approach is to find texts by women and other excluded groups to add to the canon. Students may traditionally be assigned only readings by white men; existing texts may include only references to white men; that does not mean that there are no women or no non-white men who might be read as philosophers. Unknown, unpublished, or unnoticed texts can be found to add to the canon, and those additions can alter the way problems in modern philosophy are understood.

A third approach cuts deeper. Is it possible to problematize what are taken as the very conceptual foundations of modern philosophy in the light of critical readings of standard texts, additions to the canon, and contemporary feminist perspectives? Is rationality, the hallmark of modernism, a neutral concept, or covert cover for a European master race determined to dominate? Is the “nature of man,” defined by modern philosophers like Locke and Hobbes as acquisitive and individualistic, a true universal or the emblem of a small powerful caste of European men? Can any philosophy claim to be universal? Or is the claim to universality and truth itself an illegitimate bid for power?

The dilemma women face as they ask these critical questions is shared by other disadvantaged groups. Modern Western philosophy establishes a standard of civilization—individualistic, entrepreneurial, rational—against an opposition often conceptualized as native, tribal, primitive, underdeveloped, and prelogical, as well as feminine. The history of modern philosophy is

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typically told as a story of progress, progress away from feminine sentimentality, religious fanaticism, idealist fantasy, and primitive superstition, progress toward a modern scientific era in which “just” wars are fought efficiently, disease is conquered, and mechanical conveniences ensure the pleasures of life. On the face of it, it would seem self-destructive and atavistic for any group to disown modernism and the philosophies that are at its heart. Ancient goddess worship, Afrocentric tribal knowledge, Islamic theocracy, feminine ethics of care run the danger of relegating non-white, non-male, or non-European thinkers to the impotent fringes of “alternative” thought, unable to effect changes in mainstream attitudes and beliefs. On the other hand, to leave one’s own history behind—to leave behind times when women had power, when there were viable women’s communities, or the uninterrupted history of women’s heroic care-giving—to put on the language and manner of philosophy as tradition has defined it, is to lose oneself in the name of an uncomfortable borrowed identity.

Hopefully the dilemma is false. History is not immutable fact, but always selective, partial, and from the perspective of a changing present moment. As such it is continually being reshaped. Historical time is not a composite of fixed atomic moments, but interwoven fabric. A thread pulled at one place reworks the pattern at another, future or past. Just as Renaissance scholars worked to bracket a medieval “dark ages” and provide a bridge between the admired classics of ancient Greece and the emerging sciences of modern Europe, in the same way feminist historians may succeed in giving philosophy a different past.

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Shaping a past

History has its own history. Narratives that review the way history was written in the past are often prelude to new interpretations of history and new hopes for the future. Semi-mythic legends of the founding of ancient empires, ethnographic surveys for imperial administrators, sacred histories that highlight extraordinary moments of revelation and apocalypse, political chronicles of modern nation states, all have helped successive generations to understand better who they are and what they can hope for. This is true when the historical subject is politics or society, and even more so when the history is of ideas. In the spirit of an objective cataloging of demographic trends or economic data it might be possible to produce descriptions of a society's material life as the continental *Annales* school of historians attempted after World War II. It might be possible to emulate the natural sciences and apply some version of a covering law to political trends, as C. F. Hempel and Karl Popper proposed in the same era. When the subject is philosophy, it is impossible to avoid interpretation and evaluation. What is to count as philosophy? Which works are included as important? Those considered to be important in their own day? Hardly. Those whose writers had academic status? If so Locke, Hume, and Descartes are off the list. And once the important texts are established, by what principles are they to be interpreted and judged?

As important as the selection of texts and leading ideas is the arranging of those texts and ideas in temporal sequence. A story without a beginning and an end is no story at all. Events have significance in relation to crises and climaxes, initiations and conclusions. Histories of modern philosophy have been noteworthy for a high sense of drama. After a period of darkness—the proverbial “dark ages”—glimmers of “light” show as a first generation of philosopher-scientists in sixteenth-century Europe begin to question, often at

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their peril, the intellectual authority of the Catholic Church. In the seventeenth century free thinkers like Descartes and Locke spread enlightenment, gradually placing not only natural philosophy but also politics, society, and economics under the sovereignty of reason. In the eighteenth century the fruits of secular rationalism ripen to a grand and positive vision of steady progress, as science projects the coming mastery of disease and hunger, and technology begins to provide the instruments of power by which Western “civilization” will spread to the rest of the world. Steps are taken toward Rousseau’s citizen state and Kant’s rational “kingdom of ends” in nascent democratic republics in France and America. Ethics breaks loose from hypocritical piety and finds new foundations in natural sentiment, calculated utility, or rational principle. Just as the birth of Jesus provided the focal point for sacred Christian time, Western philosophy divides into before and after. Before is the “premodern” era of Greece, Rome, and medieval Europe. After is the “postmodern” and the hopefully transitory doubts of the present era. In between comes the pivotal miracle of the birth of modernism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

How to plot the “postmodern” sequel to modernism is still a matter of debate. Sequels, by their very nature, involve not new beginnings but setbacks to be overcome as ways of thought mature and take hold. The period of time from the early 1800s to the two world wars of the twentieth century—a period that is generally covered in the philosophy curriculum under “contemporary philosophy”—saw many such lapses, including the collapse of democracy into Napoleonic authoritarianism, the restoration of ancient monarchies, romantic rebellions against reason and science, idealist and materialist visions that imported providence back into history. As the story is traditionally told, progress in the modern period is too strong to be rescinded. Through temporary regressions to the premodern or primitive, through apocalyptic prophecies of the decline of the West, science continues its steady conquest of the natural world. Political reason continues to make capitalist democracy the norm for “civilized” human society. Philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century, past a Wittgensteinian moment of anxious self-extinction, settles down to the task of ensuring that spiritualism and irrationality do not reinvade a robust scientific realism and “naturalized” epistemology.

The first contemporary feminist qualms about this shaping of history came in the revolutionary fervor of the 1960s. The problem was not so much the fact that major figures in philosophical history were men or that

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in their writing they used masculine terms. Men can be great thinkers and it might be assumed that, however they were originally meant, expressions like the “nature of man,” the rights of “man,” “rational man” can now be taken generically. More important was a resurgence of doubt about progress under the banner of modernism. Such doubt was not new. It dates back at least as far as the mid-nineteenth century, when a round of progressive modernist revolutions in Europe failed to keep promises of general well-being. It resurfaced a few decades later, at the turn of the nineteenth century, when European nation states became warring camps vying for territory with all the violence science could devise. Faced with the reality of “world” wars engineered with the naval, manufacturing, and artillery techniques that modern reason makes possible, philosopher-historians like Oswald Spengler traced not the triumphant victory but *The Decline of the West*. He and his contemporaries saw no progress toward a reconciled and peaceful world. The adventuring, expansionist activities of the West were not part of a grand mission of civilizing and colonizing conversion, but the Faustian excess of a dying empire. The possibility of making universal value judgments gave way among many European historians to skepticism and relativism. The technological and utilitarian ideals of Western culture were on the wane, and it was not clear there was any warrant for extending already compromised values to other cultures. Modern philosophy, closely linked to science and the efficient administration of nation states, was not universal truth, but the ideology of a specific and compromised way of life, rising in a particular geographical space and rapidly coming to the end of its lifespan.

After a second world war and the Holocaust, faith in the ascendancy of the West was further shaken. Emigrant German philosophers like Hannah Arendt interrogated the Western tradition and the “professional philosophers” who had defined it, for some sense of how to go on when tradition has shattered. Tradition, Arendt argued in *The Life of the Mind*, eases an always anxious transition from the past to the future. It gives necessary assurance, given that any action can turn out to have disastrous results. But when tradition is utterly discredited, as it was in the Holocaust, when its guiding philosophies are put in the service of evil, there is nothing to ease a way forward into the future.

Similar concerns were prominent among American philosophers during and in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Now it was the new triumphal leader of modernism, the United States, who appeared to be callously slaughtering innocents in the name of reason, progress, and democratic politics. A spokeswoman for these doubts was feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick. In

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Maternal Thinking she described her education as a fledgling philosopher in the 1960s. As a student, she read with excitement the great moderns, Descartes, Locke, Kant, along with their heirs—Wittgenstein, Habermas, Peter Winch. When the Vietnam War came and she was involved in the peace and civil rights movements, she began to have doubts. Perhaps philosophic reason, with its abstract concepts and deductive trains of thought, contributed to war by giving the impression that with the right method one could establish truths worth killing for. The fruits of the cognitive revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were military and navigational technologies that allowed Europe and now the United States to subjugate non-Western people. In the place of the philosopher's reason with its universal authority, Ruddick proposed a feminine "practicalism," rooted in values, skills, and a sense of reality associated, not with politics or science, but with mothering, an activity that had never been mentioned in her philosophy classes.

Also with roots in the counter-culture of the 1960s was Carolyn Merchant's critical treatment of the origins of modernism in *The Death of Nature*. If an expansionist West asserted itself violently over native "premodern" peoples, Merchant argued, the roots of that assault were in the founding attitude of modernist epistemology that nature is for men to dominate and control. Quoting Francis Bacon, whose defense of reason and independence of thought inspired Descartes and others to challenge Aristotelian science, Merchant explored insistent gender metaphors that shaped the early modern call for the mastery of nature. Nature was a woman to be stripped bare of her veils, penetrated and probed by the masculine hand of science. Her secrets were to be seized from her in heroic feats of experimentation and discovery. It was an insight that the rebels of the counter-culture could take to heart. Not only was the West under the banner of modernist politics crushing native communities in Vietnam and elsewhere, in the name of modernist epistemology and metaphysics it was destroying global environments in ruthless and irresponsible abuse of nature.

Given disillusion with the grand promises of philosophical enlightenment, with nineteenth-century scenarios of idealist or materialist revolution, and with positive visions of material progress, the philosophers who initiated modernism could seem more villains than heroes. Had modernism kept its promise of justice for all? Had poverty been eliminated? Had the ravages of slavery been addressed and repaired? Were women equal to men? Regardless of assertions of progress in implementing modernist goals of equality and liberty, regardless of assurances by Marxists that when private property was

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abolished women would achieve parity with men, many women philosophers felt the past as oppressive weight. They continued to be a small minority in the field of philosophy. Their work was underrepresented at conferences and in journals. A few feminist critics called attention to misogynous references in the writing of modern philosophers. A few feminist ethicists introduced sexual and gender issues as philosophical problems. But the great canonical body of philosophical writing remained solidly masculine, page after page of dense reasoning that, like it or not, set the agenda for philosophical discussion. The writing of male philosophers was subject to minor critique but not, it seemed, to displacement. In literature—in fiction or essay writing—there were important feminine exemplars, writers who were accepted as part of the literary canon and who were studied in literature classes. Philosophy seemed to have successfully barricaded itself against the female voice.

In the 1980s, new currents of thought from France labeled as “post-modern” or deconstruction directly challenged that barrier and offered new approaches to history. The philosopher’s rational subject, argued theorists like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, is a fraud. The projected autonomy of reason—of Descartes’s *cogito*, Locke’s natural law, Kant’s unity of apperception—is illegitimate and delusory projection and has no substantive reality, any more than does the historian who pretends to tell philosophy’s true story. The absolute time that relates and orders events and that is the backbone of conventional history is an invention and an illusion of philosophers. Not only is the time line that prioritizes milestone events a fiction; so is the removed historian who thinks she or he from the vantage of the present can survey and map that sequence objectively.

The skepticism of the new postmodern and deconstructive theorists went deeper than postwar cautions about evidence and hasty generalization. It was not that historians should verify sources, attempt objectively to discover regularities and patterns in data, or be ready to revise their conclusions in the light of new evidence. Instead the reality to which various accounts of historical events could be compared disappeared. What the critic deals with, said the new theorists, is texts, segments of an eternally present world of words from which there is no escape. The distinction between philosophy, the “queen of the sciences,” and literature dissolved; philosophy could make no more claim to truth than a novel or a poem. The authority of philosophy as the intellectual backbone of Western superiority was undermined and, along with it, masculine history and masculine pretension.

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A popular source among feminists for a postmodern approach to intellectual history was Michel Foucault. Foucault described the difference between traditional and postmodern history in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Traditional historians of ideas trace the rise and fall of various ways of thought and their interrelations. They pay attention to temporal sequences, to chronology of publication, to who influenced whom, to the social, institutional events to which writers refer. The new historian, said Foucault, does none of this. He does not look at what “discourses” are about; he looks at internal configurations. He does not trace out a linear development of ideas; he isolates a static set of rules that govern overlapping “epistemes” or modes of thought. He does not study a philosopher’s “œuvre” and attempt to guess what he meant by it. His goal is not to discover what a writer “thought, aimed at, experienced, desired” (*Archaeology*, p. 139). He “rewrites”; he “produces a regulated transformation of what has already been written” (p. 140). The relation between the old and the new history, said Foucault, is one of maturity. Interests in who discovered what ideas, or who was influential over whom, are “harmless enough amusements for historians who refuse to grow up” (p. 144). As Foucault condescendingly observed, the more sophisticated postmodern historian “remains unmoved at the moment (a very moving one, I admit) when for the first time someone was sure of some truth” (p. 144).

Foucault’s attack on traditional history was attractive to feminists for a number of reasons. First his approach reduced the commanding presence of male philosophers. In his studies of modernism, Foucault rarely discussed philosophers by name. No longer did Locke, Kant, Descartes loom so large. Their thoughts melted away in large discursive regularities not of their or anyone’s making. Ideas were not an individual possession or creation but generated in anonymous institutions of power and control. Second, Foucault’s archeological or genealogical approach to modernism suggested the possibility of fresh interpretations of oppression. The interrelated epistemes of modernism, said Foucault, were implicated in new and powerful systems of control, control not exercised by police or judges but administered under the auspices of sciences like psychiatry, criminology, and sociology, the very sciences championed by modern philosophers as objective and value-free. Although Foucault’s main interest was in the oppression of homosexuality, many feminists saw in his historical studies new ways to understand and subvert the subordination of women.

In the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault claimed to expose the true workings of modernism by mapping out the construction of “sex” as an object in sciences