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Forde, Carmel M., "Commentary on Makus" (1997). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 73.  
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# COMMENTARY ON "FEMINIST REASONING ABOUT REASON"

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Dr. Makus's carefully researched paper recognizes significant tensions among feminist accounts of theory and practice, in particular problems in postmodern feminist critiques of reason. Her formulation of the "masculinist" bias of reason, of which formal logic has been seen as the highest expression, draws upon existing critiques skillfully drawn by many philosophers. The abstraction, god's eye objectivity, neutrality, and positivistic character of a disembodied, nonnatural faculty of reason, are aptly summarized in her paper, and carry the weight of much feminist critique. Ingrid outlines three forms of feminism. The first, *feminism of sameness*—often called feminism of equality—has as its primary goal a recognition that males and females do not differ in capacity, character, or ability; women should be incorporated into the category of humanity without remainder. The second—*feminism of difference*—a view which provides the means whereby the aspects of humanity which have been devalued since classical times, and which have symbolically appeared in multiple exclusions of women, are given positive status; for example, bodiliness, particularity, emotions, nature. The difference in question is difference *from* men, difference from the homogeneity of humanity, which is regarded as "male". Ingrid identifies a third form, *postmodern feminism*—as the most comprehensive critique of western reason. The elements which overlap in postmodernist critiques are "deconstruction", along with a repudiation of (1) the stable coherent natural self (2) the ideals of a privileged white male elite and (3) the power exerted over others by this knower—this last as crucial to the critique of reason. She notices that postmodern feminists are self-critical, intending to avoid the oppressive practices so easily replicated under the hegemonic views of the knower and reason, which "marginalize and oppress those whose lives, experiences and situations are not included in the theoretical formulations of the "knower". But she suggests that postmodernism cannot but fail in its political strategies, that a feminism of sameness might be a more productive route for feminists, since postmodern feminism results in either no politics, or a politics of difference which advises that "care" extend to as many as possible.

I want to suggest that part of her critique of postmodern feminism, which is based of her acceptance of certain traditional ideals of western reason, cannot coexist with other parts, in particular her recognition of oppressive practices. Postmodern feminists reject "dualistic" thinking—not "masculinist" thinking—since there is no natural self, whether male or female, but there have been powerful social constructions underwritten by hegemonic forms of a logic of exclusion. The traditional ideals of reason are constrained by a logical structure, and dualism ought not to be equated with masculinity, nondualism with feminine discourse. There is a large middle ground which is not adequately addressed. For some, postmodernism means viewing the human subject as cultural product; for others, deconstruction occurs when the "natural bond that modernism assumed to exist between les mots et les choses is broken... and language assumes a unique and special status." (Madison) Many philosophers can be included in these interpretations of postmodernism who might not view themselves as such. But there is a point to this. There are other ways out of the dilemma Ingrid articulates.

Although she intends to outline three feminisms, postmodern feminism, on Ingrid's interpretation, turns from a powerful critique of traditional rationality into a self-parody. She does not accept that the traditional theory of rationality is problematic, and therefore susceptible to feminist critique, in particular that reason can be considered oppressive, that it has artificially excluded elements which constitute it. My concerns lie in her construals of postmodern critiques as inevitably "chaotic", and infinite in their multiplicities, or else just rhetorical

devices, construals which replicate the hegemonic logic which underwrites both the traditional view and the interpretations given here. Ingrid's view implicitly assumes there is no problematic politics underlying the ideals of reason in the tradition, appearing to reject a strong association between reason and politics.

Some feminist logicians, on the other hand, have critiqued dualism as an "alienated form of differentiation, in which power construes and constructs difference" (Plumwood, 443) and which suffers from a "denied dependency" on the other. This structural and theoretical critique has powerful practical implications, and is not simply a gender critique, essentializing masculinity. It is a matter of the politics of reason, which informs the structural features of western theories and which problematize the current analysis.

Jenny Lloyd's work is brought to bear, in Ingrid's paper, to show the unacceptability of *feminism of difference*, for its essentializing of women (and consequently men), its dualistic tendencies—which ironically replicate the structures of western reason, and its lack of acceptance of differences within the category women and the category men. This characterizes flaws in such a view, exemplified particularly in "women's ways of knowing" and "feminine ethics". While Ingrid notices the underlying logical relation of feminisms of difference to feminism of sameness, she misses out on other features which belie this logic: that a feminist account has it that *neither* males nor females have essential natures, that both men and women need to theorize difference.

Shifting perspective, a pattern emerges that links Ingrid's categorizations. Some feminists argue that classical logic has been shaped by politics of domination. It is worth repeating that feminisms concerned with oppression want to allow women to disentangle themselves from an identity constructed in the negated side of an *A/not-A* dichotomy, where one type of selfhood exists, that which was sanctioned in the tradition, described as "masculinist" above. Feminists who *theorize* difference are not exclusively "difference feminists" or "feminine" theorists, e.g. as one finds in "women's ways of knowing". Without prejudice, the use of difference in the theorizing difference in the academy is not to differentiate women FROM men. The problem is not "difference" as such, but the failure of particular formulations of reason to accommodate it. Lloyd, Code, Frye, and Plumwood, along with many others, perceive the complexities involved in knowing and acting, arguing that the issues are oppression of various kinds. These thinkers value recognition of relational theories of the self, of knowing, of situatedness, of cultural and linguistic constraints. While it may be the case that Lacan ought to be taken to task for replicating dualistic strains in his work, (as critics like Frye notice) Derrida and Foucault are two thinkers who notice and structure their discourse around relationality, who reject central aspects of the tradition, and focus upon the social constitution of selfhood; upon relational aspects of knowing, power and culture.

Ingrid may be right to claim that an extreme particularity can only replicate the problematic politics in the original dualism, since instead "chaos", not "order", would predominate. However, one does not need to assert or to accept the extreme view, that the self is infinitely malleable, fluid, open, unstable, in order to agree that it is not "naturally" constituted in the way described by the philosophical tradition. Ingrid claims that postmodern feminists consider ordering as such to be oppressive. Clarification is in order here. Postmodern feminists eschew exclusive universal categories, such as those given above, for men and women, but not categorization as such. Her account might benefit from the work of such philosophers as Val Plumwood and Marilyn Frye, who speak about categories and of negation, and who suggest that feminists work with relevance logics.

The category of men has operated as the A side of an *A/not-A* structure, with all the trimmings. The set of A is an abstraction, a logical set whose members are each considered to be independent of each other, (atomistic) but who all share properties; each set defined by a list of predicates, all who share these predicates belong to the set, and those who do not share them, do not so belong. Since *not-A* is not a *positively* defined category, but

one which is defined in negation of the positive category *A*, Frye calls these structures dichotomous, because they divide or split the world, she says, but "paradoxically, they do not split it into two." (Frye, 1996) *This* kind of category construction is critiqued by more feminists than those who are willing to label themselves postmodernist. It is important to notice that it is particularly in relation to the broadest social and cultural categories, that both feminists and postmodern feminists are concerned to avoid oppressive structures. If we remain within this structure of binary opposition, wherein one is only defined by exclusive negation from the other, the difference mentioned being "difference from men" then the only alternative seems to be to construct another structure of the same kind, but make *it* "*A*", that is try to generate positivity out of what has been ignored and negated (often called a "reversal of values"). Thus, the feminisms of difference, which occur in feminist ethics, feminist epistemologies, and other philosophical accounts. "Theorizing difference" employs a different *logic*, it does not reject logic, or categories, or order, but extends away from the system one is in; one doesn't participate in that game. One generates a category of one's own making, that allows for difference *within* itself, by recognizing that it isn't sameness that makes a social category like men and women. Structure in real categories requires "that the things structured are *not all alike*. ... a real category ... has internal complexity, and hence requires variation among its elements." This applies not only to a category of women, but to a category of men, and to that of humanity. As negated opposites of men, the sameness of women with each other matters, and is what defines the category. Sameness cannot work for social categories—aggregation and solidarity require that there are differences essentially worked in. There are logics consistent with these forms of politics of social movements. That is to say, logics where the operation of negation is not as an exclusionary, universal kind, that function to negate the features of one category/set.

Dualism/nondualism are not, as Ingrid suggests, bad logical behaviour on the part of postmodern feminists, that is, in acting out yet another dualism. Dualism is a form of rationality that does not approximate to the reality it suggests it reveals. Dualism differs from nondualisms, in that they are fundamentally distinct systems of reason. Systems of logic that are not dualistic in the classical sense are multiple, there are a variety. There are differentiable systems of logic, of politics, of reason, different ways of understanding human relations, knowing—classical logic is "oppressive" in relation to political and social life (categories) whereas relevance logic is not—Plumwood says "as work in relevant and paraconsistent logic has shown, negation is the key axis of comparison among implicational systems." Because "theory selection and construction of logic validate, reflect, and theoretically express certain worldviews implying principles of relationship to the other" (Plumwood 443) we need relevance logics for other forms of negation. In a relevance logic, negation does not operate as exclusive dichotomous operator, thus *A* and *not-A* can coexist meaningfully, or positively. Thus, in contrast, say with either "the view from nowhere" and the "view from everywhere", we have the situated knower, the knower in a community, the knower who must attempt to take on the perspectives of others. Feminists are devising complex accounts of agency and independence, freedom and authenticity of choice, forging new links between agency and accountability, than have been available within the tradition.

Thus it is not necessary to rest with a construal of postmodern "difference" as the view that "all differences must count" when one includes relational theorists among postmodernists, and this is possible under Ingrid's initial classification. We must identify significant differences and oppressive practices. This is precisely what a large body of feminists have done, along the lines of difference Ingrid mentions, sex, race, ability, class, and never height, hair colour.

There *are* feminist criticisms of male postmodern theorists; Marilyn Frye, for example, suggests that Lacan is in just as much trouble as Sartre, in the matter of self-definition, since the "subject...is constituted, either logically (Lacan) or through existential struggle (Sartre), by opposition with its negation." (Frye, 1996) Among the

theorists Ingrid cites approvingly, her view of Charles Taylor is misleading. Taylor's view of reason is not the traditional view, it develops out of a critique of traditional epistemology. He, like some feminists, critiques the Cartesian view, and is much closer to the middle ground feminist position—that position which needs stronger articulation in Ingrid's work. His view is dialectical, rather like those of the relationalist theories I mention, which incorporate difference, but not infinity of perspectives. One must not replicate the fact/value distinction which has been central to the understanding of knowledge, in asking how it is one might value difference. Indeed, recognition itself *is* value, for dialectitians.

In favouring a feminism of sameness, it is not clear what Ingrid thinks the sameness is about: if it means to identify the female subject as the same kind as that subject which has been amply critiqued, then the proposal is problematic. Ingrid acknowledges that postmodern feminists's are concerned that "the universal standpoint can so easily be used to ... exercise power over others, by excluding them ... or by making judgements about truth and knowledge which" also exclude a variety of perspectives. The abstract, disembodied subject has not done the work claimed for it. If, on the other hand, Ingrid means that there is no sense to be made of the view of humanity which excludes women, that emotions, body, and other features excluded are not human, and that all, both men and women, must be included in a category of humanity which incorporates difference, and reflects altered views of nature, subjectivity, and reason, I cannot but agree.

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