

## Presentation on “Feminism in History of Philosophy” by Genevieve Lloyd

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### 1. Early stages of feminist history of philosophy

Though no examples are given, perhaps with her own early work in mind – e.g., *The Man of Reason* – Lloyd observes:

“History of philosophy was seen as a repository of misogynist ideas and ideals towards which feminism took up a defensive posture” with feminist philosophy concerned to “define itself through opposition to a ‘male’ tradition.” (245)

### 2. More recent (‘positive’) work

Includes:

a) New strategies for “bring[ing] sexual difference to bear on the reading of philosophical texts,” by

1. Highlighting internal tensions;
2. “Opening up texts” in ways that “enrich cultural self-understanding.”

Furthermore,

Given the relative lack of methodological reflectiveness in history of philosophy,

b) feminism has not so much challenged previous approaches as help develop strategies through which the discipline has begun to acquire such self-reflection (246).

### 3. Lloyd’s aims

a) To look at a number of strategies adopted by female historians of philosophy (not all self-avowed feminists) for reading texts from the past.

b) “locate feminist history of philosophy in the broader context of the methodology of the history of philosophy.”

c) To argue that “there is – and need be – no firm identity to ‘feminist’ history of philosophy” but that we can see ways in which feminist philosophy has provided ways of enriching the relationship between philosophy and its past.” (246)

#### 4. Rorty's distinctions

Lloyd frames the rest of her piece by starting with a distinction due to Richard Rorty between:

a) Past-centred approaches to history of philosophy

These aim to “understand past philosophers in their own terms, in relation to their own agenda” (246)

b) Present-centred approaches to history of philosophy

These produce “rational reconstructions” of past philosopher where the aim/hope is to then “engage in philosophical debate” with them.

Rorty thinks it is worthwhile to do both, provided one is clear about what one is doing. We can usefully both:

a) Listen in on the conversations of past philosophers.

This helps us to see the differences between ourselves and the past and allows us to “recognize that there have been different forms of intellectual lives than ours” (Rorty, 51)

(I think the model here would be something like Richard Popkin's work on the history of early modern scepticism, or John Yolton's work on 18<sup>th</sup> century materialism – though he mentions Quentin Skinner, so it may be more in the direction of what typically gets called ‘History of Ideas’.)

AND

b) Converse with versions of a past philosophers.

This helps us to do philosophy better and gives us a sense of having progressed

(Here Rorty seems to have in mind writing about issues raised by past canonical figures in terms which involve positive and negative assessments of their own words – e.g., Descartes on scepticism, whilst abstract from the negative effects that appeals to God bring with them).

Rorty suggests that a) is likely to produce/aim at? convergence and b) admits of a multiplicity of equally admissible conversations.

My sense is that this means they do their jobs (are “useful”) if prosecuted in these ways. Here's a quote:

“If we want as Skinner says ‘self-awareness’, then we need to avoid anachronism as much as possible. If we want self-justification through conversation with the dead thinkers about our current problems, then we are free to indulge in as much of it as we like as long as we realize that we are doing so.” (Rorty, 55)

## 5. Some problems with Rorty

Lloyd points to the influence of 'postmodern' textual theory on the conception of a conversation with a person/text and the ways that, in the hands of feminists historians of philosophy, it seems to be in tension with Rorty's invocation of the notion of a "rational reconstruction".

"The idea of history of philosophy as engaging in conversation with 'the mighty dead' takes on special difficulties and perhaps special poignancy – from a female speaking position. The assumption that there is a neutral speaking position that can be occupied is by a contemporary gender-neutral philosophical reader is, intent on either self-knowledge or a reassuring put-down of the mighty dead, becomes less clear-cut when we think of it in relation to female readers." (248).

Lloyd notes that Luce Irigaray's work has helped "effect a jamming of the theoretical machinery" through the taking up of the position of feminine as the "excluded other of philosophy" (248). Here she seems to be alluding to Irigaray's identification of speaking positions in philosophical texts that are not gender-neutral (see 246).

## 6. An alternate way to go

Despite worries about Rorty's conception of 'rational reconstruction', Lloyd suggests there are congenial 'conversations with the mighty dead' that can, and have been carried out by female philosophers.

These don't force the dead philosopher to join in a conversation with norms that are determined by appeal to the standard conception of rational reconstruction.

Rather, they are initiated as searches for different philosophical agendas, such as

"a lost closeness between philosophy and literature, a closer integration of philosophy with its cultural context, a more practical orientation toward the social" (248).

The thought being that this allows us "not so much to take back to the past the philosophical agenda of the present as open up present philosophy to a wider agenda" (249).

## 7. Nikidion and *The Therapy of Desire*

On pp. 249-51 Lloyd presents us with Martha Nussbaum's character Nikidion from the *Therapy of Desire*, who goes on a difficult journey through ancient philosophy encountering the major schools of thought as a woman searching for the good life.

I didn't take away any, generic lesson Lloyd wants us to take from this book (if any), though she finishes by noting the strange malleableness of Nikidion's identity and appears to suggest that it points us to a crucial problem for all history of philosophy

“[H]ow are we to bring into manageable and fruitful relationship the present-ness of the reader and the pastness of the text. What models might we invoke for anchoring the critique of past philosophy in a firm sense of the changing present.” (251)

### 8. Fleshing out alternatives to Rorty

In the section “Engagement with the Present” (251-53) Lloyd offers us a different way to think about the present-ness of philosophy than Rorty’s model of current problems which are given to us by those he would identify as contemporary philosophers and, which have arisen through progress.

Lloyd’s foci are Foucault’s and Habermas’ readings of Kant’s *What is Enlightenment?* I found most of this quite hard to follow, given that I don’t know the Kant or the readings. BUT it seems that we are supposed mainly to take away the thought that we might approach the history of philosophy as something that demands that we ask the following as we engage in it:

“What is my present? What is the meaning of this present? And what am I doing when I speak of the present?” (252)

These questions would involve much more than thinking about my “philosophical present” and certainly much more than the philosophical present that I myself favour (which is, of course, a serious danger with the Rorty ‘progress’ approach).

### 9. Arendt’s ‘invention’ of a Kantian political philosophy

Lloyd presents Hannah Arendt’s work in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* as an example of 8 in practice. Again, I don’t know enough about Arendt or Kant to speak to the content.

BUT it seems that the main lesson is that Arendt approached some fairly indeterminate ideas in Kant and appropriates them in response to concerns of the present condition that she herself in.

“Her lectures are an exercise in remembering philosophical resources and extending them by putting them to new uses in response to situations which call them forth. Arendt interrogates the present with concepts formulated by Kant. It is in the middle zone between past and present that historically informed philosophical thinking goes on.” (253)

Again, I don’t know the details, but it’s clear enough from Lloyd that this centres around the desire to develop a new framework for attributing responsibility, which I assume is connected with her general attempt to make sense of the then present in which the shadow of the second world war and Germany’s role in that loomed large.

Though it’s not put quite like this, it seems to me that a more general methodological stance that interests Lloyd is in play here - namely, an approach that recognizes at least the following:

a) The partial nature of anything that is taken up from past texts

b) The way in which any significance that what is taken up has for us is partly determined by the present – both because of the relation between what is taken up and the context of utterance and because of the ways in which the present influences what is taken up

In the case of Kant and Arendt the sketchy nature of Kant's original thoughts highlights this.

### A segue

Lloyd also wants to work with one of the key ideas on Arendt's reading of Kant – the thought that imaginatively produced exemplars (“validating examples”) are the key to bringing together theory and political practice – to lead into considerations of the ways in which feminist critique has challenged the roles played by particular exemplars.

From here she moves to discussing Michèle Le Doeuff.

### 10. Le Doeuff's “critique of the philosophical imaginary”

Lloyd now presents a condensed account of two strategies in Le Doeuff ('early' and 'late') which are concerned with the relation between philosophy and its history.

#### a) Early Le Doeuff – *The Philosophical Imaginary*

Here (as I'm reading Lloyd) images and metaphors in the text are considered as expressions of unthought elements, which are then shown to be in tension with other elements in the text and the advertised aims of the writer. Thus the commentator seizes authority from the author and may appeal to extra-philosophical considerations to explain the existence of particular claims and theses.

One might explain them using some other theory – Marxism, psychoanalytic theory etc. – rather than, e.g., insisting on looking at the internal logic of the text and its relation to other philosophical ideas of the time.

#### b) Later Le Doeuff – *Hipparchia's Choice*

According to Lloyd, in this work Le Doeuff looks to move beyond the thought that the commentator can claim authority over the text in virtue of looking for what is unsaid.

“Here the ideal is that of a ‘dynamic’ in which philosophy and history of philosophy – construed as intellectual activity, rather than the repository of past thought – lead to and from each other. Philosophy is construed as the effort to ‘shift thinking’ – to move our patterns of thought from one configuration to another.”(257)

It's also noted that in both cases a) and b) we find Le Doeuff focussing on the place of sexual difference in texts.

I confess that I again can't make all that much out of this, given how abstract it is. But it seems like it's continuous with some of the things Lloyd suggests are happening in Arendt. Furthermore, I did

start to read *Hipparchia's Choice* and it's looking a lot more complex than that.

According to Lloyd Arendt picks a standard figure from history of philosophy and works with some undeveloped ideas to construct new ways of thinking about issues in the present. Le Doeuff seems to imply that what constitutes philosophy is also a serious question and I'd need to read a lot more Le Doeuff to get clear on whom she thinks we should look for the kind of dynamic conversation Lloyd sees as promoted in her work (if indeed that's really a good way to read what she is doing).

### 11. Doxography and demonizing

Lloyd suggests:

“In the space I have mapped out for feminist history of philosophy, concern with situating texts in their cultural context comes together with construing philosophy as a way of engaging with one's present.” (258)

Whilst this doesn't seem impossible, Lloyd thinks it unsurprising that this strategy has been misunderstood by those who are working with something like Rorty's dichotomy in mind.

Furthermore, she sees it as unsurprising that critiques of the ways in which philosophical ideas have impacted upon the history of thoughts have been taken to be attacks on those ideas (much as Rorty would think that rational reconstruction involves attacking and rejecting outmoded bits of Descartes).

Rather she points to Susan Bordo's thought that feminist historians have been more interested in promoting the idea that the emergence/reception and propagation of certain conceptions occurs to the exclusion of others, which will still be available in the very same texts and of possible interest to someone wishing to do philosophy.

Though, given her opening, we might wonder whether there was more to the demonizing thought at one point in time.

### 12. Conclusion 'we' feminists

In her conclusion, Lloyd seems to distance herself from the idea that there is anything distinctively feminist about the most important things that feminist historians of philosophy have taught us.

She points out that a number of female philosophers have gone back to standard authors and brought out interesting new conversations – e.g., Amélie Rorty picking up on love and the emotions in Spinoza, Annette Baier working with Hume to fashion a richer notion of reason – without advertising what they are doing as acts of feminist philosophy.

Rather the point, which she sees as reflecting something important about our present, is that approaching philosophers as people who can be engaged with as something other than people with the interests that a pre-feminist conception of philosophy and identity politics would have sanctioned, is something that will enrich all our philosophical encounters with those we consider as philosophical interlocutors from our past.

### 13. A surprising (to me) absence

One thing that struck me on reading this piece was the total (I think) lack of attention to historical women philosophers.

Another of Rorty's 'genres' of philosophy is 'canon-formation' (56ff).

It's clear that some of what feminist historians of philosophy have done is to investigate the ways in which attitudes toward women have influenced who is read and by whom and to recover the voices of women philosophers where traces exist.

Mary Ellen Waithe's edited work: *A History of Women Philosophers* is a 4 volume set (approx.. 1500 pages) which contains lots of articles on particular figures and at least some of these left considerable amounts of text and have been the subject of serious scholarly attention in their own right for some time.

A shorter starting point here would be *Hypatia's Choice* edited by Linda McAlister in which "Nineteen academic contributors provide an overview of the roles women have held in the development of classic Western philosophy."

Obvious examples from the period I'm most familiar with include: Margaret Cavendish, Anne Conway, Catharine Trotter, Mary Astell, Mary Shepherd, Mary Wollstoncraft. But there is a non-trivial number of others. Margaret Atherton's collection *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period* gives a selection, though some of these authors' works are available in their own right.

It also seems to me that we're moving into a time in which the 20<sup>th</sup> century becomes an era which can be considered 'historically' (which I think has a lot to do with treating authors as having produced completed oeuvres) and in which the voices of women began to have a more immediate impact on mainstream conversations in academic philosophy (especially where 'philosophy' isn't individuated by academic discipline boundaries).

Figures like Hannah Arendt and Simone de Beauvoir (I suspect also Ayn Rand), and closer to home, Elizabeth Anscombe, Iris Murdoch and Philippa Foot already look like serious candidates for inclusion in the histories of this period when they are written.

And this raises interesting issues about how we might approach the role that the present is playing in how the future canon will look.