Feminism and the Enlightenment

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The recent turn taken by feminist theory towards a critique of the spirit of humanism would have surprised de Beauvoir and the early delineators of the concerns of 'second wave' feminism. According to *The Second Sex*, feminism is an expression of humanism in a quite straightforward sense.[1] Indeed, the main feminist message of *The Second Sex* is the assertion that women must be considered first and foremost as human beings. According to the standpoint of *The Second Sex* the oppression of women appears as a denial, in a specifically discriminatory sense, of their right and task as human beings to freely choose their own identity and destiny. For de Beauvoir, feminism meant the demand that women should cease to be stultified by their culturally imposed femininity and should, along with men, enjoy the human task and responsibility of making *themselves*. According to *The Second Sex*: '... what peculiarly signalizes the situation of woman is that she – a free and autonomous being like all human creatures – nevertheless finds herself in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other.'[2]

In recent times, however, feminism has developed a powerful unmasking critique of the image of the human which underpins de Beauvoir's analysis of the oppression of women in modern society. As Lloyd points out, the Sartrean ideal of humanity as transcendence, as the drama of a self-choosing subject, is not, as it claims, a universal ideal. The Sartrean ideal used by de Beauvoir is '... in a more fundamental way than de Beauvoir allows, a male ideal...'.[3] On this recent account, the Sartrean ideal of transcendence is clearly formulated as an exhortation to the masculine self to transcend or overcome the threat of a supposed feminine state in which the mere facticity or 'given' character of the body engulfs the self.

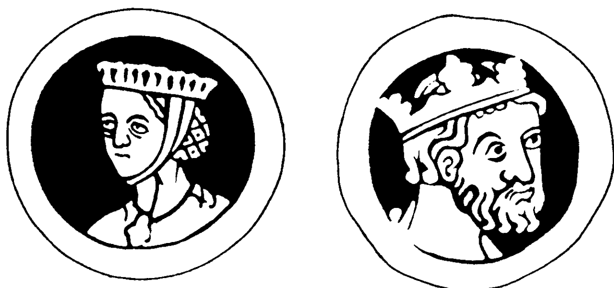
Today, it seems, feminism has lost its former innocent reliance on the claims to universality and gender-neutrality made on behalf of images of a common humanity. Indeed, contemporary feminism has played a crucial part in developing an unmasking critique of those images of universal human aspirations and priorities upon which its own disclosure of the oppressed humanity of modern women once rested. Harding describes feminism's new reflective and critical relationship to descriptions of a universal humanity in the following terms: 'What we took to be humanly inclusive problematics, concepts, theories, objective methodologies, and transcendental truths are, in fact, less than that. Indeed, these products of thought bear the mark of their individual creators, and the creators in turn have been distinctively marked as to gender, class, race and culture.'[4] In particular, as Harding goes on to show, modern feminism has in recent years played a crucial part in a developing ideology-critique of the claims to universality made on behalf of a Western conception of human reason. Feminism has joined with other perspectives in modern cultural criticism to expose this concept of reason as a mere 'thing of this world' embodying the norms, values and priorities of particular historio-cultural practices.

The distinctive participation of contemporary feminism in a broad-based critique of the claims of a sovereign reason appears symptomatic of the growing theoretical and ideological maturity of this vital social movement. There is, moreover, a considerable consensus within the recent feminist literature about the necessity and the general direction of this unmasking critique. An important dispute has arisen, however, over the question of the meaning, the consequences, of this critique for contemporary feminism itself. Certain feminists have supposed that the critique of the claims of transcendent reason establishes modern feminism on the path of counter-Enlightenment.[5] This position maintains that feminism requires a fundamental break from an Enlightenment commitment to the cause of reason and truth, which is exposed as nothing more than a distorted and disguised will-to-power. There are, however, those for whom feminism's unmasking critique of Western constructions of a sovereign reason cannot be understood as an invitation to an anti-Enlightenment posture. Harding, for example, endorses feminism's debunking critique of the ways in which Western constructions of the power of reason systematically embody the norms and priorities of a male-dominated culture. Yet for her, this critique in no way heralds feminism's own break from the commitments of the Enlightenment.[6] Lovibond too has suggested that feminism now needs to take stock of its deep indebtedness to the 'emancipatory metanarratives' of Enlightenment.[7]

The following essay investigates aspects of this disputed interpretation of the relationship between contemporary feminism and the so-called project of Enlightenment. The argument is that current attempts to sever feminism's ideological ties with the Enlightenment rest on a basic

misinterpretation of the character and spirit of Enlightenment. These feminisms have misconstrued the character of the Enlightenment on two counts. Firstly, their critique is typically aimed at a caricature of the historical Enlightenment. Their repudiation of the Enlightenment influence is based on a portrait of the legitimating temper of seventeenth-century rationalism and fails to acknowledge the anti-dogmatic spirit which progressively emerged in eighteenth-century intellectual life. The first two parts of the paper argue that this fundamental misconstruction of the spirit of the historical Enlightenment has distorted feminism's understanding of its own Enlightenment legacy. The vital difference in the temper of these two periods is then illustrated by a comparison between the limitations of Astell's seventeenth-century feminism and the radicalism of Wollstonecraft's late eighteenth-century version.

Secondly, the suggestion that contemporary feminism can be understood as an anti-Enlightenment posture indicates a failure to grasp the essential meaning of Enlightenment as an unfinished cultural project. This interpretation of Enlightenment has mistakenly reduced the dynamic, ongoing, self-critical process of Enlightenment thinking to a set of fixed principles and doctrines. Perhaps the most forceful expression of Enlightenment thinking as the aspiration which has infused the whole spirit of modernity is still to be found in Kant's famous essay 'What is Enlightenment?'. Enlightenment, Kant tells us, is 'the emergence of man from his self-imposed minority. His *minority* is his incapacity to make use of his own understanding without the guidance of another.'[8] Thus understood, Enlightenment means only a commitment to an ongoing critique of prejudice and to the historical production of a self-legislating humanity. This



commitment which has threaded its way through the intellectual trajectory of modernity exists as a living, dynamic aspiration which is fundamentally irreducible to any one single formulation. So it seems that the acknowledgement of feminism's own Enlightenment character by no means signifies its assimilation to any pre-existing goals and perspectives. On the contrary, feminism's current critique of Enlightenment formulations appears as another vital episode in the unfolding of the Enlightenment project itself. Feminism's discovery of the prejudices built into the various articulations of this project is nothing more than an extension and clarification of the meaning of the Enlightenment.

Enlightenment, it is argued, needs to be viewed not just as a one-sided epistemology, nor as the legitimating ideology of certain interests within eighteenth-century society.[9] Enlightenment, said to have produced as its 'crowning achievement' a modern culture of humanism, is not reducible to any one single interpretation of the character of its goals and perspectives. The final part of the paper outlines modern feminism's own character as a specific, dynamic interpretation of the meaning of modern Enlightenment. It indicates some of the ways in which the meaning of contemporary Enlightenment and modern feminism come together. Both criticise existing social practices and attempt to reveal the radical social possibilities existing in the present. Feminism, I suggest, needs to understand itself as a vital part of this movement pushing back the frontiers of existing social possibilities. This concluding section of the paper points to feminism's place within a contemporary historicised understanding of Enlightenment aspirations.

Images of Enlightenment in Contemporary Feminism

A certain interpretation of the postmodern 'turn' in contemporary feminism is up for review here. Basing itself on a totalising and abstract critique of Enlightenment rationalism, this brand of postmodern feminism construes modern reason as a guilty normalisation of a set of prejudices whose influence is uniformly felt throughout every aspect of contemporary culture. Jardine's *Gynesis: Configurations of Women and Modernity*, which seeks to jettison the entire legacy of the 'humanist and rationalist eighteenth century', is a typical example.[10] Hekman also looks upon postmodern feminism as a fundamental break from a 'homocentric' Enlightenment tradition. She sees a fundamental unity of purpose between feminism and postmodernism. Both 'challenge the epistemological foundations of Western thought and argue that the epistemology which is definitive of Enlightenment humanism, if not of all Western philosophy, is fundamentally misconceived'. Both, she goes on, 'assert consequently that this epistemology must be displaced, that a different way of describing human knowledge and acquisition must be found'.[11]

To Hekman and Jardine, Enlightenment embodies that colonising spirit of scientific rationalism which has, in the context of modern-day epistemological disputes, reappeared in the form of positivism and empiricism. Hekman distinguishes her own feminist critique of Enlightenment from those postures which see in Enlightenment rationalism a privileging of the 'male' values of domination, rationality and abstraction, against which they assert the claims of the supposed female values of nurturing, relatedness and community.[12] To Hekman, feminism is a vital participant in a contemporary challenge to the so-called epistemological attitude of Enlightenment. 'Enlightenment', on this account, means the oppressive, universalising assertion of certain, dogmatically assumed truth claims. Feminism, by contrast, sides with a hermeneutic sensitivity to the conditioned, interpretative character of all knowledges. Against an Enlightenment 'epistemology' defined as the study of knowledge acquisition that was accomplished through the opposition of a (masculine) knowing subject and a known subject, a modern feminist approach '... entails the attempt to formulate ... an explanation of the discursive processes by which human beings gain understanding of their common world'.[13]

The shared presumption of Jardine, Hekman and Flax is that feminism's critique of Enlightenment suggests an opposition, in principle, between two competing ideologies, Flax, for example, sees in contemporary feminism and in Enlightenment the clear and irreconcilable opposition of two ideological competitors. In her view, despite an understandable attraction to the (apparently) logical, orderly world of Enlightenment: '... feminist theory more properly belongs in the terrain of postmodern philosophy. Feminist notions of the self, knowledge and truth are too contradictory to those of the Enlightenment to be contained in its categories. The way(s) to feminist future(s) cannot live in reviving or appropriating Enlightenment concepts of person or knowledge.'[14] In particular, Flax points out that contemporary feminism is deeply opposed to an Enlightenment construction of a sovereign reason which it exposes as resting on a 'gender rooted sense of self'.[15] On this account, the motto of the Enlightenment, '*sapere aude*' – have courage to use your own reason – confers an alleged normative universality on the supposed attributes of a modern masculine subjectivity. The attributes of passionate sensibility and intuitive understanding, associated with a socialised femininity, can only appear as impediments to be overcome in the development of the self-legislating Enlightenment personality.

According to this kind of interpretation of the significance of feminism's critique of Enlightenment, Enlightenment appears only as a repressive epistemology whose grip must be broken in order to assert the excluded claims of the different and the marginal.[16] The pre-history of a feminist epistemology comes to appear as the repetitious logic of a totalitarian opposition between mind and body, reason and passion, reflection and intuition. What emerges is a portrait of a masculinised rational faculty which remorselessly identifies itself and its power of universalising abstractions with human agency itself. The claims of the passions, of nature and of the uniquely individual appear as the mere objects of reason's limitless will to mastery. Because in the 'paradigm of Western reason' the human subject is identified with her/his own subjective reason, all difference is suppressed and an ascribed masculine psychology is conferred with an alleged normativity.

It is, then, a particular interpretation of contemporary feminism's critique of Enlightenment which is up for review here. The disagreement is not with those feminist critiques which seek only to unmask the various ways in which Western constructions of the power of reason systematically embody the norms and priorities of a male-dominated culture. To the extent that a contemporary feminism understands itself as an immanent critique which seeks to rescue the emancipatory intent of Enlightenment from the various prejudices which cling to its 'master narratives', there is no argument. The disagreement is, rather, with those for whom this critique of the 'Western Paradigm of Reason' is seen to impose the necessity for separating contemporary feminism by radical surgery from the influence of Enlightenment thinking.

The Enlightenment interpretation proposed below suggests, as already mentioned, that the anti-Enlightenment turn in contemporary feminist thinking involves two major misconceptions about Enlightenment. Firstly, the feminist assault on the normalising claims of Enlightenment thinking frequently rest on a frozen image of seventeenth-century rationalism, overlooking the progressive turn away from this interpretation of the Enlightenment which occurred throughout the eighteenth century. Secondly, this particular misconstruction of Enlightenment is indicative of a more general misperception which confuses a *specific* meaning given to the ideal of a self-legislating humanity by the historical Enlightenment itself with the open-ended, dynamic interpretation of this ideal which has become the meaning of contemporary Enlightenment.

The Historical Enlightenment and its Project

While Gay has properly warned against any attempt to treat the Enlightenment as a compact body of doctrine, he discovers, nevertheless, a distinctive cultural climate in eighteenth-century intellectual life. Despite the conflicting interpretations of the object of the newly discovered 'science of man', the historical Enlightenment agreed on the ultimate self-responsibility of each individual. 'Whatever the *philosophes* thought of man – innately decent or innately power-hungry, easy or hard to educate to virtue – the point of the Enlightenment's anthropology was that man is an adult dependent on himself.'[17]

Cassirer finds, however, that d'Alembert's description of his own age as the 'century of reason' and the 'philosophic century' is too imprecise to capture the distinctive intellectual climate of eighteenth-century intellectual life.[18] Cassirer and others point out that this self-description meant something quite specific to eighteenth-century intellectuals. Namely, although they assume that there is unity, simplicity and continuity behind all phenomena, d'Alembert and his eighteenth-century colleagues do not fall into the snares of the 'spirit of the systems' upheld by the seventeenth-century rationalists.[19] In the great metaphysical systems of the seventeenth century, reason is in the realm of the 'eternal verities' of 'those truths held in common by the human and the divine mind'. The eighteenth century takes reason in a different sense. 'It is no longer the sum total of 'innate ideas' given prior to all experience, which reveal the absolute essence of things. Reason is now looked upon as rather an acquisition than as a heritage.'[20]

Markus has suggested that for the eighteenth century 'reason' appeared in what are, from a contemporary point of view, two rather incompatible guises.[21] In the first place, the eighteenth-century intellectuals constructed a specifically critical construction of the power of reason understood as the critique of prejudice. Reason, on this account, assumed the negative character of critique. Reason concerned itself with the attempt to destroy the irrational 'superstitions' of the age, seen as the cause of all its ill.[22] On this construction, reason meant that newly born capacity to understand the world-views of others not dogmatically from the standpoint of the supposed 'eternal verities' discovered by reason but, rather, as particular world-interpretations expressive of a diversity of cultural experiences. The eighteenth-century intellectuals, it has been said, discovered the concept of culture; they were the first to identify that now common-

place conception of the 'fashioning' of humans by their society. The critique of prejudice contrived to establish an anti-dogmatic insight into the social-institutional supports behind a diversity of belief systems.

And yet the Enlightenment construction of reason, as, in Cassirer's phrase, a 'heritage', also gave a particular *positive* understanding of the character of the rational life. In this positive construction, reality described an objective, albeit secular set of principles capable of guiding humanity's progress towards an enriched, fulfilled and harmonious social life. The eighteenth century's image of the rational character of the 'city of the future' modelled on 'nature's plan' suggested that the high Enlightenment was unable to countenance the absolute relativisation of the cultural accomplishment of historical periods and societies. As Markus points out, this concept of rationality evoked a normative standard, a positive conception whereby the contributions of the diverse cultural products of other societies and epochs to the promotion of the rational, the harmonious and balanced life could be assessed.[23] So the destructive power of critique was to clear the way to a new rational social order, ruled no longer by mere prejudice and superstition but by the 'highest' considerations of the well-rounded, harmonious development of human potentialities. Jacob and other major interpreters of the period particularly emphasise that high Enlightenment figures like Voltaire sought an order in society and government, modelled after the new scientific conception of the orderly and balanced universe.[24]

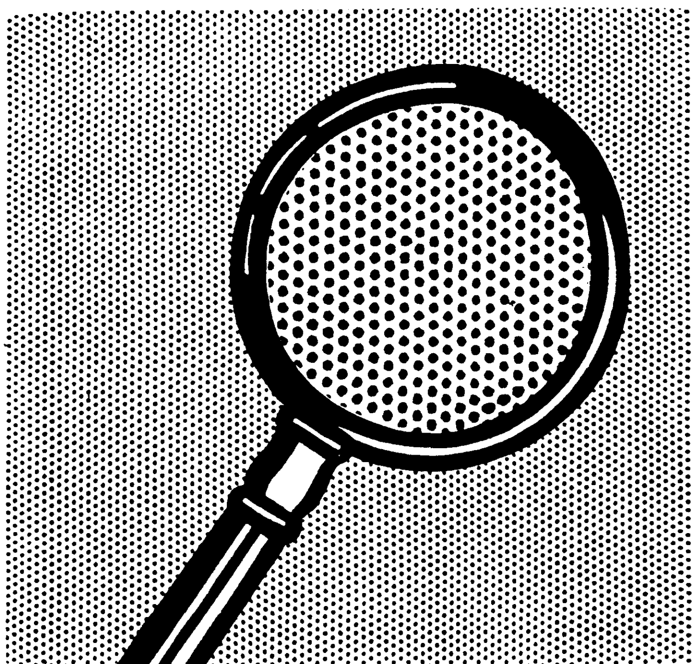
Modern feminism's antipathy towards the anthropological underpinnings of an eighteenth-century understanding of the rational life is clear. The Enlighteners' supposition that the new rational society could be modelled after the principles of nature meant that traditional social arrangements continued to have powerful sanction. And yet this eighteenth-century understanding of the rational life meant also a new departure in the development of the modern image of the self; an understanding which, in fact, shares common ground with contemporary feminism's own critique of a one-sided rationalist conception of the self.

To the Enlighteners, the secular principle of human perfectibility or self-improvement emerged as the clear successor to the rationalists' one-sided vision of reason's war on the unruly passions. Against the narrow asceticism of seventeenth-century morality, the Enlighteners' understanding of the good, the rational life encompasses the rehabilitation of the sensuous passions as a vital, creative force. Diderot, for example, insists that under the tutelage of reason's power of discrimination, a 'natural' sensuous love serves to unfold hitherto unrealised capacities for happiness and virtue in the personality of the lover.[25] And Emile's journey of self-development is radically incomplete without the love of his partner Sophie.[26]

Luhmann has emphasised that the rehabilitation of the passions evident in the Enlighteners' image of the rational, happy life is indicative of the inauguration of the modern concept of personality itself.[27] He points out that the psychology of the seventeenth century still worked with the old concepts of temperament and humour which allowed no room for personal development. This only changes in the course of the eighteenth century at which point people are conceived as being changeable, capable of development, still unperfected. In the context of this new understanding of personality, marital love, a love based on 'tender confidence' and esteem, was given a vital place in the Enlighteners' image of the virtuous, happy and rational life. Fairchilds describes the new libertarian meaning of the Enlightenment's understanding of personality as follows:

> In the face of centuries of Christian asceticism, the Enlightenment propounded the possibility of individual happiness on earth in the face of centuries of Christian disparagement, the Enlightenment rehabilitated the passions, including romantic love and sexual desire, as essential elements in such happiness.[28]

The discussion so far has been particularly concerned to differentiate some aspects of the notion of rationality typical of the high Enlightenment from the rationalism seen to characterise seventeenth-century intellectual life. Jacobus and other main interpreters of this period emphasise that the increased radicalism, the specifically critical character of an eighteenth-century understanding of the notion of rationality was by no means a uniform or unambiguous development.[29] Nevertheless, I would argue, there are important differences between the self-understanding of these two periods which need to be taken on board in the efforts of contemporary feminism to assess its own relation to Enlightenment. The anti-Enlightenment turn in contemporary feminism, as we have seen, challenges what it has construed as the essential dogmatic spirit of Enlightenment thinking; it has focussed particularly on its supposed one-sided rationalism and on its metaphysical pretensions. This image overlooks the important new critical spirit, the anti-dogmatic construction which came to infuse the conception of Enlightenment throughout the eighteenth century, al-



though this cultural commitment to the critique of prejudice laid down by the Enlighteners was, as noted, constrained by their own positive, normative conception of the character of the rational life.

Modern feminism can gain useful insights into both the radicalism and, from its own contemporary point of view, the fundamental limits of the Enlighteners' image of the rational life, by considering the focus given to this image in Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women.* A brief comparison between Wollstonecraft's late eighteenth-century feminism and the more conservative standpoint espoused in Mary Astell's late seventeenth-century feminism illustrates important discontinuities between the two constructions of the power of reason outlined so far. Moreover, serious tensions which pervade the core of Wollstonecraft's feminism can be traced to limitations within the Enlighteners' own inaugural vision of the Enlightenment project.

Enlightenment Feminism: Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft

The Enlighteners' image of the rational life was quite plainly not intended to include women. Rousseau's Sophie, 'made for man's delight', is esteemed only for her contribution to the self-development of her mate Emile. Contemporary feminist scholars have rightly drawn attention to the deep misogynistic currents which inform the perspectives of main intellectual figures in the Enlightenment. Fox-Genovese, for example, points out that 'as heirs to the time-honoured notions of female inferiority, Enlightenment thinkers normally continued to view women as weak, troublesome, shrewish, false, vindictive, ill-suited for friendship, coquettish, vain, deceitful and in general lesser humans.'[30]

Yet, despite this failure to challenge an overtly patriarchal legacy, the Enlighteners' deliberations on the character of the rational life opened up hitherto unsuspected possibilities for the development of a far-reaching feminism. Wollstonecraft's feminism moved beyond a mere politics of anti-discrimination, which calls only for an end to the exclusion of women from existing social priorities, to demand for women a vital place in setting the agenda for life in the 'City of the Future'. The Enlighteners' image of the rational life which emphasised the harmonious development of the individual's many-sided possibilities opened up a new creative dimension in Wollstonecraft's late eighteenth-century feminism.

To appreciate the novel radicalism of Wollstonecraft's feminism, it is useful to compare her Enlightenment standpoint with the limitation of a feminism which had already surfaced in the seventeenth century. Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* made explicit seventeenth-century feminism's identification with the rationalist's war on the degraded and unruly passions.[31] Aptly described as 'Reason's Disciples', Astell and her friend Elizabeth Elstorb placed great faith in the power of reason to expose the triviality, the moral unseriousness, of the conventions governing the lives of the new bourgeois women. The seventeenth-century feminist accepted her unpopular task as the upholder of the 'rules of reason' against a gross, unrestrained life guided only by the pursuit of sensuous enjoyment. Astell explains the plight of the seventeenth-century feminist as the defender of reason against the unruly, untutored passions thus: 'Custom has usurped such an unaccountable Authority, that she who would endeavour to put a stop to its arbitrary sway, and reduce it to Reason is in a fair way to render herself the butt for all the fops in Town to shoot their impertinent censures at.'[32]

In the first instance, Astell's feminism voiced the protest of middle-ranking and upper-class women at their effective loss of status and power in the new bourgeois society. Although the newly emerging bourgeois society certainly provided this class of women with substantial grievances, by its insistence on the rational legitimation of all social practices, it offered also the main ideological preconditions for the articulation of an early feminist standpoint. Writing on marriage in the year 1700, Mary Astell asked: 'If Absolute Sovereignty be not necessary in a State how comes it to be so in a Family? Or if in a Family why not in a State; since no reason can be alleg'd for one that will not hold more strongly for the other.'[33]

Luhmann and others have, however, pointed to the essentially conformist character of the seventeenth-century construction of the power of reason.[34] To the seventeenth-century European, it seemed that the rational life ultimately meant the observance of the rules and norms of the social environment against the tyranny of the unruly passions. And this seventeenth-century image of the rational life which conditioned Astell's feminism placed serious limitations on the radicalism of her protest. Astell's feminism was simply not equipped to interrogate in any essential way the priorities of her society. *A Serious Proposal* could only demand an end to the systematic exclusion of women from the seeming fruits of an intellectual culture monopolised by men. Astell's feminism called for the end to the universality of women's exclusion from the elevated 'life of the mind' and their systematic relegation to the 'Trifles and Gaities' of the marriage estate.[35]

On first inspection, the standpoint of Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication* appears as merely the renewal of the perspective already established in *A Serious Proposal.* Mary Wollstonecraft clearly emerges as another of 'reason's disciples'. Wollstonecraft's demand that the society recognise women as 'reasoning creatures' meant, however, something different and rather more radical than was implied in the feminism of her seventeenth-century counterparts. To Wollstonecraft, the barbarousness of the lives of bourgeois women does not appear simply in the denial of any intellectual life to the women newly herded into the trivialities of the domestic sphere. The tragedy of the situation appears, more precisely, in the deplorable waste of women's potential to lead a life guided by the aspiration towards self-improvement and human perfectibility. The Introduction to *A Vindication* announces Wollstonecraft's intention to 'consider women in the grand light of human creatures who, in common with men are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties'.[36] So it is the standpoint of 'improvable

reason' which provides Wollstonecraft with the platform from which to challenge the unnaturalness and irrationality of the lives of women of her own class.

A late eighteenth-century figure, Wollstonecraft has at her disposal a specifically critical construction of the meaning of the rational life: a construction which affirms as its reigning value the norm of the balanced development of all the individual's faculties into the self-directing adult personality. In the first instance, this image of the rational life appears as the platform for Wollstonecraft's scornful critique of the futility of the lives of bourgeois women in the newly de-politicised sphere of the household. To Wollstonecraft, bourgeois society had meant the creation of a whole class of women dehumanised and enslaved by their dependency. Wollstonecraft's feminism protests at the debilitating, one-sided development of women's human capacities in a bourgeois domestic life.

> Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming around its gilt cage, only seeks to adore its prison. Men have various employments and pursuits which engage their attention, and give character to the opening mind; but women, confined to one and having their thoughts constantly directed to the most insignificant parts of themselves, seldom extend their views beyond the triumph of the hour.[37]

Denied the opportunity to develop a range of human potentials, the personalities of women could only become horribly distorted and impoverished.

Clearly, Wollstonecraft had no more stomach for the idleness and mere sentimentality which dominated early bourgeois domestic life than had her seventeenth-century predecessors. What is quite new, however, is her conviction that our efforts to build an enriched and decent social life could be informed by an attempt to redeem those traces of a humanistic ethic presently locked within the distortions of bourgeois domesticity. Wollstonecraft despises the prison-house of bourgeois domesticity with its futile and trifling preoccupations. And yet it is less the type of concerns nourished by the new bourgeois family that Wollstonecraft finds so repugnant than their one-sided and hence distorted form. In the bourgeois family the humanistic image of relations with others based on a 'tender confidence' only makes its distorted appearance as an irrational romantic love fanned by 'vain fears and fond jealousies'.[38]

What needs to be stressed here is that the standpoint of 'improvable reason' does not simply articulate a judgement on the trivial irrationality of the lives of the new bourgeois women. It is also an invitation for a vital, creative participation in opening up new life possibilities for the enriched self-legislating personalities of the future. To Wollstonecraft, this creative dimension of the standpoint of 'improvable reason' suggests that a domestic ethic of affectionate care and duty towards particular others presently languishing in the artificial sentimentality of the private sphere is worthy of redemption as a public ethic. Wollstonecraft supposes that the bourgeois family both provokes and expresses a need to which it cannot adequately respond. The privatisation of the ethic of care and responsibility for particular others appears in the particular context of the bourgeois family in the unstable and distorted guise of transitory and possessive love. To Wollstonecraft, this need for relations of care and responsibility for others finds its most appropriate expression in the friendship which is to her 'the most holy band of society'.[39] Wollstonecraft's feminism preserves, then, the ideal of active citizenship. Far from conceiving the realm of private activities as a sphere which needs to be protected from political interference, Wollstonecraft encourages the politicisation of those perspectives and needs presently contained within a repressive private sphere. Ursula Vogel comments on this visionary aspect of *A Vindication*: 'The role which we commonly identify as belonging in the private sphere, Mary Wollstonecraft perceives as a constitutive element of citizenship. Stripped of their familiar association with intimate affections, and merely personal interests, the tasks of the mother obtain the dignity of public virtues.'[40]

Condorcet too argued for the 'admission of women to the rights of citizenship' on the basis of the civic importance of their 'gentle and domestic virtues' and on the basis of the distinctive character of their reasoning powers, seen by him as an expression of their specific interests and aspirations.

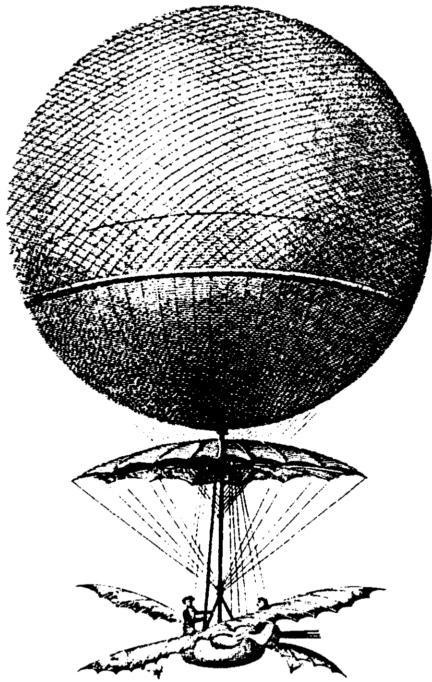
> Women are not governed, it is true by the reason of men. But they are governed by their own reason. Their interests not being the same as those of men through the fault of the laws, the same things not having the same importance for them as for us, they can (without lacking reason) govern themselves by different principles and seek a different goal.[41]

An evaluation of the utopian aspect of Wollstonecraft's programme is not particularly relevant here. What is of concern is the peculiar radicalism of her feminism which supposes itself to have not merely grievances at systematic patterns of discrimination experienced by bourgeois women, but a vital positive contribution to make to discussions over the character of the rational life. Where Astell's feminism had demanded only an end to women's systematic exclusion from the life of 'reasoning creatures', Wollstonecraft appealed to the standpoint of 'improvable reason' to demand the participation of the distinctive voice of women in unfolding the meaning of the rational, happy life.

Reiss offers a very different interpretation of the radicalism of *A Vindication*. On his account, Wollstonecraft was prevented from arguing a truly revolutionary case:

> because she argued *within* Enlightenment rhetoric, for the extension of equality without regard (at least) to gender. Wollstonecraft was asserting women's right to catch up with men, in the same way that Tom Paine (for example) argued that the enfranchisement of the dispossessed – whether colonials, the poor, or the aged must catch up with that of proprietors. It was always a matter of the right to participate in the system, not of the need to change it.[42]

Here Reiss discovers only one aspect of the main trends in what is, from a modern point of view, Wollstonecraft's highly contradictory feminism. As previously argued, Wollstonecraft is not afraid of upholding those qualities



with which education and circumstance supposedly endow women as vital ingredients in the fully humanised, improved personality.[43] In her view, bourgeois women have been constrained by a life dedicated to the cultivation of the sensibilities. And yet, as the following passage suggests, Wollstonecraft's feminism targets only the dehumanising, one-sided character of those 'feminine' qualities produced by bourgeois domesticity.

> 'The power of the woman,' says some author, 'is her sensibility'; and men, not aware of the consequence, do all they can to make this power swallow up every other. Those who constantly employ their sensibility will have most: for example, poets, painters, and composers. Yet, when the sensibility is thus increased at the expense of reason, and even the imagination, why do philosophical men complain of their fickleness?[44]

Wollstonecraft's critique of modern gender relations had at its disposal an image of the improved, many-sided personality. Accordingly, her feminism recognises a positive contribution from a different feminine voice in setting the agenda for life in the 'City of the Future'. Wollstonecraft does not, however, manage to sustain this perspective. The appeal to an Enlightenment construction of the rational social life also makes way for a legitimating perspective on an existing gendered bifurcation of private and public roles construed as nature. In this case, we see that Wollstonecraft is not calling for a recognition of the distinctive voice of women as active citizens in establishing the character of new social forms. She seeks only a reappraisal of the public significance of the private duties presently performed by bourgeois women in the domestic sphere. Women, Wollstonecraft remarks, 'may have different duties to fulfil; but they are human duties, and the principles that should regulate the discharge of them ... must be the same.'[45] At such points, the radicalism of her challenge to the new bourgeois social arrangement which severed the lives of middle-class women from the new public sphere is seemingly overwhelmed by a naturalistic patriarchal ideology.

Despite its own overt radicalism, Wollstonecraft's feminism is haunted by an historically understandable, naturalistic construction of the gendered character of social tasks and duties. In this capacity her feminism does nothing to challenge the priorities and the practical arrangement of her society. It merely calls for the recognition of the vital importance of 'womanly' duties in the realisation of an harmonious, balanced social life.

So, in Wollstonecraft's feminism, we see the aporetic manifestation of the two dimensions of an Enlightenment construction of the character of the rational life discussed earlier. On the one hand, Wollstonecraft employs the Enlightenment construction of the rationality of the balanced, harmonious life and personality as the vehicle for her positive feminist critique of both the one-sidedness of the lives of bourgeois women and the one-sidedness of public discussions over the content of the good, the rational social life. Whilst women are denied the exercise of all their human faculties in the 'gilt cage' of bourgeois domesticity, so too there is insufficient public recognition of the humanising ennobling potentials of those virtues of 'tender confidence' and 'gentle forbearance' supposedly nurtured by the intimate sphere. On the other hand, Wollstonecraft's feminism does not attempt to challenge the seeming naturalness of a gendered division of labour.[46] In its positive construction, 'rationality' loses its critical power as an interrogation of existing social arrangements from the standpoint of the neglected claims of a diversity of human potentials. Seen, rather, as a vision of a balanced, orderly social life, a vision whose rationality is authorised by the supposed order of a harmonious universe, the Enlightenment appeal to reason has the effect of sanctioning an existing way of life. To the extent that it works uncritically within the aporia of this understanding of the character of rationality, Wollstonecraft's feminism cannot itself entirely escape a naturalistic ideology which imposes an essential status on the culturally acquired roles and interests of modern women.

Feminism and the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment

The naturalistic ideology which plagues *A Vindication* appears as a manifestation of the anthropological foundations of her typical Enlightenment vision of the rational social life. Despite the eighteenth century's stress on humanity's unique capacity for self-improvement, this enterprise is still seen to be circumscribed and shaped by man's anthropological nature. The Enlightenment had not yet fully achieved the historical consciousness which was to emerge in the nineteenth century. Human attributes continue to be seen largely as fixed anthropological traits. Far from suggesting the pursuit of historically posited goals and objectives, the idea of the rational life appeared to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment as the revelation of na-

ture's own plan. Hazard points out that it was supposed that the light of reason would discover nature's plan and once this was fully illuminated all that remained was to conform the new society to it.[47] The capacity for the rational life was viewed in terms of eliminating the obstacles to the natural unfolding of 'human capacities', in the light of an anthropological discovery rather than as an affirmation of an historical project or task.[48]

The eighteenth-century anthropology according to which reason appears as an inherent capacity in the individual and truth the revelation of nature's plan was unable to discover its own legitimating prejudices. These would only become apparent with the historicised perspective which was to emerge in the nineteenth century. From the point of view of an historicised consciousness, the Enlighteners' suppositions that the new rational society could be modelled after the principles of nature ultimately suggested the failure of the historical Enlightenment's capacity to sustain a commitment to the cause of a self-legislating humanity. The *philosophes* were not yet able to formulate the Enlightenment project as a commitment to radical democracy which recognised concrete individuals as the arbiters of their own wills and needs. As Markus explains, the Enlightenment philosophers' search for the 'truth' of a rationally unified secular culture 'able to discover and to impose a unique direction towards human perfection upon all processes of change occurring in a dynamic society ultimately means the failure of the historical Enlightenment itself with respect to its own emancipatory vision'.[49]

Although it remained to later generations of Enlightenment thinkers to diagnose the root causes of the failure of the historical Enlightenment, the seeds of its own self critique were already unwittingly implanted in the aporias of Enlightenment's feminism. The democratic impulses of Wollstonecraft's feminism, which saw her calling for a recognition of the distinctive voices of women in any discussion of the character of life in the 'City of the Future', was now in conflict with her endorsement of an anthropology which construed an imposed gender division of labour as an expression of a natural order. Yet, in the final analysis, the anthropological underpinnings of her Enlightenment understanding of the rational life meant that traditional social arrangements continued to have a powerful sanction. In particular, as Jane Rendall points out, the Enlightenment's attack on the seventeenth century's concept of a divinely ordered patriarchal family was replaced by an equally repressive legitimating ideology of the family as a prepolitical web of natural relationships.[50]

The twentieth century has shattered the optimism nursed by eighteenth-century European philosophy. The extravagant expectations harboured by Condorcet and others that 'the arts and sciences would promote not only the control of natural forces but would also further understanding of the world and of the self, would promote moral progress, the justice of institutions, and even the happiness of human beings', have all but disappeared.[51] With Markus, Bauman and others. Habermas clearly acknowledges the failure of the eighteenth century to free itself from the grip of dogma and prejudice. It seems equally clear, however, that our present capacity to unmask the failure of this early formulation of Enlightenment is precisely evidence of the continuing, vital relevance of this open-ended cultural project to contemporary social life. As Bauman sees it, the failure of the historical Enlightenment to implement its own project does not mean that the project itself was abortive and doomed. 'The potential of modernity is still untapped and the promise of modernity needs to be redeemed.'[52]

So an assertion of modern feminism as an episode in Enlightenment thinking recognises feminism's own necessary participation in this, as yet radically incomplete, open-ended project of cultural criticism. Feminism takes its vital and distinctive place in the project described by Kant as the future-oriented optimism that people could emerge from their self-imposed minority to legislate for themselves. It remained for later generations of thinkers inspired by the historical Enlightenment to historicise and radically democratise the meaning of this task. Whereas the Enlighteners had appealed to the 'truth of nature' to *impose* a direction towards human perfection, the spirit of the Enlightenment since that time has sought to maintain the emancipatory temper which sees human beings as the creators of their own social world on the basis of the needs and the aspirations of concrete individuals themselves. This spirit was encapsulated in the broadening nineteenth-century demand for constitutional reform, republicanism and finally social revolution and radical democracy.

As already suggested, Kant's essay 'What is Enlightenment?' still stands as a classical interpretation of the broad cultural meaning of the Enlightenment as the on going, still radically incomplete project of modernity. Kant's essay underlines that Enlightenment exists only as a human task or goal. We live, he says, not in an enlightened age but in an age of Enlightenment. The historical Enlightenment vision of a self-reliant humanity capable of legislating for itself must be embraced as the arduous task of every modern individual. The Enlighteners showed that Enlightenment required nothing but freedom, in particular 'the freedom of man to make public use of his reason at all points'.[53] On this account, Enlightenment means the freedom of self-legislation in those matters of public import which transcend the realm of the mere private duty of the citizen. In the end, Kant suggests that, whilst Enlightenment remains a cultural and individual task, it also and at the same time identifies the original vocation of human nature itself. Nature, he comments:

> has evolved the seed for which she cares most tenderly, namely the propensity and the vocation for independent thinking: this gradually works back on the mentality of the people (whereby they become little by little more capable of the freedom to act) and also eventually even on the principles of government, which finds it advantageous to itself to treat people who are now more than machines in accordance with their dignity.[54]

Enlightenment is an historical project guided by a regulative idea to be constantly recharged with contemporary historical content.

Kant's view of Enlightenment is a call for a radical emancipation from the dogmas of the past and for practical

autonomy. This is a call that has resounded down to our own time. The call was heard by Kant's contemporaries who applied Kant's critical method to his own philosophical presuppositions. Each succeeding generation of Enlightenment has submitted the certitudes of its own milieu to the same critical questioning in order to remarshal the energies and redefine the contemporary meaning of Enlightenment thus making another advance down the road that Kant had designated. Each unveils a new dimension of the problem and a new terrain on which the battle for freedom and reason needs to be prosecuted in order to realise our historically accumulating sense of human dignity.

Modern feminism is similarly best understood as occupying this kind of double relation to Enlightenment thinking. On the one hand, modern feminism clearly cannot ignore its own continuity with the Enlightenment tradition. It preserves the Enlightenment's emancipatory vision in which human beings are affirmed as the determinators of their own social world. In particular, modern feminism is properly understood as an interpretation of a contemporary historicised understanding of Enlightenment. Feminism today typically repudiates all Enlightenment formulations which turn on an appeal to an impartial reason and to an eternal and normatively conceived human nature. Modern feminism appears as a vital moment in a contemporary interpretation of the cause of Enlightenment as a commitment to the cause of radical democracy.

The affirmation of feminism's own Enlightenment character does not, it must be stressed, suggest its assimilation to any fixed set of doctrines and principles. As its critic, modern feminism unmasks the failures of the various episodes in the Enlightenment tradition to adequately interpret the meaning of the Enlightenment project. The narrow rationalism of seventeenth-century metaphysics, the naturalising constructions of the Enlighteners themselves, the so-called gender-blindness of Marxian categories as well as liberalism's own construction of an abstract 'rights-bearing' subject have all been appropriately targeted by contemporary feminism.

Yet as a critic of the Enlightenment tradition, modern feminism is also and at the same time a manifestation and an interpretation of Enlightenment. Feminism constantly seeks to push back the legacy of our entrenched prejudices to reveal new social possibilities in the present. Ever since Wollstonecraft, feminists have affirmed their commitment to a qualitatively expanded interpretation of the meaning of Enlightenment. Modern feminism has consistently attempted to expose the prejudices embedded within those definitional constructions of the human subject called upon in the various formulations of the meaning of Enlightenment. Contemporary feminism has, moreover, attempted to open up our understanding of those activities and actions deemed the proper subject for public discussion and expression. The familiar feminist call for the politicisation of the personal sphere is one instance of feminism's vital and distinctive contribution to an on going process of immanent critique in which generations of Enlightenment thinkers have opened up new terrains which need to be encompassed in a commitment to radical democracy. Modern feminism is a qualitative expansion of the contemporary Enlightenment project. It relies unquestioningly on no preexisting interpretations but offers its own unique, still developing, interpretation of Enlightenment understood as a broad-based programme for critique and social change promoting the social recognition of diverse human potentials and ways of life.

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The Situationist International, until recently almost forgotten, has been rediscovered by a new generation. The provocative theses of Guy Debord's **Society of the Spectacle**, published on the eve of the spontaneous insurrection of May 1968, are still a focal point for critical thought about the media and capitalism.

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