

the self sometimes becomes a function of society rather than an independent entity. G. W. F. Hegel, for example, attacked the very idea of a social-contract theory because such a theory claims that there are individual selves who are capable of entering into a contractual agreement before the origins of society in which such agreements are possible. This, he insists, is nonsense. The self must be defined by society; there is no self outside of society. At its extreme, this view sometimes leads to **totalitarianism** (or **fascism**), which holds that the individual self is literally nothing, that the whole self is defined by—and is the property of—the state. (Hegel himself rejected this conclusion.)

## Justice Denied: The Problem of Race



*[I]t doesn't mean that we're anti-white, but it does mean that we're anti-exploitation, we're anti-degradation, we're anti-oppression. And if the white man doesn't want us to be anti-him, let him stop oppressing and exploiting and degrading us. . . .*

—Malcolm X, 1964

Each of us is a citizen of our nation, but this has not always guaranteed that our rights have been protected, particularly if we are members of a minority group. In the United States, African-Americans constitute one of the most important marginalized groups. The problem of institutionalized racism has been of crisis proportions in this country ever since the drafting of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, and even before, when the first slaves were brought over from Africa to toil in the fields of Virginia and the Caribbean Islands. Racism has become, over the last fifty years, an inescapable problem that threatens the very moral integrity as well as the social harmony of life in America. The question of how we are to resolve the injustices perpetrated against racial minorities is pressing, and political philosophy should help us to address it.

Philosophy itself, however, has been accused of collaborating with racist society in downgrading people of color. The fact that African-American writers, for instance, have traditionally been left unread and out of the curriculum in American universities has been challenged as a continuation of “cultural slavery,” the marginalization of one people’s ideas by another’s. In this respect, we can ask whether our tradition’s approach to intellectual history has itself been unjust in its neglect of African-American thinkers and its failure to attend to their (often political) concerns. The rise of African-American philosophy over the past half century represents a step toward redressing this unfairness and toward acknowledging the role that racial prejudice has played not only in our social practices, but even in our philosophical theories. The fact that African-American philosophy has emerged into greater prominence in the last half century is thus a step toward greater justice within the field and ideally a sanguine development for redressing past injustice.

## Philosophy Must Consider Race

*Thinking about how the facts of “race” and the demand for justice may be accommodated to each other and to the realities of our various identifications and identities: nothing could be a more recognizably philosophical project. And what [W. E. B.] Du Bois called the “social heritage of slavery; the discrimination and insult” as well as the contemporary meaning of “racial difference” need always to be borne in mind if these discussions are to hew to reality.*

*These issues, which are crucial for questions of race in public life quite generally, intersect with a more narrowly academic range of questions in what I suppose we could call not so much the philosophy of education as the philosophy of the academy, questions about how racial identities and racist histories have shaped our disciplinary heritages. Philosophers (like others) have not always been good at seeing clearly the historical formation of their own discipline.*

*Feminist philosophers have argued that the structure of philosophical discourse reflects the longstanding exclusion of most women and women’s concerns, first from the life of intellectuals, then, as it developed, from the university; and their lesson is not simply that here, as elsewhere, sexism has damaged women and men, but that it has clouded our understanding. There has not been an equally extensive exploration of the question how racism has misguided our more abstract reflections; of how the absence of black voices has shaped our philosophical discourse . . . [I]t seems simply astonishing how little of the political philosophy of the philosophers explicitly acknowledges the distinctive and different significances of race and other kinds of collective identity as well as of gender to the questions that arise at the intersection of the state with morality.*

—K. Anthony Appiah

From: *The Philosophical Forum: A Quarterly* V, xxiv, nos. 1–3  
(Fall–Spring 1992–1993): 30–31.

We do not have the space here to go into all the various contributions of African-American thinkers over our country’s history. But two African American thinkers from the 1960s have become extremely influential—**Martin Luther King Jr.** and **Malcolm X**—and so it may be helpful to devote our attention to them. The two men—who knew each other and both worked throughout their lives to enhance the position of blacks both in America and elsewhere in the world—held widely different political philosophies.

Martin Luther King Jr. advocated civil disobedience in the tradition of Gandhi and Henry David Thoreau. In other words, he sought to advance the

position of African-Americans in this country through peaceful political protest. Such protest included breaking unjust laws and suffering the consequences of doing so, but never violence. King was also an integrationist, meaning that he believed that equality of the races required mixed neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools. His goal was full integration and the equal recognition of civil rights for black and white Americans, to be achieved through peaceful and ultimately “color-blind” means.

### As Good as Anyone

*My mother confronted the age-old problem of the Negro parent in America: how to explain discrimination and segregation to a small child. She taught me that I should feel “somebodiness” but that on the other hand I had to go out and face a system that stared me in the face every day saying you are “less than,” you are “not equal to.” She told me about slavery and how it ended with the Civil War. She tried to explain the divided system in the South—the segregated schools, restaurants, theaters, housing; the white and colored signs on drinking fountains, waiting rooms, lavatories—as a social condition rather than a natural order. She made clear that she opposed this system and that I should never allow it to make me feel inferior. Then she said the words that almost every Negro hears before he can yet understand the injustice that makes them necessary: “You are as good as anyone.” At this time my mother had no idea that the little boy in her arms would years later be involved in a struggle against the system she was speaking of.*

—Martin Luther King Jr.

From: *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Ed. Clayborne Carson.  
New York: Warner Books, 2001.

Malcolm X, on the other hand, was generally taken to be a revolutionary, and he advocated Black Nationalism. Black Nationalism was a separatist movement that sought a unification of African-descended people all over the world into a separate society. Malcolm X is somewhat notorious for his claim that the interests of blacks throughout the world should be advanced “by any means necessary,” meaning that violence was appropriate where peaceful means failed. And in general, Malcolm X believed that peaceful means had failed during the hundreds of years of white oppression of blacks. During much of his active life, Malcolm X was a Black Muslim, that is, a member of an American Islamic black separatist movement. The Islamic religion, the Black Muslims believed, lent itself particularly well to the project of worldwide unification for blacks. Although Malcolm X later qualified his strong views about violence and separatism, he

defended them in much of his writing, and because he died young, he is largely remembered for them.

### A Revolution of Self-Defense

*No, since the federal government has shown that it isn't going to do anything about [the Klan] but talk, then it is your and my duty as men; as human beings, . . . to organize ourselves and let the government know that if they don't stop that Klan, we'll stop it ourselves. Then you'll see the government start doing something about it. But don't ever think that they're going to do it just on some kind of morality basis. No. So I don't believe in violence—that's why I want to stop it. And you can't stop it with love, . . . No! So, we only mean vigorous action in self-defense, and that vigorous action we feel we're justified in initiating by any means necessary.*

*Now, for saying something like that, the press calls us racist and people who are "violent in reverse." This is how they psycho you. They make you think that if you try to stop the Klan from lynching you, you're practicing violence in reverse. . . . Well, if a criminal comes around your house with his gun, brother, just because he's got a gun and he's robbing your house, and he's a robber, it doesn't make you a robber because you grab your gun and run him out. No, the man is using some tricky logic on you. . . . With skillful manipulating of the press they're able to make the victim look like the criminal and the criminal look like the victim.*

—Malcolm X, Speech at the Afro-American Broadcasting Co.,  
Detroit, 14 February 1965. *Malcolm X Speaks*. New York:  
Grove Press, 1965. © Random House, Inc.

Although Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. disagreed in their political orientations and analyses, they were both committed to pressing the cause of African-Americans. Both, however, made enemies, some of whom were not content to continue the conversation through words and symbolic actions. Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965, and Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968.

African Americans have sought to take the premise that all men are created equal as meaning what it says; but most whites in America in the latter 1960s, including many persons of good will, took equality to mean, roughly, some measure of improvement. Even now, white America does not seem organized (even psychologically) to close the gaps, but instead seems concerned only to make the situation less painful and obvious. It is worth asking what orientations and policies would really make a difference and which are geared, perhaps with window dressing, to retain the status quo.

## Sexual Politics: The Rise of Feminist Philosophy



*Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.*

—Abigail Adams, 1776

The exclusion of thinkers from the philosophical canon on the basis of race is paralleled by exclusion on the basis of gender. When we look at the list of major figures within the Western philosophical tradition, we should ask: Where are all the women? We know of female students in Plato's Academy and female thinkers in the Middle Ages, but why are they not part of the official canon of philosophy? The short answer, perhaps, is that most of them never got the opportunity to run their own schools, found it hard to have their ideas preserved in writing, and have been, for whatever reason, "written out" of the official history of the tradition.

According to recent critics, there has been an effort among philosophers and scholars to create and preserve an exclusively male, white, largely European Western intellectual tradition, which has marginalized or ignored the contributions of thinkers who were not male, white, and of European descent. Throughout the years of development of the current university curriculum in Europe and the United States, according to these critics of the university canon, the political interests of Europe—essentially a mixture of colonialism and industrialized capitalism—have influenced and distorted intellectual life throughout the world as well as in the university curriculum. They have argued that the traditional canon is propaganda for the industrialized world and its particular ideas of culture and philosophy.

### Gendered Points of View

*Would the world seem entirely different if it were pictured, felt, described, studied, and thought about from the point of view of women? A great deal looks altogether different when we notice the realities of class brought to our attention by Marx and others. Not only do economic activity, government, law, and foreign policies take on a very different appearance. "Knowledge" itself can be seen as quite a different enterprise when subject to the scrutiny of the sociology of knowledge. When connections are drawn between intellectual enterprise and class interests, social sciences claiming to be "value-free" can be seen to lend support to a capitalist status quo, and we can recognize how normative theories presented as impartial can be used to mystify reality rather than to contribute to needed change.*

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### Gendered Points of View (continued)

*Gender is an even more pervasive and fundamental aspect of reality than class. If feminists can succeed not only in making visible but also in keeping within our awareness the aspects of “mankind” that have been so obscured and misrepresented by taking the “human” to be the masculine, virtually all existing thought may be turned on its head . . . a revolution is occurring that is as important as those that took place when the views of Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud changed so radically man’s view of man. Some feminists think this latest revolution will be even more profound.*

—Virginia Held, “Feminism and Epistemology,” 1990

Women have been largely excluded from philosophical history. With only a few exceptions, they were long deprived of the chance to study, the opportunity to participate in philosophical discussions, and the venues for publishing their ideas. They and their ideas were not taken seriously, or they functioned, as the queen of Sweden functioned for René Descartes, as a good student who helped to sharpen *his* philosophy and provide an easy foil for *his* ideas. Because politics and inferior social status kept women out of philosophy, it is natural and understandable that feminist philosophy should first of all be social and political philosophy.

### Nineteenth-Century Feminism

In 1851 English feminist **Harriet Taylor** (1807–1858) published *The Enfranchisement of Women*, in which she argued for the education, employment, and civic participation of women—for the sake of both men and women. Although many men and women assume that the submission of women is natural and beneficial, Taylor reasoned that their views do not recognize what is truly good for either men or women.

*It is an acknowledged dictate of justice to make no degrading distinctions without necessity. In all things the presumption ought to be on the side of equality. A reason must be given why anything should be permitted to one person and interdicted to another. But when that which is interdicted includes nearly everything which those to whom it is permitted most prize, and to be deprived of which they feel to be most insulting; when not only political liberty but personal freedom of action is the prerogative of a caste; when even in the exercise of industry, almost all employments which task the higher faculties in an important field, which lead to distinction, riches, or*

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### Nineteenth-Century Feminism (continued)

*even pecuniary independence, are fenced round as the exclusive domain of the predominant section . . . the miserable expedients which are advanced as excuses for so grossly partial a dispensation, would not be sufficient, even if they were real, to render it other than a flagrant injustice. While, far from being expedient, we are firmly convinced that the division of mankind into two castes, one born to rule over the other, is in this case, as in all cases, an unqualified mischief; a source of perversion and demoralization, both to the favoured class and to those at whose expense they are favoured; producing none of the good which it is the custom to ascribe to it, and forming a bar, almost insuperable while it lasts, to any really vital improvement, either in the character or in the social condition of the human race.*

Since the 1960s and even since the early suffragettes, feminists have sought first and foremost political equality for women. But political equality presupposes philosophical equality. A turning point in modern feminist political philosophy was **Simone de Beauvoir's** *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir's work was a groundbreaking analysis of the experience of women in Western society, in which a man is taken as the norm and a woman is viewed as "other." The book motivated women worldwide to reflect upon their social and political position and to work to improve it.

There have always been women. They are women in virtue of their anatomy and physiology. Throughout history they have always been subordinated to men, and hence, their dependency is not the result of a historical event or a social change. It was not something that occurred, . . . but it might seem that a natural condition is beyond the possibility of change. In truth, however, the nature of things is no more immutably given, once for all, than is historical reality. If woman seems to be the inessential which never becomes essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change. . . . [W]omen do not say "We," except at some congress of feminists or similar formal demonstration; men say "women," and women use the same word referring to themselves. They do not automatically assume a subjective attitude. . . . (Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949)

Following Beauvoir, **Kate Millett** claimed in her *Sexual Politics* that the political domination of women by men is evident in every institution, every economic relationship, every work of literature, every personal relationship, of our society, both currently and throughout history. Millett called this pervasive system of male domination "**patriarchy**," and gave analyses of how patriarchy was the norm in every arena of our lives.

A disinterested examination of the situation between the sexes now, and throughout history, is . . . a relationship of dominance and subordination. What goes largely unexamined, often even unacknowledged (yet is institutionalized nonetheless) in our social order is the birthright priority whereby males rule females. Through this system a most ingenious form of “interior colonization” has been achieved. . . . Sexual domination obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power.

This is so because our society, like all other historical civilizations, is a patriarchy. The fact is evident at once if one recalls that the military, industry, technology, universities, science, political office, and finance—in short, every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive power of the police, is in male hands. (Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 1970)

One of the most controversial arenas of the current debate has to do with the question of whether femininity and masculinity (as opposed to the physiological categories “male” and “female”) arise from biology or upbringing, “nature or nurture.” Many feminists hold that the categories of gender (that is, “feminine” and “masculine”), unlike the categories of sex (“male” and “female”), are created and defined by culture. They are not “natural,” much less obligatory. Culture creates these categories and the social and political status that goes along with them, and culture can change those categories and their status. Beauvoir makes the point that gendered roles are culturally constructed when she announces, “One is not born a woman.” Beauvoir is suggesting that to call someone “a woman” is not just to claim that she is anatomically female, but to project on her the various socially imposed roles and behaviors that serve as standards for judging women. (Philosophers such as Kwame Anthony Appiah make similar arguments about the category of race, contending that there are no biological “facts” that differentiate races; race is entirely culturally constructed.)

### The Second Sex

French philosopher and novelist **Simone de Beauvoir** (1908–1986) left her position as teacher of philosophy when she published her first novel, but she did not abandon her interest. In 1949 she published *The Second Sex*, which is now considered to be one of the most important documents of feminism. Still controversial today, *The Second Sex* argues both that “woman” is a socially constructed category and that its meaning is derivative from the meaning of “man.”

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### The Second Sex (continued)

*If her functioning as a female is not enough to define woman, if we decline also to explain her through “the eternal feminine,” and if nevertheless we admit, provisionally, that women do exist, then we must face the question: what is a woman?*

*To state the question is, to me, to suggest, at once, a preliminary answer. The fact that I ask it is in itself significant. A man would never get the notion of writing a book on the peculiar situation of the human male. But if I wish to define myself, I must first of all say: “I am a woman”; on this truth must be based all further discussion. A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man.*

*The terms masculine and feminine are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. In the midst of an abstract discussion it is vexing to hear a man say: “You think thus and so because you are a woman”; but I know that my only defense is to reply: “And you think the contrary because you are a man,” for it is understood that the fact of being a man is no peculiarity.*

—Trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Knopf, 1953), introduction.

Feminist philosopher **Sherry Ortner** has argued that the distinction between nature and culture is not itself a natural distinction but a distinction made in language and therefore within culture. She points out that “nature” has often been associated with women, while “culture” has been associated with men. Women are and have long been represented as “closer” to nature, as the bearers and caretakers of children, the cooks of food, the domesticators of households, while “culture”—the context of political power and distinctively human achievement—is mainly the domain of men. The nature-culture distinction itself—or at least what counts as “nature” and “culture”—should not be taken for granted, but instead should be recognized as a means by which women are deprived of power.

Other feminists, however, have celebrated the difference between feminine and masculine characteristics. Some have argued that the feminine virtues of nurturing and caring are far preferable and more conducive to a harmonious, peaceful civilization than are the abstract, more warrior-like virtues of masculine thinking. They do not deny the differences but instead insist that women should have more say in society—in part because women have something distinctive to say.

**Mary Wollstonecraft** (1759–1797), self-taught and a native of London, founded a school at Newington Green with her sister Eliza. She worked there as schoolteacher and headmistress and soon became convinced that the young women she and her sister taught had already been effectively enslaved by their social training in subordination to men. In *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), Wollstonecraft proposed the deliberate extrapolation of Enlightenment ideals to include equal education for women.

In 1792 she published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In this landmark feminist work, Wollstonecraft argued that all human beings possess the faculty of reason and women must claim their equality by accepting its unemotional dictates. She rejected the notion that the natural condition of female existence *required* excessive concern for romantic love and desirability; these are, rather, the socially imposed means by which male domination gains a foothold.

In 1797 Wollstonecraft married radical activist and gothic fiction writer William Godwin. She died a few days after the birth of her daughter, Mary, who later married Percy Bysshe Shelley and wrote *Frankenstein*.

## Women and the Body

The idea that women are more often represented as part of nature than men comes in part from the idea that women are more closely identified with their bodies. Culture is then defined as the domain of men. In earlier chapters, we studied the philosophical problem of mind and body. Ever since Plato, philosophers have found it important to distinguish the mind—as that with which we think and reason, from the body—as that with which we move and sense our surroundings and take up space in the world. It is also the body that is so easily injured, gets sick, disintegrates with age, and eventually dies, so it is not surprising that so many philosophers have tried to separate and protect the mind from similar calamities. In particular, seventeenth-century philosopher Descartes claimed that the mind was a separate substance from the body and that only the mind can be known for certain to exist. The body, according to Descartes, is a separate substance, known by way of inference.

In several recent articles and books, however, various feminist philosophers—notably **Susan Bordo** and **Genevieve Lloyd**—have taken philosophers such as Descartes and Plato to task on feminist grounds because, they claim, these thinkers dubiously associate the mind or reasoning faculty with masculinity and the body with femininity. In this way Descartes and Plato can be understood on one level to be justifying male authority over

women. Not only in Descartes's metaphysics, but also in his theory of the passions, he puts mind or reason in authority over everything having to do with the body. This implicitly endorses the authority of men (the "specialists" in reason) over women (the "specialists" in bodily matters). Because Descartes and Plato are crucially important philosophers in the Western tradition, these feminists attribute some responsibility to them for the Western world's bias against women and the celebration of the supposedly more masculine virtues of pure thinking.

Aristotle, too, gives philosophical support to sexism, according to many feminist thinkers. In sexuality in particular, the roles of men and women seem to some extent to be biologically defined. But the obvious differences between men and women and their biological roles, particularly in the act of procreation, can be understood in various ways. In his *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle (fourth century BCE) argued:

For there must needs be that which generates and that from which it generates . . . and in those animals that have these powers separate in two sexes the body and nature of the active and the passive sex must also differ. If, then, the male stands for the effective and active; and the female, considered as female, for the passive, it follows that what the female would contribute to the semen of the male would not be semen, but material for the semen to work upon.

Thus, Aristotle suggests that by nature women are more passive and men more potent, that the essence of reproduction comes from the male while the female provides mere matter. His analysis makes the woman's contribution akin to a blob of clay. It has the potential to become a statue, but it is inert matter that must be acted upon by the sculptor. In the creation of a human being the activity that brings about the change is the male contribution, according to Aristotle. Aristotle seems to extend to ethics as well his association of men and women, respectively, with activity and passivity, for he implies that the male is more fully able to actualize his potential as a human being than is the female.

This association of masculinity with action and femininity with passivity did not end with Aristotle. It is evident in many doctrines of the Christian church and in many religions. We find these associations also in Sigmund Freud's theories about men and women, and in many other theories of human nature, for example, in the ancient Chinese Confucian tradition. (They occur in Daoism, too, where the female is associated with passivity, although in that tradition the image of "female" passivity is held up as an ideal for everyone.) Many feminists have taken issue with these tendencies—and in philosophy Aristotle comes under particular scrutiny. Because Aristotle's worldview set the tone for both Christian theology and modern metaphysics, it must be considered a profound problem if he held a mistaken belief about women and femininity. There, as elsewhere, his views held sway for nearly 2,000 years, and many of them persist today.

### Aristotle Challenged

*So it is naturally with the male and the female; the one is superior, the other inferior; the one governs, the other is governed; and the same rule must necessarily hold good with respect to all mankind.*

—Aristotle, *Politics*

*The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste, and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors, and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance.*

—Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 1969

### Plato: Patriarch or Early Feminist?

Although Aristotle's views of women and femininity were fairly clear, those of his teacher Plato are much disputed among feminists and among philosophers in general. In some ways, Plato seems to have been radically egalitarian for his time, particularly regarding women. In *The Republic*, for instance, Plato has Socrates argue for the complete equality of women in the ideal city. The important class of rulers ought to be open, argues Socrates, to women as well to men, and promising girls should be educated accordingly. And he further claims that any two people who do the same job, whatever their sex, ought to be educated, brought up, and treated in the same way. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates (fourth century BCE) argues:

There is therefore no pursuit connected with city management which belongs to a woman because she is a woman, or to a man because he is a man, but various natures are scattered in the same way among both kinds of persons. Woman by nature shares all pursuits . . . All things . . . should be done in common.

These and similar claims in Plato's dialogues have led some feminists to the conclusion that Plato was sympathetic to their cause. One noted scholar of ancient philosophy, **Martha Nussbaum**, for instance, calls Plato "the first feminist."

Other feminists, such as **Elizabeth V. Spelman**, however, have taken these claims of Plato's to be only minor gestures in an otherwise typically "masculinist" Platonic philosophy. Plato's repeated claim, for instance, that reason ought to rule over the passions in the healthy soul indicates to many Plato's accession to the gender-imposed opposition between mind and body. This is reinforced by his tendency to identify women, along with slaves and animals, as beings in whom reason does not rule the soul. Because reason, as these feminists see it, is arrogantly associated with masculinity and passion with femininity, Plato's concept of the harmonious soul is basically that of a male soul.

The Greek poet **Sappho**, priestess of a feminine love cult that flourished around 590 BCE on the island of Lesbos, celebrated the love of women for other women. Her poetry, characterized by passion and simplicity, greatly influenced Catullus, Ovid, and Swinburne.

Sappho presents a very different picture of love from that of Plato and in a very different style. It is not hard to imagine that it was poets such as Sappho that Plato may have had in mind when he suggested banning them and their work from Athens.

Sappho's verse survives in papyrus fragments and in the quotations by later critics. Some six hundred years later, the geographer Strabo would write, "Sappho was something to be wondered at. Never within human memory has there been a woman to compare with her as a poet."

### *Feminist Epistemology and Feminist Science*

Some feminists are also asking whether the very notion of knowledge, as it has traditionally been understood, is sex or gender based and whether women and men might view the world in fundamentally different ways. In the same vein as Gilligan, Beauvoir, and Millett, some feminist thinkers have claimed that scientific methodology and standards for knowledge have employed masculine models throughout their Western history. Some of them believe that a feminist model of scientific method—or at least the inclusion of women's observations—would yield a very different body of scientific knowledge as well.

**Evelyn Fox Keller** argues in her "Feminism and Science":

To see the emphasis on power and control so prevalent in the rhetoric of Western science as a projection of a specifically male consciousness requires no great leap of the imagination. Indeed, that perception has become a commonplace. Above all, it is invited by the rhetoric that conjoins the domination of nature with the insistent image of nature as female, nowhere more familiar than in the writings of Francis Bacon. For Bacon, knowledge and power are one, and the promise of science is expressed as "leading you to nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave . . ."

One might imagine how this could be so. We often **anthropomorphize** (that is, personify, or understand, in overly human terms) scientific concepts in order to understand them. You may have had a chemistry teacher who described

a molecule as “seeking” another hydrogen atom, for example. But sometimes such anthropomorphisms make their way into scientific hypotheses. For example, a biologist talks about dominant and recessive genes, and these descriptions have been made to carry the same gender connotations of “activity” and “passivity” that some feminists have opposed in more general Aristotelian discussions of reproduction. There are also, of course, “male” and “female” fittings in electrical circuits, and various other oppositions used in modern science that lend themselves to feminist interpretations. One of the strongest feminist arguments, however, is that the topics that become the agenda in the various sciences can reflect a male bias. Feminists have pointed, in particular, to the relative neglect of women’s health in medical research, an expression of the tendency to take the male to be the norm for the species. The concerns of serious science, particularly in medicine and the social sciences, are predominantly men’s concerns.

### Feminist Philosophy of Language

Keller’s mention of the impact of rhetoric and vocabulary on the way we think recalls our earlier discussion of the **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**, which claims that the patterns of one’s native language structures the way one understands the world. Feminists have sometimes criticized linguistic practices on the ground that they support a sexist view of reality. For example, the allegedly gender-neutral use of male pronouns (such as the use of *he* to refer back to “the student,” even though the student may be female), the use of terms like *chairman* or *policeman* to refer to individuals of both sexes, and the use of *man* to refer to humankind at large strike them as further instances in which the male case is presented as the norm. In response to the counterargument that English speakers recognize that such terms refer as much to women as to men, these critics point out that most people visualize a male when these terms are used and are at least momentarily startled when “he” or “the chairman” turns out to be female. In practice, these terms are not really gender neutral.

One solution to this problem is to avoid such dubiously “gender-neutral” usage, the strategy we have applied to this book. But this approach can be difficult. What if one wants to refer back to the individual student? One can, of course, say “he or she,” but if one repeatedly refers with such pronouns, statements can become painfully convoluted. A common solution is to refer with a plural pronoun (for example, *they* and *their*) even when the referent is singular (for example, “the student”), but this is ungrammatical. Another possibility is to alternate between using *he* and *she* in examples.

Fortunately for feminists, language evolves. American English usage has started to reflect more sensitivity toward inclusion. Terms like *chair* have replaced *chairman* in many contexts, and *humankind* is beginning to sound natural, even if at first it seemed an odd substitution for *mankind*. Perhaps the most effective way

to make language less sexist, however, is to change the reality that it is used to track. If women more routinely appear in roles of power and authority, language will need to reflect this.

Feminist epistemologists and feminist philosophers of science and language all draw attention to the ways in which the perspectives of those in the politically dominant majority become enshrined in our beliefs about the world. In this, they join African-American philosophers and other thinkers concerned about the ways that racism has narrowed our outlooks. The analyses of all these philosophers can help correct injustices of the past and present by undermining the self-serving theories that the powerful have used to support their position of privilege. More positively, they can enrich all our lives by helping us to make our society more just, something that can only happen if we recognize and acknowledge the women and members of minority groups among our fellow citizens.

## Closing Questions

1. What does it mean to say that “might makes right”? In your opinion, what makes a government legitimate?
2. In your opinion, what is the single most important feature of justice? Is it serving the needs of the worst off? Ensuring that people are paid fairly for what they do? Ensuring that people may keep what they earn? Protecting people’s rights? Making sure that everyone is treated equally?
3. Before the legal abolition of slavery, was it morally legitimate to own slaves? Why or why not?
4. What do you think human beings were like before the formation of societies as we know them? What would we be like if we were raised (and somehow survived) outside of any social or societal context? Do you think that such questions are relevant?
5. If you and several hundred other people were about to form a new society (let’s say, as you plunged into space to populate a newly discovered planet), what principles of justice would you propose to your peers? What sort of principles (if any) do you think would gain general agreement? (Examples: “Finders keepers, losers weepers.” “Everyone shares what they’ve got equally with others.” “No one should be punished under any circumstances.” “Anyone who breaks even the smallest law is exiled to space.”)
6. If an already-rich person makes another fortune on a lucky stock market investment, does he or she have the right (entitlement) to the entire gain—or should this be subject to taxation? What does your answer suggest about your sense of justice?