

Philosophy, feminism and universalism

Jean Grimshaw

During the last ten years or so, when I have been asked what my particular 'interests' are, I have usually said that I have been working on 'feminism and philosophy', or 'philosophy and feminism' – or perhaps, though less often, 'feminist philosophy'. I have become increasingly interested in how to think about this conjunction: 'Feminism *and*...; Philosophy *and*...'

In *Hipparchia's Choice*, Michèle Le Dœuff writes:

The desire to see philosophy continue: this is something that preoccupies us all. Yet have we thought ill enough of this discipline that we love? ... On occasion I have maintained that this discourse which claims to understand everything better than any other is a mode of phantasmagorical hegemony; all the same, in it I saw my road to freedom.¹

My own experience was similar. My interest in philosophy began in my teenage years and became serious in my mid twenties. Among other things, it symbolized to me independence of mind and rejection of the narrow rigidities of my childhood and adolescence. And one of its great attractions was that it seemed to have nothing to do with the rest of my life. The 'I' who studied philosophy seemed almost Cartesian, and I thought of philosophy as dealing with 'universal' questions where I might just possibly meet on equal terms, as it were, with other 'minds', and where the problems of the rest of my life could be bracketed out. (The American philosopher Sara Ruddick writes, in similar vein, that her life was shaped by a love affair with Reason; a desire to be in a 'world' that transcended the messy and fleshly concerns of everyday life – and particularly, in her case, motherhood.²)

When I first studied philosophy, the question of gender did not even enter my head, and when I first became aware of it, it was with a profound sense of shock, since it seemed to undermine the foundations of what I thought I had been doing. One of the most

fundamental aims of feminist philosophical work has been to deconstruct the claims of much masculinist philosophical theory to be 'universal' or 'objective' in the sense of being able to adopt a 'God's eye view' above the fray of things like social location and politics. Elizabeth Grosz³ writes that three of the most important things questioned by feminist philosophers have been the following:

1. The belief in any universal truth independent of the particularities of history or social conditions.
2. The belief in observer-neutral or context-free knowledge.
3. The belief in a transhistorical subject of knowledge who can in all ways 'distance' himself from the objects of knowledge; in other words, a disembodied, sexless, perspectiveless knower.

These views are shared in many ways by postmodern epistemologists. The distinctiveness of the feminist critique of philosophy, however, lies mainly in the demonstration that there are important ways in which much of philosophy rests on typically or paradigmatically male experience and concerns, even though these may not be the same at all times. What preoccupies philosophers, what is seen as 'important', what is marginalized or even seen as 'not philosophy', what is absent and not thought worthy of mention, what is given little value or treated with contempt – these are closely related to conceptions of masculinity, and to the projects that are, in varying ways, seen as typifying the life of a man. Much feminist philosophical writing has aimed to show that this 'false universalism' is, in fact, a type of *particularity*.

Now this might suggest that the aim of feminist philosophy should be to transcend this false universalism, and develop philosophical theories which are in some way *more* inclusive, and perhaps genuinely 'universal'. This kind of view, when applied to other fields of enquiry such as science, has sometimes been

called 'feminist empiricism'; it is a view of feminist scholarship and enquiry as aiming simply to correct the errors and biases of older masculinist ways, whilst engaging nevertheless in a similar kind of enterprise.

This conception of feminist enquiry, however, has been taken to task for its failure to be critical enough of the paradigms with which much philosophical enquiry has been conducted. In particular, it has been argued that old-style 'objectivity', premised on an implicit belief in the possibility of a 'God's eye view' which transcends social and historical location, is not recuperable for feminist purposes. *Some* kind of perspectivism must be an essential presupposition of feminist enquiry, however difficult it may be to formulate this. Feminist 'standpoint' theory is an attempt to formulate a theory of this perspectivism which draws on Marxist views of knowledge. Such attempts to formulate a feminist perspectivism do not usually involve a total rejection of any notion of 'objectivity'. More commonly, they attempt to redefine or reformulate it. Sandra Harding, for instance, distinguishes between 'objectivism' (the belief in the God's eye view) and 'objectivity'.⁴ She argues that objectivism is both too strong and too weak for feminist purposes, and that feminist enquiry should *both* reject the possibility of knowledge that transcends social location *and* reformulate the notion of 'objectivity' to allow for the critique, development and accountability of knowledge claims from varying perspectives in ways that are foreign to 'objectivism'.

If 'objectivism' is rejected, it means that questions about the objects and the subjects of knowledge can no longer be sharply held apart. Knowledge claims cannot be considered in abstraction from consideration of *who* is claiming to know, since the 'what' cannot fail to be inflected by the 'who'. The discomfiting aspect of this, for one's own philosophical practice, arises from the recognition that the feminist philosopher needs to re-evaluate not merely the masculinism of aspects of the philosophical tradition, but also the location of her own philosophical work. It is (once one has started) not so hard to see how philosophical traditions are often masculinist. It is much harder to think about perspectivism in relation to one's own work. But the critique of masculinist particularity disguised as universalism has, in recent years, also intersected powerfully with a growing awareness within feminist theory and practice of the ways in which some feminist writing has tended, sometimes unwittingly, to 'universalize' the experiences and practices of a relatively small and privileged group of women.⁵ A great deal has now been written about the importance of feminist writers, too, recognizing that they speak and

write from certain positions, difficult though it may be to acknowledge or formulate these, or to think clearly about the impact they may have on one's own work.

But if it is important to think about the position from which one writes, it is equally important – and difficult – to think about whom one imagines one is addressing and why. A symptom of this difficulty is the uneasiness commonly felt by many feminist writers about the term 'we'. Who is included or excluded in this 'we'? How is one to think about these inclusions and exclusions? I want now to explore some of these questions further by looking at Michèle Le Dœuff's discussion of feminism and philosophy in *Hipparchia's Choice*.

Le Dœuff's choice

Like other philosophers writing from a feminist perspective, Le Dœuff rejects the false universalism of much philosophical writing. She links her feminist critique of this false universalism to her analysis in a previous book, *The Philosophical Imaginary*, of myths and images in philosophy.⁶ Historically, philosophy has often seen itself as fully 'rational'; it has tried to establish its own value by *distinguishing* itself from other forms of discourse such as myth or poetry. If philosophers have used myths or images, they have seen these as mere embellishments, or as inessential heuristic or pedagogic devices. But Le Dœuff argues that these images are *constitutive* of philosophy. It could not function without them; they are its unacknowledged support. And it is important to investigate them since they often indicate the points at which there is stress or tension in a philosophical theory, the points where it cannot come out into the open, or where there are things that it has to exclude. She analyses Thomas More's *Utopia*, for example, and in particular the way in which it is dominated by imagery of theatre and islands. She argues that these images signal a blind spot in More's work; an excess where he says more than he means to, and where he is not able to say other things overtly. Not all of the myths and images that Le Dœuff analyses are directly connected with gender. But nevertheless notions of the 'masculine' and the 'feminine' commonly function, as myth or metaphor, to disguise or repress what cannot be acknowledged, what must be excluded. They also indicate the points at which a philosopher may 'exceed' or contradict the premisses of his own theory. In *Hipparchia's Choice* there is some very powerful analysis of the way in which Sartre's analysis of 'bad faith' in *Being and Nothingness* signals such blind spots.

So, philosophy's own self-image has been that of the fully transparent and rational, that which can validate its own foundations. But Le Dœuff argues that no discourse

can do this. Her strategy of analysing myths and images in philosophy aims not merely to expose what is hidden within any particular philosophical system, but to work towards a new conception of philosophy, one which is aware of its own necessary limitations and partial and incomplete character. It is not that we should just wallow in myth and metaphor. Le Dœuff sees it as very important that we should aim for such things as clearer insights, critique, and reasoned argument. But it is crucial, she suggests, that we should also recognize the partial and provisional nature of all philosophical work, and the concerns, interests and perspectives from which we write. We should put *ourselves* into our philosophy, and not try to remain 'outside' what we say or write.

Now it looks at this point as if Le Dœuff is moving in the direction of saying that philosophy should simply be perspectival. However, despite her critique of false universalism, she also wants to maintain that there is an important sense in which philosophy *should* be 'universal'. Her defence of the 'universal' in philosophy depends, I think, on an important distinction between the experience and perspectives from which philosophical work arises, and the *audience* to whom it is addressed.

Le Dœuff says some interesting things about audiences. First, she argues that readers and authors must have something in common if they are to meet at all. This does *not* mean that they will always agree. In fact, real or substantive *disagreement* can only come about if there are certain shared interests, values and assumptions about what it is important and legitimate to investigate. This sort of issue has been brought home to me very forcibly on many occasions when I have tried to have discussions about feminism and philosophy with men (though also with some women). I have spent much totally frustrating time on occasions when no progress at all was made, because it seemed impossible to establish or share any basic values or goals. Here is a small selection of remarks that I have encountered which have indicated this state of affairs:

Well, this may be quite interesting, but is it *philosophy*?

But surely there are no barriers to women becoming philosophers nowadays?

But surely the fact that a philosopher makes a few sexist remarks about women has nothing to do with their *philosophy*? (They might have had all sorts of other unpleasant personal habits as well...)

My wife doesn't feel oppressed.

And so on. If you get this kind of response from an audience, you rarely get beyond the state of trying to

show that there *is* actually something to discuss, and you almost inevitably reach a kind of deadlock.

So it seems that the audience to whom philosophical work is addressed must, if the work is to communicate at all, share at least a sense of the basic worth and importance of the questions being asked and the enterprise being undertaken. But Le Dœuff wants to say something else as well about the audience for philosophy. Philosophical work, she writes, *proposes* a 'we'; it invites a response. But the audience invited to listen or respond to philosophy should not, she argues, be restricted by any extra-intellectual criterion. Philosophy should aim to address women and men together. It should postulate an open debate in which only 'reasonable' people will be involved. Even though it should not try to develop theories of universal application, it *should* aim to be universal in the following kind of way. She writes:

It comes down to postulating that the things one is talking about have being, or at least the ones that are worth talking about do. This does not mean that they 'really' exist, ... nor that they are radically independent of the thought that thinks about them. The postulate according to which the things one is talking about have being is more minimal than that. It is the idea that ... the simple fact that I posit something as the object of my thinking means that I posit it as an object...⁷

What Le Dœuff means, I think, is that I must assume that any 'reasonable' listener or reader will agree that the object of my investigation 'exists', in the sense of being worthy of attention and capable of being investigated. This is what Le Dœuff calls a 'regulatory' idea. It does not presuppose agreement; in fact, as I have said, one cannot really disagree unless there is also something shared. The 'objects' of feminist study should therefore be, Le Dœuff suggests, 'independent', and in principle at least be objects of thought, study and reason for everyone. But if this is the case, she raises the following question:

In what sense, then, can one speak of feminist philosophy? If it is a form of philosophy, its object is independent (or in any case postulated as such); but what independent object can reside in an empirically identifiable sociological 'place'. In the first analysis, this is a contradiction.⁸

In other words, she is saying that there seems to be a contradiction between her conception of philosophy as 'universal', addressed to readers not differentiated by any extra-intellectual criterion, and the fact that all writers of philosophy have a social location.

It seems to me that there is indeed a tension in what Le Dœuff writes. If the writers of philosophy are socially related, then so too are the readers. The idea of the proposed 'universal' reader who is not differentiated by any extra-intellectual criterion seems to me to be a shadow of the idea of the universal 'Man of Reason' who has been the target of so much feminist critique. Le Dœuff herself cannot, of course, be unaware that the readers as well as the writers of philosophy are socially located. The 'universal' reader is not an empirical reality, and the 'existence' of the object is simply, she argues, a necessary postulate in philosophical writing. But if, in writing philosophy, one must assume as a reader someone who shares some agenda with oneself, the sharing of that agenda cannot be seen merely as a matter of abstract 'reason', and it is hard to see how an abstract postulate based on that idea could function as a basis for philosophical work. In the case of feminist philosophical writing, the agenda that needs to be shared before discussion can even begin must include, for instance, some serious appreciation of feminist concerns, a recognition that issues of gender in philosophy are not a 'trivial' matter, and an awareness that philosophy should not be discussed as if it were a question of 'Great Ideas' that spring out of the blue and fully formed from the heads of philosophers alone. And the kind of profound change in intellectual orientation that is required for feminist philosophical thinking to be pursued and communicated does not arise simply out of one's head, or as a matter of pure thought. It always intersects with changes in experience, orientation and practice in other areas of one's life. Certainly, in my own case, my growing interest in feminism and philosophy arose both from an increasing awareness of 'women's issues' in the rest of my life, and from a feeling (still at times ambivalent) that the intellectual and personal dimensions of my life should be brought more closely into relationship with each other.

So I do not think that the idea of the 'universal' reader, as Le Dœuff proposes it, can be accepted, since the realm of the 'intellect' cannot be thought of as one which is wholly divorced from the historical and social contexts in which human intellects operate. Nevertheless, I think it suggests some important things about the way in which we might think about feminism and philosophy, which I would like to try to reformulate.

A starting point for this reformulation might be as follows. Much feminist philosophy has considered the question of what it might mean to *be a woman* doing philosophy, or to write as a woman. Much has also been written about the need to recognize that one is never *just* a woman, since gender can never be wholly abstracted

from race, class and other aspects of one's social location. But whilst one cannot either simply write as a 'human being', and whilst it is necessary to recognize the force of feminist critiques of notions of 'the human' that have so often excluded women or other beings perceived as inferior, nevertheless it seems to me that in the writing and reading of philosophy there are aspects of 'being human' which are not *reducible* to experiences which can simply be classified under gender, race or class, however complex the intersections between these. There are always senses in which philosophy may, indeed must, transcend gender and address issues which can be seen as being of common human concern. And it is important, indeed, to add that issues of gender should *themselves* be issues of common concern. Nor is it always plain at the outset what kinds of implications for philosophy thinking about gender will have.

A different significance

But this kind of point can be expressed more generally. Even if philosophical theories are related in some way to social experience, the nature of the experience from which philosophical theorizing arises, or to which it speaks, may be very wide-ranging and diverse. In sociological theory, an influential theory of socialization at one time laid great stress on the notion of 'significant others'.⁹ But many theorizations of *who* these 'significant others' might be seemed to assume that they could only be the people one happened to bump into in the course of one's daily life. The implication seemed to be that anything which was historically, geographically or culturally remote could not really be significant. It seems to me that 'significance' cannot possibly be restricted in this kind of way. It is not necessary for all aspects of social experience to be shared for it to be possible for a philosophical theory to 'speak' to one from a position of considerable distance. And, *pari passu*, it may be that writing one produces oneself may 'speak' to people whose location is very different from one's own. It is always interesting, for example, to find ways in which the writings of philosophers or theorists (Nietzsche or Freud, for instance) who are highly patriarchal and misogynist in many ways, may nevertheless provide insights or conceptual frameworks which can provoke a significant re-articulation of what one thinks about one's own life or work.

The 'meaning' of philosophical theories and the significance they might have is always open, and may always generate an 'excess' which certainly cannot be attributed to authorial intention, and which may transgress the boundaries of expectation. Even where these same writings try to effect closures or are premised

on exclusions, they may not fully succeed in these things. I may read Nietzsche or Freud with profit in ways that are remote from any expectations they would themselves have had. Philosophical theories may also of course *not* speak to those to whom one assumed that they would speak. But we need, I think, to recognize the intrinsically 'open texture' of philosophical writings, and avoid the kind of parochialism which assumes that their relationship to the experience of writers or readers can always be clearly known in advance or restricted to any particular social groups.

The nature of the conjunction between feminism and philosophy does not consist in bringing two self-contained disciplines or areas of enquiry into confrontation or relation with each other. One of the first things that happens when the relationship between feminism and philosophy is taken seriously is that there is a tendency for intellectual enquiry to become interdisciplinary, and for the traditional or orthodox boundaries of disciplines to be transcended. This is not accidental. I noted earlier how one of the commonest remarks I have heard from those who have been antagonistic to feminist work in philosophy has been 'But is this *philosophy*?' I have stopped feeling a need constantly to try to show that an enquiry 'really' is philosophical. One reason is that conceptions of what philosophy is have themselves been historically very variable. In addition, the strong desire to demarcate rigid territories is partly a function of the common academic desire to have hierarchies of expertise and a strong territorialism of discipline boundaries. But as soon as you acknowledge the legitimacy or importance of questions about the identities of human knowers, as soon as you stop delegitimizing or bracketing out questions about *who* is claiming to know, then the sharp boundaries between the 'objects' of knowledge and the 'subjects' who claim to know begin to collapse. This means that one's conception of the 'nature' of a discipline will change profoundly, and it will no longer be possible to demarcate academic territories in quite the same way as before.

So philosophy (or any other area of intellectual enquiry) will change profoundly in an encounter with feminist thinking, in ways that are not always obvious from the outset. But, in addition, feminism should not be thought of as a clearly defined set of

beliefs, or an orthodoxy. It is an orientation, which is both political and epistemological. Feminist enquiry assumes, as I have already said, some kind of agreement or consensus about the nature and importance of the enterprise. But feminism is (and should be) compatible with strong and often interesting and productive disagreements and debates about the objects of study and the methods by which enquiry should proceed. And it is compatible with – and often requires – radical and ongoing modification to one's own thinking in all sorts of ways.

Some conceptions of the relation between feminism and philosophy have explicitly or implicitly suggested that one or the other should be the dominant partner. In *The Sceptical Feminist*,¹⁰ for instance, Janet Radcliffe Richards seemed to see philosophy simply as a useful tool with which to sort out the horrible conceptual



muddles into which she thought feminists had got themselves. Others, by contrast, have seen philosophy as something which needs knocking into shape by a feminist sledgehammer, and purifying of its sexism and phallocentrism. I have come to think that neither of these conceptions is of much use. There is no clear 'inside' or 'outside' to feminist theory or philosophy. Feminist theory is an ongoing and enormously ramified enterprise, and the term 'feminist' is not some kind of hallmark of authenticity with which one can simply stamp a theory and accredit it. Feminist goals and values are themselves matters of contention, and which theoretical outcomes will come to be seen as apt for those values and goals is, *a fortiori*, a matter of dispute and debate. It frequently does not follow, in philosophy at least, that the relevance or interest of philosophical theories to aspects of feminist enquiry is always in proportion to the level of misogyny or phallocentrism displayed by the male philosophers who espoused the theory in the first place.

Once feminist philosophical enquiry moves beyond the initial stage of investigating things such as the overt sexism of male theory, it is rarely possible sharply to demarcate which bits of one's intellectual endeavours are 'feminism' and which are 'philosophy', since each has become so changed by the other. And it is for this reason that, whilst I think that there are problems with the particular ways in which Le Dœuff expresses her conception of the universality of philosophy, there is also something very important about it. As I have said, the idea of a postulated audience of abstractly 'reasonable' people who are differentiated by no extra-intellectual criteria seems to be a shadow cast by the idea of the universal 'Man of Reason'. But I do not think that there can or should be an enterprise called 'feminist philosophy' which can in principle speak only to women, nor variants within this that can in principle speak only to particular groups of women.

One might in fact just as well call this the universality of feminism as the universality of philosophy. It is interesting here to consider the ways in which books on philosophy that have a feminist orientation are often classified in libraries or bookshops. It is commonly the case that even when they obviously deal with philosophical topics, they are classified not under 'philosophy' but under 'gender' or 'women's studies'. 'Feminist philosophy' is marked as a variant. Courses with 'feminism' or 'gender' in the title are often seen as a 'special interest', of relevance only to women. One of the central objectives of feminist philosophical work should be that questions now identified as 'feminist' should become part of the normal repertoire of everyone who studies philosophy.

But the reason for this is not simply that one would like the insights of feminist philosophy to become part of the 'mainstream'. More importantly, it is because of a dialectic that emerges. When feminist enquiry encounters any discipline, the parameters of that discipline begin to yield and dissolve in important ways. At the same time, the parameters and boundaries of feminist thinking may themselves respond, sometimes in surprising ways, to new resources which could not have been predicted. The audience who might respond with recognition or intellectual excitement to this dialectic is one which must share some general orientation. This will involve interconnections between the social experiences and political awareness of the audience and their intellectual interests and endeavours. But *who* will share this orientation, *what* the objects of enquiry will turn out to be, *how* they can best be pursued, are things which cannot be clearly determined in advance. It may well be necessary, for strategic reasons, for women to retain spaces of their own for the foreseeable future. Without such spaces, a feminist approach to philosophy could not have flourished, since it would have been almost impossibly difficult to get beyond the stage of trying to show that there actually was something to discuss. It also seems somewhat depressingly unlikely that, for the foreseeable future, the academic mainstream will regard feminism as anything more than a 'special interest'. But the dialectical relationship between feminism and the academic disciplines has the potential for transformations that are of entirely general human and intellectual relevance. Philosophical and feminist discourses have unstable boundaries; they are open-textured and can be permeable to each other. Because of this, they project in front of themselves an audience whose nature is open and uncertain and which always has a potential for indefinite and unknown expansion. In this sense, there is a kind of 'universalism' implicit in the enterprise on which one engages when writing from a feminist and/or philosophical point of view.

As I have said, Le Dœuff argues that the universalism of philosophy is a postulate, a regulative ideal, rather than an actuality. But I want to suggest that there is a sense in which her conception of this regulative ideal is not *sufficiently* 'universal', and that the reason for this is her use of the idea of the abstractly 'reasonable' person.

Although Le Dœuff nowhere discusses Habermas, there is something very Habermasian about her notion of the universalism of philosophy. Habermas has argued that the notion of an 'ideal speech situation', or unrestrained communication free from force or fear of reprisal, is implicit in the making of validity claims in

the communicative practices of everyday life. In his concept of an 'ideal speech situation' he seems to assume, like Le Dœuff, the possibility of an 'abstractly reasonable' listener or party to the conversation. But Habermas has been criticized for assuming an ideal consensus about rationality that can seem at times less like the universal conditions presupposed by linguistic communication as such, and much more like particular Western, post-Enlightenment (and arguably, masculinist) norms of rationality. (It is interesting in this context that Habermas has expressed interest in the views of writers such as Kohlberg, who have similarly been accused of masculinist forms of universalization.)

Perhaps the problem with Le Dœuff's notion of a 'reasonable' audience for philosophy is not only that this conception of the audience is too abstract, but that it does not sufficiently recognize the ways in which the criteria for what is 'reasonable' may themselves be contested. Le Dœuff argues that philosophical writing needs to presuppose agreement on what will count as 'rational' ways of proceeding, as 'good reasons' for agreement or disagreement. But her own view of philosophy also suggests that such criteria can be highly contentious. To give an example, imagine a debate about abortion conducted between a moral philosopher who is wedded to a style of argument rooted in an analytic 'desert-island dilemma' approach and a feminist who wants to give an account of the power relations involved in the history of the criminalization of abortion, and to ask questions such as when and why abortion became seen as 'murder'. To the analytic philosopher, the feminist may be perceived as shelving or evading the central *moral* question – is abortion right or wrong? To the feminist, the analytic philosopher is simply failing to recognize that questions about 'morality' cannot be settled in complete abstraction from questions about power and about social relationships.

Discussion and debate between women living and thinking within different cultural traditions can reveal similar kinds of problems. Anne Seller, for instance, has written about the ways in which an experience of teaching in India unsettled and challenged many of her assumptions about academic debate, about its purpose and legitimacy, and about the ways in which it should proceed.¹¹ A great deal of feminist thinking and discussion spanning different cultural traditions has faced similar problems; what has been at issue has been the criteria for how debate should proceed and what should count as 'reasonable' argument.

What Le Dœuff's conception of the 'reasonable' audience does not adequately recognize is the ways in which feminist philosophical writing can think of itself

not merely as projected out to a potentially open audience, but as open to change from the response of that audience. This openness should concern not merely the 'substance' of an already agreed agenda, but challenges to that agenda itself or to what counts as a 'reasonable' way of proceeding. It is precisely this kind of openness that seems to me to find insufficient place in the somewhat Habermasian approach of Le Dœuff, and I shall conclude by suggesting that there are some useful philosophical resources for thinking about this issue in the work of Gadamer on hermeneutic understanding.

Truth and method

In *Truth and Method*¹² Gadamer's central aim was to give an ontological account of the conditions of possibility of understanding, and to describe the processes by which it works in human life. It was not to provide a *method* for achieving understanding or truth, nor to spell out a normative or ethical ideal of communication. For Gadamer, the basic misunderstanding of the Enlightenment was to suppose that there could be knowledge or understanding which was derived from some abstract or universal standpoint. The Enlightenment saw reason as sharply opposed to tradition and authority. Gadamer believes that this opposition is a false one. All understanding involves projecting a meaning on one's perceptions, and all these interpretive projections are rooted in the situation of the interpreter. Understanding is contingent, finite and conditioned. This is also true of our conceptions of rationality and objectivity; 'reason' is historical and grounded in tradition.

A central concept in *Truth and Method* is that of 'prejudice'. But for Gadamer, 'prejudice' does not mean 'bias' (which might be eliminated). It means, rather, those things which have to be assumed or 'prejudged' before any form of knowledge or understanding is possible. In this sense, all understanding involves prejudice and all knowledge is perspectival and limited. What seems interesting or worth investigation, and the presuppositions that are brought to this task, are anchored in a particular historical situation.

According to Gadamer, it is a mistake to see prejudices as merely negative or as a hindrance which we might aim to overcome. Without them we could not have understanding at all, since they constitute what he calls the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Meaning is produced as a *relation* between the subject matter and ourselves, and whilst in one sense the contextual limitations may put constraints on what meaning is produced, in another sense they are the conditions of its possibility.

But Gadamer does not believe that the situated, prejudiced and perspectival nature of understanding entails that we are locked into finite or closed 'worlds' of meaning whose parameters are permanently fixed. Such a model of understanding would suggest that the only way in which we might hope to understand others would be to 'get outside' our own situation totally, disregard our prejudices, and think ourselves into the world of the other. But if all understanding is necessarily partial and perspectival, this is impossible. The outcome of a conception of knowledge or understanding which supposes that we must necessarily be wholly locked into closed worlds of meaning can only be objectivism (I am right and they are wrong) or relativism (everyone is 'right', which is to say that notions of truth, or of progression towards a better understanding, cannot get a purchase at all).

The central metaphor that Gadamer uses with which to think about understanding is that of a 'horizon'. Like many metaphors that have been used in philosophy to think about knowledge or understanding, this is a spatial metaphor. But although a horizon only exists from a particular viewpoint or perspective, it is nevertheless open, and its boundaries are indefinite and can be extended. We can never remain hermetically sealed within the prejudices that form the initial parameters of our understanding. The trajectory of human understanding, Gadamer suggests, necessarily involves encounters with others, and with other perspectives, which will in turn modify our self-understandings. Any interpretation is always open to encounter with and critique from another interpretation. The process of mutual modification that may occur is called by Gadamer a 'fusion of horizons'. It is possible to understand across differences of time and place, but the process of understanding does not merely flatten out or eliminate these differences, nor does the 'fusion' involved necessarily imply a reconciliation.

Georgia Warnke¹³ describes the Gadamerian notion of the 'fusion of horizons' as a de-absolutized Hegelian conception; an 'Aufhebung' in which initial positions are transcended in a new synthesis. But if the ideal of 'synthesis' is taken to imply reconciliation or agreement, then Gadamer's view does not seem to imply that such a 'synthesis' necessarily happens. If, starting necessarily with our own prejudices, we come up against something which challenges these, we may respond in various ways. We might, for instance, feel that we must reject or dismiss or ignore what we have encountered. We might feel angry or discomfited. What we cannot wholly avoid is the confrontation with something which asserts itself *against* the prejudices from which we start; nor can we

wholly avoid the changes in our own self-understandings which will result from such confrontations.

Now at this point there seem to be two main problems with the idea that Gadamer's thinking about understanding could be relevant to thinking about feminism or feminist philosophy. First, Gadamer himself showed no interest in and little sympathy with feminism.¹⁴ And since its central impulse has been and must be anchored in a *critique* of those traditions and prejudices which have oppressed women, how can a view of hermeneutic understanding which involves arguing that understanding is always rooted in tradition and prejudice be useful to feminism?

There is plainly no sense in which Gadamer's work can be utilized lock, stock, and barrel for feminist purposes, any more than that of any other contemporary thinker who has so little sympathy with feminism. But it is useful to contrast Gadamer's approach with that of Habermas on the one hand, and Rorty on the other. Rorty's pragmatism, his rejection of all Enlightenment notions of reason or knowledge, and his reading of hermeneutics entail the end of epistemology, if by 'epistemology' is meant any attempt to 'ground' knowledge in any way at all. Beyond the rejection of Enlightenment foundationalism, there can only be 'conversation', and even if feminists provide an additional 'voice' in such conversations, it is unclear how, under such a view, any of the central critical impulses of feminism can be theorized at all. Habermas, on the other hand, is insistent that we have to move beyond hermeneutics if we are to have a critical theory of society, or any account of power relations. But his move beyond hermeneutics involves postulating an ideal of communication in which all parties are able to examine disputed claims without fear of force or reprisal, and by appeal to reason and the force of argument alone. This ideal seems to me to be very similar to the regulative ideal of 'universalism' in philosophy proposed by Le Dœuff, in which an audience supposedly demarcated by no extra-intellectual criterion considers arguments or knowledge claims on the basis of 'reason' alone. They both assume the possibility of an abstract 'rationality' which is *not* anchored in any particular tradition or set of prejudices, and in Le Dœuff's case this is, I think, quite incompatible with her stress on the need for agreement before debate can begin. Gadamer, on the other hand, whilst rejecting the Habermasian ideal of unrestrained communication as abstract and unreal, in no way aligns himself with the kind of relativism or view of philosophy as 'conversation' that Rorty espouses. The fact that all understanding is prejudiced does not entail that there cannot be better understandings, even if these cannot be

measured against some abstract or universal ideal.

But the issue of the validity of understandings or knowledge claims also raises a second problem about Gadamer's work. There are many points in his writing (as Strickland notes) where he may *appear* to be proposing a normative or ethical ideal of communication with the other. When giving an account of his view of understanding, it is often very difficult to describe it without lapsing oneself into a normative or ethical mode of writing. For instance, in describing the idea of 'the fusion of horizons', one is led at times, following Gadamer's own language, to deploy phrases such as 'openness to the other', or to write about 'responding to the other'. But critics of Gadamer, such as Habermas and Bernstein,¹⁵ have argued that a fundamental problem with Gadamer's hermeneutics, with his notion of the 'dialogue' or 'dialectic' of understanding, is that he nowhere addresses the issue of the sorts of conditions under which any kind of 'dialogue' can be entered into.

Indeed, if Gadamer's view of the 'dialectic' of understanding, the 'fusion' of horizons, is interpreted as an ethical ideal, it is not at all clear how a kind of openness or readiness to listen or respond to others could come about in situations which are structured by hierarchies of power or relations of domination or oppression. But Gadamer's central concern was not to set an ethical ideal, but to give an ontological account of the 'dialectic' of understanding; the way in which understanding occurs as a fundamental mode of our being-in-the-world. Strickland argues that the notion of 'dialectic' is more adequate to describe Gadamer's view of understanding than the word 'dialogue'. A 'dialectic' between interpretations, encounters between them that will impact in some way on one's own understandings, will happen whether we like it or not, and whether or not we have any intention of entering into 'dialogue' with the other. And this dialectic is not dependent on agreement, nor on reconciliation of perspectives.

So a Gadamerian account of understanding is not fundamentally concerned with considering the power structures within which oppressors or those in situations of power may well have no intention whatsoever of being open to or responding receptively to the prejudices or viewpoints of those with whom they are in an unequal relationship. Nor does Gadamer consider what might be done to increase the likelihood of such receptivity. There are ways in which his account of hermeneutic understanding can be understood as conservative. Warnke, for instance, argues that when discussing the ways in which understanding presupposes common judgement or agreement, Gadamer ultimately fails to distinguish between two senses of agreement: the substantive sense

of actually embracing the views of a tradition, and the sense in which these views may be an integral part of our self-understanding, whether or not we agree with them.

In so far, therefore, as feminism must be concerned with power relationships, including both those which specifically structure the relationships between women and men, and those (of race and class, for instance) in which many women are themselves implicated, it seems that an ethical ideal of communication is needed, of which no adequate account can be found in Gadamer's work. In addition, a political account is needed of the conditions under which openness, receptivity or readiness to respond to the other might have a chance of being practised.

There seems, therefore, to be no sense in which Gadamer's view of understanding can wholly escape the charges either of conservatism or of failing to offer a sufficient account of what a feminist understanding of understanding itself might be. I want to end, however, by suggesting that, despite these things, Gadamer's account of understanding can still be useful to feminism.

One reason for this usefulness is, I think, that there remain tensions in Gadamer's hermeneutics. Despite his professed intention to analyse the structure and nature of understanding, there are times at which, as I have already noted, his account of the dialogic structure of understanding suggests an ethical ideal of communication in which one is prepared to recognize one's own fallibility, to be open to other views, to discover the strength of the positions of other participants in a dialogue. These are themes which resonate with a great deal of recent feminist thinking, both about the blindness of many to any kind of feminist writing at all, and about the blindness of some feminist understandings to the diversity of women's lives and priorities. But some feminist discourse has had difficulty in trying to give an account of how such blindness might be overcome. Some feminist accounts of understanding have suggested that it is *impossible* ever to understand the experience or perspective of another. (This is frequently combined with the kind of reification of 'experience' which takes it as given that one *can* understand one's own experience.) A different kind of view suggests that perhaps it is possible to understand the other, but *only* if we can almost *become* her, suspend entirely our own preconceptions and prejudices and 'enter into' her world.

The particular usefulness of Gadamer's approach to understanding lies, I think, in the way he attempts to steer a course between these two paths. It will *never* be possible to understand another fully in the way that she understands herself. To suppose that this should be our aim amounts, in effect, to a form of appropriation of the

other, such that we imagine ourselves as able to speak for her almost as she might speak herself. We can never do this. Nor can we ever speak in a way that allows us to suspend the prejudices from which we begin. In that sense, to use Le Dœuff's terminology, we have no choice but to assume that the objects of our investigation 'exist'. But it is equally wrong to suppose that our own understanding of ourselves is unmediated, or that it cannot radically change when confronted with prejudices or perspectives that have a very different starting place. Our understandings of both ourselves and the other remain always provisional and partial; we cannot divest ourselves of our own prejudices, nor can we enter wholly into the world of another. But Gadamer's notion of 'dialectic' suggests that neither of these understandings can remain wholly unchanged if there is an encounter between them. What feminism needs in addition, however, is a political and practical account of how the potentialities of such a dialectical encounter can be maximized, and how a mutual receptivity and openness can best be achieved that is not a form of denial of one's own locatedness nor a form of appropriation of the other.

When the traditions and perspectives of feminist enquiry and philosophy – or those of women in very different social and cultural situations – come into dialogue or relation with each other, any 'fusion' that may result will be no simple synthesis. Nevertheless, the idea of the 'fusion of horizons' seems to me to be one that might be used to give useful expression to precisely the universal impulse in philosophical thinking that Le Dœuff wants to characterize. Philosophical thinking, from Plato onwards, has often been characterized in metaphors, and 'horizon' is a metaphor. But it is a useful one in that it suggests both locatedness and positionality, and at the same time an indefinite openness and lack of closure. The 'universality' of feminist theory or feminist philosophy should not be thought of as involving appeals to either final or absolute truths, or to an audience characterized merely by an abstract rationality. Nor, on

the other hand, should it think of itself speaking merely to an audience whose relation to what is said is thought to be known in advance. It involves, rather, a potentially indefinite openness, both to the nature and social location of audiences, but also to the reciprocity that may be involved in the challenges posed by those audiences themselves, and the painstaking reshaping of theory and of conceptions of the processes of debate and argument themselves in response to those challenges.

Notes

1. Michèle Le Dœuff, *Hipparchia's Choice*, trans. Trista Selous, Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, p. 1.
2. Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, Beacon Press, Boston MA, 1989.
3. Elizabeth Grosz, 'Philosophy', in S. Gunew, ed., *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct*, Routledge, London, 1990.
4. See Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1991.
5. See, for example, Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*, Beacon Press, Boston MA, 1988.
6. Michèle Le Dœuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary*, Athlone Press, London, 1989.
7. Le Dœuff, *Hipparchia's Choice*, pp. 40–41.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
9. See, for instance, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1967.
10. Janet Radcliffe Richards, *The Sceptical Feminist*, Routledge, London, 1980.
11. Anne Seller, 'Should the Feminist Philosopher Stay at Home', in K. Lennon and M. Whitford, *Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology*, Routledge, London, 1994.
12. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Seabury Press, New York, 1975. My discussion with Gadamer owes a considerable amount to Susan Strickland's Ph.D. thesis, University of Hull, 1993.
13. Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1987.
14. See, for instance, Gadamer's remarks in an interview in *Radical Philosophy* 69, Jan/Feb 1995, pp. 34–5.
15. Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1983.

Discourse Unit Day Conference 20 April 1996

Social Constructionism, Discourse and Realism

A conference to explore connections between theory, method and politics in social research, with particular reference to social constructionist and discursive debates in psychology.

Guest speakers: Ian Burkitt, Vivian Burr, Andrew Collier, Beryl Curt, Ruth Merttens, Jonathan Potter, Carla Willig

Details from: Lita Denny, Commercial Office, MMU, Hathersage Road, Manchester M13 0JA, UK (tel: 0161 247 2535, email: L.Denny @mmu.ac.uk)

