

◆ **F**eminist
Contentions

A Philosophical Exchange



Seyla Benhabib

Judith Butler

Drucilla Cornell

Nancy Fraser

Introduction by Linda Nicholson

Feminist Contentions

Thinking Gender

Edited by Linda Nicholson

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A Note on the Text

“Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance,” by Seyla Benhabib; “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism,’” by Judith Butler; and “False Antitheses,” by Nancy Fraser were first published in *Praxis International* 11 (2 July 1991). “Subjectivity, Historiography, and Politics,” by Seyla Benhabib; “For a Careful Reading,” by Judith Butler; “Rethinking the Time of Feminism,” by Drucilla Cornell; and “Pragmatism, Feminism, and the Linguistic Turn,” by Nancy Fraser were first published in German in *Der Streit um Differenz: Feminismus und Postmoderne in der Gegenwart* (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1993); they appear here in English for the first time.

Introduction

Linda Nicholson

This volume is a conversation among four women, originating in a symposium organized by the Greater Philadelphia Philosophy Consortium in September 1990. The announced topic was feminism and postmodernism. The original speakers were Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler with Nancy Fraser as respondent. The selection of this particular group was not accidental. While these three theorists had much in common—a well-established body of writing in feminist theory influenced by past work in continental philosophy—these three were also noted for relating to this topic in different ways. This conjunction of similarity and difference combined with the reputation of each as a powerful theorist seemed to ensure a noteworthy debate. And because that was the consequence, the papers of the symposium were published in the journal *Praxis International* (11:2 July 1991). Following this publication, a decision was made to extend the discussion: to include a contribution from Drucilla Cornell, to have each of the now “gang of four” responding to each other’s original paper, and to publish the whole as a book. The volume was first published as *Der Streit um Differenz* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1993). This volume marks the appearance of a somewhat altered version of this collection in English.

The above depicts only some of the structural features of this volume; it provides the reader with no sense of its content. But articulating the content of this volume is a particularly challenging task, for reasons best understood through considering a few things the volume is not. For one, this volume is not an anthology on the present state of

feminist theory. In 1995, for a collection of essays and responses written by four white women from the United States who come out of a certain tradition within a particular discipline to claim to represent “feminist theory” would represent a kind of arrogance each of these women would vehemently reject. Consequently, this volume makes no claim to provide any kind of overview on contemporary feminist theory. Nor even does it claim to provide a state-of-the-art discussion of “the relationship of feminism and postmodernism.” Though the phrase “feminism and postmodernism” was used to advertise the original symposium, disagreement soon emerged over the usefulness of the term “postmodernism” as each differently put forth her views on how the discussion should best be described. Thus, a major source of the difficulty I, as introducer, face in telling you, the reader, “what this volume is about” is that partly defining this discussion are differing views on “what this discussion is about.” In this respect, this volume is not like an anthology where the topic has been determined in advance and where each of the contributors is asked to speak on it. But this distinctive feature of this volume, combined with the complexity and richness of the ideas expressed, makes any attempt at abstract characterization of the subject matter of this volume problematic, particularly before you, the reader, have any sense of what the authors themselves are saying. Consequently, before I interject my own perspectives on “what this volume is about,” let me first provide some brief summarizations of the initial contributions.

Benhabib responded to the original symposium theme by situating the relation of feminism and postmodernism within broader cultural trends. For Benhabib, the present time is one in which some of the reigning traditions of western culture are being undermined. While Benhabib sees much about these traditions which need to be abandoned, she also views some formulations of this overhaul as eliminating too much. Consequently, a major purpose of her original essay was to separate out that which feminists ought to reject from that which we need to retain. Borrowing from Jane Flax’s claims about certain key tenets of postmodernism, Benhabib elaborates this separation in relation to the following three theses: the death of man, the death of history, and the death of metaphysics. Benhabib argues that all of these theses can be articulated in both weak and strong versions. The weak versions offer grounds for feminist support. However, Benhabib claims that in so far as postmodernism has come to be equated with the strong formulations of these theses, it represents that which we ought to reject.

Thus, from her perspective, it is more than appropriate that feminists reject the western philosophical notion of a transcendent subject, a self thematized as universal and consequently as free from any contingencies of difference. Operating under the claim that it was speaking on behalf of such a “universal” subject, the western philosophical tradition articulated conceptions deeply affected by such contingencies. The feminist take on subjectivity which Benhabib supports would thus recognize the deep embeddedness of all subjects within history and culture. Similarly, Benhabib welcomes critiques of those notions of history which lead to the depiction of historical change in unitary and linear modes. It is appropriate that we reject those “grand narratives” of historical change which are monocausal and essentialist. Such narratives effectively suppress the participation of dominated groups in history and of the historical narratives such groups provide. And, finally, Benhabib supports feminist skepticism towards that understanding of philosophy represented under the label of “the metaphysics of presence.” While Benhabib believes that here the enemy tends to be an artificially constructed one, she certainly supports the rejection of any notion of philosophy which construes this activity as articulating transcultural norms of substantive content.

But while there are formulations of “the death of man,” “the death of history,” and “the death of metaphysics” which Benhabib supports, there are also formulations of these theses which she considers dangerous. A strong formulation of “the death of man” eliminates the idea of subjectivity altogether. By so doing, it eliminates those ideals of autonomy, reflexivity, and accountability which are necessary to the idea of historical change. Similarly, Benhabib claims that certain formulations of the death of history negate the idea of emancipation. We cannot replace monocausal and essentialist narratives of history with an attitude towards historical narrative which is merely pragmatic and fallibilistic. Such an attitude emulates the problematic perspectives of “value free” social science; like the latter, it eliminates the ideal of emancipation from social analysis. And, finally, Benhabib rejects that formulation of “the death of metaphysics” which entails the elimination of philosophy. She argues that philosophy provides the means for clarifying and ordering one’s normative principles that cannot be obtained merely through the articulation of the norms of one’s culture. Her argument here is that since the norms of one’s culture may be in conflict, one needs higher-order principles to resolve such conflict. Also, she claims that there will be times when one’s own culture will not necessarily provide those norms which are most

needed. Philosophy again is necessary to provide that which one's culture cannot.

In general, Benhabib's worry about the strong formulations of these three theses is that they undermine the possibility of *critical* theory, that is, theory which examines present conditions from the perspective of utopian visions. Her belief is that much of what has been articulated under the label of postmodernism ultimately generates a quietistic stance. In short, for Benhabib, certain political/theoretical stances—specifically those which are governed by ideals and which critically analyze the status quo in the light of such ideals—require distinctively philosophical presuppositions, presuppositions which are negated by many formulations of postmodernism.

Judith Butler's concerns, however, are of a very different nature. Butler focuses her attention not on what we need philosophically in order to engage in emancipatory politics, but on the political effects of making claims to the effect that certain philosophical presuppositions *are* required for emancipatory politics. Such a focus reflects her general inclination to inquire about the political effects of the claims that we make and of the questions that we raise. She points to some of the problems involved in the very question: "What is the relation of feminism and postmodernism?" noting that the ontological status of the term "postmodernism" is highly vague; the term functions variously as an historical characterization, a theoretical position, a description of an aesthetic practice and a type of social theory. In light of this vagueness, Butler suggests that we instead ask about the political consequences of using the term: what effects attend its use? And her analysis of such effects are mixed. On the one hand, Butler sees the invocation of the term "postmodernism" as often functioning to group together writers who would not see themselves as so allied. Moreover, many of its invocations appear to accompany a warning about the dangers of problematizing certain claims. Thus, it is frequently used to warn that "the death of the subject" or "the elimination of normative foundations" means the death of politics. But Butler argues: is not the result of such warnings to ensure that opposition to certain claims be construed as nonpolitical? And does not that in turn serve to hide the contingency and specific form of politics embodied in those positions claiming to encompass the very field of politics? Thus, questions about whether "politics stands or falls with the elimination of normative foundations" or "the death of the subject" frequently masks an implicit commitment to a certain kind of politics.

If Butler sees any positive effects of the use of the term “postmodernism,”—and the term she better understands is “poststructuralism”—it is to show how power infuses “the very conceptual apparatus that seeks to negotiate its terms.” Here her argument should not be interpreted as a simple rejection of foundations, for she states that “theory posits foundations incessantly, and forms implicit metaphysical commitments as a matter of course, even when it seeks to guard against it.” Rather it is against that theoretical move which attempts to cut off from debate the foundations it has laid down and to remove from awareness the exclusions made possible by the establishment of those foundations.

The task then for contemporary social theory committed to strong forms of democracy is to bring into question any discursive move which attempts to place itself beyond question. And one such move Butler draws our attention to is that which asserts the authorial “I” as the bearer of positions and the participant of debate. While not advocating that we merely stop referring to “the subject,” she does advocate that we question its use as a taken-for-granted starting point. For in doing so, we lose sight of those exclusionary moves which are effected by *its* use. Particularly, we lose sight of how the subject itself is constituted by the very positions it claims to possess. The counter move here is not merely to understand specific “I’s” as situated within history; but more strongly, it is to recognize the very constitution of the “I” as an historical effect. This effect cannot be grasped by that “I” which takes itself as the originator of its action, a position Butler sees as most strikingly exemplified by the posture of the military in the Gulf war. Again, for Butler, the move here is not to reject the idea of the subject nor what it presupposes, such as agency, but rather to question how notions of subjectivity and of agency are used: who, for example, get to become subjects, and what becomes of those excluded from such constructions?

This position, raises, of course, the status of the subject of feminism. Butler looks at the claim that postmodernism threatens the subjectivity of women just when women are attaining subjectivity and questions what the attainment of subjectivity means for the category of “woman” and for the category of the feminist “we.” As she asks: “Through what exclusions has the feminist subject been constructed, and how do those excluded domains return to haunt the ‘integrity’ and ‘unity’ of the feminist ‘we’?” While not questioning the political necessity for feminists to speak as and for women, she argues that if

the radical democratic impetus of feminist politics is not to be sacrificed, the category “woman” must be understood as an open site of potential contest. Taking on asserted claims about “the materiality of women’s bodies” and “the materiality of sex,” as the grounds of the meaning of “woman,” she again looks to the political effects of the deployment of such phrases. And employing one of the insights developed by Michel Foucault and Monique Wittig, she notes that one such effect of assuming “the materiality of sex” is accepting that which sex imposes: “a duality and uniformity on bodies in order to maintain reproductive sexuality as a compulsory order.”

Thus, the concerns of Benhabib and Butler appear very different. Where Benhabib looks for the philosophical prerequisites to emancipatory politics, Butler questions the political effects of claims which assert such prerequisites. Are there ways in which the concerns of each can be brought together? Nancy Fraser believes that there are. While Fraser’s original essay was written as a response to the essays of Benhabib and Butler, one can see in it the articulation of a substantive set of positions on the issues themselves. This is a set of positions which Fraser views as resolving many of the problems which Benhabib and Butler identify with the stance of the other.

Many of Fraser’s criticisms of Benhabib’s essay revolve around how Benhabib has framed the available options; Fraser claims that the alternatives tend to be articulated too starkly with possible middle grounds overlooked. In relation to “the death of history,” Fraser agrees with Benhabib’s rejection of the conflict as that between an essentialist, monocausal view of history and one which rejects the idea of history altogether. However, she claims that Benhabib fails to consider a plausible middle-ground position: one which allows for a plurality of narratives, with some as possibly big and, all, of whatever size, as politically engaged. Fraser hypothesizes that Benhabib’s refusal to consider such an option stems from Benhabib’s belief in the necessity of some metanarrative grounding that engagement. Consequently, conflicts between her position and that of Benhabib’s around “the death of history” ultimately reduce to conflicts between the two concerning “the death of metaphysics.”

Whereas Benhabib asserts the need for a notion of philosophy going beyond situated social criticism, Fraser, pointing to the position articulated by her and myself in an earlier essay, questions such a need. Fraser claims that the arguments Benhabib advances for such a notion of philosophy are problematic, since the norms Benhabib

states are necessary for resolving intrasocial conflict or providing the exile with a means for critiquing her/his society must themselves be socially situated in nature. Consequently, if what is meant by philosophy is an “ahistorical, transcendent discourse claiming to articulate the criteria of validity for all other discourses,” then social criticism without philosophy is not only possible, it is all we can aim for.

Whereas it is through criticisms of Benhabib’s formulations of the options available around “the death of history” and “the death of metaphysics” that Fraser articulates her own position, it is through criticisms of Butler’s formulation of the options available around “the death of the subject” that Fraser’s ideas on this topic come forth. She agrees with Butler that to make the strong claim that subjects are constituted, not merely situated, is not necessarily to deny the idea of the subject as capable of critique. However, Fraser believes that there are aspects of Butler’s language, particularly, her preference for the term “re-signification” in lieu of “critique,” which eliminates the means for differentiating positive from negative change. Fraser sees the need for such differentiation in relation to several positions she views Butler as adopting from Foucault: that the constitution of the subjectivity of some entails the exclusion of others, that re-signification is good and that foundationalist theories of subjectivity are inherently oppressive. As Fraser questions: “But is it really the case that no one can become the subject of speech without others being silenced? . . . Is subject-authorization *inherently* a zero-sum game?” She notes that foundationalist theories of subjectivity—such as the one of Toussaint de l’Ouverture—can sometimes have emancipatory effects. Fraser believes that being able to differentiate the positive from negative effects of re-signification, processes of subjectification and of foundationalist theories of subjectivity requires the adoption of those critical-theoretical considerations which she views as absent from the kind of Foucauldian framework Butler adopts. Finally, Fraser believes that introducing these kinds of consideration would enable Butler to advance a more elaborated conception of liberation than is present in Butler’s discussion of feminist politics.

Fraser’s essay was developed as a response to the papers of Benhabib and Butler, as was demanded by the structure of the initial symposium. Drucilla Cornell’s essay, contributed after the symposium had taken place, is more of an independent articulation of her own position. Like Butler, Cornell questions the need for foundationalist principles. Instead, Cornell advocates that feminists adopt what

she describes as the ethical attitude, a stance that aims for a nonviolent relationship to the Other, which includes the Other within oneself. She notes that such an attitude has much in common with what Charles Peirce has described as fallibilism and musement, that is “an openness to challenge of one’s basic organization of the world” and “the stance of amazement before the mysteries and marvels of life that takes nothing for granted.” Like Butler, Cornell does not view this attitude as entailing a negation of principles. Instead she views it as representing a negation of the idea of fixed or ultimate principles.

Cornell views the ethical attitude as particularly central to the feminist project. She sees the reigning system of gender hierarchy generating fantasies of Woman which deny difference other than that enacted in its divide between the “good” and “bad” girl. For Cornell, the feminist project is made possible by the discrepancy between the diverse lived realities of women and the totalities which the fantasies construct. Thus, any claimed feminist project which speaks in the name of totality must represent merely another incarnation of the reigning fantasies.

Cornell elaborates these ideas through a reading of Lacan modified by Derrida. Lacan offers the insight that the category of “Woman” which operates within the realm of the symbolic cannot be fixed in relation to any ultimate ground of biology or of role. In short, there is for Lacan “no fixed signified for Woman within the masculine symbolic.” For Cornell, this insight provides us with an understanding of the transformative possibility of feminism. Because there is “no fixed signified for Woman within the masculine symbolic,” feminism can assert difference within the meaning of “Woman” against those tropes which deny it. Secondly, Cornell takes from Lacan the claim that the denial of the feminine within sexual difference serves as the ground of culture. Unlike those psychoanalytic narratives which situate the father and the child’s relationship to him as central to ego formation, Lacanian theory’s focus on the castrated Mother makes the issue of the resymbolization of the feminine the key to the overthrow of that which has been taken for “civilization.”

However, within the narrative offered by Lacanian theory, such a resymbolization is impossible. Women, whose signification within this story of psychic development is that of “lack,” can escape from the split image of good girl/bad girl presented to them only by attempting to appropriate the phallus, that is, by entering the boys’ club. A representation of feminism which attempts a resignification

of the feminine is ruled out. While Cornell sees much in this analysis which is helpful for explaining the difficulties feminism faces—i.e. that feminism *will* persistently encounter the move to place it on the side of the masculine—she also sees weaknesses in the theory whose correction would overcome the hopeless conclusion it generates.

Specifically, Cornell sees weaknesses in Lacan's claim that the bar to the resignation of the feminine is absolute. The bar is certainly there, which is why for Cornell, feminism is not easy. But, drawing on the work of Derrida and Wittgenstein, she notes that there is greater possibility of slippage in the signification of Woman than Lacan allows. We make possible such resignification in the act of mimetic identification as we expose the gap between the fantasies and images of Woman allowed to us and the complexities of the lives we lead.

The Questions From Here

But what now shall we say is the relation among these claims? How shall we describe the points of conflict and of these which shall we say are merely the products of misunderstanding and which shall we state represent genuine and interesting theoretical differences? There are no easy answers to these questions, as how one describes the issues of conflict and which one depicts as serious and interesting must in part depend on one's own theoretical stance. This phenomenon emerges in the responses where each author poses the differences between her own position and those of each of the others in complex ways. Rather than attempting to summarize these complexities, I would instead like to focus on certain themes which *I* see as interesting in the responses. From these themes I derive certain questions which I believe would move the discussion forward.

One productive conflict I identify in the responses is that between Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler around the issues of subjectivity and agency. As noted, Benhabib argued in her initial essay that Butler's position seems to disallow agency, that Butler's discussion of subject constitution suggests a very determinist approach. Benhabib elaborates this argument in her response by claiming that the way out of such determinism must involve some theoretical explanation of how agency becomes possible. And Benhabib claims that accounts which merely describe the historical processes of meaning constitution will not suffice. Also required are explanations of the develop-

ment of ontogenetic processes, that is explanations which elaborate the structural processes of individual socialization.

The question that I would like to pose to Benhabib is the following: What precisely do we need an account of the “structural processes of individual socialization” to do? Do we need such accounts because the processes by which individuals appear to assume subjectivity from infancy to adulthood appear different from the processes by which subjectivity is attained by groups across history? But if this is the case, that demand appears satisfiable merely by the development of different kinds of narratives of meaning constitution. But I sense that this would not suffice. Implicit in Benhabib’s demand seems the idea that there are processes involved in the attainment of individual subjectivity which are independent of historically specific, social interpretations. For that reason, accounts of the attainment of individual subjectivity must be different *in kind* from accounts which tell us how diverse groups have attained subjectivity across history. But, given the diversity in the ways in which societies seem to understand the relationship between childhood and adulthood, it is not clear to me that those accounts are so different in kind. In short, while I would agree with Benhabib that we do need theoretical explanations of how agency becomes possible, I am not sure why any of these need necessarily be of an “ontogenetic” or transcultural nature.

Benhabib’s claim that Butler’s discussion of subject constitution needs supplementation by some account of the “structural processes of individual socialization” gains part of its force, I believe, from certain ambiguities in Butler’s own remarks, ambiguities whose clarification would undermine the force of such a claim. Benhabib asks the question: “How can one be constituted by discourse without being determined by it?” She goes on to say that “the theory of performativity, even if Butler would like to distinguish gender-constitution from self-constitution, still presupposes a remarkably determinist view of individuation and socialization processes which fall short, when compared with currently available social scientific reflections of the subject.” Sometimes Butler appears to respond to such remarks by appealing to features of language, by noting, for example, that as the performative aspect of language constitutes subjects, so it also *reconstitutes* or *resignifies* that which had been constituted and in such resignification agency lies. Thus Butler notes that in *Gender Trouble* she suggested “that change and alteration is part of the very process of ‘performativity.’” Also, she states, “In this sense, discourse

is the horizon of agency, but also, performativity is to be rethought as resignification.” A problem I have with this kind of appeal is that it provides no means to distinguish or explain those instances of performativity which generate new kinds of significations from those which are merely repetitions of previous performative acts. But, there do seem times over the course of the history of societies that change appears more pronounced than at others. Moreover, over the course of individual lives, there also seem times—at least within contemporary cultures that I am familiar with—that change of a certain self-initiated nature appears more pronounced. Given the apparent poverty of a theory of language to account for changes of either kind, the need for other kinds of explanation emerges. Thus, in relation to the inability of a theory of language to account for such changes in individual lives, Benhabib can claim the necessity for other such theories, such as that of socialization.

But there are many other instances in Butler’s response that indicate that she does not in fact limit her account of agency to what a theory of language can provide. Butler frequently invokes the need to pay attention to specific historical contexts to explain the possibility of agency. For example, in speaking about gender performativity, she notes that deriving agency from the very power regimes which constitute us is *historical* work. Also, in opposing transcendental notions of the self, she notes that asking the question “what are the concrete conditions under which agency becomes possible” is “a very different question than the metaphysical one. . . .” What these latter remarks suggest to me is that for Butler it is not discourse or performativity per se which operate as “the horizon of agency” but rather certain kinds of discourse or certain kinds of performative acts. From my own perspective, the advantage of the latter appeal is not only that it enables us to distinguish those performative acts which function as repetitions from those which function as transformations, but that it also moves us to distinguish the conditions which support one as opposed to the other. In short, it enables one to respond to Benhabib’s justified demand for accounts of the possibility of agency, not with the claim that one does not need such accounts, but rather with the claim that one needs many. On such grounds, existing theories of socialization tend to be impoverished in so far as they too frequently assume that one is enough.

In short, I see Butler as employing two different kinds of responses to Benhabib’s objection; clarifying the relation of these responses to

each other would undermine the force of the objection. And I see the need for a similar clarification in relation to one of the questions which Fraser asks Butler. As earlier noted, Fraser, in her first essay, questions Butler as to whether subject constitution always produces at least some negative effects. I see the justification for this question in that Butler sometimes appears to attribute a certain inherent negativity to the exclusionary processes of subject constitution. For example, Butler, in her first essay, in arguing that subjects are constituted through exclusion, uses the example that certain qualifications must be met for one to be a claimant in sex discrimination or rape cases. Following the description of this example, Butler then states: "Here it becomes quite urgent to ask, who qualifies as a "who," what systematic structures of disempowerment make it impossible for certain injured parties to invoke the "I" effectively within a court of law?" I read this conjunction of statements to suggest that it is the exclusion itself, and not the effects of this specific exclusion within a certain context, which generates the importance of asking such questions. Similarly, shortly following these remarks she points approvingly to a clarification of Joan Scott that "once it is understood that subjects are formed through exclusionary operations, it becomes politically necessary to trace the operations of that construction and erasure." But this also seems to imply that it is the exclusionary operations per se which make the political questions appropriate.

Butler responds to Fraser's question in the following way. She states that she is misunderstood if she is taken as claiming that the exclusionary processes by which subjects are constructed are necessarily bad. Rather, for her, "the exclusionary formation of the 'subject' is neither good nor bad, but, rather a psychoanalytic premise which one might usefully employ in the service of a political critique." In addition, she states: "My argument is that 'critique,' to use Fraser's terms, always takes place *immanent* to the regime of discourse/power whose claims it seeks to adjudicate, which is to say that the practice of 'critique' is implicated in the very power-relations it seeks to adjudicate." I interpret these remarks to mean that for Butler, issues of good or bad are not appropriately about the construction of subjectivity per se but are immanent to specific discursive regimes. Consequently questions of politics are questions about the construction of specific subjects and the specific exclusions generated by their construction.