

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I. THE PROBLEM OF SUBJECTS AND OBJECTS IN MODERN THEORY

An issue lurks beneath the surface of contemporary feminist theory. It possesses different guises and traverses boundaries, from feminism's most conservative to its most radical thought. Although it concerns questions of moment, it has been gathering strength for centuries. The issue encompasses the old question of the nature of women and assumes, in its ultratemporary form, the question of *difference*. Are women really so different from men? Does it matter politically? What might be the basis of the politically significant differences between men and women? How do we know?

The question about how we know marks the point of departure of this book. Although it is easy enough to assume that there are significant differences between women and men, it is difficult to know what they are, beyond the obvious physical and biological appearances. Yet much of contemporary feminist theory regards the differences between men and women, and their social consequences, as settled. The prevailing feminist contention, which assumes a variety of political shapes, is that women are somehow more at peace with nature than are men, experience less metaphysical angst, less tension between "inside" and "outside." The meaning of inside and outside, which changes depending upon the interest of the theorist, may focus upon the relationship between mind and the world, abstract and concrete, reason and emotion, thought and action, consciousness and history, or theory and praxis. Some argue that men experi-

ence the world dichotomously while women travel more easily between different arenas of life. Women live in a world with soft borders; the division between self and the world is easy and permeable. Men, in contrast, live in a harshly divided world, isolated from each other and their environment. It is sometimes even supposed that the notion of divided arenas of life is an entirely male construct.

Problems exist in all of the work I have read on the concept of gender difference. Even assuming that the descriptions of difference are accurate, the theories are all laden with unexplored assumptions about the sources of the difference. Although the concept of feminine "nature" (or "human nature") is somewhat archaic to a twentieth-century theorist, the notion of difference seems to call for discussion of that concept. Are the differences between men and women "natural," or are they the result of environment and history? Is nature itself, perhaps, a part of history? To build a political theory around the concept of difference, one must surely have some ideas about the basis of difference. The contention that men and women experience existence differently involves metaphysical questions about what existence in the world is like, as well as epistemological questions about how one knows anything about the world or oneself. How can one know what another person experiences?

The terms I prefer to use to address these questions are *subjectivity* and *objectivity*. They are sufficiently general to be flexible about the problem of division that contemporary feminists have come to associate with men. They may be used to address a problem that has preoccupied philosophers and metaphysicians for millennia, and that may be described as puzzlement over an apparent gap between the tangible world and our ability to know about it. Hannah Arendt regards this problem as particularly poignant in the modern age, concerning doubt about whether we can trust our own senses. In *The Human Condition* Arendt associates this relatively recent phenomenon, which she calls "world alienation," with modern loss of the stability of the objective world. The loss is characterized by a breakdown of the boundaries that once made the world, in Arendt's view, a more habitable place: private and public spaces, a stable objective world to survive generations of people and to "stand against"

nature. Alienation, for Arendt, is associated with the loss of secure divisions between household and political life, the loss of anything in the world that is expected to last beyond the lifetime of a single generation. In her terms, this amounts to relinquishment of the objective world, which carries an enormous psychological price. She believes that being human involves the creation of permanence external to human beings. She reminds us of the etymology of the word *objective*. It means “stand against.”

It is this durability which gives the things of the world their relative independence from men who produced and use them, their “objectivity” which makes them withstand, “stand against” and endure, at least for a time, the voracious needs and wants of their living makers and users. From this viewpoint, the things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life, and their objectivity lies in the fact that—in contradiction to the Heraclitean saying that the same man can never enter the same stream—men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table. In other words, against the subjectivity of men stands the objectivity of the man-made world rather than the “sublime indifference of an untouched nature.”¹

Along with the loss of boundaries to divide the world, Arendt believes that the particularity of basic human activities has disappeared. Not only have formerly distinct public and private arenas become one ill-defined place (referred to by Arendt as “the social”), but the distinction between *labor*, *work*, and *action*—activities that always used to characterize human life—has become blurred. Of the three, labor, the least peculiarly human, has come to dominate our lives. Labor is cyclical, duplicating biological rhythms. It may have a beginning point, but it has no defined end. In contrast, work is something that distinguishes people from animals. It has a starting and an ending point, and leaves something that lasts. It is the activity of hands and tools. Action is the most distinctly human of the three, according to Arendt. It leaves deeds that can be remembered and talked about, also regarded by Arendt as things permanent. From

Arendt's perspective, the terms can be distinguished most readily when regarded objectively, rather than subjectively. A loaf of bread is a product of labor: it will quickly decay whether or not it is used (consumed). A pair of shoes is an example of a product of work: it may be expected to last, if used properly or if not used at all. The difference between a day spent baking or making shoes is not as significant as the difference between the products, between what is contributed to the world.

The products of work are introjections into the cyclicity of the natural world, as are the results of action, whereas labor itself is cyclical, and natural. In Arendt's view, human beings define themselves by the permanence they impose upon natural cyclicity. Regrettably, we have become a world of laborers and consumers and have lost the comfort of permanence in life. We have acquiesced in the reduction of everything to cycles of production and consumption, lost the firmness of the division between private and public. We expect everything to dissolve before our eyes, expect shoes to go out of style before they wear out, to be as transient in our lives as bread. Instead of acting, asserting ourselves upon the world, we simply *behave* according to predicted norms. Acting is a uniquely public capacity; behaving according to predictable routines is what people normally do in the privacy of their own household. Animals also behave; only human beings are capable of action. The decline of both private and public, and their replacement with the social means that behavior, not action, is dominant. This confusion between what is public and what is private robs people of the capacity to act. The rise of social science, the study of predictable mass behavior, is an indication of what we have lost.

Loss of the objective world is what defines alienation, according to Arendt. An overemphasis on intangible, fleeting human experience—subjectivity—is another way to describe what she regards as unnerving about modern life. Arendt traces the rise of subjectivism (or the centrality of subjectivity) to Descartes. "I think therefore I am" is not a statement about epistemological certainty, but rather about a last refuge taken from the increasingly unlivable world. It is a statement revealing profound uncertainty, doubt, a modern scepticism about the reliability of the world. It is descriptive of modern alienation. Galileo's

discovery by means of a telescope (a product of work) that the earth was not the center of the universe contributed to conditions that permitted the rise of Cartesian doubt. People could no longer trust their senses or their reason; appearances were no longer to be relied upon. What had appeared obvious to the naked eye—that the sun revolves around the earth—was, if Galileo was to be believed, now proven false. The startling discovery that one could no longer trust one's senses overshadowed the dichotomy between reason and the senses that had previously characterized the world.

The old opposition of sensual and rational truth, of the inferior truth capacity of the senses and the superior capacity of reason, paled beside this challenge, beside the obvious implication that neither truth nor reality is given, that neither of them appears as it is, and that only interference with appearance, doing away with appearances, can hold out a hope for true knowledge.²

The response to Galileo's discovery was thus not exultation but doubt, "that 'school of suspicion' as Nietzsche once called it," and an accompanying rise of introspection and loss of common sense.³ However, introspection is thought thinking about itself, cut off from rather than responding to the reality of the external, objective world. It is a description of an overriding subjectivism. "The poignancy of Descartes' doubt is fully realized only if one understands that the new discoveries dealt an even more disastrous blow to human confidence in the world and in the universe than is indicated by a clear-cut separation of being and appearance."⁴

According to Hannah Arendt, then, we live in a world dominated not by objectivity and dichotomy but by subjectivism and a loss of the very distinctions that modern feminists would call dichotomies. Our feeling of unease in our own world is the result of a lack of clarity, crispness, between our internal, subjective existence and our objective "being-in-the-world." This line of thinking runs counter both to other "male" descriptions of modern alienation and to most contemporary feminist theory as well. For example, Marx's theory of alienation, of which Arendt is

explicitly critical in *The Human Condition*, offers a description of alienation that is nearly the inverse of Arendt's. To Marx, alienation is characterized by a forced dichotomy between a human subject and the objects of labor. Alienation results when human energy is infused into the material, objective world, in the form of products of labor, and then, because of specific historical conditions, is withheld from the person whose energy has been captured in them. Alienation is the loss of objectivity, but that loss is material; the worker has lost control over the world she produces. Alienation in capitalist society is characterized by a hostile confrontation between subject and object.

Marx's concept of alienation and his ideas about the relationship between subjects and objects will be discussed in detail further on. They are noted here to emphasize the importance in modern thought of the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, terms that may be used to describe the modern problem of "alienation." Although alienation has been used to describe a psychological state more often than a political problem, it may also be useful in elucidating aspects of political oppression itself. It is certainly related to feminist concerns. The meaning of and relationship between subjects and objects, subjectivity and objectivity, have been increasingly central to efforts to construct the basis of a feminist theory: a feminist epistemology.

II. CONTEMPORARY FEMINISM: SUBJECTS AND OBJECTS, EQUALITY AND DIFFERENCE

If contemporary feminist theorists are in agreement about anything, it is that dichotomies are anathema to feminism. However, contemporary feminists are less explicit about the nature of these troublesome dichotomies. Sometimes the difficulty seems to lie more with objectivity, sometimes with subjectivity. On other occasions "dichotomous" thinking itself is regarded as incompatible with feminist theory, and a world "divided" into subjects and objects is considered suspect. In the immediately following pages, I shall explore feminist use of the terminology meant to indicate the problem with dichotomous thinking. My purpose is not to defend a divided and alienated world but rather to question whether doing away with conventional cate-

gories of analysis is prerequisite to formulating an epistemology for feminism. The fact that both radical and conservative feminists share a mistrust of dichotomies is in itself worthy of inquiry. It assumes that a link exists between epistemology and political content, but a single epistemological tendency is criticized, while the political conclusions drawn from it are quite different. Can dichotomous thinking then be held responsible for inhibiting development of a political theory compatible with feminism? Is an emphasis on objectivity, whatever that may mean, incompatible with feminist substance? What about subjectivity? Indeed, is there any correlation between the epistemological structure and the political substance of a theory?

In this book, the links between structure and substance in theorizing about politics will be explored in detail. In the overview of existing feminist positions that follows, I shall argue that the link between epistemology and politics has been insufficiently explored, permitting unwarranted and unconscious assumptions about what those links might be. I do not intend to engage in technical quibbling about some obscure methodological point. I believe that existing feminist theory, whether radical or conservative, that concerns itself with problems about subjects and objects, dichotomies and unities, assumes that the way things are is the result of male thinking. That is, objectivity is male, or subjectivity is male, or dichotomies themselves are male. Women would not have brought the world to its current deplorable state because women think differently than men.

The two directions that can be taken from this assumed starting point are, in my view, equally undesirable. Either one must conclude that women are fundamentally different from men, which assumes some theory of nature, also usually inadequately addressed by contemporary feminist thought, or one can assume that the way the world is currently conceived, that is, the epistemology before the men who use it, is responsible for political circumstances that have oppressed women (and in a different way, men) and so must be changed. The former offers no real opportunity for change because it tacitly accepts concepts of masculine and feminine nature while overlooking what the basis of that nature might be. At best, it offers a change in leadership: "If women were in charge, things would be better, or at least dif-

ferent.” In its most conservative form, the former view may argue that women’s domain has been undervalued throughout and history ought to be taken more seriously without, however, suggesting any formal change in the power arrangements to which society has become accustomed. By bringing the matter to public attention, the assumption is that people will come to recognize that the private sphere with its intimacy, nurturance, unity, is valuable on its own. The “male sphere,” however, is still characterized by competition, aggression, individuation, warfare, etc., while the female sphere is not.

The alternative to assuming that men are just plain different from women, the assumption that a dichotomizing epistemology itself is conducive to oppressive politics and creates hierarchies, contains its own problems. I am in general agreement up to this point: some epistemologies have created difficulties for women. Instead of focusing on what it is about the relationship between subject and object that creates the difficulties—usually described by feminists in terms of dichotomies or hierarchies—feminist theorists have either sought to include women as subjects without questioning the epistemology itself (de Beauvoir), or have attempted to abandon the categories subjectivity and/or objectivity altogether, leaving an unnerving absence of structure in their wake (deconstructionist feminists). More specifically, Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, identified an epistemological problem that had gone unrecognized since the Enlightenment: the problem with mainstream epistemology and its substantive outcome is “homocentrism,” the assumed centrality of the male subject. The modern discovery of the individual, which facilitated or accompanied the rise of liberalism, assumes that the individual is male. The centrality of the male subject in post-Enlightenment thought assumes a dichotomy between subject and object. Women, when thought about at all, are assumed to be objects.⁵ In the beginning, if we attribute the origin of contemporary feminist theory to de Beauvoir, was the male subject. While de Beauvoir is critical of this asymmetrical and hierarchical view of the world, she is not particularly critical of the subject-object split per se, but only of the male monopoly of subjectivity. She herself is not really a theorist of difference, but the French deconstructionist feminists who claim to be following and going beyond her theories

are, and would completely eliminate subjects and objects from philosophical vernacular.

The other side of the "epistemology-as-problem" stance assumes objectivity rather than "the male subject" as the problem. The concept of "male objectivity" involves both the making of women into objects and the assumption that truth resides in the world "out there," calling for the withdrawal of subjective, personal involvement. Catharine MacKinnon is one theorist who has written powerfully against the concept of objectivity, which she regards as a "male construct," and against the usefulness of the categories subjectivity and objectivity altogether. In her provocative two-part article, "Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State,"⁶ MacKinnon argues that "The male epistemological stance, which corresponds to the world it creates, is objectivity: the ostensibly uninvolved stance, the view from a distance and from no particular perspective apparently transparent to its reality. It does not comprehend its own perspectivity, does not recognize what it sees as subjective like itself..." (1:24).

She does not, however, adequately distinguish between epistemological objectivity and political objectification. She seems to assume that the former invariably leads to the latter: "Objectivity, as the epistemological stance of which objectification is the social process, creates the reality it apprehends by defining as knowledge the reality it creates through its way of apprehending it" (2:636).⁷ If she is critical of objectivity, neither does MacKinnon focus upon the desirability of subjectivity. Although psychological distance, not only from what is studied but from oneself, is the problem created by objectivity, MacKinnon tacitly assumes that where there is objectivity there must also be subjectivity, for the two concepts constitute parts of the same whole. Each one assumes a dichotomist stance. The methodology appropriate for feminism transcends the partiality of both objectivity and subjectivity.

Having been objectified as sexual beings while stigmatized as ruled by subjective passions, women reject the distinction between subjective and objective postures—as the means to comprehend social life. Disaffected from objectivity, having been its prey but excluded from its world through relegation

to subjective inwardness, women's interest lies in overthrowing the distinction itself. (1:22)

In transcending the partiality of both subjectivity and objectivity, MacKinnon also paradoxically envisions the possibility of overcoming the impulse to universalize. The specifically feminist method she seeks will stand outside all traditional categories of epistemology.

Feminism does not see its view as subjective, partial, or undetermined but as a critique of the purported generality, disinterestedness, and universality of prior accounts. These have not been half right, but have involved the wrong whole. Feminism not only challenges masculine particularity, but questions the universality imperative itself. Aperspectivity is revealed as a strategy of male hegemony. (1:23)

Although MacKinnon does not define the terms *subjectivity*, *objectivity*, *objectification*, or *universality* with particular precision, on the whole she seems to be arguing that women, or at least feminists, would not divide the world into subjects and objects but rather would (naturally?) utilize a more unified epistemological stance. In her view, subjectivity seems to be associated with passivity and internality. Objects are associated with activity, externality, and also with tangibility, for in this work she argues that Marx's materialism is as objectivist as liberal empiricism. But objectivity as MacKinnon uses the term is also associated with "the universality imperative." That is, objectivity has to do both with tangible materiality and with aperspectivity; psychological distance, which encourages thinking in terms of universals, gives one the false confidence that it is possible to stand upon an Archimedean point and lift the entire world.

The problems MacKinnon discusses in this work and others⁸ are recognizable and have certainly caused difficulties for women. Whether feminists would necessarily think any differently is another matter, for she does not suggest *why* the world divided into subjects and objects is invariably male. The point to be noted in this context, however, is that the difficulties are associated with both objectivity and dichotomous thinking.

Of the two feminist critiques of subjectivity and objectivity discussed so far, de Beauvoir is considered a “moderate” because she accepts the dualist categories subjectivity and objectivity, desiring only to include women as subjects. This stance anticipates the androgyny argument of liberal feminism: women should simply be included in all aspects of public life, regardless of the injustices, inequalities, and economic and racial hierarchies upon which liberal capitalism rests. By refusing to acknowledge that there may be politically significant differences between men and women, it tacitly advocates the “superwoman syndrome.” A privileged class of women expect themselves to “do everything”: succeed at a professional career, marriage, childbearing and child rearing, on a model of a male life pattern (or “career curve”) without public support in the form of federal- or state-funded maternity leaves, childcare, etc. The liberal feminist stance has most recently been referred to in feminist discourse as the argument for “equality.” In contrast, the argument for difference assumes that politically significant differences exist between men and women. This stance has become more acceptable to feminists recently and enlists both more radical and more conservative spokeswomen. The difference between radical and conservative is often blurred, although it is related to the sort of solution advocated, and probably also to the amount of anger displayed in writing. MacKinnon is an example of a radical, although she declines to modify feminism with any adjectives at all.

On the conservative side of the difference question is, for example, Carol Gilligan. Her book *In a Different Voice* received a lot of attention when it was first published, arguing as it does that girls and boys have very different perceptions of their relationship to the world. Gilligan, a psychologist, studied the process of moral decision making, taking as her point of departure a well-known scale of moral reasoning developed by Harvard psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg. She argues that the methods used by Kohlberg and his associates, specifically the ranked hierarchy of levels of moral reasoning, assume standards of thinking that are specifically male. Excellence, or a high rating on the moral reasoning scale, involves characteristics that, for whatever reason, are male. Male moral reasoning involves the capacity to “individuate,” to create distance between the self and the prob-

lem, and the capacity to think abstractly, in terms of impersonal rights. The alternative, which Gilligan argues is more characteristic of girls and women, is to become involved, reasoning in terms of personal responsibility to another person.

Although Gilligan doesn't specifically use the vocabulary of subjectivity and objectivity, it is evident that her thinking is compatible with that vocabulary, and that the difference between men and women has something to do with the relationship between self and other, inside and outside, subjectivity and objectivity. She suggests that women perceive the world as more connected to themselves than do men. The distinction between the male and female voices she hears has to do with "two modes of describing the relationship between other and self."⁹ Because women are less inclined to see a clear-cut separation between self and other, they are more reluctant to make decisions based upon abstract moral standards. In a psychological experiment designed to test the process of moral decision making, this tendency may appear as an inability or an unwillingness to distance oneself from a situation—that is, to reason in conventionally abstract (male) terms.¹⁰

The ability to reason abstractly, to differentiate oneself from others, is in our society defined as adulthood itself. Gilligan argues that such a conception of adulthood is gendered, and specifically male: "When the focus of individuation and individual achievement extends into adulthood and maturity is equated with personal autonomy, concern with relationships appears as a weakness of women rather than as a human strength" (17). Without elaborating on the possible origins of this difference, Gilligan notes that women approach situations differently than men:

Sensitivity to the needs of others and the assumption of responsibility for taking care lead women to attend to voices other than their own and to include in their judgement other points of view. Women's moral weakness, manifest in an apparent diffusion and confusion of judgement, is thus inseparable from women's moral strength, an overriding concern with relationships and responsibilities. The reluctance to judge may itself be indicative of the care and concern for others that infuse the psychology of women's development and are responsible for what is generally seen as problematic in its nature. (16, 17)

Gilligan describes an alternative to the male model of adulthood. Female maturity involves the ability to think in terms of the needs of others, rather than in terms of individuation and autonomy. It operates in a concrete rather than an abstract mode, judging a particular situation in terms of the individuals involved, rather than in terms of abstract theories about justice or equality. Women make decisions that affect other people by thinking in terms of networks of relationships, rather than hierarchies of values.

The difficulty with Gilligan's work is that she does not elaborate, does not offer a theory about how women came to be the way they are. She claims to be offering a description rather than an analysis. At one point she suggests that she is only highlighting a form of moral reasoning that has been overlooked, and that may not be directly related to gender: "The different voice I describe is characterized not by gender but theme. Its association with women is an empirical observation, and it is primarily through women's voices that I trace its development" (2). There is something unsatisfactory, or at least incomplete, about offering a description of so fundamental a difference between men and women while declining to suggest how the difference might have arisen or even whether it really applies only to women. Gilligan mentions that women have been nurturers and seems to imply, however vaguely, that that womanly experience is the source of the difference. Woman's role is devalued in a male-dominated society that views separation and individuation as key developmental tasks, and autonomy and individual achievement as its major values. Does Gilligan mean to imply that the difference between male and female reasoning is desirable? Indeed, how specifically female is it? Is it possible to change it? Is it biological or sociological in origin?

Gilligan is close to assuming a theory about feminine nature without recognizing what she is doing, or taking responsibility for the implications. The problems involved with tacit assumptions about nature in a theory about "the way women are" will be discussed more fully in chapter 3, on John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*. What one does with the "simple observation" that women are different from men in a given way has much to do with what one assumes about the origins of the dif-

ference. To suggest that a particular trait is just plain *there*, that it makes little difference anymore how it came to be, is an example of the ahistoricity of liberal thought. The empiricist believes that she is merely describing what she sees, but acknowledged differences between men and women have proven particularly destructive to women. When not used as an excuse for exclusion, or a polite description of inferiority, they have been the basis of romanticized notions about feminine characteristics. Difference has provided the basis of hierarchy in the past and should be treated with delicacy and wariness by feminists.

There are other examples of theories about women's greater capacity to experience the world as connected to themselves. Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering* presents separation and individuation as specifically male developmental problems because girls identify with their mothers and are encouraged to maintain a sense of connection with both the mother and others, who characterize the bonds of infancy and childhood.¹¹ Sigmund Freud and traditional psychologists viewed the maintenance of childhood bonds as the source of weak ego boundaries. Chodorow and other feminist psychologists view the identification with the mother as a source of strength: the capacity for empathy with others.

Dorothy Dinnerstein in *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* makes a similar point, although she is more explicit about the problems that accompany the inability of girls and women to see themselves as separate and autonomous.¹² She comes closer, I think, to presenting an argument for equality rather than difference between men and women when she suggests that it places an impossible burden on women to be singularly associated with the extraordinary dependency of infancy. Dependency inevitably translates into ambivalence toward women in general, because everybody grows, and growth necessarily entails separation and independence, which is both painful and exhilarating. The person who serves as a background for, or the most involved witness to, growth is bound to be the recipient of both anger and gratitude, hatred and love. The other parent, the one who represents the outside world, apart from infancy, will receive extraordinary admiration and fear. Neither parent should bear the weight of such complicated unconscious associations. Dinnerstein empha-

sizes the importance of both male and female contact with the infant in order to prevent the perpetuation of unconscious association of infancy wholly with one sex or the other. Women should not have the burden of representing empathy and lack of individuation in a society that doesn't publicly value those traits; nor should men have the burden of representing autonomy and independence in society, with all the associated responsibilities. No woman is as powerful as the infant's conception of her mother; no man is as powerful as the child expects her father to be. Whomever the infant encounters first, however, will be the basis of the more powerful associations because of the strength of that first, primal bond. What is called for is a redistribution of primal associations in order to defuse exaggerated attitudes about both sexes. That is, difference may amount to a skewing or exaggeration of traits associated with masculinity and femininity, which is likely to lead to hierarchy.

I find Dinnerstein's argument promising (in spite of its assumption of the heterosexual nuclear family as a norm in society) precisely for its emphasis on the importance of a more equitable distribution of what society regards as masculine and feminine characteristics. She is fairly clear about the *sources* of the differences that can be observed between male and female behavior: they are rooted in the unconscious, rather than any vaguely alluded to concept of nature, and hence can be changed only by changing an infant's primal, unconscious associations with female and male, mother and father. Too often, the feminist theories that rest upon a conception of difference simply avoid discussion of the sources of difference and its implications.

Consider one more example of a feminist theory of difference whose neglect of the basis of difference leads to precisely the same uncertainty that Gilligan displayed when she acknowledged that she might not even be describing a difference unique to women but rather a "theme," or a tendency, characteristic of some women and some men. Sara Ruddick in her article "Maternal Thinking" argues that mothers possess special qualities that have been overlooked and undervalued by society because they have been wrongly regarded as emotional rather than cognitive. Ruddick's purpose is to demonstrate that one important aspect of mothering is in fact *thinking*. She identifies three qualities associ-

ated with motherhood, which call for conscious, intellectual thought. "I speak about a mother's *thought*—the intellectual capacities she develops, the judgements she makes, the metaphysical attitudes she assumes, the values she affirms. A mother engages in a discipline. That is, she asks certain questions rather than others; establishes criteria for the truth, adequacy, and relevance of proposed answers; and cares about the findings she makes and can act upon."¹³ The three characteristics of maternal thinking, reasons Ruddick, are interest in the preservation, growth, and acceptability of the child.¹⁴ Her description of mothering is poignant, insightful, and interesting, but it soon becomes unclear whether she is actually describing mothers, or even women only. In a single confusing page (346), she suggests (1) that identifying anything with "womanly" is an invitation to oppressive misuse: "Our current gender dichotomies are rigid and damaging. Praising cultures of oppression comes close to praising oppression itself"; (2) that one needn't be a mother to be capable of "maternal thinking": "Maternal thinking is only one example of 'womanly thinking'. . . . For me, 'maternal' is a social category: Although maternal thinking arises out of actual child-caring practices, biological parenting is neither necessary nor sufficient. Many women and some men express maternal thinking in various kinds of working and caring with others"; (3) that women are after all different from men: "Maternal thought does, I believe, exist for all women in a radically different way than for men"; and finally, once again, (4) that women are not after all so different from men: "Along with biology, I put aside all accounts of gender difference or maternal nature which would claim an essential and ineradicable difference between female and male parents."

Maternal or not, this is an example of confused thinking! What can Ruddick be talking about? Does she mean to say that women are different from men or not? Is the difference biologically or socially rooted? There are probably no definitive answers to these questions, but that doesn't save a theorist from obligation to be clear about what is being assumed, and what the implications of a given stance may be. If an argument for difference is to be made, a theorist must establish the basis of that difference. If the difference to be focused upon is biological, what are the social implications? Does bearing children account for

the difference in a woman's relation to the world? How exactly can the relationship be characterized? Are women more at peace with the world, less aware of tension between self and other? Are women more a "life force," who would not, for example, have thought of making war, or of inventing weapons? What about the wild protectiveness of female animals for their helpless young? Or the willingness of some animals to abandon their young? Perhaps, ironically, motherhood gives rise to a tendency towards aggression? In that case, a feminist theorist ought to consult a biologist, or a geneticist, to find out about sources of aggression or the lack of it in hormones, genes, etc.¹⁵

Then, too, if Ruddick means to suggest motherhood as the source of the difference between women and men, how do women who are not biological mothers fit in? Is womanhood to be reduced to maternity? If adoptive mothers, for example, behave toward their children in much the same way as biological mothers, shouldn't the possibility also be considered that fathers, biological or adoptive, might be capable of similar or identical relationships with their children? Perhaps the difference is physiological more than biological or genetic. Perhaps living in a male body is so different from living in a female body that behavior is affected. But how do we know? If it cannot be established even probabilistically, does it make any sense to focus on difference?

Obviously, I do not think much is accomplished by focusing upon the differences between women and men. Thinking in those terms, even if carefully done, leads inevitably to a theory of nature, and I do not think it is possible to establish once and for all a theory of immutable human, feminine, or masculine nature. It makes more sense to me to focus on the possible similarities between men and women if the relationship between the sexes is to change significantly from what it has been. If men believed they were more like women, and women believed they were more like men, I can't see how the theories that have served to separate and subordinate women from men would continue to be possible.

On a slightly different tack, there is a school of feminist thought that endeavors to transcend traditional dichotomies and traditional categories of analysis completely. The theory of Luce Irigaray, a contemporary French feminist, exemplifies the post-modern effort to transcend both traditional boundaries and tra-

ditional language. Her essays in *Speculum of the Other Woman* stress the harshness and limitations of a dichotomous approach to knowledge, drawing our focus to phallic imagery, which she believes is to be found in all traditional male thought. "Plato's Hystera" discusses the parable of the cave in *The Republic* as an effort to escape the darkness of the womb, through a vaginal passage, into the light of the sun. Plato forces unnecessary choices between darkness and light, female and male, and any number of equally false dichotomies. His perspective reflects a distinctly male, that is, phallogocentric view of the world. Referring to the path or passageway he describes between the cave and the sunlight, Irigaray writes:

Between the "world outside" and the "world inside," between the "world above" and the "world below." Between the light of the sky and the fire of the earth. Between the gaze of the man who has left the cave and that of the prisoner. Between truth and shadow, between truth and fantasy, between "truth" and whatever "veils" the truth. Between reality and dream. Between. . . . Between. . . . Between the intelligible and the sensible. Between good and evil. The one and the many. Between anything you like. All oppositions that assume the *leap* from a worse to a better. An ascent, a displacement (?) upward, a progression along a line. Vertical. Phallic even? But what has been forgotten in all these oppositions, and with good reason, is how to pass through the passage, how to negotiate it—the forgotten transition, the corridor, the narrow pass, the neck.

Forgotten vagina. The passage that is missing.¹⁶

That is, dichotomous thinking is inevitably phallogocentric, laden with phallic imagery. Plato imagines only the possibilities inside or outside the cave. Irigaray believes these choices to be false, even vicious. To emphasize their oppressiveness, she draws our attention to the force Plato believes will be necessary, and the pain that will occur as the unenlightened prisoners are wrenched, torn from their places in the cave, turned completely about, and forced to gaze directly into the sunlight. The linear imagery, where there is only forward and backward, is a harshly limited view of the world and is distinctly male. Men, she notes, also are

agonized by the dichotomies they see as inevitable. They seek relief in unities, but Irigaray believes they also force the unities before they are ready to emerge more spontaneously, because zealous, aggressive man “only asks [himself] questions that he can already answer, using the supply of instruments he has available to assimilate even the disasters in his history” (137).

Even the choice between unity and dichotomy is dichotomous, one-dimensional, phallic, and encourages the masculine will to violent domination.

A split tears open the arche of presence. . . . Being stands on high, off stage . . . and there it referees the life and death rivalries. . . . But there is no reduction of the gap, the rift between the bewitching spell of the cave and the logic of reason, between the earth's attraction and the sun's allure. Between the more maternal and the more paternal. . . . (274, 275)

When the Other falls out of the starry sky into the chasms of the psyche the ‘subject’ is obviously obliged to stake out new boundaries for his field of implantation to re-ensure—otherwise, elsewhere—his dominance. Where once he was on the heights, he is now entreated to go down into the depths. (136)

This sort of thinking certainly holds radical epistemological promise. My problem with it is that in shattering all conventions, in arguing that subjectivity and objectivity are inevitably dichotomous and that dichotomies inevitably turn into hierarchies, too much may be relinquished. All hold on anything familiar is sacrificed.

Irigaray's solution is worrisome to me because doing away with the security of known epistemological categories, most specifically subjectivity and objectivity, leaves a nerve-wracking world, free-floating, with no structure, no reliable perspective at all. The price of living in such a world is the abandonment of epistemological conventions that have provided the basis of Western philosophy since the time of Plato and Aristotle. However, it is not simply my personal distaste for the relinquishment of solid historical ground that makes me so wary of postmodernism. The call for an antiauthoritarian stance toward history,

toward the old authors, courts the danger of utter irresponsibility for the political consequences of any text. Anything is possible in a deconstructed world, in a world where there is no standard for weighing the responsibility of an author against the responsibility of a reader. While that may provide a handy weapon for undermining entrenched traditional authority, it offers no basis, indeed, it self-consciously denies the very *possibility* of a solidly grounded alternative to the past. It surrenders too much.¹⁷

Most importantly, it surrenders the possibility of confronting injustices of the past by simply “writing them off.” If history can be reduced to text, and if a reader’s interpretation of text carries as much authoritative weight as the author’s, how can one argue that problems *actually* existed, and *still* persist? The power of the past is undone by an act of literary will. It is too facile a solution. In the next chapter we shall see that some feminist philosophers of science have struggled with the political difficulties of the postmodernist epistemological stance. Sandra Harding, in particular, wants to integrate the radical potential of a poststructuralist epistemology with the confrontational power of a “successor science” that accepts conventional terminology precisely because a dialogue with the past can be maintained.

I have a different solution. I think it may be possible to salvage the concepts, at minimum, of subjectivity and objectivity in a way that is compatible with feminist theory. They do not lead inevitably to a dichotomous world, but rather provide the possibility of some psychological distance, or perspective that might not always be as destructive as its historical overvaluation leads many feminist theorists to believe it must be.

Minimalist dialectics is an effort to salvage some central traditional philosophical concepts for feminist theory, an insistence that feminist theory need not reinvent the wheel, but can make use of significant work that has already been done in an effort to understand the world. Minimalist dialectics calls for a specific perspective on the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, which in turn sheds new light on the concept of nature. The assumption is that one’s relationship with nature and with the past is developmental, rather than predictably linear. Minimalist dialectics assumes that all human beings experience tension between mind and the world: perception and consciousness