

Daring to Embrace Feminist Philosophy

by Cléo Salion-Girault

Do you really know what intersectionality is? What about the epistemology of positioning? A new collection of introductory essays on feminist philosophy questions the way feminist thought has been relatively overlooked by French philosophy, and brings to light the promise of emancipation that fuels it.

Reviewed: Manon Garcia (ed.), *Philosophie féministe. Patriarcat, savoirs, justice*, Paris, Vrin, 2021, 458 pp., €15.

In France, feminist philosophy is still not recognized as a field of philosophy in its own right. "Even Simone de Beauvoir, whose body of work is internationally recognized as one of the most important in twentieth-century philosophy, is barely considered a philosopher by French universities", observes Manon Garcia (p. 8). And yet, feminist philosophy does exist, with its own subjects of analysis, questionings and methodologies. Garcia's new book sets out to make this field more widely known and recognized among French readers, by bringing together key texts that have not yet been translated or widely disseminated.

In her book *We Are Not Born Submissive*, Garcia shows how reflecting on the coexistence of a desire for emancipation and a desire for submission in "feminine" subjects has become one of the major challenges of contemporary feminism. Turning the perspective usually adopted by political philosophy on its head, she considers "submission from the perspective of the submissive person rather than the dominant

one"¹, thus joining the ranks of authors whose texts are featured in *Philosophie féministe*. In her new anthology, Garcia translates, edits and explains. This undertaking is a practical response to the problem of the non-recognition of feminist philosophy by the philosophical discipline in France. But she also proposes a theoretical discussion of the causes and implications of this lack of recognition, by bringing together the voices of ten different women authors.

The collection is organized into four themed sections, each preceded by an insightful introduction by Garcia. In the first part, texts by Michèle Le Dœuff and Nancy Bauer re-examine the relationship between women and philosophy. The exclusion of women is anything but accidental; it is part of the very definition of this discipline, which is said to have been constructed in opposition to an irrational "feminine principle". With contributions from Sandra Harding, Sally Haslanger and Geneviève Fraisse, the book then examines the relationship of feminist philosophy to the concept of reason, which has often been used to exclude allegedly irrational women from the realm of knowledge. In the third part, essays by Mary Wollstonecraft, Marilyn Frye and Christine Delphy serve to remind us that we have feminist philosophers to thank for the gradual introduction of the personal into political philosophy. Finally, Garcia focuses on the future of feminist philosophy. Bringing together texts by Susan Moller Okin and Uma Narayan, which contribute to the highly topical controversy between universalist and intersectional approaches, she demonstrates the "vitality of feminist philosophy" (p. 27).

What is feminist philosophy?

"Feminism is more than just its historical struggles: it is also a program of research that consists, at the very least, in exposing and combating the oppression that women suffer as women," explains Garcia (p. 10). The emergence of feminism as a political movement dates back to the end of the eighteenth century, and can be distinguished from the development of feminist philosophy itself. Although philosophers have long grappled with the question of equality between men and women, as evidenced by Wollstonecraft's book, it was not until 1949, when *The Second Sex* was published, that feminist philosophy was embraced and identified as a specific

¹ M. Garcia, *We Are Not Born Submissive: How Patriarchy Shapes Women's Lives*, Princeton University Press, 2021.

field of philosophy. Since then, feminist philosophy has continued to develop, and while it now displays a "wide variety of subjects and approaches (...), these works have in common a reflection on gender," observes Garcia.

Whether in the context of the Beauvoirian analysis of the social construction of gender identity, the questioning of the category of sex by Judith Butler in the 1980s², or reflections on non-binarity and trans identity³, feminist philosophy seeks to answer the question of how to define the subject "woman". It articulates descriptive statements—stating how the oppression of women operates—and normative statements—revealing the unjust nature of this oppression and proposing non-sexist conceptions of the world.

Yet, even though the existence of a feminist philosophy is undeniable, the problem is that it is still not recognized, by philosophy and its institutions, as a field of philosophy in its own right. Is this lack of recognition (merely) a manifestation of the failure to recognize women as subjects of knowledge in general?

Identifying philosophy's enemies within

For Michèle Le Dœuff, the refusal to acknowledge the existence of feminist philosophy also reflects a process by which philosophy has been legitimized in relation to other disciplines; the field of philosophy has been created by its exclusions. In this process of identification through negation, philosophy has also constructed its own opposite. It presents itself as a masculine discourse of reason, radically opposed to the feminine discourse of the "unreasoned"⁴. In the modern context, the place of philosophy was redefined among the human sciences, with philosophers such as Rousseau, Hegel and Comte developing sexist theses that radicalized this duality, and constructing femininity as a "hostile principle". Using symbolic vocabulary drawn

² J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1990, New York, Routledge; *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, 1993, New York, Routledge.

³ As Garcia recommends in her book, see E. Diaz-Léon, "'Woman' as a Politically Significant Term: A Solution to the Puzzle", *Hypatia*, vol. 31, n°2, 2016, pp. 245-256; K. Kenkins, "Amelioration and Inclusion: Gender Identity and the Concept of Woman", *Ethics*, vol. 126, n°2, 2016, pp. 394-421; T. Bettcher, "Feminist Perspectives on Trans Issues", in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2014.

⁴ C. Jambet, G. Lardreau, *L'Âge*, Paris, Grasset, 1976, p. 37.

from psychoanalysis, Le Dœuff explains that "the shadow then lies within the field of light itself, and women are the enemy within" (p. 57).

Discovering feminist epistemologies

Historically, feminist philosophy is a philosophy made by women, but it is above all a research program that has brought gender inequalities back to the fore. This collection shows how feminist epistemologies have highlighted "the influence of *socially constructed conceptions and norms of gender and gender-specific interests and experiences on the production of knowledge*"⁵. In her article "What Is 'Strong Objectivity'?", Sandra Harding defends an epistemology of positioning, according to which the social situation of subjects is decisive in their production of knowledge.

Harding counters the conventional wisdom that feminist philosophy, by putting the subjectivity of philosophers in the foreground, leads to relativism and ethnocentrism. She argues that one is always in a better position to analyze an experience when one has lived it. If women take their own lives as a starting point for philosophical analysis, and compare their own positions with those of others, "we can learn from all of them and change our patterns of belief" (p. 157). The author thus criticizes the fact that many philosophers who hold a dominant position in society allow their point of view to slide into a "view from nowhere" (p. 152) with universal claims. However, she does not wish to renounce scientific objectivity; she advocates a "strong objectivity" that considers the sum of subjective experiences as a "systematically accessible resource for maximizing objectivity" (p. 118).

Exploring spaces of oppression and domination

Political philosophy has also been influenced by feminist philosophers' desire to recognize the personal as political. This was expressed in the slogan "The personal is political"⁶ chanted by second-wave feminist activists in the United States, for whom gender inequalities were experienced not only in the public sphere, but also in the

⁵ E. Anderson, "Feminist Epistemology: An Interpretation and a Defense", *Hypatia*, vol. 10, n°3, 1995, p. 54.

⁶ Popularized following the publication in 1970 of Carol Hanisch's essay, *The Personal is Political*.

private sphere. Rather than seeking to describe the "female condition" objectively, feminist political philosophy analyzes women's experiences in the public and private spheres from a critical and normative perspective. As Marilyn Frye explains, it is from inside the cage of the private, to which women have been relegated, that the experience of oppression can best be understood as that of being in "a double bind: a situation in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation" (p. 325).

But do all women suffer the same oppressions? If feminist philosophy is an "invitation to speak" (p. 119), as Nancy Bauer hopes, its representatives cannot answer this question in the affirmative, and adopt a universalist approach, without running the risk of silencing the voices of "other" women. In her article "Minds of their Own", Uma Narayan warns us against an "imperialism of the imagination" (p. 413) that consists in imagining experiences of oppression, rather than giving resonance to the voices of those who actually live them. In an attempt to avoid the twin pitfalls of the imperialism of universalist feminism and the relativism of multiculturalist feminism, Narayan reminds us that "it is only possible for a woman who does not feel highly vulnerable with respect to other parts of her identity, e.g., race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual alliance, etc., to conceive of her voice simply or essentially as a 'woman's voice'" (p. 381). Hence the need, for the feminist philosophy of the future, to bring the moral agency of oppressed people back to the fore.

As Garcia acknowledges from the outset, the selection of texts for this collection, which is intended as an introduction and does not claim to be exhaustive, was a "difficult and sometimes painful" choice (p. 26). This choice also marks a significant political gesture. While it is regrettable that Uma Narayan's article is the only one to convey the voice of a woman from the global South, and that the dominant voices in the collection are those of white feminists from the North⁷, Manon Garcia's focus on texts that are not easily accessible serves as a reminder that many authors considered "minor" are in fact "minoritized". She invites us to delve into the vast wealth of feminist philosophical literature on our own.

⁷ As Garcia recommends in the book, see the anthology edited by Elsa Dorlin, *Black feminism: anthologie du féminisme africain-américain, 1975-2000*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2008.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, May 19, 2022. Translated by Susannah Dale, with the support of Cairn.info. Published in booksandideas.net, September 10, 2024