

# 1

## *Feminist Philosophy and the Way of Despair*

### Introduction

Feminist philosophy is preoccupied with a range of common philosophical questions about being and truth, goodness and justice. However, the perspective of feminist philosophy on what is relevant to understanding and addressing this range of questions is distinctive. Feminist philosophers are interested in how sexed or gendered modes of thought have been complicit in constructing the form and substance of questions and answers about being, truth, goodness and justice which are explored in the philosophical tradition.<sup>1</sup> This interest has two dimensions. In the first place, it is an interest in exposing the way in which gender bias operates in mainstream philosophy. In the second place, it is an interest in examining the ways in which understandings (not necessarily articulated) of sex or gender may either help or hinder both philosophical inquiry and the achievement of the goals of feminist politics. In what follows, I will seek to demonstrate certain persistent patterns of feminist philosophical debate. In section 1.1, I examine how feminist philosophy has responded to the modern (post-seventeenth-century) Western philosophical tradition and suggest that we can discern four ideal types of feminist philosophy which emerge from this engagement: *rationalist*, *critical*, *sexual difference* and *postmodernist*. Each of these pathways within feminist philosophy depends on a response to the conceptual framework of mainstream philosophy and its association of female or feminine qualities with the denigrated pair of a mutually exclusive binary opposition. This means that the diverse directions of feminist philosophy hinge on the question of how the categories of 'women', 'sex' and 'gender' are understood. In sections 1.2, 1.3 and

1.4, I trace the implications of these different philosophical routes in debates within feminist philosophy over the conditions of possibility of claims to knowledge, moral and political agency and judgement. It will be argued that what emerges from this overview confirms the ways in which feminist philosophical consciousness is perpetually caught in exposing the inadequacy, but also the apparent inescapability, of the hierarchical binary oppositions in relation to which its thinking is always oriented. This conclusion forms the bridge to chapter 2, in which it will be argued that the patterns of thinking within feminist philosophy display parallels with what Hegel termed the ‘way of despair’ which consciousness follows in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* and which defines the terms of his own philosophical project (Hegel, 1977: 49).

### 1.1 Thinking as a Feminist

Feminist philosophy in the Western academy begins in reaction to contemporary philosophy and its apparent denial of the relevance of sex and gender to philosophical reason. Feminist philosophers were suspicious of this denial, given the absence of women from the philosophical academy and of concerns particularly relevant to women from the substantive philosophical agenda. The suspicion was that behind this silence and absence lay an actual denigration and consequent exclusion of women from philosophical reason and therefore from the category of the fully human. For feminist philosophers, the re-interpretation of the canonic tradition has been a crucial route into interrogating the way in which presumptions about sex and gender have in fact been complicit in constructing the agenda of modern philosophy. Feminist readers have gone back to trace the appearances of women, sex and gender in the work of canonic thinkers from Plato to Marx in order to uncover the gendered subtext of apparently gender-neutral philosophical thought. Feminist readings of canonic thinkers have brought to light the way in which the binary conceptual oppositions which are central to Western philosophy are also gendered, with certain categories being consistently male- and others female-identified. The categories associated with the male side within the philosophical tradition are normally identified as superior to those associated with the female. Standard examples of this binary conceptual hierarchy include the following (privileged term first in each case): culture/nature; mind/body; form/matter; reason/emotion; universal/particular; transcendent/immanent; ideal/real; truth/opinion;

absolute/relative. Men are associated with that which is self-determining, spiritual and rational. Women are associated with that which is natural, uncontrollable, fleshy and irrational. These are the characteristics which, since Plato, have been identified as the opposite of those associated with capacity to do philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most shocking 'discoveries' in the feminist re-reading of the philosophical tradition was the extent to which canonic modern thinkers, such as Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel and Marx, with few exceptions, continued to perpetuate patriarchal assumptions about women, sex and gender. The hierarchical conceptual binaries of the pre-modern philosophical tradition did not disappear but were re-cast in terms which continued to associate the male with reason, universality, autonomy and culture (progress) and the female with emotion, particularity, heteronomy and nature (stasis). This was shocking because of the historical roots of feminist ideology in liberal and socialist ideas which were formulated by these thinkers and which feminists had drawn on to underpin their own political struggles. Enlightenment conceptions of reason, individual rights, freedom, historical progress and moral universalism were crucial to feminist accounts of women's oppression and emancipation, from Wollstonecraft onwards (Wollstonecraft, 1975). Increasingly, therefore, the question for feminist readers of canonic texts became one of *whether* and if so *how* it was possible to work both with and against the grain of the modern philosophical tradition. The answer to this clearly depends on the extent to which understandings of women, sex and gender in the canonic texts of Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel and Marx are structurally significant for their thought as such. In attempting to work this out, feminist philosophers are obliged to go beyond identifying explicit or implicit misogyny within philosophy. They have to address the question of whether women, sex and gender are necessarily or contingently philosophically significant (that is to say, significant as conditions of possibility for thought) both in the work of canonic philosophers and in their own responses to it.

One of the most influential attempts to categorize the nature of feminist interpretations of canonic texts is Seyla Benhabib's 'On Hegel, Women and Irony' (1996a: 25–7). In this essay Benhabib makes a distinction between feminist readings in terms of the paradigms of the 'good father', 'the rebellious daughter' and a 'feminist discourse of empowerment'. Her concern is particularly with feminist readings of enlightenment texts which are ethically and politically universalist yet which denigrate, exclude or marginalize women. The 'good father' reading treats lapses of universalism in such texts regarding the

treatment of women, sex and gender as contingent, philosophically insignificant error. The failure of the philosopher to include women within the category of humanity is excused on grounds of historical context explaining the author's bias. This means that the feminist philosopher can still operate with the same conceptual framework as the particular thinker in question. In contrast to this, the 'rebellious daughter' interpretation is one in which the reader sees the treatment of women, sex and gender as fundamental to the philosopher's argument and as therefore undermining its authority for feminists. This kind of reading, according to Benhabib, rejects the authority of canonic texts and turns to the construction of a different kind of discourse, grounded on an alternative feminist or feminine authority.

In the third 'feminist empowerment' type of interpretation, the meaning of the text is judged not simply in terms of the current preoccupations of feminist readers and the extent to which the text in question underpins or undermines contemporary feminist agendas, but also in relation to its historical context. Thus the question for the feminist reader becomes not just how the text invokes, excludes or relies on conceptions of women, sex and gender in general but, more specifically, the question of its import for women in the context in which the text was published. Benhabib's preference is for the third type of reading. She stresses the importance for feminist readers of grasping an author's concepts as a practical intervention in a discursive context within which those concepts will have effects.<sup>3</sup> The extent to which an argument will have conservative (counter-enlightenment) or emancipatory implications depends on the philosopher's ethical universalism. Benhabib is critical of 'good father' readings because they overlook the substantive effects of the treatment of sex and gender from the viewpoint of the 'victim' and thereby misread the meaning of texts, which are actually ethically particularist even while they claim universalism. She is critical of 'rebellious daughter' readings because she rejects the grounding of interpretation and judgement in an ethically particularist feminist perspective. Her position is one which continues to hold onto universalist categories of enlightenment thought as an underpinning for feminist theoretical arguments against and practical resistance to women's oppression in the contemporary world. For Benhabib, the political and philosophical culpability of the canonic enlightenment philosopher depends on whether his apparent universalism disguises actual ethical particularism.<sup>4</sup>

Genevieve Lloyd provides an alternative approach to categorizing feminist interpretations of canonic philosophy (Lloyd, 2000). In the context of a broad discussion of the development of feminist reading

of the history of philosophy, Lloyd argues for what she sees as the most fruitful direction for future development. She begins by pointing to the fact that much initial feminist work on canonic philosophers was oppositional in character. Like Benhabib, however, she notes that the philosophical significance of canonic thinkers' misogyny is read differently by different types of feminists. So that some feminist ('good father') readers deplore the misogyny but defend the fundamental gender neutrality of the philosophical position of canonic thinkers; whereas other ('rebellious daughter') readers see this misogyny as necessitating the development of an alternative feminist philosophical position. Unlike Benhabib, however, Lloyd suggests that the significance of 'rebellious daughter' readings of canonic philosophy goes beyond the straightforward dismissal of masculinist thought. Benhabib identifies the rebellious daughter reading with psychoanalytic sexual difference feminism, in particular the work of Irigaray. Lloyd points out how the work of feminist readers such as Irigaray depends on immanent, deconstructive readings of texts, which play on the tensions, possibilities and limitations inherent in the texts themselves. The point then is not simply to judge the text from a feminist perspective, but to play off the internal tensions of the text in relation to the insights of the feminist reader in order to better understand the meaning and implications of sexual difference for doing philosophy. It is this, for Lloyd, which marks the positive philosophical potential of feminist engagement with canonic thinkers, a way forward between the 'good father' and 'rebellious daughter' alternatives which involves 'a collaborative positioning of the commentator in relation to the author' (Lloyd, 2000: 257). For Lloyd, however, it is crucial that feminist readers are self-reflective about their own practice in this collaboration. There is no stable feminist perspective from which to read and the philosophical implications of encounters between feminist readers and texts cannot be settled in advance.

Although both of them argue for a way forward for feminist philosophy which transcends Benhabib's 'good father' and 'rebellious daughter' options, Benhabib's and Lloyd's perspectives on feminist reading are quite different. The difference lies in the nature of their contrasting responses to the binary conceptual hierarchy which associates sexual difference between men and women with different qualities and capacities. More specifically, the difference lies in a different assessment of the potential for the conceptual legacy of modern, enlightenment, liberal and socialist thought to underpin feminist philosophy and politics. In general, I would argue that it is differing reactions to this conceptual legacy which explain the alternative pathways that feminist

philosophy has taken and which structures both feminist philosophy's engagement with mainstream thinking and the arguments that feminist philosophers have with each other. I will go on to suggest that, building on the analyses offered by Benhabib and Lloyd, we can identify four distinct 'ideal types' of feminist philosophy. This typology, as with any classification, risks over-simplification and distortion of a range of positions which rarely fall neatly into a single category.<sup>5</sup> These are, however, generally recognizable trajectories of feminist thought and are labelled as follows: *rationalist*; *critical*; *sexual difference*; and *postmodernist*.

Rationalist feminist philosophy is the type of feminist philosophy which underpins 'good father' readings of the canonic texts of modern philosophy. It is distinguished by the common ground it shares with the ontological, epistemological and normative claims of enlightenment thought, more specifically of liberal enlightenment thought (Locke and Kant rather than Rousseau and Marx). The key ontological claim of rationalist feminism is that sexual difference as such is not significant in the sense of referring to any essential difference in capacities between men and women. To the extent that sexual difference is taken to be ontologically essential, rationalist feminists argue that this is due to the distorting effects of a patriarchal culture and philosophical tradition which have operated in the interests of men. The key epistemological claim of rationalist feminism is that truth depends on adequation to an independently existing reality. This adequation can be assured through a combination of rational argument, methodological sophistication and openness to empirical evidence. The sex of the knower is irrelevant to the validity or otherwise of knowledge claims. The key normative claim of rationalist feminism is that women are fully rational moral and political agents and are entitled to the same rights and freedoms as men. This normative claim is argued to be rationally and empirically justifiable on the grounds that women do not differ in any relevant respect from men. Feminist philosophy of the rationalist type can be found in feminist interventions in all branches of philosophical inquiry. It is characteristically inclusive in its ambitions, and is associated both with straightforward endorsement of mainstream arguments and their extension to women, and with the project of redressing patriarchal denigration of 'feminine' qualities which could complement and improve mainstream philosophy. For feminist rationalist philosophy, its project is necessitated by patriarchy and its relevance will wither away with patriarchy.<sup>6</sup>

Critical feminist philosophy has much in common with feminist rationalism in terms of its normative assumptions but differs in its

ontology and epistemological perspective. Like rationalists, critical feminists deny the essential significance of sexual difference and endorse the normative goals of equality and freedom as equally relevant to men and women. However, whereas rationalist feminists by and large accept mainstream assumptions about the nature of truth and knowledge and the disinterestedness of reason, critical feminists insist on a fundamental relation between rationality, knowledge and interests. Critical feminist philosophy appropriates aspects of the Hegelian-Marxist and Frankfurt School traditions of critical theory. According to these traditions, human beings are historically constructed through their relations to each other and their interaction with nature. Human action and reflection are always therefore mediated through social and material relations. Because of this, there is no 'innocent' access to knowledge of the world aside from one's position within it. Thus, it is argued that there is a distinction to be made between claims to truth articulated from the standpoint of those who benefit from any particular set of social and material relations, and claims to truth articulated from the standpoint of the victim of such relations. The difference in perspective, reflecting a difference in experience and therefore interests, is a difference in what can be seen and understood, and there is no Archimedean point which transcends all perspectives. However, it is assumed that those who suffer social and material oppression will have an interest in ending that oppression and that their perspective will therefore be oriented towards goals of equality and freedom. The latter becomes a normative guide to the assessment of philosophical argument for critical philosophers. Critical feminism is therefore particularly preoccupied with articulating understanding and judgement from a feminist standpoint. As with rationalist feminism, this involves drawing attention to the omissions of the philosophical mainstream. However, for critical feminists this goes beyond the correction of bias and is seen instead as part of a project of the transformation of social and material relations in the interests of the oppressed and excluded. Critical feminism can be distinguished into versions which stay closer to early Hegelian-Marxist and first-generation Frankfurt School thought and those which have been more profoundly influenced by Habermas. The former tend to be more focused on the connection between patriarchy and capitalism as modes of oppressive social relations and closer to socialist than to liberal ideology. The latter, like rationalist feminism, tends to be more optimistic about the potential of the liberal democratic state to enable the withering away of patriarchy.<sup>7</sup>

Sexual difference feminist philosophy is referred to by Benhabib under the 'rebellious daughter' heading and figures largely in Lloyd's account of the deconstructive turn taken by Irigaray's reading of the philosophical tradition. Both rationalist and critical feminist philosophy insist on the importance of gender as a transcendable socially constructed category which has no transhistorical grounding in biological sex or any other fixed 'essence' of women. This means that the philosophical significance of sex and gender is historically contingent and should ultimately give way to the inclusive category of humanity in philosophical argument. In contrast to this, in its ontological assumptions, sexual difference feminism does not deny but asserts the fundamental significance of sexual difference. This does not mean that most sexual difference feminisms are straightforwardly biologically essentialist; they are as often reliant upon social psychological, psychoanalytic or linguistic accounts of the meaning of sex and gender. However, it does mean that sexual difference feminisms are preoccupied with the positive potential of sex and gender as conditions of possibility for thought and the transformation of social and political relations for both men and women. This is in contrast to rationalist and critical feminisms, which see sex as ultimately philosophically and politically irrelevant and gender as something which ought to be transcended. Sexual difference feminism denies the argument of rationalist feminists that truth is essentially gender neutral and the argument of critical feminists that the goal of emancipation is essentially universal. Instead it is argued that mainstream philosophy, and even language as such, is essentially and irredeemably masculinist and relies on a gendered hierarchy of values in which the feminine is persistently denigrated and excluded. The appropriate response of feminist philosophers to this is not to include woman within existing philosophical narratives, but to discern and re-evaluate the criteria for truth and value based on the denigrated and excluded feminine position. Some forms of sexual difference feminism see the feminine mode of being and thought as complementary to or co-existing with mainstream masculinism. More radical sexual difference feminisms argue for a complete feminist transformation of social and political relations. Sexual difference feminism is much more ambivalent about, or in some cases hostile to, the categories of modern enlightenment philosophy and the ideological legacy of liberalism and socialism than rationalist and critical feminisms. For sexual difference feminism, patriarchy and modernity tend to be seen as necessarily rather than contingently related.<sup>8</sup>

Rationalist feminist philosophy accepts dominant post-enlightenment views of what philosophy should be; critical feminist philosophy carries

forward the understanding of philosophy first articulated by Marx as necessarily mediated by and reflecting experience and interests; sexual difference feminist philosophy builds on the significance of sexual difference for human thought. In contrast to all of these three, postmodernist feminist philosophy challenges claims to ground explanatory or normative judgement in reason, emancipation, female nature or the structure of the psyche. In doing so, it follows through modes of thinking characteristic of poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists such as Derrida and Foucault. Feminist postmodernism eschews stable ontological, epistemological and normative assumptions except of a negative kind. The key feature of feminist postmodernism is its emphasis on plurality and relativism. Thus, it rejects concepts of both universal humanity and the idea that the feminine subject position constitutes a unified category. Postmodernist feminists argue instead for the philosophical significance of difference between women as well as between men and women, and for the plurality of perspectives that are thereby generated for understanding and judgement. In this sense, postmodernist feminists are like the feminist readers invoked by Lloyd as 'shifting subjects, taking on multiple identities' (Lloyd, 2000: 261). Unlike the three previous types of feminist philosophy, postmodernist feminists do not see themselves as supplementing, complementing or providing an alternative set of responses to ongoing philosophical questions about being, truth and ethics. Instead their work tends to be oriented towards the subversion of philosophical claims to authority in relation to being, truth and ethics, including their own. Nevertheless, there is a politics implicit in postmodernist feminists' invocation of that which they are against. Like sexual difference feminists they are critical of the conceptual framework of modernity and see the ethical universalism of enlightenment thought as disguising particular power agendas.<sup>9</sup>

The modern, post-enlightenment philosophical tradition presents feminist philosophy with the conundrum of how women, sex and gender are to be defined in opposition to ways of thinking which have consistently identified women with the inferior term of hierarchical conceptual oppositions between reason and emotion, universal and particular, autonomy and heteronomy, culture and nature. Over the last thirty years, rationalist, critical, sexual difference and postmodernist feminist philosophies of different types have all offered various responses to the conundrum. However, they have not done this in a series of separate conversations with the philosophical tradition, but through an ongoing complex of conversations with each other which is also mediated by particular engagements with mainstream

philosophy. The development of feminist theory and ideology is often presented in introductory texts as following a particular logic, which begins with liberal feminism and is succeeded by a series of reactions to the inadequacies of the liberal viewpoint in radical, socialist and pluralist (lesbian, black, third-world) feminisms (Tong, 1992; Whelehan, 1995). In the case of philosophy, a similar logic can be discerned moving from rationalist to sexual difference to critical to postmodernist thinking. This is a caricature because all of these forms of thought actually exist in parallel and are mutually critical. Nevertheless, there is a grain of truth in this view to the extent that particular feminist approaches do define themselves as in some sense overcoming the inadequacies of existing alternatives. Moreover, what counts as inadequacy always relates back to the ways in which opposing views fail to emerge fully from the masculinist mode of thought which they claim to be transcending.

For instance, sexual difference feminisms argue that rationalist feminism remains caught in masculinism, because it neither overturns nor sublates the traditional binary hierarchies, but simply argues for the re-thinking of what was seen as 'male' in terms of an inclusive category of 'humanity'. In turn, rationalist feminism argues that certain forms of sexual difference feminism remain caught in patriarchal forms of thought because of their acceptance of the essential distinctiveness of women, whether grounded in nature, psyche or language. Thus the one-sidedness of the philosophical tradition is argued by both rationalists and sexual difference feminists to continue to haunt the other. Critical and postmodernist feminists criticize the one-sidedness of rationalist and sexual difference feminisms and look for a way beyond or between 'good father' and 'rebellious daughter' alternatives. Nevertheless, there continue to be echoes of debates between rationalists and sexual difference feminists in arguments between critical and postmodernist feminisms. Postmodernists accuse critical theorists of essentialism in suggesting an identity of women's interests or subject position; and of reverting to masculinist thinking in their endorsement of ethical universalism. Critical theorists accuse postmodernists of undermining the possibility of a ground for feminist critique by abandoning the side of reason. This, it is claimed, both disables coherent feminist politics as a project of women's emancipation and reinforces the ingrained essentialism of the philosophical tradition by identifying women with irrationality. The charge is always that the opponent has fallen into a dangerous one-sidedness in their thinking, having gone too far down a particularist (emotion, heteronormy, nature) route or too far down a universalist (reason, autonomy,

culture) one. It seems that the ghost of hierarchical binary oppositions has not been decisively laid even in those feminist philosophies which seek to sublimate them most explicitly.<sup>10</sup> In the following sections, we shall see how this pattern of haunting is repeated in certain areas of feminist philosophical work: feminist epistemology; feminist moral theory; and feminist political philosophy.

## 1.2 Feminist Re-thinkings of Reason and Truth

The ideal of true knowledge in the philosophical tradition is the perfect adequacy of the concept of an object to the object itself. The preoccupation of modern epistemology and philosophy of science since Kant has been with identifying the method by which concepts can best capture the reality of objects. The conceptual hierarchies we have already encountered have been vital to post-Kantian accounts of the conditions of possibility of knowledge. The predominant view has been one in which reason is grasped in contrast to emotion as an evaluatively neutral and authoritative route to knowledge of objects by the subject-knower. Reason as a capacity is seen as having nothing to do with concrete aspects of the knower's identity (state of mind) or of their identity with others (social existence). To the extent that feelings or social position affect rational processes they are seen as distorting them, which results in outcomes which are biased and subjective as opposed to neutral and objective. Truth, therefore, is grasped in contrast to opinion. Truth is understood as the perfect adequation of rational representation to objective reality, which is guaranteed by the use of appropriate ratiocination or method. Opinion, however, is a matter of perspective and guesswork; it is influenced by specific aspects of the knower's state of mind and context and is fundamentally relative. It is possible for opinions to coincide with truths, but only accidentally. Opinion only properly becomes knowledge when its claims are justified by reason and method.<sup>11</sup>

Feminist epistemologists argue that the notions of reason and truth outlined above are masculinist because they undermine feminist claims to knowledge in a variety of ways. For rationalist feminist philosophy, the masculinism of this account lies in the ways in which women are in principle excluded as knowers, because of their association with the realms of emotion and heteronomy in the philosophical tradition. In the case of critical feminisms, it is argued that the feminist or women's viewpoint is delegitimated by mainstream accounts of epistemic authority because of the denial of the relevance of identity

and interest to the validity of claims to know. This means that mainstream epistemology cannot be oriented in terms of emancipatory feminist goals, but also that the dominant masculinist ideology is able to masquerade as objective and impartial. Sexual difference and postmodernist feminists share the critical feminist view that mainstream epistemology blocks the recognition of feminist knowledge claims and promotes a masculinist political agenda. In their case, however, there is no reference to normative goals which transcend particular interest; instead, they argue for either one or many alternative feminist standpoints for claims to knowledge. It is clear therefore that feminist epistemology has been the site of considerable internal debate over the appropriate scope and limits of feminist alternatives to mainstream theories of knowledge.

Sandra Harding has famously classified the different feminist epistemologies as feminist empiricist, feminist standpoint and feminist postmodernist positions (Harding, 1991).<sup>12</sup> According to Harding, feminist empiricism identifies the problem of mainstream approaches to understanding knowledge and knowledge acquisition with masculinist bias, and seeks more adequate, accurate and unbiased accounts. In general, feminist empiricism has been most closely associated with problems of knowledge in the context of the natural sciences (Tanesini, 1999: 95–113; Longino, 1993a; 1993b). In contrast, feminist standpoint theory is probably the most widely known and discussed feminist approach within the social sciences. Feminist standpoint theorists argue for the relevance of women's experience as the ground of authority of feminist claims (Hartsock, 1987; Smith, 1988). Feminist postmodernism, which distances itself from the idea of a stable feminist standpoint, argues for the situated and discursive nature of all knowledge claims and emphasizes the partiality and power-effects of those claims (Hekman, 1990; Flax, 1990).

Harding's classification is not meant to be taken rigidly; she herself suggests that there is an internal relation between the three schools she identifies, with feminist standpoint theory radicalizing the insights of feminist empiricism, and feminist postmodernism following through the implications of the insights of standpoint (Harding, 1991). There are certain key commonalities and certain key differences between the three perspectives. They have in common a shared acknowledgement of the importance of understanding reason, knowledge and truth as being inherently social, political and practical. They differ, however, in relation to questions about the conditions of possibility of knowledge claims and their accounts of the relation between the subject-knower and the object of knowledge. Let us examine the

commonalities first. To illustrate them I will draw on Helen Longino (1993a; 1993b) to exemplify feminist empiricism, on Nancy Hartsock (1987) to exemplify feminist standpoint theory and on Susan Hekman (1990; 1997) to exemplify feminist postmodernism.

Longino develops an argument that knowledge is essentially the product of publicly recognized and debatable standards of evidence, methods, assumptions and reasoning. These standards emerge and change through the dialogic interaction both between practising scientists and between them and the shifting social and political context in which science takes place. The validity of knowledge claims depends, for Longino, on the degree of 'cognitive democracy' within scientific communities (Longino, 1993a: 113). On her account, the notion of reason is thoroughly socialized and public. Rationality is not only something which shifts historically but, as an essentially public matter, it is open to challenge and revision. By insisting on a conception of reason which is intersubjective, Longino departs from both the notion of reason as a pure and privileged foundation of knowledge and from the notion of reason as an impartial methodological tool of analysis. She therefore also departs from classical rationalist and empiricist epistemologies in which reason provided a key to knowledge for the subject-knower, conceived in isolation. In addition, Longino argues that knowledge and truth should be understood not in terms of correspondence of subjective representation to the object of analysis, but rather in terms of 'practice' – a matter of interacting with and intervening in the world rather than reflecting it. As Longino puts it, there is no longer a 'terminus of inquiry that just is the set of truths about the world' (Longino, 1993a: 116).

Hartsock's standpoint version of feminist epistemology centres her theory of knowledge on the epistemological privilege and emancipatory potential seen to reside in grounding knowledge claims in the material standpoint of women. Within the context of contemporary capitalist societies, this standpoint is one of being caught in oppressive social and economic relations of reproduction and production (Hartsock, 1987). Hartsock draws upon a reading of Marx's understanding of the position of the proletariat under capitalism as enabling insights into the contradictions inherent in the system, which would be less immediately visible to those in positions of power (Hartsock, 1987: 158–9). According to feminist standpoint theory knowledge is necessarily linked to a point of view, a point of view which will either reflect positions of power or positions of subordination. The claim is not that the oppressed see everything more clearly, but that they have privileged insight into the conditions of their own

oppression and that in articulating them they will be better able to dismantle those very conditions. As with feminist empiricism, reason is historicized and politicized, understood not as neutral method, providing access to impartial truth, but as fundamentally ‘interested’, and not as private but as socially constructed and public. The notion of knowledge as practice is also present in standpoint theory. In standpoint theory there is a shift in the understanding of the relation of subject and object in knowledge to seeing knowledge as a form of self-understanding in the light of a project of self-transformation. This is not the self-transformation of an individual knower, but of the socially constructed identity-group of women. Like Longino, Hartsock identifies truth with fitness for purpose, but in feminist standpoint theory the ideal of emancipation, which is identified with the purpose of feminist knowledge claims, acquires an absolute end status which is lacking in feminist empiricism (Hartsock, 1987: 175–6).

As mentioned above, Harding sees feminist postmodernism as a radicalization of the feminist standpoint theorists’ insight into the importance of the position or perspective of the knower for what can be known. Hekman makes a similar claim, arguing that feminist postmodernism is an extension of feminist standpoint (Hekman, 1997). According to Hekman, in the original formulation of standpoint theory, there was an in-built tension between its strong social-constructivist basis (in which knowledge is grounded in the positionality of the knower within social relations) and its equally strong claim to universal truth (defined in terms of an ideal of emancipation). This tension has then formed the basis of a shift to a new account of knowledge which continues to emphasize positionality and perspective but loses its attachment to universal truth. Part of the reason for this is argued to be the unsustainability of the notion of one feminist standpoint in the light of critiques from black and third-world feminists regarding the radical differences between different women’s social positions (Nicholson, 1990; Hill Collins, 1990; Gunew, 1991). The other reason is seen as the increasing purchase of poststructuralist and postmodernist theories which undermine the notion of stable identities for knowers on which both feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint rely (Hekman, 1990; 1995).

The new paradigm of knowledge of which feminist standpoint theory is a part involves rejecting the definition of knowledge and truth as either universal or relative in favour of a conception of all knowledge as situated and discursive. (Hekman, 1997: 356–7)

For Hekman, the ‘situated’ nature of knowledge refers to something like the particular perspective of knowers in context. The ‘discursive’ nature of knowledge refers to its inherently linguistic form, something which, for Hekman, involves reference both to the inherent instability of meaning and the openness of all claims to deconstruction (drawing on Derrida) and to the practical effects of power which are undetachable from claims to knowledge (drawing on Foucault). In Hekman’s case, then, the re-thinking of reason, knowledge and truth represents a radicalization of the understanding of epistemic positionality, beyond both the context of scientific and political community (feminist empiricism) and the privileged access of the knower to insight into the conditions of her own oppression (feminist standpoint). However, in line with Longino and Hartsock, what continues to be stressed are the social contexts and political agendas which form the conditions of possibility of knowledge claims, along with their practical effects.

Feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint and feminist postmodernism all work with an understanding of reason, knowledge and truth as being social, political and practical. This understanding is crucial to a shared critique of mainstream epistemology and the philosophy of science and social science. Re-thinking reason, knowledge and truth, in this way, opens up the possibility of incorporating feminist values in the assessment of claims to epistemic authority or objective truth. However, it is also clear that the positive implications of these approaches for notions of epistemic authority and objective truth are radically different since they differ in their views: first, as to the conditions of possibility for the generation of valid knowledge claims; and, second, as to the implications of those conditions for the status of and the relation between the subject making knowledge claims and the object about which those claims are being made. The result of this has been an ongoing debate within feminist epistemology about the conditions of possibility of knowledge claims, in which feminists seek to hold their ground between different versions of stable epistemic authority on the one hand (‘cognitive democracy’ versus the feminist standpoint) and postmodernist instability on the other; and a debate about the subject/object relation in which feminists negotiate between social/linguistic constructivism (idealism) and the assertion of a mind-independent reality (realism) – an argument on which there is some common ground between feminist empiricists and standpoint theorists as against postmodernists. The debate between the different versions of feminist epistemology is clearly preoccupied by, and also concerned to resist collapsing into, a simple reassertion or reversal of

hierarchical binary oppositions between universal and particular, reason and emotion, autonomy and heteronomy, ideal and real. In each case, proponents of any particular viewpoint would deny their assimilation to the kind of either/or choice which mainstream conceptions of the meaning and conditions of possibility of knowledge institutionalizes. At the same time, the familiar categories re-emerge in the ways in which opponents are characterized. In particular, the critical weight carried by the charge of epistemological relativism and consequent ethical particularism indicates the degree to which feminist argument continues to rely on the alternatives decreed by the mainstream conceptual framework. These alternatives do not provide a way of answering ontological and epistemological questions except in terms of either realism or idealism, universalism or particularist relativism.

### 1.3 Feminist Re-thinkings of Moral Agency and Judgement

Feminist moral theory, like feminist epistemology, has developed in reaction to a mainstream philosophical agenda. Until recently, this agenda was either concerned with highly metatheoretical questions concerning the validity of moral reasoning or, in relation to substantive moral frameworks, was dominated by a choice between the accounts of moral agency and judgement implicit in utilitarianism (or other forms of consequentialism) on the one hand and in deontological (most often Kantian) moral theory on the other. Feminist critiques of mainstream moral theory focused on a variety of ways in which it reflected masculinist bias in the accounts of both agency and judgement, and was therefore exclusive of women and the significance of gender as an aspect of moral subjectivity and judgement. As far as moral subjectivity was concerned, feminist commentators were uneasy with the highly individualized, disembodied and rationalistic characteristics displayed by the moral actor in both utilitarian and deontological theory. This model not only excluded the possibility that gender might be a relevant consideration in relation to moral agency, but also reflected the familiar binary conceptual hierarchy of the Western philosophical tradition in which conceptions of the subject as relational, embodied and feeling have been systematically devalued. The identification of these denigrated modes of subjectivity with women traditionally put women's status as moral agents into question. In relation to conceptions of moral judgement, the emphasis of mainstream moral theory was on the necessity to abstract from the specific and particular

in order for moral judgement to be possible. This occupation of the abstract and impartial position foundational to moral judgement is enabled by the invocation of a universal principle for judgement, which can make no sense without a stepping outside of particular interest and identity. Again, feminist critics argued both that this excluded consideration of gender as relevant to judgement and that it identified the ideal of moral reasoning with characteristics of separateness, disembodiedness and rationality, which have been traditionally associated with the masculine. Women's moral status is again put into question by their identification with the opposite of the characteristics valorized as necessary for morality.<sup>13</sup>

The critiques of mainstream moral theory began with the familiar 'good father' and 'rebellious daughter' alternative responses to mainstream philosophy. Rationalist feminist responses were largely concerned with the need to demonstrate that women should be considered as fully moral agents, with the capacity to act and judge as rational, separate individuals. In other cases critiques drawing on sexual difference feminism were developed, which argued for a new conception of moral agency and judgement to reflect the woman's, feminist or the feminine perspective. In turn, critical and postmodernist feminists sought to transcend the either/or choice between mainstream views of morality and the identification of morality with the previously subordinated term of the traditional binary oppositions. A key focus of debate within feminist ethics has been the idea of a feminist ethic of care, an argument which took particular inspiration from the work of the social psychologist Carol Gilligan (Gilligan, 1982).

In her book *In A Different Voice*, Gilligan not only reported on empirical evidence for the gendered nature of patterns of moral reasoning, but used this as a basis for challenging accepted assumptions about the meaning of moral maturity. Gilligan argued that the conception of moral maturity implicit in standard deontological, contractarian and utilitarian moral theory was in fact modelled on male patterns of development, which reflect an emphasis on separation, autonomy and abstraction (Kohlberg, 1981; Gilligan, 1982; Held, 1993: 64–90). Traditionally, following Kohlberg's model of the hierarchy of moral growth and learning, the highest level of moral maturity had been associated with the capacity to utilize impartial, rationally grounded universal principles in making ethical judgements. Gilligan challenged this, arguing that the contextual, relational and empathetic features of moral reasoning, more often displayed by adult women than the impartial, universalist approaches usually typical of adult men, were equally sophisticated and valuable. Since the impartial universalist

account of moral maturity dovetails with the dominant deontological and consequentialist paradigms in ethical theory, it is unsurprising that Gilligan's debate with Kohlberg has become characterized as the debate between an 'ethic of justice' (impartial universalism) and an 'ethic of care' (contextual particularism) in mature moral thinking (Cole and Coultrap-McQuin, 1992: 1–11). Gilligan's thesis draws attention to the centrality of the conception of moral subjectivity and agency to moral theory. She sets up the idea of an ethic of care in terms of a contrast between two sorts of moral subject: one of whom is positioned in abstraction from particularities of place and time, including his own concrete self-identity, rather like a Rawlsian individual behind the veil of ignorance; the other of whom is self-consciously a particular person judging in terms of the specific responsibilities and relations of care within which she is enmeshed. This distinction in terms of two types of moral subject opens the way to alternative accounts of the nature and validity of moral judgement. Gilligan does not argue for the superiority of one kind of judgement over the other; instead she argues that to reason contextually in terms of specific responsibilities and relations is both valid in itself and complementary to the procedure of invoking impartial principles for judgement (Gilligan, 1982: 174).

Gilligan states clearly that there is no necessary connection between the ethic of care or maternal thinking and being biologically female. However, critics of care ethics are concerned that it over-emphasizes a link between women and a particular, fixed form of subjectivity or moral identity. This concern is shared by rationalist, critical and post-modernist feminists (see Scaltsas, 1992; Porter, 1991; and Hekman, 1995 respectively). In all three cases, the worry is the linking of women to a set of characteristics that confirms rather than challenges the philosophical tradition's placing of women within its binary conceptual hierarchy. The ontological question about the nature of women is important not only in itself but because of its implications for the possibility of authoritative normative judgement within feminism. Here rationalist and critical feminists (as with feminist empiricists and standpoint theorists in the context of epistemology) can be distinguished from postmodernists. For the former, authoritative judgement depends on the invocation of commonalities which are in principle non-exclusive and therefore generate universalizable judgements. For the latter, it is precisely the rejection of stable foundations for, and assumptions about the generalizability of, moral claims which underpins the meaningfulness and possible effects of any judgement. Rationalist and critical feminists accuse both sexual difference and

postmodernist feminists of a dangerous ethical relativism, which undermines the possibility of feminist emancipatory politics (Porter, 1991; Scaltsas, 1992; Benhabib, 1992). In different ways, sexual difference and postmodernist feminisms accuse rationalist and critical feminists of subsuming women's difference within masculinist norms and values. For sexual difference feminists, however, that which is shared by women provides an alternative site for moral thinking and action (Noddings, 1984; Ruddick, 1990). Whereas for postmodernist feminists, the suggestion that there is a common ground from which women judge and act is as problematic as reliance on universalization tests in ethics (Diprose, 1994; Hekman, 1995). The logic of debate within feminist moral theory exemplifies again both the goal of transcending the options ingrained in mainstream moral theory and the resilience of the hierarchy of values embodied within that mainstream. Once more, feminist philosophy presents us with the difficulty of thinking a way between fixed essences on the one hand and arbitrariness on the other, in its quest to grasp the ontology of sexual difference and its implications for authoritative normative judgement and prescription.

#### 1.4 Feminist Re-thinkings of Politics

All branches of feminist philosophy are the offspring of feminist ideology and identify themselves as part of an ongoing political struggle. Feminist political philosophy is directly concerned with questions of ideology and practical political engagement and, in particular, with the question of how women's oppression is to be understood and addressed. The key reference point in the development of feminist political theory has been the assumptions entrenched in the liberal political order and in liberal political philosophy, which continues to dominate mainstream political thought in the academy. Feminist philosophy's response to liberalism follows a familiar pattern in which rationalist 'good father' interpretations are criticized from sexual difference, critical and postmodernist perspectives respectively. Rationalist feminism shares the basic assumptions of liberalism which were developed in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century enlightenment thought. In particular, rationalist feminism accepts the liberal conception of the individual as entitled to rights. The oppression of women is seen to reside in the extent to which they have not been treated as individuals and have been denied access to rights on the same terms as men. For rationalist feminism, therefore, the way to address this

oppression is to guarantee equality of right to all, regardless of sex (Whelehan, 1995: 25–43).

Feminist critics of rationalist feminism argue that it overlooks the masculinism of the presuppositions of liberal thought upon which it relies. The liberal ideal of the rights-bearing citizen is premised on privileging his rationality and autonomy as the ground of his entitlement to rights. This is argued to exclude women doubly, both because of their traditional identification with the denigrated pair in the reason/emotion, autonomy/heteronomy binary oppositions, and because it disguises the actual dependence of the citizen in the public sphere on the work of reproduction and care carried out in the private sphere. The re-thinking of political agency in terms which do not privilege rationality and autonomy in the liberal sense is crucial to feminist attempts to articulate a different kind of politics. Different types of feminist philosophy approach this re-thinking in different ways. Sexual difference feminists focus attention on the reproductive and caring roles carried out within the private sphere and the value they may have for formulating a different ideal for ‘doing politics’. Critical feminists focus attention on the structural dependence of liberal states and capitalism on a sexual division of labour and locate political agency not in abstract, individuated rationality and autonomy, but in women’s common interest in emancipation. Postmodernist feminists focus attention on the diversity of women’s identities and interests within the liberal polity and, in contrast to rationalist, sexual difference and critical feminisms, argue for a radical pluralism in feminist politics. In all three cases, these are arguments about how feminists should do politics within liberal polities (Squires, 1999).

The liberal ideal of citizenship is one which is grounded in the idea of natural individual rights. These natural rights are both discernible by and justified by the natural reason inherent in each individual. They underpin the legal, political and social positive rights to which citizens of liberal states are entitled. Liberal citizenship is principally a matter of the protection of entitlements to rights; it does not demand the commitment to participation in and identity with the polity which is engrained in the republican tradition. Instead, liberal citizenship is focused on protecting the citizen from the state and enabling as wide a sphere of uncoerced activity within the private sphere and civil society for citizens as possible. Liberal citizenship was originally understood as exclusive to male property-owners; over time it has been extended to all adults within liberal states. As we have seen, feminist critiques of liberal citizenship began as arguments to extend

liberal citizenship rights fully to women within the liberal state. However, what they found was that even when rights were so extended women remained excluded and disadvantaged within the liberal state. One response to this was for feminist political theorists to argue for alternative models of citizenship which would be more enabling for feminist politics. Three such alternatives can be found in the ideas of maternal thinking, deliberative democracy and identity politics.

In her book *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace*, Ruddick draws on Gilligan's idea of an ethic of care as a central part of her argument for feminist moral theory and political practice. Ruddick argues that the practice of rearing children embodies certain virtues and attitudes which provide a resource for feminist politics (Ruddick, 1990: 13–27). This implies a rejection of two aspects of liberal citizenship as it has been traditionally understood: abstraction and impartial universalism. Like the subject-knower and moral judge of mainstream epistemology and moral theory, the good liberal citizen is a citizen in virtue of a capacity to reason which is irrelevant to their private identity. In addition, the good liberal citizen judges and acts with reference to principles engrained in natural reason, rather than private interest embedded in particular relationships. Ruddick argues in contrast that the capacity for citizenship depends on private identity and, more strongly, that the capacity for good citizenship is bound up with a particular kind of private experience which has been common to women. In addition, she argues that the judgement and action of citizens should be contextual and reflect the actual patterns of responsibility within concrete, empathetic relationships. Two examples Ruddick gives of ways of doing politics along maternalist lines are women's anti-nuclear protests and the mothers of 'the disappeared' in Argentina (Ruddick, 1990: 222–51). In both cases, Ruddick argues that we see the values inherent in maternal thinking used to subvert the oppressive politics of states. Ruddick's focus is on peace politics, but her argument typifies a strand of feminist political theory which requires the re-thinking of citizenship in terms which bring the virtues and values traditionally associated with women's work in the private sphere into the public domain.

Benhabib criticizes the turn to care in moral and political theory for its relativism and parochialism (Benhabib, 1992: 187–90). Her argument rehearses a familiar point made by critical theory in response to sexual difference feminisms, which is that without an orientation to a universal normative standard of emancipation the critical, transformative capacity of feminist politics is lost. Benhabib is sympathetic to the attention to identity and context within the ethics and politics

of care, but argues that when this becomes the sole ground of judgement and action feminist politics becomes the exclusive expression of partial interest. Part of Benhabib's argument is that thinkers such as Ruddick tend to essentialize an account of women's identity and experience without paying sufficient attention to differences between them. A more significant aspect, however, is the claim that a politics of care over-corrects the bias of the philosophical tradition towards abstraction and impartiality. Benhabib argues instead for the incorporation of both the 'concrete' and the 'generalized' other in a critical political theory, and for a deliberative democratic politics which permits both contextual sensitivity and orientation towards universally valid normative goals (Benhabib, 1992: 164–70). In order to do this, she draws on Habermas's account of communicative reason. According to Habermasian theory, there is an interest in emancipation which is common to all individuals because it is implicit in the conditions of rational argumentation itself (Benhabib, 1996b: 67–74). Benhabib's deliberative ideal of citizenship combines aspects of liberal and republican traditions. It is based on the conditions specified by Habermas for the force of argument alone to determine the outcomes of political argument and is therefore grounded in certain basic rights. At the same time, however, it requires equal participation of citizens in democratic decision-making in a way which recognizes and articulates particular identities and interests.

The argument between maternalist and deliberative ideals of feminist citizenship is one aspect of a broader feminist debate about political participation and representation. Both Ruddick and Benhabib are concerned to affirm the relevance of identity to political judgement and action. However, critics such as Young argue that there is a problem with the way in which identity and politics are brought together in both of these two models. Young criticizes the maternalist model because it is based on generalizations about women's identity and neglects significant power differences between women in terms of class, race and sexuality. The danger of maternalism is that it reproduces an exclusivist politics which reflects the experience and interests of only some (white middle-class) women (Young, 1990: 161–3). The danger of deliberation based on a Habermasian view of communicative reason is that it privileges certain forms of communication and is exclusive in practice of modes of discourse which don't fit mainstream ideals of rationality as abstract and impartial (Young, 1996; 2000: 52–80). Young argues that if feminist politics is to be genuinely inclusive then it has to be more radically pluralist and to embrace a conception of citizenship in which representation of

subordinated groups is institutionalized (Young, 1990: 156–91). Young's revision of the Habermasian ideal of democratic citizenship remains close to Benhabib's critical theory, in that notions of communication and of the orientation of politics towards emancipation remain crucial. More radical postmodernist questioning of maternalist and Habermasian feminist political ideals can be found in theorists such as Mouffe. Mouffe argues that the link between identity and politics takes on far too fixed, and thereby exclusive, a form in sexual difference feminism (Mouffe, 1993: 78–82). For Mouffe, however, Young's analysis makes the same kind of mistake by being tied to an essentialist conception of group identity (Mouffe, 1993: 86). However, according to Mouffe, critical theory feminisms make another kind of mistake, because they rely on the notion of the orientation of communication towards a universal, emancipatory ideal (Mouffe, 1993: 8). Mouffe argues instead that the feminist model for citizenship should be premised on the critique of 'essentialism in all its different forms' (Mouffe, 1993: 88). This means that 'identity politics' becomes conceived in terms of shifting, contingent and strategic *identifications* of citizens with particular political goals (Mouffe, 1993: 82–5).

Mouffe's argument completes a pattern to feminist debate over citizenship in which successive theorists criticize their predecessors for failing to be sufficiently inclusive in their feminist politics. The claim of false inclusivity which was made against liberal citizenship, in which its universality in theory failed to amount to universality in practice is made in turn against maternalist (Benhabib *contra* Gilligan and Ruddick) and deliberative (Young and Mouffe *contra* Benhabib) models. However, the universal/particular conceptual binary is turned back on postmodernist critics such as Mouffe, because they are accused of an extreme of particularism which undermines the meaningfulness of the category of feminist politics as such (Benhabib, 1992: 203–41). The pattern which is already familiar from examining debates in feminist epistemology and moral theory is repeated.

### Conclusion

The above sketches of feminist philosophical debate demonstrate that there is a recurring pattern discernible within and between diverse strands of feminist philosophy. I have suggested that this pattern is determined by feminist philosophy's relationship to the hierarchy of conceptual oppositions which frames much of mainstream

philosophical thought. Feminist philosophers identify the traditional conceptual hierarchy as excluding and denigrating them both as women and as feminists. Within this hierarchy to be female is to be less than human. To be a feminist and thereby to introduce ideological values and goals into philosophical reason is to misunderstand what philosophical reason is and to exclude yourself by definition as a valid participant in philosophical debate. Unsurprisingly, therefore, lapsing back into traditional binary oppositions is identified as the greatest danger for feminist thinkers and the most significant way in which an opposing feminist position can be criticized. Yet it proves remarkably hard to formulate ways of thinking which cannot be accused of re-inventing hierarchical binaries and the exclusiveness and one-sidedness of judgement which they entail. This is evident in the ways in which references to binaries are invoked to condemn alternative arguments. It is also evident in the way in which the strategic goal of much feminist philosophical thinking is to find an alternative to the choice between 'good father' and 'rebellious daughter' alternatives.

In the discussion of feminist philosophies in section 1.1, it was noted that critical, sexual difference and postmodernist feminisms draw on theoretical perspectives which are also subversive of the mainstream philosophical tradition. Marxist, psychoanalytic, poststructuralist and postmodernist thought all define themselves, at least to some extent, in terms of an opposition to conceptual binaries between culture and nature, reason and emotion, fact and value, ideal and real. A key philosophical reference point for all of these modes of thinking is Hegel's work. Hegel was the first philosopher to identify his philosophical project with moving through and beyond the 'way of despair', in which the inadequacy of thinking in terms of binary oppositions is demonstrated and overcome. In the following chapter, I will offer an exposition of what this means in Hegel's thought before returning to raise the question of the parallels between the pathways of Hegelian and feminist thought, and the potential of a conversation, or even convergence, between them.