

Feminism, Postmodernism and Thomism Confront Questions of Gender

Rosalind Smith Edman

Feminism will shape our future as a people and whether it does so for good or ill entails a heavy responsibility.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese¹

Neither feminism nor postmodernism lends itself to clear definition. Both encompass a broad spectrum of theories. Feminism may be liberal, Marxist, radical or postmodern. Postmodernism defies definition, perhaps even description. In its deconstructive form (the form of most interest to feminism), it is anti-foundational and skeptical of any form of certainty. The various theories which are drawn together under the umbrella of postmodernism all have in common a repudiation of early modernism.

A number of feminist theorists within the past decade have found that they hold much in common with postmodernists. “. . . Both [feminism and postmodernism] have sought to develop new paradigms of social criticism which do not rely on traditional philosophical underpinnings.”² Yet, not all feminists would espouse a marriage between feminism and postmodernism. Some fear that postmodernism’s repudiation of the subject would eliminate

¹ Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth, *Feminism Without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 10.

Ms. Genovese explores the positive and the negative effects of the feminist movement, criticizing particularly feminism’s total acceptance of the absolute rights of the individual so idealized in our contemporary society.

² Nancy Fraser & Linda J. Nicholson, “Social Criticism Without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism,” in *Feminism / Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 19.

feminism as a social-political power—there would be no subject “woman” and consequently no “woman’s movement.”³ Others find the postmodern “death of the subject” quite compatible with the feminist agenda. After all, the “subject” has always been conceived of as *male*.

The concept of gender has long been central to feminist thought. However, its evolution over the past twenty years has resulted in a growing consensus among feminist theorists that gender relations need not correspond to anatomy. Postmodernism with its denial of universalist and transcultural identities such as gender or woman has impacted even further upon the desexualization of gender for those feminist theorists who subscribe to postmodern thought. Gender need not, in fact, be related at all to anatomical sex. Arguing that not only gender, but sex as well is culturally constructed, Judith Butler suggests that “[w]hen the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.”⁴ The social and ethical implications and ramifications of the desexualization of gender are significant.

Meanwhile, some philosophers and theologians are recognizing that there are affinities to be found between Thomism and postmodernism, particularly in the rejection of the Cartesian splits between mind/matter, body/spirit, and subject/object, as well as between Thomist and postmodern emphases upon bodiliness and the constitution of the individual self in and through social and cultural relations.⁵ Can we bring feminism, postmodernism and Thomism into conversation with one another in such a way that the positive insights of each might further the great strides that have been made by feminist theorists in establishing the equality of men and women; in such a way that “feminism will shape our future as a people . . . for good?” What follows is necessarily only an overture to such an ambitious task.

POSTMODERN FEMINISM

Nicholson and Fraser, argue that feminism should adopt a “carefully constructed” postmodernism, taking the best aspects of each. They point out

³ Susan Hekman provides a lucid discussion of the postmodern and feminist critiques of the subject in “Reconstituting the Subject: Feminism, Modernism, and Postmodernism,” *Hypatia*, Vol 6, no. 2 (Summer 1991), 44 - 63.

⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 6.

⁵ See, for example, J. A. DiNoia, O.P., “American Catholic Theology at Century’s End: Postconciliar, Postmodern, Post-Thomistic,” *The Thomist* 54, no.3 (July, 1990), 499-518.

that postmodernism provides feminism with a critique of feminism's foundationalism and essentialism, while feminism provides postmodernism with feminism's strength as social criticism.⁶

One advantage of such a "carefully constructed" postmodern feminism is that categories such as the "modern, restricted, male-headed, nuclear family" would be understood to be "historically specific institutional categories" which would take precedence over "ahistorical, functionalist categories like reproduction and mothering."⁷ Furthermore, a "carefully constructed postmodern feminism" would avoid any type of universalisms such as early feminist attempts to find one universal explanation of sexism that would be cross-cultural and cross-generational—what Nicholson and Fraser call "quasi-metanarratives" or "god's eye-views."⁸ A "carefully constructed postmodern feminism" would embrace the "death of the subject." Rather than a universalist notion of "woman" or "feminine," social identity would be a multi-strand conception including class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, etc.⁹

Jane Flax, writing as therapist, philosopher, feminist, and political scientist, approaches gender from the vantage point of "gender relations." Why should feminist theory analyze gender? Because gender relations have for the most part been simply relations of domination.¹⁰ Flax describes gender relations as:

Differentiated and (so far) asymmetrical divisions and attributions of human traits and capacities. Through gender relations two types of persons are created: man and woman. Man and woman are posited as exclusionary categories. One can be only one gender, never the other or both.¹¹

If gender relations are not to continue to be relations of domination, then gender itself needs to be problematized. One must question the relationship between gender and sex. Why? Because, says Flax, "[i]f gender is as natural and as intrinsically a part of us as the genitals we are born with, it would be foolish, (or even harmful) to attempt either to change gender arrangements or not to take them into account as a delimitation of human activities."¹² But is gender a "natural"—pre-social—fact? No, according to Flax. Rather, gender

⁶ Nicholson and Fraser, 19-20.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

¹⁰ Jane Flax, "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory," in *Feminism / Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 45. Flax describes herself as philosopher, therapist, feminist and political scientist in her own work *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1990), 3. *Thinking Fragments* is also a more developed presentation of the ideas found Flax's contribution to *Feminism / Postmodernism*.

Flax does not subscribe to a wholly postmodern feminism; however, she does believe that aspects of postmodernism can certainly advance the feminist cause.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹² *Ibid.*, 49.

results from three things:

1. social conditions, which are rapidly changing.
2. male dominance.
3. equation of sex and gender (sex being the anatomical differences between male and female).¹³

Like Nicholson and Fraser, Flax eschews Enlightenment essentialisms and universalisms. She, too, finds that "[f]eminist notions of self, knowledge, and truth are too contradictory to those of the Enlightenment to be contained within its categories."¹⁴ She suggests that both sex and gender find their origin in social relations, rather than in a natural or essential difference in being.

Judith Butler, best illustrates the postmodern feminist position with regard to gender. She is profoundly influenced by the thinking of Michel Foucault, especially in regard to the "death of the subject" and the theory of the body. In agreement with Nicholson and Fraser, but contrary to Flax, Butler questions the assumption that there is a subject—woman.¹⁵ In fact, the notion of the decentered self is essential to her postmodern critique of gender. The consequences which follow from a thoroughly postmodern feminist theory of gender become most apparent in Butler's work.

Citing Foucault's idea that "juridical systems of power *produce* the subjects they subsequently come to represent," she notes the importance of the question of the subject for politics in general, but even more for feminist politics. "To what extent," she asks, "does the category of women achieve stability and coherence only in the context of the heterosexual matrix?"¹⁶

Her argument, following Foucault, is that the body comes into being as a function of discourse.¹⁷ The fact that the body becomes sexualized as "naturally"

¹³ Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments*, 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹⁵ "My suggestion is that the presumed universality and unity of the subject of feminism is effectively undermined by the constraints of the representational discourse in which it functions." See note 4 above.

Flax, on the other hand makes the point that "those who celebrate or call for a 'decentered' self seem self-deceptively naive and unaware of the basic cohesion within themselves that makes the fragmentation of experiences something other than a terrifying slide into psychosis." *Thinking Fragments*, 218-19.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 4-5.

¹⁷ Foucault says, "The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration." McNay notes that Foucault is not denying the materiality of the body, only that the materiality or corporeality of the body can be known apart from its "cultural significations." Quoted by Lois McNay, in "The Foucauldian Body and the Exclusion of Experience," *Hypatia*, Vol. 6, No.3, Fall, 1991, 125-139.

One of Foucault's most important contributions to feminist theory, according to McNay, is

or “essentially” male or female is simply the effect of power relations which inscribe gender upon the surface of the body. These power relations are those of the heterosexual culture.

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*.¹⁸

These acts give the “illusion of an abiding gendered self.” The body performs or acts out what the dominant heterosexual culture determines to be normative for one sex or the other. In this way the dominant heterosexual culture conceals the fact that gender is performative and that it need not be limited to those acts which the dominant culture determines to be normative—heterosexual acts.¹⁹ For the fact is, “the gendered body has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.”²⁰

Does Thomism have anything to say to postmodern feminism? *Yes*, inasmuch as Thomism shares postmodern feminism’s rejection of the Cartesian dichotomies of mind/matter, body/spirit, subject/object, as well as its rejection of rationalist closed-systems of knowledge; *yes*, inasmuch as Thomism speaks to the embodiedness of the person; and *yes*, inasmuch as Thomism gives priority to existence over essence. Hence, to speak of the nature or essence of woman is not to deny the individual woman who exists in this historical, contingent moment, suffering oppression from the social, cultural, and linguistic biases of sexism and domination in its various forms.

THOMISM—A CORRECTIVE

At the outset, we must grant that one would not generally consider turning to the writings of Aquinas to support feminism in its attempts to eliminate male domination. One could cite passages from his writings which would

to have provided the possibility of speaking of a sexualized body (thus enabling continued reflection on the oppression of women which has been based in sexual difference) while at the same time denaturalizing sex, seeing it as clearly a cultural construct.

¹⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 140.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 141. ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

²¹ Citations from St. Thomas Aquinas are taken from *Summa Theologica* (3 vols.). Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Brothers, Inc., 1947-48).

Those sections in which Thomas Aquinas does treat of women are not likely to be the source of much fruitful conversation with feminism or postmodern feminism. A few choice comments follow:

“It was necessary for woman to be made, as the Scripture says, as a *helper* to man; not indeed as a helpmate in other words, as some say, since man can be more efficiently helped by

provoke a ballistic response from most feminist quarters!²¹ However, in Thomas' defense, his reflections on women and the relations between male and female were influenced by Aristotelian physiology, by the cultural practices of his time, which he accepted as "given," and by his own reflections upon Genesis and the writings of Paul, without benefit of contemporary biblical exegesis. Furthermore, Thomas never problematized issues of male dominance or gender. How then might we bring Thomism into conversation with postmodern feminism? I suggest that we do so by way of the writings of Pope John Paul II (Karol Wojtyla) regarding the human person.

Rooted in the metaphysics of Aquinas, and influenced by French personalism and the phenomenology of Max Scheler, Karol Wojtyla further developed Aquinas' anthropology.²² Wojtyla's reflections on the person include reflections on the person as subject, as embodied, as gendered, and as equal—male and female. All of these topics are core issues for postmodern feminism; thus, the appropriateness of employing Wojtyla as an interlocutor between Aquinas and postmodern feminism. The focal point for this interlocution is the doctrine of the *imago Dei*.

Aquinas concludes that male and female are equal in regard to the image of God which dwells in the rational soul. They differ only bodily. However, this bodily difference becomes the basis for woman's subordination to man on the basis of Thomas' reading of Genesis 1-3 and of Paul's assertion that "man is the

another man in other works; but as a helper in the work of generation." (emphasis added) *STI*, 92, 1

or

As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from some defect in the active force or from some material indisposition, or even from some external influence; such as that of a south wind that is moist; as the Philosopher observes." *ST. I*, 92, 1, 1

or

"It was right for the woman to be made from a rib of man. First, to signify the social union of man and woman, for the woman should neither *use authority over man*, and so she was not made from his head; nor was it right for her to be subject to man's contempt as his slave, and so she was not made from his feet . . ." (emphasis added) *STI*, 92, 4

For a comprehensive study of the nature and role of woman in the writings of both Augustine and Aquinas see *Subordination and Equivalence: The Nature and Role of Woman in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas*, Kari Elisabeth Borresen, Translated from the revised French original by Charles H. Talbot (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981).

²² For a brief summary of the origins of Pope John Paul's philosophical thinking, see Robert Modras, "The Moral Philosophy of Pope John Paul II," *Theological Studies* 41 (December 1980), 683-97.

glory of God, while woman is the glory of man." Aquinas distinguishes between the spiritual, intellectual soul (on the basis of which *both man and woman* are equally in *imago Dei* and destined for beatitude) and the body (woman's body, not man's!).²³ According to Genesis, woman's body was made from man. Thus, for Aquinas, based on the analogy between God as the beginning and end of the universe, man is the beginning and end of woman. Apart from her body, woman shares in being in the image of God and is equally destined for Beatitude. But, unlike man, who, as embodied, is made in the image and likeness of God, woman cannot, in her embodied state, be in the likeness of God. Why? Because her body is imperfect, dependent upon man's and thus not as perfect a likeness of the Divine. Furthermore, woman, according to Aquinas is weaker of intellect—again due to the difference in body.²⁴ The difference and the "defect" in woman's body is due to its end, which is to be a helpmate to the male in generation. In the male, both soul and body are ordered to the same end—intellectual operation—Beatitude. Woman, on the other hand is divided. While her soul is ordered to intellectual operation and Beatitude, her body is ordered to her role in reproduction. As Borresen points out, woman's subordinate role in Aquinas is "rooted exclusively in her reproductive role."²⁵

Again, it must be remembered that Aquinas was thinking within the constraints of Aristotelian physiology and an unquestioned subordination of women to men which was rooted in the culture of his time. If we remind ourselves that at no point in his writings did he actually problematize either gender or the subordination of women, then perhaps we can free ourselves from some of his inadequate concepts regarding women and actually find the basis for dialogue with postmodern feminism.

Pope John Paul II (Karol Wojtyla) has taken Aquinas' metaphysical bases and applied a corrective derived in part from Scheler's phenomenology.²⁶ The

²³ *STI*, 93, 4, 6, ad 2.

²⁴ "Now the proximate end of the human body is the rational soul and its operations; since matter is for the sake of the form, and instruments are for the action of the agent. I say, therefore, that God fashioned the human body in that disposition which was best, as most suited to such a form and to such operations. If defect exists in the disposition of the human body, it is well to observe that such defect arises as a necessary result of the matter, from the conditions required in the body, in order to make it suitably proportioned to the soul and its operations." *STI*, 91, 3.

"But man is yet further ordered to a still nobler vital action, and that is intellectual operation. Therefore there was greater reason for the distinction of these two forces [active and passive powers of generation] in man; so that the female should be produced separately from the male; . . ." *STI*, 92, 1.

²⁵ Borresen, *Subordination and Equivalence: The Nature and Role of Woman in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas*, 178.

²⁶ See note 22 above: Modras, 685.

result is an emphasis which sees sexual differences as *accidental* on the level of substance or nature, as Aquinas would have it, but as *necessary* on the level of person.²⁷

For Wojtyla, person and nature are integrated, but they remain distinct.²⁸ The concept of a static human "nature" or "essence" which is so eschewed by postmodern feminism is, in Wojtyla's anthropology, dynamized by its integration in the person.²⁹ The person becomes manifest, both to self and others, through the body, which is thus *essential* to the person. Not just self-consciousness and self-determination, but the body itself is essential for the human being to be a subject. It is the activity of the body which gives expression to the person.³⁰

Herein lies Thomism's corrective to postmodern feminism. One need not eliminate the subject in order to overcome the Cartesian mind/body duality. The person, the subject, only exists as embodied. Furthermore, the person—the embodied person—can only be fully understood in light of Revelation. Reflecting on the Genesis accounts of creation, John Paul II notes that in the first narrative man was created in the image of God as male and female. John Paul II extends the meaning of the *imago Dei* found in the first narrative to the Yahwist narrative and sees the second narrative as being a "preparation for the understanding of the Trinitarian concept of the 'image of God'." For, it is in the communion of persons—male and female—that the image of God is most clearly expressed.

In the mystery of creation—on the basis of the original and constituent "solitude" of his being—man was endowed with a deep unity between what is, equally humanly body, male in him and what is, equally humanly and through the body, female in him.³¹

²⁷ John Grabowski, "Theological Anthropology and Gender Since Vatican II: A Critical Appraisal of Recent Trends in Catholic Theology," Ph.D. diss., Marquette University, 1991. I am indebted to Dr. Grabowski for drawing my attention to this point.

²⁸ Karol Wojtyla, *The Acting Person*, trans. Andrzej Potocki (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1979), 76-80.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 84. It is impossible within the limits of this article to adequately treat Wojtyla's discussion of nature and person. However, a dialogue between Wojtyla and certain postmodernists on this point would prove interesting.

"The integration [of nature and person] could not consist solely in the individualization of nature by the person. The person is not merely an 'individualized humanness'; it actually consists rather in the mode of individual being that pertains (from among all the types of existing beings) to mankind alone. This mode of being stems from the fact that the peculiar type of being proper to mankind is personal." (83)

³⁰ John Paul II, *Original Unity of Man and Woman: Catechesis on the Book of Genesis*, comp. Daughters of St. Paul (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1981), 57.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

According to John Paul II, the theology of the body, which from the beginning is bound up with the creation of human persons in the image of God, becomes at the same time a theology of sex, "of masculinity and femininity." Sexuality has a profound theological significance for, while each person is in made in the image and likeness of God, it is in the complementarity, the intimate communion of man and woman with one another that each best images the God who is Love, who is Trinity.

Gender/sexuality, far from being the source of domination, was meant from the beginning to be the occasion for the communion of persons, the way in which man and woman would best incarnate the image and likeness of God wherein they find their equality and dignity.³² The sexualized body is not, as Judith Butler would have it, the effect of power relations by which the heterosexual culture has inscribed gender upon the surface of the body "for the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality."³³ Rather, as Sara Butler points out, and as we have seen above, for John Paul II, "sex is integral to the identity of the body-person."³⁴

To the degree that postmodern feminism seeks to eradicate male domination and the oppression and subordination of women, Pope John Paul II's synthesis of Thomist, personalist, and phenomenological philosophies can provide a firm theological/philosophical basis for the dignity and equality of man and woman as embodied, gendered persons. On the other hand, by supposing that the solution to male domination is to be found in the denial of "any ontological status to the gendered body;"³⁵ by supposing that modernist mind/matter, body/spirit, subject/object dichotomies can be overcome only by the elimination of one term or the other, postmodern feminism will necessarily fall prey to the desexualization of gender and the depersonalization of the body. In this case,

³² Pope John Paul's reflections on the theology of the body provide a wealth of material to be further plumbed by Christian feminists. For an excellent essay on his theology of the body see Sara Butler, "Personhood, Sexuality and Complementarity in the Teaching of Pope John Paul II" *Chicago Studies* 32 (April 1993), 43-53.

In response to feminist concerns regarding a relationship of "complementarity" which, as she points out, has historically been one of domination rather than complementarity, Sara Butler refers her readers to John Paul II's teachings on the disorder which original sin has introduced into the relationship between man and woman — a disorder which has been healed through the redemption of Christ, so that "there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). (50-54)

³³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 136.

³⁴ Sara Butler, "Personhood, Sexuality and Complementarity in the Teaching of Pope John Paul II," 49.

³⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 140.

sad to say, for postmodern feminists, embodied persons become simply "passive bodies."³⁶

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³⁶ See note 17 above, McNay, "The Foucauldian Body," 137.

McNay presents an interesting critique of the Foucauldian theory of the body (presented above in the context of Judith Butler's writing). "The paradox which Foucault's work presents for feminists is that by placing so much emphasis on the body as an historically specific entity, he bypasses any notion of individuality and experience. Thus, whereas feminists have recognized the need to show that women are more than passive victims of domination — through the rediscovery and re-valuation of their experiences and history — Foucault's understanding of individuals as passive bodies has the effect, albeit unintentional, of pushing women back into this position of passivity and silence."

³⁷ Fox-Genovese, *Feminism without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism*, 10.