An Introduction to Feminism

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There are two main ways of interpreting the question, 'What is feminism?' The first is to interpret it as asking what the general flavour of the thing is – what is its *content*? What is it *about*? What does it *stand for*? But another, equally important, question to ask is the question of what *sort of thing* feminism is, in a more basic sense. All sorts of objects can have 'content', or be 'about' something – books, films, utterances, gestures. What kind of thing is feminism?

A likely answer to this is that feminism is a form of *theory*: the theory which identifies and opposes what it calls sexism, misogyny or patriarchy. But feminism is not just a matter of words; it is also a way of living and struggling against the status quo. This aspect is often treated as secondary, in the order of meanings offered in dictionary entries for the word 'feminism', and also in terms of where political philosophers tend to place emphasis – feminism may be acknowledged to have a practical aspect, but the focus of philosophers is on feminist *theory* (with practice regarded as primarily a matter of the application of theoretical insights). Against this, some feminists have chosen to emphasise feminism as a practical struggle. bell hooks,[1] for example, has defined it as 'a movement to end sexism and sexist oppression' and as a 'liberation movement'.[2] This book sides with hooks in mounting some resistance to the dominant approach, and emphasising the practical side of feminism. But in order to see more clearly what it even means to take sides on the issue of 'theory versus practice', it's useful to say something more about the notions of *theory* and *practice*, and about the relationship between them.

[1] This is the (intentionally lower-case) pen-name used by the writer Gloria Jean Watkins.
[2] See hooks (2000a, 2000b).

Theory and practice are not two cleanly separate types of feminism, or alternative forms that feminism can take: the protest and the treatise. To expound a theory is also an action, and sometimes an important political intervention – as we'll see, the insight that *to say something is to do something* has been an extremely important one for some feminists. The radical feminist Andrea Dworkin asserts the self-conscious status of her own writing, her theory, *as practice* with unmistakeable force in the opening lines of her first book, *Woman Hating*:

> This book is an action, a political action where revolution is the goal. It has no other purpose. It is not cerebral wisdom, or academic horseshit, or ideas carved in granite or destined for immortality. It is part of a process and its context is change. It is part of a planetary movement to restructure community forms and human consciousness so that people have power over their own lives, participate fully in community, live in dignity and freedom.[3]

Equally, to do something – e.g. to go on strike or to chain oneself to the railings – is not just a dumb physical action; it is also to *say* something, to make a statement or even an argument. As lawyer and feminist theorist Catharine MacKinnon puts it: 'Speech acts. Acts speak.'[4]

In that case, it's not clear that it makes much sense to see theory and practice as two separate classes of thing – or to see 'theory' as a simple and neatly demarcated subclass of 'practice' – where one is dominant over the other. Yet, to dispense altogether with the distinction between theory and practice would be neither good theory nor good practice. Instead, I suggest, the best way to conceive of that distinction is as a distinction between two *aspects* or *ways of looking*, which are both always simultaneously present and available: to look at something as a piece of theory is to look at it with an eye to, for example, its (propositional) content, its argument, scope and presuppositions; to look at the same thing as a piece of practice, perhaps, is to pay more attention to its origin, context, functions or effects.

Of course, the question then immediately arises as to what makes it appropriate or correct to look at something 'as practice' rather than 'as theory'; and it is a question with no short or simple answer. One generally valid thing to say about that, however, is that what is an appropriate way to look at something, an appropriate choice of focus or approach, *must depend on our purposes*.

[3] Dworkin (1974, p. 17). [4] MacKinnon (1994, pp. 20–1).

And it is clear that a central purpose of feminism is that of opposing the system of patriarchy – which means emancipating and improving the lives of women. The ultimate answerability of feminist theory to this objective suggests one powerful reason to keep the practical aspect of feminism firmly in sight.[5]

Having said something about the form, let us now say some more about the content. There is no single, coherent, positive doctrine called feminism. If feminism is to be defined at all, I would suggest, it is better defined negatively, in terms of what it *opposes* – in this respect, feminism is comparable to anti-racism, more akin to anti-capitalism than to socialism. Feminism has two basic components.[6] First, it recognises or posits a fact: the fact of patriarchy. Second, it *opposes* the state of affairs represented by that fact.

'Patriarchy' names a system in which men rule or have power over or oppress women, deriving benefit from doing so, at women's expense. Feminists believe that this system exists, and not as something minor or peripheral or as a hangover from an earlier age, but as central, woven into the fabric of social reality. They may disagree about the nature of patriarchy – what *is* power? What is the benefit that men derive from their collective power over women? – but they all agree that it is real.[7]

It is worth pointing out straight away that in asserting patriarchy as a fact, feminists are *not* committed to the claim that it is *only* women who suffer under that system. Noting the ways in which men suffer is in no way an objection to this basic feminist assertion, but points to something of which most feminists are perfectly aware and which many explicitly acknowledge. In this respect, feminism runs parallel to another much-misunderstood body of thought and practice: Marxism. At least for Marx himself, it is simply not

[5] Of course, most feminists would *say* that the practical aspect of feminism is important. (Mere) sayings are easy. The real question is what we then *do*, where that question includes not just the matter of whether we turn up to protests, but also the matter of *what further things we say*. I cannot make this book turn up to a protest, but I can try to make sure it doesn't just state the importance of talking about feminism as practice *and then forget to talk about feminism as practice*.

[6] Taken on its most general level of understanding, that is. There are many and varied 'feminisms', as we are told at the start of virtually every general introductory article or book on the subject.

[7] This is a *political* claim on my part. There are, of course, people who label themselves 'feminists' but do not believe that patriarchy exists (any longer). They can call themselves what they like, but we do not have to follow suit.

the case that the proletariat are the only ones to suffer under capitalism (for example, to suffer from alienation).[8] From a Marxist point of view, whilst at one level the capitalist clearly benefits from the exploitation of the worker, there is an equally important sense in which the capitalist, too, would be better off in a classless society where human beings would no longer be estranged from one another and would be better able to develop the creative powers that are essential to who and what they are. Marxists can say this whilst simultaneously holding that there is something fundamentally and systematically different about the situations of capitalist and worker.

Any plausible feminist position will say something analogous about the situation of men and women under patriarchy, although it is perhaps helpful to distinguish a stronger and weaker version of the thesis. At the very least, any tenable feminism must make room for the vulnerability and humanity of men, even whilst it regards them as the dominant or oppressor class. It is a short step from this to the recognition that patriarchy is one of the things that might be a cause of suffering for men – the stock example here is the pressure to be conventionally 'masculine' and to suppress emotion. Call this recognition the weaker thesis. But acknowledging patriarchy as one source of men's suffering is not yet to claim that men are overall 'worse off' under patriarchy, or that patriarchy is 'bad for' men. Lots of things which are beneficial for a person or group will also have some downsides for that person or group – e.g. the side-effects of an effective medication, or the higher vulnerability of white people to sunburn – and yet we can still say that people benefit in general from being members of certain groups, and are disadvantaged by the membership of others.

So, to say that men not only suffer some of the downsides of patriarchy, but are actually *worse off* because of it, would be to make a stronger claim. The stronger claim, in turn, admits of two main readings; and it makes sense for a feminist to commit to one reading, whilst disowning the other. To say that men are worse off under patriarchy raises the question: worse off relative to what? What feminists must deny is that men are worse off – or even equally badly off – *relative to women under patriarchy*. To think this would be to abandon the core feminist commitment to the idea of a fact of patriarchy: in what sense is something *patriarchy*, if it damages men more than women, or

[8] See 'Estranged labour', in Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1967 [1844]).

damages men and women equally?[9] In what sense is something *feminism*, if what it analyses and opposes is analysed and opposed as a system that is not damaging to women in particular? The feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye puts the point by reserving the concept of *oppression* (i.e. patriarchal or 'phallist' oppression) to apply exclusively to the situation of women: 'When the stresses and frustrations of being a man are cited as evidence that oppressors are oppressed by their oppressing, the word "oppression" is being stretched to meaninglessness.'[10] It is worth noting, however, that this does not exclude a second reading of the stronger claim, which restores the parallel with Marxist theory noted above: women are worse off under patriarchy, relative to men; but we may also say that both men and women are worse off under patriarchy, relative to the hypothetical inhabitants of a post-patriarchal world.

Feminists, I've noted, are further united by their *opposition* to the system of patriarchy. The nature of this opposition, like the characterisation of patriarchy, will take different forms depending on the sort of feminist we are talking about. Many feminists have used various moral notions to criticise patriarchy, describing it in terms of 'wrongness' or 'injustice'. Others have sought to avoid 'moralising' language, some aspiring to fight patriarchy through ruthlessly factual analysis of the mechanisms through which it functions, and of the legal and other resources at hand to combat it.[11] Those feminists

[9] One rejoinder to this might run along lines analogous to the idea of the 'white man's burden': there is a fact of patriarchy in the sense that men do run the world, but they do not run it in such a way as to benefit themselves relative to women (at least once you factor in the burdens and costs of leadership). I've characterised 'patriarchy' above in such a way as to preclude this – by building into the definition of 'patriarchy' that it is something which serves men's interests and undermines women's – but if we were to adopt a more minimal definition couched only in terms of who *rules* (or leads, has power, etc.), my point would still hold: adopting this version of the stronger thesis might not amount to a denial of the fact of patriarchy, on this understanding of the term 'patriarchy', but it still amounts to a denial of a core feminist commitment, i.e. a commitment to *opposing* patriarchy on the grounds of what it does to women. (In my chosen layout, it was not specified that the feminist opposition to patriarchy had to be on these grounds – as opposed to, for example, being motivated by the need to alleviate the terrible pressures of leadership that the system places on men; but this should be taken as implicit.)

[10] Frye (1983, p. 1).

[11] This is the stance taken most notably by Catharine MacKinnon. Without positively *denying* that women's oppression is wrong – and certainly without judging it to be 'right' – MacKinnon deliberately avoids presenting her thesis as a moral one. She says, in the Preface to *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (1989, p. xii): 'This book is also not a moral tract. It is not about right and wrong or what I think is good or bad to think or do. It is about what *is*, the meaning of what is, and the way what is, is enforced.'

see their opposition as being stronger rather than weaker for the adoption of this stance and strategy. Once again, then, there is a constant amid the differences: if it doesn't oppose patriarchy, it's not feminism.

There are a number of common ways in which feminism, as just characterised, might be misconstrued, or unfairly dismissed, or both. I will try now to pre-empt two of them.

2.1 Prophylactics

2.1.1 Descriptive and normative: against a gulf

I've described a 'core' of feminism, composed of two main elements: recognition of patriarchy; opposition to patriarchy. In the language currently popular in analytic philosophy, the first element would be classed as 'descriptive' (it says something about what the world is like, namely that it is characterised by the system of patriarchy), and the second element would be classed as 'normative' (it seems to make a claim about how the world *should* be, i.e. that patriarchy should not obtain). This distinction can be a helpful one, so long as we don't mistake its status. For a start, I already noted above that the 'normative' core component of feminism need not necessarily take the form of a commitment to a moral 'should'-claim, e.g. a claim that patriarchy is 'wrong', or 'unjust', or 'should not' exist, or 'should' be swept away. A plain commitment to *resistance* might be what is at issue. We can call such a commitment 'normative' if we like, but it would be an unusual use of that term: *norma* is a rule or standard; and in the context of contemporary analytic ethics and political philosophy, 'normativity' is implicitly understood as being a matter of holding actual or possible practices up against certain rules, standards, or principles, and judging them accordingly. Whether or not that is the right way to think about patriarchy, it should be recognised that it is not an approach that all feminists share. So whilst there is a useful distinction to be drawn between, on the one hand, identifying or analysing patriarchy, and, on the other, opposing it, we shouldn't allow the ubiquitous vocabulary of 'normativity' to push us into a premature narrowing of possibilities as to

what *opposition* might mean or what forms it might take. The importance of this will become clearer.

Another mistake to guard against is the idea that there is a simple *dichotomy* between 'descriptive' and 'normative' – i.e. the idea that this distinction delineates two cleanly separate and non-overlapping classes of claims, statements or theories. Take a disagreement between someone who says that women now enjoy 'equality', and someone who denies this. This will most likely not be a straightforward disagreement over empirical matters of fact such as how much women earn, relative to men, for the same work (significantly less, it turns out). The claim that women enjoy 'equality' with men may have the *form* of a descriptive claim, but it will always turn out to carry normative content. To say that there is equality between men and women is not to say that all things are distributed equally between them (what could that even mean? What about the possession of breasts or penises?). It is to say that they are equal in the ways in which it is *right* or *just* that they should be equal: if you think that it is enough that all professions be formally open (where possible) to both men and women, then you may say that 'equality' has (with one or two exceptions) been achieved, even though the women in a given profession will tend to earn less than the men in that same profession; if you don't think this formal equality of opportunity is enough, then you are likely to reject that 'description'. When people say that women and men are equal nowadays, what this means is that they do not think that women and men *should* be equal in the ways in which they are still not equal (or, perhaps, that they don't much care either way).

So, many 'descriptive' statements might also be seen to have a normative dimension: they do describe the world, but they describe the world in a way that can only be fully appreciated if one sees them as containing an implicit evaluation of the world, or at least a supportive or oppositional *reaction* to it. It's worth noting that throughout feminism's history, resistance to feminist ideas has very often presented itself in an at least superficially descriptive form: it would be argued, for example, not that women are innately inferior and deserve their subordinated position – although of course that was often enough argued as well – but that the status quo in fact already displayed a relationship of harmony, reciprocity or even equality between the sexes.[12]

[12] The nineteenth-century feminist and economist Charlotte Perkins Gilman was concerned to attack such apologetics for the status quo, arguing vociferously against the prevalent idea that marriage represented a fair and equal exchange between men and women. We might also compare this with the use of the phrase 'separate but equal' to justify racial segregation, or 'parity of esteem' to legitimize the deeply divisive 'tripartite' system of secondary education instituted in the UK by the 1944 Butler Act.

Nowadays, certainly, it is much more common to find people taking issue with the idea that society is patriarchal than to find them arguing that patriarchy is acceptable: the 'fact of patriarchy' is the component of feminism that comes in for attack. It is said that women are no longer oppressed, have now achieved equality with men – in some respects are even the dominant sex – and need only to learn to make the most of their liberation. Such 'patriarchy denial' cannot be properly understood as a purely descriptive quarrel with feminism. It is the view that women have already got what the speaker finds it fitting for them to have; and that must involve a view as to *what* and *how much* this is. Of course, that is not to say that it doesn't also have a descriptive aspect: the denial of patriarchy usually rests on fairly crude distortions of reality, or simple obliviousness to certain phenomena. To some extent, therefore, it may be fought with facts. And this brings me to the next point.

2.1.2 'I'll be a post-feminist in the post-patriarchy'

The slogan above has been used by feminists, since at least the 1970s, by way of a retort to any denial of the fact of patriarchy.[13] The slogan links this denial to 'post-feminism', a loose term which represents a contemporary guise of anti-feminism: a position which presents itself as 'pro-woman', 'liberating' or even 'feminist', but which avows a factual disagreement with the gloomy feminist perception of patriarchy as a continuing reality.[14] That is, if we were to think of the core of feminism as consisting of a descriptive and a normative element, 'post-feminism' purports to oppose feminism by rejecting the descriptive component only. As noted already above, this sort of move is

[13] Kavka (2002) reports the use of the slogan 'I'll be a post-feminist in the post-patriarchy' as a 1970 New Zealand bumper sticker.

[14] 'Post-feminism' has also been associated with an equation of female 'liberation' with the embrace of previously male-dominated practices, and of so-called 'raunch culture' in particular – i.e. a culture in which women's liberation is identified with their enthusiastic inclusion, both as producers and consumers, in areas traditionally critiqued by feminists under the concept of 'objectification', such as pole-dancing, lap-dancing and stripping (see Levy 2005 for a critical account of this tendency).

by no means new, and in its contemporary guise it rests on the drawing of a particularly sharp division (between 'descriptive' and 'normative') which we would do well to treat with suspicion.

What, beyond that, can the feminist say to the patriarchy-denier? Far, far too many things to attempt to canvas, but it is worth mentioning some of the more basic empirical facts – acknowledged even by mainstream or conservative sources – that may be invoked in reply:

1. Globally, women perform 66 per cent of the world's work, produce 50 per cent of the food, but earn only 10 per cent of the income and own only 1 per cent of the property.[15]
2. Although the Equal Pay Act was passed in the UK in 1970, in 2013 there was still a gap of almost 15 per cent between the full-time earnings of men and those of women; and the fact that women are more likely to work part-time means that the overall gap is considerably bigger.[16]
3. Only 19 per cent of national parliamentarians are female.
4. Despite the disproportionate impact of war and military occupation on women, women make up fewer than 3 per cent of signatories to peace agreements.[17]
5. In the UK, according to the 2009 British Crime Survey, approximately 80,000 women are raped per year. Approximately one in ten rapes is reported, and only 6.5 per cent of these result in a conviction.
6. Forty-five per cent of women have experienced some form of domestic violence, sexual assault or stalking. Around 21 per cent of girls experience some form of childhood sexual abuse.[18]
7. In a survey for Amnesty International, over 1 in 4 respondents thought a women was partially or totally responsible for being raped if she was wearing sexy or revealing clothing, and more than 1 in 5 held the same view if a woman had had many sexual partners.

Now, all this is pretty familiar stuff – although still not as familiar as it should be – and the extent to which it can be expected to alter anyone's view

[15] Source: United Nations Development Programme.

[16] Women who worked part-time earned 35 per cent less per hour than men working full-time. Source: *The Guardian*, Staff and agencies (2013).

[17] Source: United Nations Development Programme.

[18] Source: White Ribbon Campaign.

on the feminist assertion of a general fact of patriarchy is limited. Any of the individual points might be fixed upon and disputed, objections (sometimes compelling ones) raised against the underlying observations or the inferences drawn from them – theory is always underdetermined by data, after all.

You either see patriarchy or you don't. If you don't, then you are very unlikely to be convinced by a rehearsal of the sorts of points listed above (try to think of a case where you have witnessed any such conversion . . .). If you do see it, then you don't need any convincing – in any case, the world convinces you every day, in the form of innumerable 'personal' events and interactions ranging from the dramatic and visibly life-shattering to the almost unmentionably banal.

The textbook facts are worth mentioning, nonetheless. One way of putting this is to point out that the disjunction just given ('either you see patriarchy or you don't') is not an exclusive one. There is an important sense in which those who see patriarchy *also* do not see it – in significant respects or a significant part of the time. We don't see it in the same way that we sometimes do not hear a constant humming in the room (only noticing when it stops). The sorts of empirical fact listed above give the feminist something to hold onto, a reminder of some more external or shared evidence that her endless 'personal' pieces of evidence are something other than symptoms of madness. They are sufficiently stark and glaring as to perform this necessary function well – and if they are not so familiar as their starkness might seem to warrant, then this may be the reason why. In media coverage of Middle East politics, there is an eerie absence of maps depicting the share of territory between Israel and Palestine (or the alterations in the respective shares over time). The moment one does look at these maps, it becomes extremely difficult to uphold the position that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is 'complicated' in the sense often claimed: it is starkly, unmistakably one-sided.

It is also important here, of course, that no Zionist will crumble in the face of such a map, should she be forced to confront it. It will almost invariably make no difference whatsoever. Positions that are in one sense difficult to uphold – that is, almost impossible to square with reality – seem in another sense (i.e. in practice) remarkably easy to cling onto. So with patriarchy, and the denial of patriarchy. Facts are not enough. Indeed, they are

surprisingly feeble. Not only is theory always *underdetermined* by data; the sorts of observations made by feminists – no matter how apparently unambiguous or uncontroversial – seem invariably to be *undermined* by something else. That something, I suggest, is best described as 'patriarchal ideology'. The next chapter deals with this idea.

3 Outposts in your head: ideology, patriarchy and critique

The word 'ideology' is one of those words that gets used in a disconcerting number of ways. For example, it may be used to refer simply to a system of beliefs ('my ideology . . . '), or it may be used more pejoratively, to indicate an outlook – usually a political one – which is judged to be dogmatic, inflexible, exaggerated, or in some other way misguided ('your ideology . . . ').

The sense of the term that is most relevant here is neither of the above, but one which I associate with Marx. Marx also used the term 'ideology' in more than one way, so we will need to zoom in further. 'Ideology' in Marx's work can refer to a particular view of history (historical 'idealism', which he dubs 'the German ideology'), and it can also refer in general to the sphere of reality that is composed of ideas (the 'ideal' as opposed to 'material' component of social reality). But there is a further sense of 'ideology' which may be detected in Marx, and which has been extremely important for later theorists. This is the sense of 'ideology' which is bound up with another term Marx uses: 'false consciousness' (*falsches Bewusstsein*). To class something as 'ideology', in this sense, or as 'ideological false consciousness', is to identify it as an instance of a particular kind of *illusion*. I'll say something first about how we should understand the idea of 'false consciousness', before moving onto the 'ideological' bit.

'False consciousness' just means – here, as well as for Marx – 'error' or 'illusion', in the broadest sense: consciousness which is, in whatever way, false or inappropriate.[1] This might be a matter of having a false belief about

[1] It is worth bearing in mind that the German *falsch* is not quite the same in meaning as the English 'false'. The English word predominantly connotes *factual or propositional* incorrectness – although there are antiquated usages of 'false' to mean 'unfaithful' or 'bogus' (as in the idioms 'false friend' or 'false economy'). The German *falsch*, on the other hand, retains a greater breadth, and can equally well suggest inappropriateness