Comment on Flax's "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory"

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In "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory," (*Signs* 12, no. 4 [Summer 1987]: 621–43) Jane Flax makes two different kinds of claims about postmodern philosophy in relation to current feminist theory. The first claim is a descriptive one: feminist theory today in fact can be seen to be a type of postmodern analysis. As Jane Flax explains, postmodernism seeks to raise radical doubts about the unity and stability of the self, the reliability and independence of reason, the authority of truth, the neutrality of knowledge, and the transparency of language. In this first claim, which concerns assessing and accurately describing some of the principles and themes at work in much feminist theory now, Flax is right. Increasingly, feminist theorizing does rely on a discourse that is deeply skeptical about essences, universals, and the transcendence of reason, and hence about the coherence of the self and about the stability of meaning and values.

But Flax's second claim is that feminist theorizing *should* adopt postmodern principles and that postmodern thought is the proper foundation for future discussions of gender relations and the situation of women. It is this normative claim that presents important problems.

Feminism and postmodern philosophies are closely allied in some respects. Both pursue a critique of the deep structures of society and of certain constricting forms of thought. Both share a suspicion of "linear, teleological, hierarchical, holistic, or binary

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ways of thinking and being" (Flax, 622). Both feminism and postmodernism reject the concept of "essence" with its claim of a natural defining core for persons and things; it has been fundamentally important to both of these outlooks to show that nothing is constituted entirely in an "essential," that is, an ahistorical way, but rather that everything is to some extent culturally determined. Feminism and postmodernism do share a similar problematic, as Jane Flax recognizes.

But while there is some aptness in the partnership that Flax proposes, I believe she makes a mistake in recommending postmodern philosophy as a foundation for feminist theorizing. The denial of depth to the self, the refusal of firm and legitimate grounding to claims of any kind, the contempt for reason, and the preoccupation with appearances—themes that have become the hallmark of the postmodern attitude—should serve as ready evidence that, ultimately, this philosophical orientation will not produce the deep understanding that women and society as a whole want and need. Without the possibility of a coherent self, liberation becomes impossible. There is no one who persists, who remembers, whose experience and suffering counts; there *is* no one to emancipate. Without the possibility of stable meaning, insight and self-understanding become trivial, irrelevant. There is nothing worth understanding; personal meaning and values fluctuate, will not hold, and cannot be trusted. Without the primacy of reason and intelligence, injustice can flourish unrestrained. There is nothing stable, that is, no justice, against which to measure injustice. It is only reason, at work in any person, that would have some measure of ability to stand apart from the practices of injustice and to identify them; reason alone is independent of contingencies and is universal and available to everyone. This independent position, crucial to claims of injustice, becomes unavailable once postmodernism is embraced, since its principles demand that everything be culturally constructed and that transcendence is impossible.

One way that Jane Flax's ill-advised recommendation of postmodern theory happens is through the use of the term "postmodern" in the first place. The second way is through the use of "the Enlightenment" as a foil for postmodernism. I will return to this second problem shortly.

The trouble with "postmodernism" is that this term is too broad; there are many trends within postmodern theory, differing in significant ways from one another. At least six such trends can be identified: hermeneutics (associated with the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer), deconstruction (Jacques Derrida), French feminisms (Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous), critical theory (Jür-

gen Habermas, Theodor Adorno), Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Foucauldian analysis. (The pragmatism promoted by Richard Rorty might be considered yet an additional trend within the postmodern category.)

What is crucial to note about this array is that these analyses can differ importantly from one another in the goals they formulate and in the methods they advocate. For instance, with regard to reason, hermeneutics urges that human judgment be accorded a primary place alongside reason in our picture of what "understanding" is. But in Adorno's critical theory, the attempt is not to expand or adjust the conception of reason but rather to undermine it, to overthrow it. Reason, in Adorno's view, is fundamentally oppressive. His style of writing, which is heavy with irony and inversions and has a fragmentary quality, is part of the project of reason's rejection. Lacan's impenetrable style of exposition makes a similar statement. Foucault's geneological analyses seek to show that reason and knowledge are, inescapably, tools of power.

With regard to the self, hermeneutics could be viewed as a means of altering philosophically the notion of the self from an abstract entity to one that is immersed in and affected constantly by the historical-cultural environment and tradition. In the work of the French feminist Hélène Cixous, there is a strong emphasis on bodily determinations of the self rather than on cultural ones. (To what extent this is an essentialist view has been a matter of dispute between Cixous and other postmodern feminists.) Both Foucault and Adorno are decisively antisubjectivist. They both reject vigorously the ideal of the stable, coherent, directed self that is posited by Gadamer and Cixous.

This list is meant only as a brief indication of the salient differences in the various postmodern programs. Some of these programs have the correction and adjustment of the tradition as their goal. Others are explicitly and deeply subversive or anarchic in their ambitions, and there is no recovery intended from their radical doubts and deep skepticism. The differences here have enormous practical consequences. Which one(s) is Jane Flax endorsing? How far does feminism need or want to follow the more thoroughgoing of postmodernism's negative impulses?

Flax herself recognizes that there are problems in moving in this latter theoretical direction. She writes: "The relation of feminist theorizing to the postmodern project of deconstruction is necessarily ambivalent. . . . If there is no objective basis for distinguishing between true and false beliefs [a postmodern principle] then it seems that power alone will determine the outcome of competing truth claims. This is a frightening prospect to those who lack (or are oppressed by) the power of others" (625). The prospect of a

world in which power is absolute authority, where there is no recourse to reason or to standards of justice because these have been construed to be only part of the arsenal of force—this prospect should be frightening to every person. And this does appear to be an unavoidable implication of Foucault's description of the reach of power, for example, and Adorno's abandonment of rationality. When reason in the form of explanation and clarification is rejected as the basis for distinguishing truth from falsehood, what remains for making these claims *but* force? Though she senses this critical danger, Flax does not address it squarely and presses ahead with the endorsement of postmodernism.

A difficulty, then, in Jane Flax's discussion is the adoption of the imprecise term "postmodernism." I have indicated that a number of elements of postmodern discourse make it poorly suited for women's self-understanding and humane political analysis. This is true particularly of the work of Foucault, Lacan, and Adorno, and of some of the work of Derrida. This is not to insist on the rejection of all postmodern work, however. Some postmodern themes are timely, and some postmodern methods can be constructive. For example, in her paper, Jane Flax uses what has come to be taken as a postmodern insight, namely, that in observing and thinking about things we are always historically situated, and hence our understanding is determined by our conditions and is limited, never perfect or complete. Flax points out that some feminist work has not been self-critical, has not been willing to examine its own limited understanding. Philosophically it is a genuine advance to be able to recognize the limits or boundaries of one's thinking, and this insight may be part of the hermeneutic perspective, for example. The issue, again, is that the variety of positions taken within postmodernism, some of which are valuable and some of which have serious negative implications, necessitates that distinctions be made within the term and applied with some precision.

The second difficulty in "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory" is a broad employment of "Enlightenment philosophy" to set against and set off the postmodern project in a flattering light. Flax lists the fundamental working ideas of the Enlightenment as a belief in a coherent self that is capable of reason, a faculty marked by transcendence and universality. Reason can provide a reliable foundation for knowledge, according to Enlightenment philosophers, and can and must test all claims to truth and authority. Freedom and autonomy are defined and exercised properly only in conformation with reason. Science and language are the neutral, transparent means by which reason achieves a neutral, unbiased knowledge. The world is not constructed by these means but rather is discovered through them. As accurate as this summary

is in some respects, it could not possibly convey the complexity and depth of these and other ideas associated with the Enlightenment and with other periods of Western thought as well. Indeed, this kind of shorthand approach to the history of ideas gives the impression that whole eras of thought and sets of ideas are easily grasped, are by now self-evidently implausible and can be readily dismissed.

Another problem, as I see it, is that it begins to appear that there are just two theoretical positions available, and that a conscientious theorist has a choice between only these two: the Enlightenment or postmodernism. I do not think that Jane Flax herself intends for the matter to come down to this simple, either-or position. Her own analysis of gender relations is more subtle and insightful than that, and furthermore one of the positive contributions of deconstruction, for example, is to warn about errors bred by exclusionary disjunctions or "binary oppositions." Still, her discussion in this paper gives the impression that there are, finally, only two positions, the Enlightenment—which appears to stand for the entire Western intellectual tradition—and postmodernism as the single alternative position and the only place from which to critically assess the tradition. Whatever the excesses and failures of Enlightenment conceptions of the self and reason, and these failures are real and sometimes quite serious, it remains true that reason as understood throughout the philosophical tradition has the capacity for self-criticism and self-correction. It is precisely because reason can achieve some distance from the web of social practices that it has this capacity. It is this ability that narrative, imagery, rhetoric, power and its operations, and the other productions favored by postmodernism do not have and, by postmodernism's rules, cannot have. Postmodernism promises the possibility of critique and correction as well as the possibility of tolerance and self-acceptance. These attitudes have perhaps too often been missing in traditions where reason itself is idolized and used unreflectively as a tool. But the trends within postmodernism that deny the integrity of the self and repudiate reason completely will not be able to deliver on such promises.

Postmodernism, with its "deep skepticism" and "radical doubts" is not the medicine required to cure intellectual and social life of the afflictions of various orthodoxies (e.g., Marxist, Enlightenment, Freudian). What is sorely needed instead of theory that denies the self and the integrity of reason is theory that permits us to achieve appropriate and intelligent trust in the self and in its various abilities to come to know what is real.