FEMINIST INTERPRETATIONS OF LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

EDITED BY NAOMI SCHEMAN AND PEG O'CONNOR
FEMINIST INTERPRETATIONS OF LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN
RE-READING THE CANON

NANCY TUANA, GENERAL EDITOR
This series consists of edited collections of essays, some original and some previously published, offering feminist reinterpretations of the writings of major figures in the Western philosophical tradition. Devoted to the work of a single philosopher, each volume contains essays covering the full range of the philosopher’s thought and representing the diversity of approaches now being used by feminist critics.

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PEG O'CONNOR

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The call for papers for this volume went out in 1995, and the process of editing the volume has been maddeningly drawn out, something for which I take full responsibility. Its finally coming to a successful end, however, is something for which the responsibility goes primarily to my co-editor, Peg O’Connor, whose philosophical acumen is happily combined with organizational efficiency. Nancy Tuana, the series editor, and Sandy Thatcher, the editor at Penn State Press, have been extremely helpful and heroically patient, as have the contributors, despite their understandable frustration at not having their work see the light of day. I am sure they all share my gratitude to Peg. The Introduction remains mine, since, unlike Peg, I do not have an essay in the volume; and I owe her a philosophical, as well as a practical, debt: as her teacher, then dissertation supervisor, and then philosophical colleague, I have learned a great deal from her about the actual social and political processes by which language games can, slowly but significantly, change.

One of the consequences of the volume’s delay is that the project of thinking Wittgenstein and feminism in the same breath has proceeded in ways that the volume was meant to prompt. This development is, of course, a welcome one; and while it may make the present collection less groundbreaking, it does not make it less relevant, nor do the particular essays in it have less to contribute to ongoing discussions. There is just more out there now for readers who want to follow up on the possibilities this volume raises and explores. The bibliography is as up-to-date as we were able to make it: thanks to Susan Parry, Linda Wayne, and Tanya Rodrigues for their work on compiling it. In particular, one of the contributors, Cressida Heyes, has published a book that expands on the themes of her essay here; Peg O’Connor similarly has a book due to be published at the same time as this volume, *Oppression and Responsibility:*
Acknowledgments

A Wittgensteinian Approach to Social Practices and Moral Theory, also with Penn State Press; and Alice Crary and Rupert Read have edited a volume, The New Wittgenstein, which, although not explicitly feminist, bears reading in relation to the present volume.

I would like to also acknowledge the women’s studies department at the University of Gothenburg for providing support, collegiality, and ideal working conditions during 1997–98, and Douglas Lewis for assuming my duties as director of Graduate Studies in Philosophy for the summer of 2000 to allow me to work on this volume. Neither, needless to say, bears any responsibility for their generosity’s not having done the trick. My primary gratitude, however, goes to the contributors to the volume, for the effort they have put into writing and (repeatedly) rewriting their essays, and, first and foremost, for the quality of those essays and for the contribution they have already begun—as circulating manuscripts—to make to conversations drawing together, and thereby enriching, Wittgenstein scholarship, philosophy more generally, and feminist theory. I am not alone in having “forthcoming” essays from this volume cited in my notes, and I look forward to seeing many more, less promissory, references in the future.

Finally, this is an awkwardly appropriate place in which to acknowledge my debt to the many feminist philosophers and theorists who over the years have solicited and published my essays. Since literally everything I have published falls in this category, I owe my entire career to (mostly) women who have edited anthologies and special issues of journals. It was to (partially) repay that debt that I agreed to edit this volume. However far short of repayment I remain, the writing and reading public will be relieved to know that I have no intention of trying again.

Naomi Scheman

I have been fortunate to work with Naomi Scheman for the last eleven years as her student, advisee, colleague, and friend. Her influence on me is significant, and her fingerprints can be seen on my thinking. Working with her on this project provided intellectual stimulation combined with a good amount of humor.

I owe thanks to Ambryn Melius and Jenny Schiebe, two students at Gustavus who helped immensely in the final preparation of the manuscript.

Peg O’Connor
Take into your hands any history of philosophy text. You will find compiled therein the “classics” of modern philosophy. Since these texts are often designed for use in undergraduate classes, the editor is likely to offer an introduction in which the reader is informed that these selections represent the perennial questions of philosophy. The student is to assume that she or he is about to explore the timeless wisdom of the greatest minds of Western philosophy. No one calls attention to the fact that the philosophers are all men.

Although women are omitted from the canons of philosophy, these texts inscribe the nature of woman. Sometimes the philosopher speaks directly about woman, delineating her proper role, her abilities and inabilities, her desires. Other times the message is indirect—a passing remark hinting at women’s emotionality, irrationality, unreliability.

This process of definition occurs in far more subtle ways when the central concepts of philosophy—reason and justice, those characteristics that are taken to define us as human—are associated with traits historically identified with masculinity. If the “man” of reason must learn to control or overcome traits identified as feminine—the body, the emotions, the passions—then the realm of rationality will be one reserved primarily for men, with grudging entrance to those few women who are capable of transcending their femininity.

Feminist philosophers have begun to look critically at the canonized texts of philosophy and have concluded that the discourses of philosophy are not gender-neutral. Philosophical narratives do not offer a university perspective, but rather privilege some experiences and beliefs over others. These experiences and beliefs permeate all philosophical theories whether they be aesthetic or epistemological, moral or metaphysical. Yet this fact has often been neglected by those studying the traditions of
philosophy. Given the history of canon formation in Western philosophy, the perspective most likely to be privileged is that of upper-class white males. Thus, to be fully aware of the impact of gender biases, it is imperative that we re-read the canon with attention to the ways in which philosophers’ assumptions concerning gender are embedded within their theories.

This new series, *Re-Reading the Canon*, is designed to foster this process of reevaluation. Each volume will offer feminist analyses of the theories of a selected philosopher. Since feminist philosophy is not monolithic in method or content, the essays are also selected to illustrate the variety of perspectives within feminist criticism and highlight some of the controversies within feminist scholarship.

In this series, feminist lenses will be focused on the canonical texts of Western philosophy, both those authors who have been part of the traditional canon, as well as those philosophers whose writings have more recently gained attention within the philosophical community. A glance at the list of volumes in the series will reveal an immediate gender bias of the canon: Arendt, Aristotle, de Beauvoir, Derrida, Descartes, Foucault, Hegel, Hume, Kant, Locke, Marx, Mill, Nietzsche, Plato, Rousseau, Wittgenstein, Wollstonecraft. There are all too few women included, and those few who do appear have been added only recently. In creating this series, it is not my intention to rectify the current canon of philosophical thought. What is and is not included within the canon during a particular historical period is a result of many factors. Although no canonization of texts will include all philosophers, no canonization of texts that excludes all but a few women can offer an accurate representation of the history of the discipline, as women have been philosophers since the ancient period.²

I share with many feminist philosophers and other philosophers writing from the margins of philosophy the concern that the current canonization of philosophy be transformed. Although I do not accept the position that the current canon has been formed exclusively by power relations, I do believe that this canon represents only a selective history of the tradition. I share the view of Michael Bérubé that “canons are at once the location, the index, and the record of the struggle for cultural representation; like any other hegemonic formation, they must be continually reproduced anew and are continually contested.”³

The process of canon transformation will require the recovery of “lost” texts and a careful examination of the reasons such voices have been
silenced. Along with the process of uncovering women’s philosophical history, we must also begin to analyze the impact of gender ideologies upon the process of canonization. This process of recovery and examination must occur in conjunction with careful attention to the concept of a canon of authorized texts. Are we to dispense with the notion of a tradition of excellence embodied in a canon of authorized texts? Or, rather than abandon the whole idea of a canon, do we instead encourage a reconstruction of a canon of those texts that inform a common culture?

This series is designed to contribute to this process of canon transformation by offering a re-reading of the current philosophical canon. Such a re-reading shifts our attention to the ways in which woman and the role of the feminine is constructed within the texts of philosophy. A question we must keep in front of us during this process of re-reading is whether a philosopher’s socially inherited prejudices concerning woman’s nature and role are independent of her or his larger philosophical framework. In asking this question, attention must be paid to the ways in which the definitions of central philosophical concepts implicitly include or exclude gendered traits.

This type of reading strategy is not limited to the canon, but can be applied to all texts. It is my desire that this series reveal the importance of this type of critical reading. Paying attention to the workings of gender within the texts of philosophy will make visible the complexities of the inscription of gender ideologies.

Notes

1. More properly, it is a realm reserved for a group of privileged males, since the texts also inscribe race and class biases that thereby omit certain males from participation.
2. Mary Ellen Waithe’s multivolume series, A History of Women Philosophers (Boston: M. Nijoff, 1987), attests to this presence of women.