

Constructing Women's Humanity from Feminist Standpoints

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This article analyzes the philosophic significance of women's academic works in three major schools of feminist political theories. The author first argues that the universal masculine political subjects are faced with unavoidable dilemmas in social life, which can only be solved by restoring the philosophic ontology of women's humanity. This paper uncovers intellectual values of love, care, and harmonious relationships from liberal feminist theories, prioritizes radical feminists' postulation that female sexuality plays complicated roles in struggles against patriarchal rule and explores socialist feminists' propositions about women's productive and reproductive labor as a part of the economic foundations of society. The author concludes that women's work is essential for constructing the concrete epistemology and humanity in any philosophic work, because classical philosophers' denial of women's life experiences has violated their own epistemological standpoints for isolating knowledge from social practices.

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The philosophic ontology of women's humanity has remained a necessary problem in Western philosophy, because the reality of gender oppression always needs a public explanation and because today's feminist struggle entails a representative political agency. From Plato, Aristotle, to Descartes, classic Western philosophers have established the solid foundations for categorizing women as the "Other" object of desire, separate from the subject, mind, culture, politics, and devoid of basic needs for education, status, or qualification. To defy this traditional definition of women's status disseminated since the Enlightenment in the modern era, and to defend women's human rights against the phallogocentric prescriptions of humanity or social agency, disseminated since the Enlightenment in the modern era, Mary Wollstonecraft, Frances Wright, and other early advocates of woman's movement articulate the importance of women's equal rights to receive public education and to gain employment freely. The intellectual roots planted in 19th century continue to grow and ripen into an academic branch of the women's movement, during tidal waves of 20th century. While women's studies have been institutionalized in America as a multi-disciplinary field incorporating literary, historical, and sociological studies in 1970s, this once thriving field is losing its edge or is being assimilated into classical Western disciplines, because feminists seldom agree on a unified definition of women's humanity and feminism has been labeled as politics disconnected from history or philosophy.

The philosophic ontology of women's humanity has challenged the thrusts of feminist history, sociology, or queer theory, vying for a tenable foothold in academic institutions. As scholastic pioneers debuted women's presence in American academe, feminist historians were the first to respond to philosophers, inquiring whether

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this new discipline constituted a radical re-conceptualization of traditional history or is just another version of male-defined history of gender. Obviously, the answer lies in the extent to which feminist history could replace women's "Other" philosophic position with the feminist historic agency, to establish a new epistemology, as Newtonian and Einsteinian revolutions introduced a new set of paradigmatic theories, which no scientist could ignore.¹ Although feminist history was defined by its approach and forms of analysis related to feminist theories, feminist political aims in academic fields were compromised by insufficient records about women's lives in the past, which deprived feminists of the legitimacy to transform male-stream history with a coherent feminist chronological paradigm. Yet the philosophic construction of women's humanity does unite feminist histories with the common goal of prioritizing women as the subject, or agency, rather than victims of history. Queer theories have been outright against sexual essentialism, but their subversive performances were downplayed by feminist historians for failing to establish an epistemology to construct coherent political subjects. Besides, sociologists have been at odds over whether "gender" is an abstract, neutral intellectual concept, or a useful category of historical analysis to reverse male-defined, essentialised notions of sexual differences.² In order to rectify traditional definitions of women's humanity as the sex, the historic agency of women has to be established on the basis of women's lived experiences, from philosophic and political perspectives.

This article is aimed at establishing the political agency of women's humanity by refuting classic Western philosophers' denial of interrelationships between female biology and human souls, and by analyzing the philosophic significance of women's academic expressions in three major schools of feminist political theories. The author first argues that the universally recognized masculine political subject fails to solve dilemmas that abstract political representatives have been faced with in social life. Secondly, this paper uncovers intellectual values of love, care, and harmonious relationships from liberal feminist theories to enrich traditional definitions of civic virtue, prioritizes radical feminists' postulation that female sexuality plays complicated roles in struggles against patriarchal rule, and explores socialist feminists' propositions about women's sexuality and procreation as a part of the economic foundations of society. Finally, the author concludes that women's work, in both the private and public sphere, is essential for constructing the concrete knowledge and humanity in any philosophic work, because classical philosophers' denial of women's life experiences has resulted in dilemmas in epistemology for isolating knowledge from social practices.

1. Liberal Feminist Construction of Independent Humanity

The philosophic problem of women's humanity was first addressed by classic Western philosophers, who presupposed that only autonomous, rational individuals constituted philosophic subjects capable of taking political actions. Yet the mental capacity of women remained puzzling, either in mainstream scholarship, where male philosophers continued to rationalize Cartesian dualisms separating the mind from body, culture from nature, or public from private, to keep women's place at home;³ or in feminist works, where various schools of feminist scholars compete for public recognition of their political demands. Plato relegated women, together with children and slaves, to the separate private sphere, but he confused the demarcation of gender roles by assigning the same social roles to men and women,⁴ thereby initiating the unending controversy about women's familial and social status in Western philosophy. The philosopher scientist Aristotle justified the rational man's authority over the irrational women, on the basis of men's seminal contribution to generating the soul of life to the material flesh and blood of women, though the logic of this sexist division of parents'

faculties is still to be explicated by modern biologists.⁵

Following the Aristotelian distinction between form and matter, or mover and moved, Enlightenment philosophers unscrupulously used the generic "he" to generalize humanity as representatives of political liberty and civic freedom, though issues concerning gender did surface in philosophic works of Hobbes, Rousseau, and Locke, who recognized the ambivalent relationships between women's family and man's state. Hobbes situated human nature in social relationships, which started from the family, but he delineated women's wit and physical activities within the state of nature, invisible under the rule of patriarchal power in civil society.⁶ Rousseau also started *The Social Contract* with the only natural society in the family, and admitted that women developed moral and human relationships, but he disconnected women's political relationships from men's General Will, consigning her to live in another world of softness and complacency. Locke came closest to recognize women's domestic rights and responsibilities to their children and property, yet he diminished women's political roles in society by defining the legislative body as composed of "persons," with supreme power placed on them by "the people,"⁷ bypassing any woman's name, who might be related to her independent father, husband, or son. Enlightenment philosophers agreed that women cannot participate in politics without denying their sexual roles and invariably abstracted the humanity of subjects in the public domain, so that the key terms in classical liberalism, such as civic freedom, honor, or virtue, are devoid of any gender connotations.

This evident deprivation of women's political status or evisceration of gender relationships from liberal politics not only left the classical definition of civic virtue incomplete, but contended feminists with philosophic definitions of women's humanity, which would foreground the public significance of women's rights, experiences, and development. The first and most vocal feminist voice to defend women's "natural and inalienable" rights came from suffragists in 19th century, who pushed US Congress to pass the 19th Amendment in the name of liberating women on an equal footing with men. Liberal feminists' strong argument for guaranteeing women's human rights on the grounds of their sexuality, intelligence,⁸ and emotions remained an enduring legacy in feminist thoughts, yet the social, economical effects of 19th Amendment became controversial, partly because liberal feminists' proposition for women's human nature fell in line with traditional denigration of female rationality.

Liberal feminists largely accepted neutral, abstract definitions of humanity, in an effort to qualify women for classical liberal standards of citizenship, though they insisted that women were entitled to equal human rights after receiving liberal education for rational citizens. According to Bertrand Russell's gendered division between thought and action, women were destined inadequate in any thinking or writing about intellectual theories, and liberal feminists' unequivocal fight for independent citizens' right to vote might have aligned themselves on the side of thoughtless activists, draining intellectual values from the action of feminist politics. Although Elizabeth Cady Stanton recognized her capacity to philosophize and radically stipulated the distinctive nature of women's citizenship in terms of personal and social life, she accepted John Stuart Mill's assumption of intellectual differences between men and women and kept agnostic attitudes toward the subordinate position women's intellectual qualities.⁹ Nevertheless, liberal feminists' ground-breaking voice for female independence did impress the public with the uniqueness of women's humanity, which was manifested by their freedom to love, to care, and to express women's multiple, harmonious relationships in familial, social, and cultural terms. It may be a Utopian ideal to suggest that harmonious relationships between human culture and women's nature can alter sexual inequality, yet it is sober to conclude that to educate women for the full development of intellectual and moral faculties is the first step to endow women with humanity, and ultimately,

individual political rights.

Liberal feminists' "Declaration of Sentiments" for women's freedom to love, to care, and to disseminate morality were further expounded by pioneering feminist scholars searching for an independent position in American universities. Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Helen Thompson both questioned the validity of denying women's humanity on the basis of female physiology by traditional academics and postulated that women's intellect, or special gifts were indispensable for building a peaceful civilization.¹⁰ Although liberal feminists' struggle for political equality overshadowed these advocates for women's human characteristics, the early formulations of women's independent humanity based on their intelligent thoughts and emotional life heralded more radical pronouncements of feminist quests for philosophic significance in the academe.

2. Women's Humanity in the Dialectic of Sex and History

While various schools of feminists continued to propose political programs for women's liberation according to the distinctive social roots for women's oppression, the gender connotations of political subjects were gradually revealed in academic studies of women's lived experiences in relation to other marginal social groups in 1960s. The ongoing search for women's humanity in academic fields of women's studies proved more troublesome, yet more useful, than presenting political slogans in the public domain, which could be easily abstracted, or manipulated by dominant discourses. During the second wave of American women's movement in 20th century, radical feminists and socialist feminists rarely reaped similar legislation achievements as liberal feminists, but they stood the test of ideological controversies derived from their roots in the Civil Rights, or leftist movement, and both feminist theories provided fresh insights into the philosophic ontology of women's humanity, from perspectives of sexuality and social history. Although feminists and leftists had been accused of posing communist threats to national security, academic investigations into these feminist philosophies did yield defects in classical male-stream philosophies and faults of biological determinism.

In order to reverse the patriarchal social order based on biological determinism, radical feminists proposed that women's humanity depended on female sexuality, harmoniously connected with the natural world. To that end, radical feminists attributed causes for women's oppression to their sexual and reproductive work, which constituted the material base of society, and initiated the moving power of historic events in "the dialectic of sex;"¹¹ therefore, Shulamith Firestone revolted against the philosophic ontology based on patriarchal dualisms by eliminating sex distinctions or by transforming female biology, so that the sexual division of labor will disappear and the ideal of androgyny will come true in a sexless society. In line with radical feminists' bold arguments, queer theorists were also in the opinion that presumptions of heterosexuality functioned to enforce normal gender hierarchies and sought to overthrow "the violence of gender norms" by performing opposite acts to produce the sexed body in the gay and lesbian culture.¹² However, both these radical rebels against heterosexuality and patriarchy violated socially acceptable boundaries of human culture and failed to exert positive influence in contemporary American society. For anybody enjoying real life, a trans-sexed being is less qualified for humanity than a bodily marked female, or a generic male, who is capable of transcending personal lives with his values and meaningful actions. The political program of overthrowing patriarchal social hierarchies by changing women's anatomic biology became more an illusive ideal than feasible plans, because these radicals also abstracted women's humanity by reducing women's complex historic experiences to mere sexual performances.

Drawing on radical feminists' sexual analysis and Marxists' definition of human nature in terms of productive labor, socialist feminists uncover social economic roots for women's oppression and recount women's humanity in sexual, childbearing, and childrearing activities, which are situated in social historical contexts. Gerda Lerner analyzes "the dialectic of women's history" or conflicts between women's actual historic experiences and the deprivation of women's historic agency, by applying approaches of historic materialism to discovering origins of patriarchal civilizations; Claude Lévi-Strauss traces women's subordinate roles and sexual division of labor from marriage relationships and family institutions based on the exchange of women, which dehumanized women's body and labor.¹³ These academic works rationalize the complex nature of women's labor as the basis of women's humanity, which incorporates not only productive work in the public sphere, but also reproductive work in the private sphere. In particular social historical contexts, women's productive labor and gender relationships formed in women's household labor are both essential for women's class status and social economic well-being. For example, prescriptive roles of middle-upper class women to stay in the private sphere constitute gender oppression by male patriarchs, but familial duties of working mothers who take on night shifts result from other social economic factors. In this sense, the necessity of women's work to satisfy human material and emotional needs has replaced sexual essentialism as the basis of women's humanity and as a part of economic foundations of society. The gender relationships are inseparable from women's sexuality, but unlike abstract, neutral sociological concepts, these social relationships are not reducible to productive labor in the public sphere, nor will they automatically change because of different bodily performances. By locating women's humanity in particular social historic contexts, socialist feminists gain philosophic grounds for political goals of fully developing women's potentialities in free sexual expressions, childbirth, and housework.

From the perspective of feminist philosophy, the public recognition of women's humanity in their biological function and social production not only elevates the scholastic significance of women's historic experiences, but also overcomes classical philosophers' sloppy divisions between ontology and epistemology. The deeply ingrained separation of public and private spheres in Western philosophic tradition persists in Cartesian dualisms between the mind and body, culture and nature, or fact and value, which have been enshrined by classical Anglo-American philosophers. However, this absolute, rigid distinction consistently ignores the fact that any great mind capable of creating knowledge or intellectual achievements are embodied in human beings who want their material and emotional needs satisfied in real life experiences. If empirical knowledge is the product of human thinking based on social practice or productive activities,¹⁴ the philosophic ontology of human beings can never be eviscerated from the philosophic epistemology of knowing; namely, philosophers' mind, ideas, or knowledge are precisely related to their physical existence, life experiences, and social relationships of a certain historic period. Philosophies separate from social practices inevitably repress human needs for others' labor of care and result in distorted social structures dominated by abstract masculinity. By contrast, the philosophic knowledge emanating from women's humanity will reveal implicit assumptions of social life behind autonomous political subjects and contribute to building a good society based on mutual care and moral relationships.

3. Constructing Women's Humanity from Multiple Standpoints

It can be concluded from the arguments above that constructing women's humanity from the three schools of feminist philosophies rectifies the abstractly reified definition of human nature and offers alternatives to

hierarchical social structures based on the dominant masculine side in Cartesian dualisms. Although “the dialectic of sex” can hardly propel the social progress of history with struggles of the two biological classes for controlling powers in marriage, reproduction, and childcare, the historic agency of women sheds light on the ongoing process of patriarchal philosophers’ exclusion of women’s experiences from their institutions and language systems, thereby naturalizing unequal gender relationships in laws, metaphors, and social roles. To shift women’s humanity from the margins of society to the center of historic agency enables women to understand that caring and nurturing labor at home is no less important than factory work, and that women’s human labor constitutes a dynamic force to change their destiny through the dialectical interrelation of human biology, society, and physical environment.¹⁵ “The dialectic of women’s history” manifests that human nature is not static, but changes with the dynamic interactions between gender relationships and biological environment.¹⁶ The rediscovery of women’s humanity endows the majority of human race with academic approaches to construct new laws and social roles, through which gender relationships are substantiated by improved human relationships and social life. Therefore, women’s historic agency has saved the sociological category of gender from reducing women’s life experiences into abstract theoretical concepts or separate individual stories.

In a broader postmodern context, to restore women’s humanity to the center of social history helps to elucidate discriminatory philosophic assumptions behind the advancement of Modern Western scientific knowledge. As the Enlightenment has privileged the dominant masculine human agency, Modern Western sciences have also preferred androcentric, Eurocentric cultural values and interests to that of other people of different gender or ethnicity groups, which have been justified by the universal scientific standards delineated by those who fund, sponsor, or direct scientific research. If the empirical knowledge from Modern Enlightenment is derived from social practices, the philosophic agency who produces knowledge can only take shape within multiple, postmodern contexts in post-colonial era. To evaluate cultural beliefs and social relations emanating from the philosophic ontology of women’s humanity will reveal that any scientific, objective standards are integral with their particular historical contexts¹⁷ and that the diverse cultural beliefs and historic traditions handed down through generations of life experiences in other countries are no less valid or objective. In other words, women’s work has created social relationships that can link the subjugated half of Western race to the rest of the world and women’s historic agency holds potential to enlighten the cultural studies of vast majority of people in non-Western world, who have been degraded by the few Anglo-Saxon autonomous masculine subjects. The value women’s humanity is not prioritized by a few rational political subjects, but resides in women’s intricate interconnections with the majority of underdeveloped, oppressed racial, ethnic, or national groups. Whether feminists belong to the leftist ideological camp or not, their widespread political representation is consistent to the loyalty to all of humanity.¹⁸

Notes

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