

Introduction

Sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age. According to [the philosopher Martin] Heidegger, each age has one issue to think through, and one only. Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our “salvation” if we thought it through.

—LUCE IRIGARAY¹

The French philosopher Luce Irigaray wrote the above quote in 1984, more than three decades ago. Today, the question of sexual difference remains one of critical importance especially to feminists, those who wish to help women thrive and flourish. Nationally, the question of the nature and role of women in society continues to define political battles within the United States. Internationally, debate over the role of women in society and the rights of women influences and forms foreign policy between nations. The debate is rarely framed as a debate concerning the value of women as such. In this sense feminists have won the cultural battle to affirm that women have inherent value equal to that of men. Rather, the reason for the debate is that there is not a clear agreement on what laws and protections are best for women. Today, there is clearly a need for further discussion and thinking through the issues of the nature, destiny, and needs of women. This discussion is necessary especially among feminists.

This book is an attempt to help readers think through the questions of sexual difference. Specifically, this book is a guide for readers as they consider the fundamental question of what it means to be a woman. This

1. Irigaray, *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 5.

question must be the starting point for conversations about the politics and ethics of sexual difference. However, many people—even those engaged in the political and ethical debates, even those who call themselves feminists—have not had the opportunity to grapple deeply with this foundational question. This book is intended to help the interested reader with this grappling.

The Method and Design of *Thinking Woman*

This is a philosophical book, not a sociological study or a political treatise. This book explores a “What is X?” type of question, namely “What is a woman?” The book’s method follows that of the ancient philosopher, Socrates. Socrates’s method, which he advocates for both men and women philosophers according to Plato, was to ask a question, hear an answer, discuss the answer, detail the limits or problems of the answer, and then continue with another possible answer. This is the method that is used in each chapter of the book.

As such, this book is an invitation to the reader to a philosophical dialogue on the question: “What is a woman?” The book is by no means comprehensive or exhaustive. I have limited the conversation to four major theories that are active in contemporary Western feminist discourse. These theories are Gender Essentialism, Gender Neutrality, Gender Existentialism, and Gender Fluidity. *Gender Essentialism* is the theory that women have an essential and unique nature that is both biologically and psychologically different from the nature of men. *Gender Neutrality* is the claim that women have the same essential psychological and intellectual nature as men despite biological differences in sex. *Gender Existentialism* is the theory that women, although biologically different from men, have intellectual and psychological habits that differ from men only because of cultural factors. The theory of *Gender Fluidity* claims that both gender and biological sex are constantly changing categories that are culturally defined.

Each chapter presents each system by introducing some of the women thinkers who most famously articulated the theories. Because their views were born in the context of their lives, the lives and historical context of the thinkers are important. Each chapter presents the biographies as well as the ideas of the women who were the main architects of each theory. Included also is a description of the ways the specific theory influenced the feminist struggle to help women thrive. Importantly, each chapter shows an area

of contemporary public discourse where the theory remains a dominant voice. This demonstrates that each theory is still very much alive. Each chapter concludes with a discussion of the possible objections to the discussed theory before summarizing the main points of the chapter.

In the conclusion, the book does not advocate for a specific theory of woman as being true or correct. Rather the conclusion acknowledges that the concept of woman is complex. Each of the four theories says something obviously true. Thus, understanding women requires holding all four theories simultaneously while acknowledging their contradictions. However, all four theories also clearly fall short of a comprehensive account of women. Thus, understanding women requires continuing dialogue with women and those who are interested in them.

The Argument for Philosophical Inquiry as Feminist Activism

This book uses a literal definition of the word feminism as a stance for women. Feminist activism is, thus, activism that works to support women as members of society who are equal to all other members of society in dignity and value. The underlying thesis of this work is that such activism requires some philosophical study of the question of woman. Such study nourishes those who participate so that they might grow to greater self-awareness and greater community involvement. In this sense philosophical study about women is a kind of feminist activism. Such activism is important, possible, and empowering.

First, philosophical inquiry about women is important for everybody, not just academics in women studies or in gender studies. The feminist thinker, bell hooks, who herself has written thirty-two books on feminism, has made frequent requests to feminist academics to write books about women for women in language that all people can access and understand. Her view is convincing. Only by understanding oneself and one's culture can one do the work of transforming oneself and one's culture. Feminist inquiry is not an "academic" issue that has no relevance to daily life of ordinary people. It is a central issue to all people who wish to flourish and help others to flourish. Inquiring into the nature of woman is necessary in order to advocate thoughtfully in the areas of women's health care, women's sports, women's political rights, and women's education.

Second, fruitful discussion of this issue is possible. In contemporary times many people feel that dialogue between those who fundamentally

disagree is pointless. This is considered especially true if the participants come from widely different perspectives influenced by differing languages, cultures, and religions. Yet, there is much evidence to bolster the claim that thoughtful people can have successful discussions and dialogues. It is not the case that individual thinkers are imprisoned by their worldviews. Those who teach know this to be true. The course that inspired this book is an example. While Mount Mary is a Catholic women's institution, its students come from a wide variety of ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Moreover, a few male students from a partnering nursing college have chosen to take this class over the years. I have also had students who struggle to place themselves in the gender binary of male or female. Generally, all the students come to the first class with a diverse collection of deeply held opinions about the nature of women. Despite this diversity, the conversation has been fruitful. Indeed, because of this diversity the dialogue has been more productive than it would be if the students had all come from the same background. In the past, each student has shown evidence of marked growth in her understanding of the issue by the end of the course. More importantly, virtually every student has reported that reading, discussing, and thinking about this issue deepened her understanding of her self and her role in her community in significant ways. Fruitful dialogue is possible.

Finally, philosophical inquiry on the definition of woman is empowering. Those who advocate for women's rights, women's health care, women's equality with men, and justice for women require a theory of what a woman is in order to advocate for these things. Thinking deeply about womanhood exposes questions and answers about the real needs and desires for women. Thinking deeply can destroy old structures of thought that imprison bodies and minds in false constructs. Thinking deeply can create new structures that allow more authentic or more autonomous living for individuals in society. This type of deep thought reorients the thinker as she moves and acts in her community. In that sense she becomes an activist.

A Note on the General Purpose of Philosophy

There have been a number of books written in the last century with the title *What is Philosophy?* Thinkers as auspicious as Martin Heidegger,²

2. See Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?*

José Ortega y Gasset,³ and Gilles Deleuze⁴ have sought to both explain the nature of philosophy and argue for its essential importance for human beings. They have made a stand that philosophy is important, possible, and empowering. So, too, argued the poet and philosopher Sappho who ran a school for young women 2600 years ago on the island of Lesbos. She told her fellow Greeks that she who does not cultivate her mind “dying will lie with the undistinguished dead,” her life one of perpetual inconsequence.⁵ The Greek philosophers, Socrates and Aristotle, agreed. They claimed respectively that “the unexamined life is not worth living”⁶ and that “all humans by nature desire to know.”⁷ In the twentieth century, the controversial thinker Ayn Rand asserted that the choice to be conscious or not is the choice to be alive or not.⁸ In the twenty-first century, philosopher Martha Nussbaum frequently reminds her fellow philosophers that their work is essential for the common good.⁹ It is in this spirit of philosophy as consequential, as conscious, and as necessary for human flourishing that this book is written. It is written in order to encourage philosophical thinking, questioning, and dialogue for its readers. Whether the readers are thinking on their own or in a community of scholars, whether they are in a library, at home, or in a philosophy or women’s studies class, the hope is that they will be encouraged to take the question of “What is woman?” seriously and deeply.

3. See Ortega y Gasset, *What Is Philosophy?*
4. See Deleuze, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*
5. Sappho, “Poem Fragment 65.”
6. Plato, *Apology*, 38a.
7. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 980a.
8. Rand, *Objectivist Ethics*, 21.
9. See, for example, Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*.