

## THE ECLIPSE OF SUBJECTIVITY AND IDEALIZATIONS OF THE `OTHER`

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Perhaps the most important debate within contemporary feminist theory concerns questions of autonomous identity and of subjectivity in the struggle for the full emancipation of women. This debate fractures along the fault lines of modernity and postmodernity, where the legacies of the former, such as its belief in the transformative and emancipatory power of reason and in the capacity of autonomous moral subjects to bring about greater justice and a more humane world in cooperation with others are currently under heavy attack by the latter.<sup>1</sup> The focus of this paper is to examine one of the key issues contested by postmodernism that is of crucial importance to feminism: the concept of the autonomous subject.<sup>2</sup>

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1. For a larger sense of some of the key theoretical issues at stake in the debate between postmodernism and modernity, see Juergen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990.

2. Although the concept of autonomous subjectivity, or selfhood, may be understood in a wide variety of ways, the concept here is in agreement with notions of subjectivity developed in the communicative ethics theory of Juergen Habermas, and especially his sympathetic feminist critic, Seyla Benhabib. Following Habermas and Benhabib, autonomous subjectivity is intersubjective, relational and dialogical, where human beings develop their sense of selfhood in and through relationships with others. It is constituted by the ability for critical distance, the capacity to resist, and the ability to see the

Postmodernism's repudiation of subjectivity along with the humanist traditions of the Enlightenment derive from an undifferentiated understanding of what constitutes a coherent self-identity that consciously strives to change the world along with other subjects who possess a similar sense of identity. This undifferentiated understanding of subjectivity is based on a deeper confusion between autonomy and omnipotence, whose philosophical roots go back to Kant.<sup>3</sup> However, there are different understandings of autonomy that do not equate it with omnipotence and which also form a part of the theoretical traditions of modernity. The failure of many postmodernist critics of modernity to consider possibilities of autonomous subjectivity situated in relationships of solidarity and intersubjective action is especially debilitating for feminist theory and its political struggles for the full emancipation of women. The modernity/postmodernity debates within contemporary feminist theory extend to feminist theological discussions as well, where the issue of an autonomous, coherent self-identity is particularly vital.

The purpose of this essay, however, is to focus on the larger theoretical context of the modernity/postmodernity debate in feminism, and then to move to a detailed critique of a particular postmodernist theorist whose work contains

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world from the perspective of other people without losing one's critical capacities or sense of distinct identity. See, for example, essays in Juergen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, Boston: Beacon Press, 1979 and *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990. See also Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study in the Foundations of Critical Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986 and *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, New York: Routledge, 1992. The theme of subjectivity and the autonomous self recur throughout these works.

3. Juergen Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, trans. Ciaran Cronin, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993, p. 10.

important implications for feminist theory and feminist religious thought. The approach here is primarily theoretical and methodological, inquiring into the implications of the postmodernist repudiation of autonomous subjectivity from the perspective of feminism. From this larger vantage point some troubling implications for feminist theology begin to appear.

### **Contested Subjectivity in Feminist Theory**

Several years ago, Nancy Hartsock exposed the central weakness--and danger--of postmodernist theory for feminism by asking: "Why is it, exactly at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes 'problematic'?"<sup>4</sup> Hartsock's somewhat rhetorical question illuminates the underlying regressive political tendencies of postmodernism which come to light most vividly in its negative treatment of Enlightenment conceptualizations of subjectivity, autonomous selfhood and human agency, and their role in the production of history. The postmodernist insistence on the 'death of the subject' has disturbing political and ethical implications not only for women and their struggles for freedom, but for any subjugated group. Rosi Braidotti's description of postmodernism's regressive and oppressive tendencies remains valid for all emancipatory theories: "contemporary philosophical discussions on the death of the knowing subject...have the immediate effect of concealing and undermining the attempts of women to find a theoretical

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4. Nancy Hartsock, "Rethinking Modernism: Minority vs. Majority Theories," *Cultural Critique*, No. 7, (Fall 1987), p. 196.

voice of their own...in order to deconstruct the subject one must first have gained the right to speak as one."<sup>5</sup>

The modern concept of an autonomous subject as an historical agent who understands herself as such gives way to the 'Other' in postmodernist thought. The subject has been displaced by a concentrated attention on the Other(ness) where this Other never achieves anything beyond a categorial, at times almost numinous status, remaining disembedded and disembodied. Postmodernist idealizations of an abstract, almost other-worldly Other inevitably rely on totalizing discourses that betray its own stated intentions to break with such discourses. The totalizing discourse of postmodernism with respect to the Other lies in the identification of Other with 'lack.' What kind of lack that constitutes the Other is rarely clear, except that this Other is not a subject, an autonomous self with a coherent sense of self identity. However, the ideological basis of most forms of domination and discrimination of any marginalized, subjugated group--and this especially applies to women--is the refusal to acknowledge the full humanity of subjugated people. The full humanity of women<sup>6</sup> is not possible in the absence of autonomy, which is the precondition of the very possibility for confidence and justification in speaking for oneself, demanding equal treatment with full participation in society, and taking principled stands on moral issues. Only persons recognized and treated as full human beings can be viewed as ends

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5. Rosi Braidotti, "Patterns of Dissonance: Women and/in Philosophy", in *Feministische Philosophie*, ed. Herta Nagl-Docekal, Oldenbourg, Vienna/Munich: 1990, pp. 119-120. Cited in Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 236-237, n. 39.

6. The notion of the full humanity of women as integral to women's liberation is a central and recurring theme in the feminist theology of Rosemary Radford Ruether. See, for example, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1983.

rather than means, with the attendant rights to freely pursue their aspirations and life goals.

The postmodernist denial of the ethical validity, political relevance and theoretical coherence of subjectivity undermines the emancipatory aspirations of feminism by driving women further into the obscurity generated by empty constructs. The category of 'Other' is as problematic for living women as its conceptual counterpart 'Woman'. Both the concept of 'Woman' and the concept of 'Other' generate new mythologies about unnecessary suffering--about the ways it is produced and those who are targeted by the diverse forms of injustice resulting from domination and subjugation--thereby offering empty consolations which deny their own concealed impotence to solve the growing problems of human misery. The real needs and social conditions that result in reduced lives for concrete women dissolve into invisibility in both the abstract categories of 'Woman' and 'Other.' All-inclusive, ubiquitous and ultimately empty categories, such as the 'Other,' tend to mimic the imperialistic epistemological treatment they criticise.

Herein lies what Seyla Benhabib calls the "Janus face" of postmodernism: "For any definition of a group's identity not in terms of its own cognitive experiences but in terms of its victimization by others reduces that group's subjectivity to the terms of a dominant discourse and does not allow for an appreciation of the way in which it may challenge that discourse."<sup>7</sup> As women dissolve within the universal conceptual vacuity of 'Woman', so they become even further erased as concrete human beings with a variety of specific needs in the even more amorphous, nullity of the concept of 'Other.' The vaporous comprehensiveness of the 'generalized Other' obscures its exclusionary action toward

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7. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, p. 83, n. 5.

the 'concrete other.'<sup>8</sup> The repudiation of concepts of subjectivity and the postmodernist celebration of 'Other' blurs the locus of ethical responsibility and transformative actions while ignoring the need for social-political analysis. Without these, women's struggles against oppression are seriously compromised. *Who* struggles for freedom, and *who* is responsible for oppression, along with an inquiry into the conditions that produce oppressed and oppressor as such, are questions that cannot easily be asked in postmodernist discourses. One result of the postmodernist claim for 'the Death of Man,' along with its consequent repudiation of the subject and notions of autonomous selfhood, is that there is no longer any 'who' capable of bearing any form of ethical or political responsibility.<sup>9</sup>

However, there are many feminist theorists who embrace postmodernist ideas, attracted by its critique of Enlightenment notions of an autonomous self possessing the powers of instrumental reason and technological development, and resulting in the domination of nature, women and other human beings who do not fit within the category of the Masterful Self.<sup>10</sup> Such forms of feminist postmodernism do not adequately consider that monolithic concepts of subjectivity are not the only possibilities inherited from the Enlightenment, and that the failure to

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8. Seyla Benhabib, "The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Feminist Theory," *Feminism as Critique*, Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell, (eds.), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, pp.77-95.

9. For one of the clearest and most cogent statements of the postmodernist idea of the 'death of Man' from a sympathetic feminist perspective, see Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

10. For one of the best critical descriptions of this development of Enlightenment ideas of Selfhood as Mastery over the objective world, see Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, New York: The Seabury Press, 1972, especially "Excuses 1: Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment."

seriously explore reconstituted notions of subjectivity poses a grave threat to feminist emancipatory goals. Rather than reject concepts of autonomous selfhood and political, ethical agency, feminists need to address themselves to "the task of reformulating and reconstructing our concepts of the self"--to searching out "new models of identity, of individuation, of agency and autonomy"<sup>11</sup> that, while critical of notions of a controlling, masterful subject, nonetheless do not jettison the autonomous self altogether. What postmodernist feminist theorists need to realize is that "the contemporary women's movement is the culmination of the logic of modernity,"<sup>12</sup> not its negation. Without those Enlightenment traditions of autonomy, agency and responsible selfhood, feminism, with its theoretical and practical orientation to the full emancipation of women, is not possible.

Since the question of the subject and of autonomous agency is indivisible from questions of morality and ethical responsibility, the issue is political as well. According to Richard Bernstein, "we cannot understand ethics without thinking through our political commitments and responsibilities. And there is no understanding of politics that does not bring us back to ethics. Ethics and politics as disciplines concerned with *praxis* are aspects of a unified practical philosophy."<sup>13</sup> Ethical-political action, or *praxis*, can only be carried out by subjects, individuals who possess some understanding of themselves as makers of history and who, as such, realize that the conditions of misery, injustice and oppression do not exist through ahistorical necessity, but by humanly produced

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11. Allison Weir, "Toward a Model of Self-Identity: Habermas and Kristeva," in *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse*, ed. Johanna Meehan, New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 263.

12. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, p. 110.

13. Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992, p. 9.

contingency. This realization carries the potential to mobilize human beings to carry out acts of political resistance and social transformation that are animated by the ethical desire for "radically improving human existence."<sup>14</sup> Such individuals enter into relationships of solidarity with other human beings in a conscious effort to bring about more reasonable, humane conditions of life, where people may pursue their aspirations in a material context of satisfied needs and through social-political structures that enable and support them. They must be autonomous and understand themselves as coherent subjects capable of political action and principled moral stands.

Protest and resistance to what is, in the name of what could be, requires individuals who can think independently and critically. In the words of Max Horkheimer, the growing tendency to "liquidating the individual" in modern culture constitutes the most serious threat to the "evolution toward the humane." The ability to resist, for Horkheimer, is constitutive of "true individuality."<sup>15</sup>

The concepts of justice, freedom, and of happiness (which involve the satisfaction of needs through egalitarian democratic political structures), and the primacy of the human being as an end in him/herself, are also features of the Enlightenment legacy, a fact which is too often disregarded by postmodernist critiques. These Enlightenment ideals, especially as they became radicalized in Marx, are oriented toward a rational utopian hope in the possibility of a future society committed to the fulfilment of

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14. Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew O'Connell, New York: Continuum, 1972, p. 233.

15. Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, New York: Continuum, 1947, pp. 156, 157, 161.



the material<sup>16</sup> needs of all human beings. A *rational* utopian impulse seeks to humanize the achievements of current productive forces and technological development, in order to meet human needs, rather than harness these forces to the mere, inhuman accumulation of wealth. In certain respects, Marx's social theory can be described as preserving the Kantian moral idea that human beings must always be treated as ends in themselves and never as a means, for example, to the accumulation of profit.

Emancipatory social theories, such as that developed by Marx, are dismissed by leading postmodernist thinkers like Jean-Francois Lyotard, as 'master narratives' operating out of totalizing logics which simply reproduce discourses of domination and legitimation. For Lyotard, the emancipatory task "has become, not to seek any revolutionary change, or even to articulate the political aspirations of a particular oppressed group, but to 'wage a war on totality'."<sup>17</sup> The postmodernist critique and repudiation of Enlightenment values as so many 'totalizing discourses,' ironically, employs an equally totalizing method by presenting the Enlightenment and its legacies as a monolithic, dominating force which is easy to condemn. The struggle against concrete oppression is now displaced by a struggle that pits one set of intellectual abstractions against another. The postmodernist interpretation of Enlightenment thought, as serving the purposes of a corrupt

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16. The term 'materialism' requires some explanation. Although there is an enormous body of literature on the subject, I will refer only to Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* where he defines the "human essence" as "the ensemble of the social relations" (VI), and the materialism that informs his theory as arising out of "Human society, or socialized humanity." (X) Thus by 'materialism,' Marx includes all dimensions of human experience and sensuous activity that are lived in the concrete conditions of human history, affecting human beings on all possible levels. This notion of materialism is quite opposed to reductionist notions that identify materialism with a vulgar empiricism.

17. Cited in Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989, p. 86.

humanism centred on a Masterful Subject who dominates nature, reduces the Enlightenment to something one-sided. Such critiques are carried out oblivious to the fact that "most people's lives are still...shaped by their lack of access to productive resources and their consequent need to sell their labour-power in order to live."<sup>18</sup>

The postmodernist critique of the tendencies to power and domination inherent in Enlightenment concepts and discourses need not result in a rejection of all Enlightenment ideas. What postmodernism ignores is the *dialectic* of enlightenment that is capable of criticizing its own self-betrayal where reason becomes mere technique and control. Rather than wholly repudiate the Enlightenment, what is required is a critique that can "prepare the way for a positive notion of enlightenment which will release it from entanglement in blind domination."<sup>19</sup> Such a critique needs to reconstruct notions of autonomous selfhood as situated, dialogical, and interrelational, where social relationships take place within a concrete context characterized by manifold difference of human possibilities--difference in worldviews, experiences, values and religious traditions. Postmodernism attempts to liquidate, rather than resolve, the contradictions of Enlightenment thought by means of a regressive theologico-mythology, obsessively focused on the 'Other.'

### **Modern Subject vs Postmodern Saint and Its 'Other'**

A feminist challenge to postmodern rejections of autonomy and subjectivity examines some of the deeper ethical and political implications of postmodernism itself. In many respects, postmodernist ethics splinters into theoretical incoherence and political conservatism because

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18. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

19. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xvi.

of its dismissal of the autonomous subject as well as its hostile view of reason as identical with instrumental, calculative rationality. Edith Wyschogrod's *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy*, provides a vivid example of some of the problems which arise in such postmodernist critiques. Although this work is in no sense feminist or explicitly Christian in its approach, it has devastating implications for feminist theory and feminist religious thought. This has to do with Wyschogrod's intention to rehabilitate and radicalize ideas of selfless devotion drawn largely from Christian hagiography, as a basis for a contemporary moral theory adequate to a 'postmodern world.' Wyschogrod's argument is not only important for feminist theory and its division into modern and postmodern versions, but poses questions concerning the possible role of theological ideas and religious themes within contemporary emancipatory theories and praxes. Again, although Wyschogrod does not explicitly appeal to a Christian--or any other--theology in her reconstitution of moral theory, her use of Christian hagiography in order to reformulate the theory-practice divide that bedevils ethics inevitably raises theological issues with respect to theories of social transformation. Her work is theological in the sense that she utilizes Christian themes of self-sacrifice and devotion in proposing moral theories which are valid beyond a theological realm. Wyschogrod advances truth claims drawn from a specific tradition--hagiography--which she argues possess powerful, if not absolute, relevance for moral theory. Such an approach is not untypical of theologians who make a variety of claims concerning social problems and their solution in a pluralistic world from a highly specific theological perspective.<sup>20</sup>

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20. See for example, David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion and Hope*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987; essays by David Tracy, Helmut Peukert, Francis Schussler Fiorenza, Matthew

Wyschogrod's main thesis is that narratives of saintly lives and hagiographic texts offer ethical models which promise to bridge the divide between moral theory and practice. She argues that such narratives demonstrate "what moral lives are," yielding insights into "how one might go about living a moral life while still avoiding the two difficulties associated with moral theory"--i.e., on the one hand, the "gap between theory and practice" and, on the other, the "incommensurate propositions" of moral theories which fail to result in the production of "moral dispositions."<sup>21</sup> The way she handles these contradictions is to situate the 'saint' with respect to 'the Other' such that the saint, motivated by an excessive desire to negate the already assumed destitution and lack that defines the Other as such, puts itself "totally at the disposal of the Other."<sup>22</sup> Both 'saint' and its corresponding 'Other' are neither embodied nor engendered; rather they are abstract ontological categories--hardly more than disembodied, decontextualized, anonymous traces or conceptual fragments--whose relation to each other is mutually constituted while, at the same time, having no separate identity or reality. They flow into one another, calling each other into being through the static polarities of idealized devotion and destitution, polarities which themselves have a strong theological resonance.

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Lamb and Charles Davis in *Habermas, Modernity and Public Theology*, eds. Don S. Browning and Francis Schussler Fiorenza, New York: Crossroad, 1992; Ronald F. Thiemann, *Religion in Public Life: a Dilemma for Democracy*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1996. What all these authors share is a view of how human beings in highly pluralistic societies may live peacefully together in egalitarian, democratic relations of mutual respect but from a very specific Christian theological perspective. They do not confront the contradiction inherent in such an approach, because at no point do they examine the inherent theological rationality of their own normative framework.

21. Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 4.

22. *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

The saint enacts "radical saintly generosity" which becomes emblematic of the "postmodern expression of excessive desire...on behalf of the Other...seeking the cessation of another's suffering and the birth of another's joy."<sup>23</sup> The saint is motivated by the recognition of the "primacy of the other person" which arises out of the "dissolution of self-interest;" "saintly life" is defined as "compassion for the Other, irrespective of cost to the saint," based on a two-fold negation of self and the desire to eradicate the Other's want.<sup>24</sup> Wyschogrod's approach is thoroughly postmodernist in its repeated emphasis that self-sacrifice is rooted in self-erasure, where the individual subject is given up in favour of a reconstituted hagiography of "saintly singularity".<sup>25</sup> She emphasises that radical altruism occurs "irrespective of the cost" to oneself.<sup>26</sup> Read from a feminist perspective that is fully aware of how the value of self-sacrifice remains a central feature of women's suppression, Wyschogrod's saints can be seen to reinforce traditional theological justifications for women's oppressed condition. From the perspective of Christian feminist critique, Wyschogrod's approach recalls the idea of a divinely sanctioned subjugation of woman whose role in life is to serve her husband, children and God.<sup>27</sup> When read from the critical perspective of gender, Wyschogrod's moral theory is dangerously regressive.

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23. *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.

24. *Ibid.*, xiv; xxii, xxiii.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

27. Perhaps no other feminist religious thinker has pointed out the sociological and psychological identification between God and the male, an identification encouraged by Christian attitudes toward male-female relations, despite its implicit idolatry, than Mary Daly. For example, she writes: "There is no way to remove male/masculine imagery from *God*...*God* represents the necrophilia of patriarchy...*Patriarchy is itself the prevailing religion of the entire planet*..." *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1978, p. xi; 39. Despite the obvious and intentional hyperbole of her words, her point remains valid.

This regressive core of Wyschogrod's moral theory involves the proposal of a reverse subjugation where the moral actor--insofar as there can be an 'actor' of any kind--totally submits to the "primacy of the Other." Authentic moral action occurs through willing, rather than enforced, subjugation. This is the only way that human existence might be preserved in "the face of the possible extinction of humankind."<sup>28</sup> Anticipating the critique that her moral theory "grounds ethical relations in self-humiliation," she counters with the astounding assertion, "I am not only commanded by the Other but am also capable of issuing commands: I am, as it were, commanded to command the Other to command me."<sup>29</sup> Not only for women, but all historically oppressed people, this moral imperative entrenches and even legitimates their subjugated condition by asking them to collude with it: the oppressed must 'command' that they be harnessed into submissiveness. Under the widespread conditions of unfreedom and domination, this is what altruistic service too often looks like for oppressed people, especially women. A 'good' wife and mother, for example, serves her husband and family irrespective of the cost to herself and the realization of her aspirations independent of family life.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Wyschogrod's argument in favour of a "radical altruism"

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28. Edith Wyschogrod, "Man-Made Mass Death: Shifting Concepts of Community", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, LVIII/2, p. 174; 173.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

30. See for example the work of the contemporary German systematic theologian Werner Neuer, which promotes the traditional theological concepts of male "headship" of woman, marriage, church and society with woman in the "position of supporter," living in "loving subordination under male leadership." As for female self-sacrifice, he writes: "Christian women in their marriages have ample opportunities as wives and mothers to live for others and to sacrifice everything that hinders them from being unconditionally their husband's partner and their children's mother." *Man and Woman in Christian Perspective*, trans. Gordon Wenham, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1990 p. 181; 178. There is nothing in Wyschogrod's idea of saintly devotion that could be used in argument against Neuer's conclusions.

echoes an ancient theological value of self-subordination<sup>31</sup> that was hostile to notions of autonomous female subjectivity and its inevitable conclusion, social equality. Wyschogrod's approach to the moral subject goes far beyond such antagonism, as there simply is "no I who is the subject of responsibility."<sup>32</sup>

The moral command of the numinous, non-worldly Other for self-erasing devotion can produce only an illusion of ethical relationship, for it arises out of idealizations of saint and Other which, at the same time, conceal and are predicated upon a deeper, real rupture in solidarity with the concrete other. The illusory relationship requires the sacrifice of a real relationship. The pervasive category 'Other' is empty, a conceptual 'black hole' into which living human beings in their sensuous existence with their needs and life activities are drawn and disappear. The postmodern Other as presented by Wyschogrod is a contextless, unsituated entity bereft of the aid of an immanent critique of the social conditions that produce destitution as such. The same can be said for the saint, whose devotional attitude to the Other has neither content nor substance: it is the mere principle of sustained devotion. Wyschogrod's Other inhabits a realm so far beyond the reach of social theory and material analysis that the dynamics of gender domination, which certainly inform most forms of domination, become irrelevant. Consequently, she deals with gender in moral theory by refusing to consider it, since: "The hagiographic body...is a neuter. No sexual

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31. See, for example, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's discussion of "Christian love patriarchalism" which affirmed "the basic inner equality of all 'in Christ' while the basic social differences and hierarchies in the political and ecclesial order were maintained." This concept of 'love patriarchalism' built the church "on the backs of women, slaves, and the lower classes." *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, New York: Crossroad, 1984, pp. 79-80.

32. Wyschogrod, "Man-Made Mass Death," p. 174.

identity can be inscribed on its surface because the saintly body accommodates all sexual identities...and none. The disinterested love of the Other requires the totality of the body of the one who loves as an ever shifting point of reference."<sup>33</sup>

If the 'hagiographic body' is "a neuter," then it is 'no/body' at all. A critique of the dynamics of gender domination requires an immanent critique of the particular circumstances in which domination takes place and affects concrete human beings. Moral theories without subjects, proposals for unreflective devotion to an indeterminate Other irrespective of the cost to an equally indeterminate self, proposals for a radical altruism without considering the social mediation of values and how they are shaped by their material context, reinscribes rather than challenges domination. Wyschogrod fails to ask the question of what submitting oneself entirely to the needs of the Other *means* under current social conditions of exploitation and widespread injustice. In other words, she does not consider what the absolute command to serve the Other means in the concrete contexts of women suffering from sexist practices inherent in culture, society and the family. She lifts hagiographic narratives out of their historical and social context without asking about the political interests such narratives may have served or about the power structures they may have supported under the guise of 'pure' theological doctrines understood to represent the will of God. Wyschogrod's insistence on saintly self-sacrifice "has its hazards in a context of inequality,"<sup>34</sup> since all moral norms and ethical practices are mediated by concrete conditions and experience. Since she ignores the fact that all relationships are mediated by social conditions and

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33. Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*, p. 116.

34. Genevieve Lloyd, "Reason, Gender, and Morality", *Social Research*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (Autumn 1983), p. 512.



arrangements of power, Wyschogrod fails to consider that her idea of saintly service can contribute to, rather than challenge, the domination of women.

If saintly action requires a radical effacement of the self, one may well wonder "not at how much [the saint] loves morality, but at how little [he/she] loves" him/herself.<sup>35</sup> If one repudiates or denies oneself, from where does one find the capacity to love the other? According to Michel Foucault, "One must not have the care for others precede the care for self,"<sup>36</sup> since caring for the self is connected with a self-knowledge that in turn yields knowledge about one's duties and responsibilities to and for others. For Foucault, domination and tyranny over others "comes from the fact that one did not care for one's self and that one has become a slave to his desires. But if you care for yourself correctly...you cannot abuse your power over others."<sup>37</sup> As well, if one has no sense of self or autonomous moral agency, it can hardly be expected that one could perceive the selfhood of others which demands that every 'you' be treated as another 'I'. I-you relations of reciprocity are expressed in interactionist, intersubjective terms, where the 'I' takes as a binding universal moral imperative that the 'you' be treated as the 'I' would wish to be treated. In this way, the ethical demand to treat all human beings as ends both preserves particularity and guarantees it, through the reciprocal recognition of the universal imperatives of justice and fairness in the treatment of others.

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35. Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume LXXIX, No. 8, August 1982, p. 424.

36. Michel Foucault, "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom." p. 7.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

### Alternative Subjectivities: Beyond Saint and Other

An interactionist, intersubjective perspective on ethical relationships raises a further question concerning postmodernist approaches such as that advanced by Wyschogrod. How can one know that one's actions toward others are genuinely ethical--that is, how can one know that the other person actually benefits from one's actions, and that the actions directed toward the alleviation of the suffering of another person are not motivated more by one's desire to appear 'saintly' than by the real needs and desires of the one who is the object of a radical altruism? The most striking aspect of the relation between the saint and the Other envisioned by Wyschogrod is the silence that exists between them, where the saint assumes the destitute condition of the Other in an attitude of sustained devotional giving. Wyschogrod's concept of radical altruism does not include discursive relations between saint and sufferer; it is as if the condition of destitution of the Other--defined, presumably, by the saint--speaks for itself and is sufficient in itself.

In the absence of dialogue, the radical altruism Wyschogrod proposes threatens to become another version of authoritarian action, where the saint assumes that it knows exactly what the Other requires, proceeding from the saint's assumptions of what the Other needs, not what the Other says it needs. Under these conditions, the saint becomes a missionary, and the Other's misery and need become yet another field of colonization for the fulfilment of the desires of the oppressor. Wyschogrod's remark that "I take the sphere of ethics to be a holding open of a discursive and ontic space for becoming, specifically the becoming of moral change,"<sup>38</sup> belies the absence of a discursive, intersubjective *relationship* between saint and

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38. Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*, p. 55.

Other. Intersubjectivity is hardly possible in Wyschogrod's saintly morality, because there are no subjects to engage in such a relation. No matter what efforts the saint may undertake to alleviate the distress of the Other, in the absence of dialogue and the mutual understanding that may be achieved by it, the Other provides little more than an occasion for the exercise of the saint's desire. The constitution of Other *as destitute* renders the saint possible, while the saint requires the Other *as destitute* in order to be constituted *as saint*. One can only wonder whose interests are being served in this way.

Wyschogrod's work is highly representative of the postmodernist valorization of the 'Other,' which functions as a conceptual burial ground of the very diversity and plurality of human experience it wishes to protect. The concepts of 'Other' and 'Otherness' floating free of a materialist social analysis of domination tell us nothing about the living people who suffer nor why they do. This happens because the category is formal and empty, concealing rather than revealing the dynamics of oppression that structure much of human experience. From a feminist perspective, the equation of 'woman' with 'Otherness' "deprives the feminist struggle of any kind of specificity. According to Toril Moi, the subjugation of women is not a question of the repression of "otherness, but specific, historically constructed agents"--in other words, *women*.<sup>39</sup> Several feminist critiques of postmodernism have pointed this out, and are unwilling to engage in a wholesale repudiation of those Enlightenment values which make resistance and struggle against oppression possible. As Moi writes further, "[t]he Enlightenment we seek to dismantle in the name of our political values is precisely a major source

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39. Toril Moi, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Style: Recent Feminist Criticism in the United States", *Cultural Critique*, Number 9, Spring 1988, p. 12.

of such values."<sup>40</sup> In order to bring about social change within historical circumstances, concepts of the individual and subjective agency are indispensable; as human beings create history, only human beings can change it. "Only a materialist analysis can provide a credible explanation of why the burden of Otherness has been placed on this or that particular group in a given society at a given time."<sup>41</sup> To reduce women to 'Other' as a means to account for injustice is to erase women once more from history. "[S]imply to equate woman with otherness deprives the feminist struggle of any kind of specificity. What is repressed is not otherness, but specific, historically constructed agents."<sup>42</sup>

Ethics has less to do with creating discursive *space* than with establishing a discursive *relationship*. According to Habermas, language and the dialogue that takes place between self and other "inscribes the gap between I and Thou"<sup>43</sup> through intersubjective relations mediated by democratic, egalitarian social structures. The relationship between care of the self and care of others requires a well-developed critical self-reflexivity which indicates an ability to submit one's actions and motives with respect to others to rational self-scrutiny, aided by attending to the views of others about one's actions toward them. This kind of discursive, interactional activity can only occur through free dialogue among the members of a given community. Postmodern ideas of 'responsibility without agency' mystify ethics and cloud 'right relations' between human beings. In the absence of what Benhabib calls a "coherent sense of self" where "autonomy and solidarity"<sup>44</sup> coalesce, moral accountability and responsibility evaporate. Devotion and

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40. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

42. *Ibid.*

43. Juergen Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, trans. Ciaran P. Cronin, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993, p. 143.

44. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, p. 198.

care can themselves become forms of domination and control in the absence of intersubjective communication, so that the saint, for example, decides for the Other what needs to be done irrespective of what the suffering person thinks about his/her own condition. For Habermas, on the other hand, a dialogical, intersubjective relationship "makes harmony between the integration of autonomy and devotion to others possible for us--in other words, a reconciliation that does not efface differences."<sup>45</sup>

Addressing issues that threaten the "preservation of human existence"<sup>46</sup>--issues that concern Wyschogrod as well--requires a moral theory that emphasises and reconstructs notions of the subject, autonomy, reason, and justice. Such reconstructions need not revert to notions of autonomy as omnipotence or 'master narratives.' Postmodernist theories reduce the Enlightenment and its legacies in modernity to a monolithic block of oppressive forces, where reason is strictly identical with the instrumental, technical rationality of domination. From this perspective, theory is nothing more than a "body of true propositions" producing a "master discipline for interpreting being" that annihilates difference.<sup>47</sup> However, a critique of reason as calculation and technique, and of knowledge as harnessed to the mere exercise of power over the human and non-human world, also constitutes part of the critical discourses of modernity generated out of the logic of modernity itself. The idea of the autonomous subject possessing the ability to use his/her own critical understanding "without the guidance from another," with the "courage to use [his/her] own understanding" that Immanuel Kant formulated as the "motto of

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45. Habermas, *Justification and Application*, pp. 143-144.

46. Wyschogrod, "Man-Made Mass Death", p. 173.

47. Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*, pp. 132ff.

enlightenment,"<sup>48</sup> contributes to the possibility of an ethics and political action capable of challenging the status quo. The notion of an independent, critical, morally responsible subject needs to be developed and nurtured in the light of contemporary needs and human experience, not rejected.

### The Situated Subject of Modernity

In a time when the credibility of theological and philosophical idealisms and their consolations are radically questioned and where appeals to heteronomous authority have lost widespread support, the challenge posed by modernity requires that we create normativity and individual and social identity from out of ourselves. This is a view put forward by Juergen Habermas, for whom "Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; *it has to create its normativity out of itself.*"<sup>49</sup> Under these conditions, the autonomous subject may become the source of resistance and protest, the locus of change that has the possibility to orient history to the norms of justice and peace. Not the mastering subject championing an abstract humanism, but the concrete, situated and gendered subject of history in dialogue with other subjects treated and recognized as such, has the power to realize the longing for "purer and freer conditions."<sup>50</sup>

The resolution of global problems, such as man-made mass death, poverty and violence against women and children, cannot take place through appeals to an idealized altruism severed from concrete human experience and need.

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48. Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?", *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983, p. 41.

49. Juergen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990, p. 7.

50. G.W.F. Hegel, cited in Habermas, *Ibid.*, n. 13, p. 390.

The category of 'Other,' as treated in postmodernist discussions, conceals particular human beings who suffer real and multiple oppressions. The position of saint and destitute Other is a non-dialectical, non-discursive and non-relational positioning that cannot address the condition of human beings in modernity because, by postmodernism's account, there are no concrete human beings to address. The more adequate yet more modest moral theory of feminists such as Benhabib attempts to address itself to fostering moral relationships that challenge us all to cultivate an "enlarged mentality" that enables us to see the world from the "standpoint of others". Such demands can only be made on individuals who understand themselves as in possession of a coherent identity with its autonomous power of acceptance or refusal. Only autonomous agents can debate the value of attempting to relate to others through a sustained, continuing 'conversation' as a worthwhile daily practice.<sup>51</sup> It is only through discourse that human beings come to understand how the world looks and feels from the perspective of another person, such that people can make decisions together about what is best to do. The ethical commitment to sustained, intersubjective dialogue permits questions of justice and need to be articulated and heard. It also requires action oriented to bringing about the social and political structures that will allow such dialogue to occur.

This, then, is a brief outline of an alternative moral theory derived largely from the discourse theories of Habermas and Benhabib, whose basic presumption promotes the "radical democratization" of discursive processes, where the locus of moral discourse is not exclusively the arena of public discussion (although this is

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51. Seyla Benhabib, "Afterword," *The Communicative Ethics Controversy*, Benhabib and Fred Dallmayr, (eds.), Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990, p. 346.

also necessary) but is situated in "the continuation of ordinary moral conversations," wherein we exercise the ethical commitment to appropriate the concrete other's point of view.<sup>52</sup> Relations structured as dialogical and intersubjective, which include an ongoing commitment and conscious effort to see the world from another's perspective, results in a contextual, shared negotiation of what is best for human beings in their relationships and their communities. Such a process requires that we attend closely to difference and particularity, so that we do not assume what the other needs based on *our* interpretation of his/her destitution or lack. As well, dialogue under the conditions of an intersubjectivity that is as free as possible allows for a critical process that is capable of adjudicating norms.

With these considerations we may begin to see an alternative to postmodernist ethics that does not reject, but rather reconstitutes Enlightenment ideas for ethical action under the conditions of modernity. Wyschogrod's legitimate concern with formulating an ethics which can address human need without engaging in practices of domination is not well served by a rejection of moral agency in favour of the primacy of alterity in the name of an abstract Other. Rather than focusing on concrete human beings in their particular circumstances of need, postmodernists such as Wyschogrod take refuge in an ontology of saint and Other with its inevitable if unintended theological echoes of service, self-sacrifice and submission which most often function to the detriment of women in religious contexts which embrace such values. Although Wyschogrod does not offer religious consolations in the traditional sense by turning directly to Biblical sources to support her views, her attempt to rehabilitate hagiography for our time is sufficient

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52. *Ibid.*, p. 353; 358.



to recall and validate an oppressive theological tradition that has been especially harmful to women. The sacrifice of selfhood along with devotion to an absolute Alterity and Other[ness] are the new/old theological categories of a postmodern world.

Postmodernist condemnations of Enlightenment discourses which stand "under the sign of subjective freedom"<sup>53</sup> become trapped in their own aporias because their attempt to dismantle totalizing theories results in their reconstruction in a new guise. Although the possibilities for human freedom championed by the Enlightenment have been seriously weakened by its self-betrayal, this does not mean that its humanistic ideals are completely bankrupt. The Masterful Subject of instrumental reason no matter how prevalent, is not the only possible concept of reason and subjectivity, and it must give way to the situated, gendered, and interactional self of communicative rationality and shared discourse. The abstract humanism that produced the monadic, transcendental moral subject of Kantian ethics needs to be reconstructed in terms of a concrete humanism that promotes the dialogical, particular and relational individual as an end in him/herself who can never be treated as a means to a non-human purpose. Such a reconstruction of the subject requires a corresponding set of social conditions and arrangements whereby this form of subjectivity may be realized. That is why an ethics that aspires to address the needs of contemporary human beings requires a material social analysis. Thus, ethics and politics are activities that cannot be adequately pursued in isolation from each other. A postmodernist ethics, which abandons many of these Enlightenment themes and their potential reconstruction by placing its focus on abstract notions of alterity, resolves one contradiction in favour of another,

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53. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 83.

thus abandoning a politics and ethical practice of intersubjective engagement for the safer ground attained by withdrawal and retreat.

*Many people genuinely do not wish to be saints, and it is probable that some who achieve or aspire to sainthood have never felt much temptation to be human beings.*

**- George Orwell**