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The question concerning the construction of morality cannot be examined apart from the question concerning the construction of subjectivity. Formulating the concept of subjectivity has been a reflecting and controversial issue for western feminism. The western philosophical tradition defined women as inferior and excluded them from moral realms and developed the concept of subjectivity as inherently masculine. Feminists' first response to Western philosophy's disparagement of women's moral subjectivity was to insist on women's capacity for moral autonomy and rationality, soon, however, they began to question prevailing understandings of autonomy, rationality, and even subjectivity. They see Western philosophy's symbolic association of women with the body as only reflecting and reinforcing unjust social arrangements. Feminist dissatisfaction with the Enlightenment conception of moral subjectivity springs partly from an interest in the body, which many feminists regard as key to women's subordination. Some argue that this subordination is maintained by male control of women's bodies, especially women's procreative and sexual capacities, and that it is expressed in women's traditional assignments for biological reproduction and bodily maintenance.

The features of human subjectivity emphasized by many feminist
philosophers are precisely those that Western culture associates with women and the feminine; they are features that tend to preoccupy women in virtue of their social situation, they are culturally defined as appropriate to women, or they are associated symbolically with women. However, to point to these features of human subjectivity is not to imply that the paradigm moral subject should be a woman rather than a man, or even culturally feminine rather than culturally masculine. Instead, it is to suggest that previous conceptions of human subjectivity have often provided understandings and ideals of both women and men that are partial and distorted. Feminist critics point out, in western culture; the mind and reason are coded as masculine, whereas the body and emotion are coded feminine. To identify the self with the rational mind is, then, to masculinize the self. Feminist critiques, accuse regnant philosophical accounts of masculinizing the self. One corollary of this masculinized view of selfhood is that women are consigned to selflessness — that is, to invisibility, subservient passivity, and self-sacrificial altruism.

Feminists have argued that the notion of the self that dominates Western culture was inherited essentially from Descartes' view of a disembodied, autonomous, isolated self. The Cartesian understanding of the subject is defined as autonomous ego that realizes its essential qualities divorced from contingent circumstances. An alternative stand to which is to posit subject that is determined by the historical contingencies (as in Karl Marx) which leads to the construction of an anti Cartesian subject.

Freud's notion of subject is also a constructed subject as he upholds the view that personal identity is constituted by sex identity. Piaget and Kohlberg both assume that development towards autonomy and separation is the paradigm of healthy subjectivity. Whereas Horney and other mid century psychological theorists argued that the self is constructed in part through social relations. But object relation theory describes self as that which has no fixed essential core but which becomes "self" through relations with others. It is not the case that feminists alone
have challenged against this model of the self, as Freudians, existentialists and post modernists have also attacked it. But, the centrality in feminist's critique of autonomous self centers around its excessive male biasedness. An adequate notion of the self must be, therefore, that of an embodied, contextualized, interdependent and communicative.

Theorizing subjectivity has always been an important question for modern western feminism as Western Philosophical tradition has defined women as inferior and excluded them from moral and political realms.

The topic of the self has long been salient in feminist philosophy, for it is pivotal to question about personhood, identity, the body, and agency that feminism must address. In some respects, Simone de Beauvoir’s trenchant observation, "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute — she is the other," sums up why the self is such an important issue for feminism. In The second sex she asks the question like 'what is woman?' 'Why is she defined as other?' To be the 'Other' is to be the non-subject, the non-person, the non-agent — in short, the mere body. Here women's subjectivity is denied and moral realm is supposed to be grounded in a concept of the subject that is inherently masculine. Mary Wollstonecraft reveals her efforts to fit women into rational, autonomous definition of the subject. Arguing that moral values have no gender; she regards "feminine" virtues as manifestations of true human virtues. In contemporary feminist theory and gender theory, the intersections of subjectivity and embodiment are explored in different ways.

Feminist approaches of subjectivity focus on two issues – “essential woman” and what is known as “dialectical” subject. The feminist debate regarding essentialism was decisively altered in 1988 with the publication of Elizabeth Spelman's Inessential Woman. She presents arguments against adopting an essentialist concept of woman by asserting that such a concept necessarily results in a hierarchical ranking of categories of woman; some women are defined as conforming to the category
true woman' while those who fall short of this ideal are ranked as inferior.² But Diana Fuss maintains that essentialism in feminist theory is neither inherently good nor inherently bad but rather, is a concept that can be used either progressively or conservatively. She also maintains that the dichotomy between essentialism and constructionism is a product of the binary thinking that is the cause of the problem that feminists face. She claims that the deconstructionists have not moved beyond the epistemological boundaries of the essentialist subject. The dichotomy between essentialism and constructionism is a product of the binary thinking that is the cause of the problem that feminists face.

The second issue that is central to contemporary discussions of the subject in feminist theory is that of the 'dialectical subject'. Lorraine, one of the feminist thinkers in her recent book on gender identity provides a representative statement on this issue. Lorraine holds that there are two different conceptions of the subject: the humanist subject – a unified rational subject, self interested agent – and the postmodern or poststructuralist subject — a constructive self with no coherent account of freedom, responsibility or authenticity. According to Lorraine, dialectical subject is an entity that is produced by social codes. Lorraine attempts to reconcile elements of the Cartesian, modernist subject with the constructed subject that is identified with post modernism or post structuralism.³

Meyers argues that it is a mistake to view the moral subject as independent, transparent and rational. Instead, she presents a picture of a heterogeneous and pluralistic subject, one that is defined by ties to other people, liable to misunderstand its own motives and aims, and in need of a repertory of strategies for purposes of moral reflection. She employs essentialist and constructionist language in her description. Meyers' subject is an extreme example of dialectical subject.⁴ Another feminist theorist who tries to establish a dialectical interaction between elements of an essential subject and a constructed subject is Linda Alcoff. Unlike Meyers, however, Alcoff is concerned to bridge the gap not between the modernist (Kantian)
subject and a constructed subject but between the essentialist feminine subject of what she calls the “cultural feminists” and the subject of postmodernism. Linda Alcoff rejects both the universalized conceptions of gender that cultural feminists advocate and the deconstruction of the category ‘woman’ that poststructuralist feminists tender. Her alternative is to construe femininity as “positionality.” Positionality has two dimensions (Alcoff 1994). First, it is the social context that locates the individual and that deprives her of power and mobility. Second, it is a political point of departure — the affirmation of women’s collective right to take charge of their gendered identity. To be a woman is, then, to be deprived of equality, and to be a feminist is to take responsibility for redressing this wrong and for redefining the meaning of being a woman. Alcoff salvages the category ‘woman’ by defending an interpretation of the social meaning of being assigned to that category. Feminist critiques of regnant philosophical theories of the self expose the normative underpinnings of these theories. Feminist analyses of women’s capacities both acknowledge traditional feminine social contributions and provide accounts of how women can overcome oppressive norms and practices. She believes that woman creates her identity from the mix of discursive forces that is available to her in her historical situation.

Like Alcoff, de Lauretis is explicitly arguing for a dialectical approach. Her dialectical definition of the subject is expressed in various ways: as an interaction of inner and outer worlds and as each individual’s ‘personal subjective engagement’ with the world forming the basis of her identity. She claims that a feminine subject is thus one that is constituted across a number of discourses, discourses that frequently conflicts with one another. Elsewhere, de Lauretis writes of how feminist studies have reconstituted both the methods and object of knowledge, to produce new knowledges and to transform the conditions of knowing; the way we appraise what is and what can be known. She states that to reshape knowledge is to reconstitute “women as social subjects, as subject of both knowledge and knowing”.

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It is an understanding which escapes casting women in the position of victim. While
recognising the ways in which women are discursively positioned, it works to transform
systems of difference. It seeks to redefine knowledges from the landmarks of the
present, from the shadows of those images through which we make ourselves and
our desires and through those points of incoherence we can find a basis for
reconceiving subjectivity.

In her later work de Lauretis asserts her new notion of identity. Again she
asserts that the feminine subject is thus one that is constituted in a cross number
of discourses, discourses that frequently conflict with each other.

Meyers, Alcoff and de Lauretis criticized post modernism for failing to provide
a coherent concept of subject and hence political agency. That postmodern
approaches to the subject are perceived as both threat and an opportunity for
feminism is evident in the intense debate they have generated in feminist theory.

Julia Kristeva transposes the classic Freudian conception of the self and the
distinction between consciousness and the unconscious into an explicitly gendered
discursive framework. For Kristeva, the self is a subject of enunciation — a
speaker who can use the pronoun 'I'. But speakers are not unitary, nor are they
fully in control of what they say because discourse is bifurcated. The symbolic
dimension of language, which is characterized by referential signs and linear logic,
corresponds to consciousness and control. The clear, dry prose of scientific research
reports epitomizes symbolic discourse. The semiotic dimension of language, which
is characterized by figurative language, cadences, and intonations, corresponds to
the unruly, passion-fueled unconscious. The ambiguities and non-standard usages
of poetry epitomize semiotic discourse. These paradigms notwithstanding, Kristeva
maintains that all discourse combines elements of both registers. Every intelligible
utterance relies on semantic conventions, and every utterance has a tone, even if
it is a dull monotone. 7
This contention connects Kristeva’s account to feminist concerns about gender and the self. Since the rational orderliness of the symbolic is culturally coded masculine while the affect-laden allure of the semiotic is culturally coded feminine, it follows that no discourse is purely masculine or purely feminine. The masculine symbolic and the feminine semiotic are equally indispensable to the speaking subject, whatever this individual’s socially assigned gender may be. It is not possible, then, to be an unsullied masculine self or an unsullied feminine self. Every subject of enunciation—every self amalgamates masculine and feminine discursive modalities.

Moreover, Kristeva’s account of the self displaces “masculine” adherence to principle as the prime mode of ethical agency and recognizes the urgent need for a “feminine” ethical approach. Viewing the self as a “questionable-subject-in-process”—a subject who is responsive to the encroachments of semiotic material into conscious life and who is therefore without a fixed or unitary identity—and valorizing the dissident potential of this decentered subjectivity, Kristeva seeks to neutralize the fear of the inchoate feminine that, in her view, underwrites misogyny.

But despite the difficulties, these French theorists, particularly Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva, have established a number of themes that have transformed discussion of the subject in feminism. These themes also provide the basis for a new approach to the moral subject. The first and most central theme of these theorists is the significance of discourse and the link between discourse and subjectivity. Julia Kristeva has also much to say about discourse. She avoids the pitfall of searching for woman’s identity by speculating instead on woman’s discourse. But the theorist who has done most to revolutionize discussion of the feminine subject is Luce Irigaray. Irigaray maintains that, first and foremost, one’s task as feminists is to interrogate philosophical discourse to uncover the coherence of discursive utterance. Discourses, she claims, both produce and reproduce subjects. But the discursive mechanism that she uncovers in her analysis defines women as a lack or deficiency.
In one respect, Nancy Chodorow’s appropriation of object relations theory parallels Kristeva's project of reclaiming and revaluing femininity, for Chodorow’s account of the relational self reclaims and revalues feminine mothering capacities. But whereas Kristeva focuses on challenging the homogeneous self and the bright line between reason, on the one hand, and emotion and desire, on the other Chodorow focuses on challenging the self-subsisting self with its sharp self-other boundaries.

Chodorow sees the self as relational in several respects. Every child is cared for by an adult or adults, and every individual is shaped for better or worse by this emotionally charged interaction. As a result of feelings of need and moments of frustration, the infant becomes differentiated from its primary caregiver and develops a sense of separate identity. Concomitantly, a distinctive personality emerges. By selectively internalizing and recombining elements of their experience with other people, children develop characteristic traits and dispositions. Whereas Kristeva understands the self as a dynamic interplay between the feminine semiotic and the masculine symbolic, Chodorow understands the self as fundamentally relational and thus linked to cultural norms of feminine interpersonal responsiveness. For Chodorow, the rigidly differentiated, compulsively rational, stubbornly independent self is a masculine defensive formation — a warped form of the relational self — that develops as a result of fathers’ negligible involvement in childcare.9

The exploration of the feminine subject by these theorists has taken different forms. Irigary emphasizes woman’s jouissance as a way of refusing the binary discourse of masculine subjectivity. Kristeva focuses on the semiotic/symbolic distinction and the realm of the maternal to define the feminine subject.10

Poststructuralist Judith Butler presents post-structural point of view on subjectivity. Her concept describes subject as based on expressions, which are non-substantial, these expressions constitute the subject’s identity and its unity.
Her proposition is to analyse subjectivity as structures of modalities, which create an identity by the process of performing by one. She discerns at least two problems in the attempt to ground an essential, naturalized female identity. She argues that the assertion of the category ‘woman’ as the ground for political action excludes, marginalizes and inevitably misrepresents those who do not recognize themselves within the terms of that identity. She claims, moreover, that a feminist identity politics that appeals to a fixed ‘feminist subject,’ ‘presumes, fixes and constrains the very ’subjects’ that it hopes to represent and liberate’. She maintains that personal identity — the sense that there are answers to the questions ‘who am I?’ and ‘what am I like?’ — is an illusion. The self is merely an unstable discursive node — a shifting confluence of multiple discursive currents — and sexed/gendered identity is merely a “corporeal style” — the imitation and repeated enactment of ubiquitous norms. For Butler, psychodynamic accounts of the self, including Kristeva’s and Chodorow’s, camouflage the performative nature of the self and collaborate in the cultural conspiracy that maintains the illusion that one has an emotionally anchored, interior identity that is derived from one’s biological nature, which is manifest in one’s genitalia. Butler wants to show that gender is not just a social construct, but rather a kind of performance, a show we put on, a set of signs as costume or disguise—hence as far from essence as can be. Gender is always doing, but not by subject “woman” who precedes the deed.. She starts by asking questions about the category “woman” — whom does it include, and how do we know whom it includes? Butler argues that “even if the sexes appear to be unproblematically binary in their morphology and constitution (which will become a question), there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two” and hence, man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily a female one”. She asserts that subjectivity is a work of art and gender is a project, a skill, pursuit, and an enterprise.
Butler then looks at psychoanalysis as a "grand narrative," about how "woman" as a unitary category is formed. Psychoanalysis is a story about origins and ends, which includes some aspects, and excludes others. The story starts with a utopian non-differentiation of the sexes, which is ended by enforced separation and the creation of difference. This narrative "gives a false sense of legitimacy and universality to a culturally specific and, in some cases, culturally oppressive version of gender identity."^1^2

Different moral discourses define different kinds of moral agency. Approaches to the articulation of moral subjectivity bear the distinct marks of the moral discourse of which it is a product. Many feminist philosophers argue that a relational conception of moral subjectivity is not only more adequate empirically than an atomistic model but that it also generates moral values and a conception of moral rationality that is superior to those characteristics of the Enlightenment. For instance, it encourages women to seek resolutions to conflicts by means that promise to repair and strengthen relationships, to practice positive caretaking rather than respectful non-intervention, and to prioritize the personal values of care, trust, attentiveness, and love for others. Above all impersonal principles of equality, respect, and rights.

The work of Butler and Haraway demonstrates the usefulness of employing postmodern concepts to construct a feminist subject.^1^3 The subject they articulate is situated but no social dupe. It must be a resistant subject, who is capable of political actions with other women, even her subject is different from others. And Butler's work is most relevant to her discussion of agency. Agency is not a transcendental presupposition of subjectivity but rather a discourse subject that varies from discourse to discourse. She asserts to claim that a subject is constituted, and to claim that is not to state that it is determined but rather the constituted character of the subject is the precondition of its agency.
Modern discourse links moral agency to the Cartesian subject. To the feminists women’s moral agency is not restricted to the “justice voice” of the modernist tradition rather it is expressed in many different moral voices. Gilligan has shown that gender plays a major role in the constitution of moral voice. But apart from gender, race and class are also constitutive. They suggest a new array of definitions for moral voices and new approach to the articulation of moral subjectivity. It encourages women to seek resolutions to conflicts by means that promise to repair and strengthen relationships to practice positive care taking and to prioritize the personal value. Establishing that there are different moral voices and deconstructing the unitary paradigm of modernist moral theory, will prepare the grounds for discussing the differences among a plurality of moral voices. Nothing would be gained by conceptualizing the different voice either as ‘essentially female’ or by assuming that it is characteristic of all women. Further more having establishing the relational concept of moral voices, it would be exceedingly odd if feminists concluded that gender is the only variable in their formation. Feminist theory can benefit enormously from examining how moral discourses are constructed and what factors, gender among them,’ constitute moral subjectivity.

REFERENCES


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