

Benign Masculinity and Critical Reason

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ABSTRACT *This article critically examines the feminist claim that masculinity is closely associated with an oppressive, objectifying rational order. It argues that certain psychoanalytic and postmodern feminist theories have shaped our current conceptualisations of masculine identity and reason; deconstructs their negative portrayal of masculinity and one-dimensional representation of reason; and, finally, provides an affirmative depiction of masculinity and reason as an antidote to the excesses of these particular feminist assertions. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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PSYCHOANALYTIC FEMINISM: THE LINK BETWEEN MASCULINITY AND REASON

An assumption made by contemporary feminist theory is that masculinity and reason are intimately intertwined, as masculine rationality determines the way in which the world is organised materially and is perceived psychologically – but, one might ask, how has this strong link between masculinity and reason been established? According to some psychoanalytic feminist theorists, e.g. Dinnerstein (1976), Chodorow (1978) and Keller (1983), the answer to this question can be found in the way our conceptions of male and female are constructed by differential perceptions of and experiences with parents or parent figures. The fact that, for most of us, it is our mothers who provide the emotional context from which we become oblivious of the discrimination between self and other, may lead to a skewing of our perceptions of gender. As long as our earliest and most forceful experiences of dependence have their origin in the mother–child relation, it appears that that experience will tend to be identified with “mother”, while separation is experienced as “not-mother”. In the disentanglement of self from mother, the mother emerges, by a process of affective – and effective – negation, as the first object. The very processes, both emotional and cognitive, which remind us of that first bond become coloured by their association *with* the woman who is, and forever remains, the archetypal female. Correspondingly, those processes of delineation and objectification are coloured by their origins in the process of separation *from* mother; they become marked as “not-mother”. The mother becomes an object, and the child a subject, by a process which becomes itself an expression of opposition to and negation of “mother”.

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Furthermore, in an attempt to complete and secure its separation from the mother, the child of heterosexual parents turns towards the father, or father figure, for assistance. Thus it is the father who comes to stand for individuation and differentiation – for objective reality itself – and who represents the “real” world by virtue of being or being seen to be *in* it. Freud (1923, 1924), for example, believed that reality becomes personified by the father during the Oedipal conflict: it is the father who, as the representative of external reality, harshly intrudes on the child’s, i.e. boy’s, early affair with the mother, offering his protection against the threatening possibility of the boy remaining in symbiotic unity with the mother. Thus, while the primary bond with the mother forever constitutes the deepest unconscious origin and structural layer of the child’s ego and reality, this bond is also the source of the deepest dread, which promotes the identification with the father and, thereby, the ego’s progressive differentiation and organisation of reality.

Thus it is that for all of us – male and female alike – our earliest experiences predispose us to associate the affective and cognitive stance of objective delineation with the masculine, and the blurring of the boundary between subject and object with the feminine.

What seems to be crucial for these feminist writers (Dinnerstein, Chodorow and Keller) is that, while the patterns which give rise to the aforementioned gender associations may be quasi-universal, the conditions which sustain them are not. It is perhaps at this point that specific cultural forces intrude most prominently. For example, in a culture which values subsequent adult experiences that transcend the subject–object divide, e.g. the Samoan culture as described by Mead (1928), these early identifications can be counteracted; whereas, in our Western culture, which values “reason” premised on a radical dichotomy between subject and object, and where all other experiences are accorded secondary, “feminine” status, the early identifications acquire additional strength.

Furthermore, what these feminist authors enable us to recognise is that, although children of both sexes must learn equally to distinguish self from other, and have fundamentally the same need for autonomy, to the extent that boys rest their very sexual identity on an opposition to what is both experienced and defined as feminine, the development of their gender identity is likely to put emphasis on the process of separation. As boys, they must undergo a double “disidentification from mother” (Greenson, 1968), firstly for the establishment of a self-identity, and secondly for the consolidation of a male gender identity. Further impetus is added to this process by the external cultural pressure on the young boy to establish a stereotypical masculinity, based on absolute independence and autonomy.

The result of this defensive strategy is, these feminist theorists argue, that the boy’s sense of gender identity tends always to be more fragile than the girl’s. Her sense of self-identity, however, may, comparatively, be more frail. This is because the girl’s development of a sense of separateness may be weighed down by her ongoing identification with her mother. Cultural forces may make her development of autonomy more difficult by stressing dependency and subjectivity as feminine characteristics. To the extent that such traits become internalised, they can be passed on through the generations, leading to an accentuation of the symbiotic bond between mother and daughter (see, for example, Chodorow, 1974).

It would seem, then, appropriate to suggest that one possible outcome of these processes is that boys who may be more inclined towards excessive delineation grow into men who have difficulty forming and maintaining intimate relationships, while girls, who may be inclined towards insufficient delineation, grow into women who do not fully utilise their capacity for

objective reasoning. Together, these networks of interactions constituting gender development create emotional and belief systems that equate rationality with masculinity.

In summary, the argument here is that “masculinity” is a defensive gender construction premised on the superiority of reason, the establishment of clearly defined boundaries between genders, and marked by comparison with the “boundary-less”, irrational category of “the feminine”.

A CRITIQUE OF THE FEMINIST PORTRAYAL OF MASCULINITY AS A DEFENSIVE RATIONAL POSTURE

Although these feminist voices have helped to bring psychological depth to a lot of current thinking about masculinity (and femininity), their portrayal of masculinity as an inherently defensive rational posture has not been very useful to individual men who feel increasingly uncomfortable with their sense of maleness and seek to distance themselves from it. Instead of comprehending and effectively dealing with the aspects of their masculinity that are bothersome, they feel the need to eradicate their “rational” masculine identity altogether.

This depiction of masculinity is the product of these feminist theorists’ selective use and interpretation of psychoanalytic theory, which has another more constructive way of discussing the role of the father in assisting his son’s differentiation from the primary union with the mother. For instance, in his paper “Masculinity, identification, and political culture”, Richards (1990) argued that, in being available as a love-object and as an object of identification, the father can bring a *legitimate* support to his son’s struggle to develop a sense of self as separate from the mother.

Richards’ description is not incompatible with the feminist one, since they both formulate real and important aspects of the development of masculinity. It is, however, radically different in that it posits the identification with the father as being a loving one, and a major element in the development of the son’s sense of self. The image of the father as a benevolent figure is, in Richards’ view, the object of identification. This identification is not a defence but, rather, a crucial aspect of the core developmental process whereby good images of others are internalised to form the substance of a good sense of self. When this process is the dominant one in the boy’s relationship to his father, then the aggression and Oedipal anxiety, that is also present, can be contained.

In this description, we have an image of masculinity as a benign, indeed necessary, quality of psychic life in men. This positive representation of masculinity, however, is absent or marginal in the work of the aforementioned feminist theorists. It is significant, therefore, that, in her attempt to break down the rigid conception of male identity formation, the French feminist Julia Kristeva is concerned precisely with this benign quality of masculinity. Kristeva (1983/1989) has engaged in a reformulation of narcissism, in an attempt to avoid the state of puzzlement which she has articulated in the observation that “[M]aintaining against the winds and high tides of our modern civilization the requirement of a stern father who, through his Name, brings about separation, judgement, and identity, constitutes a necessity, a more or less pious wish” (p. 46).

Kristeva asserted that there are two fathers: one imaginary and the other Oedipal, and that both are necessary for the son’s separation from the mother. The imaginary father is the father of identification and idealisation, one who presents the son with an image of a self that allows

space to be created away from the maternal container. Kristeva emphasised the importance of the narcissistic formation of the self for the emergence of the death drive. By loving himself, an image of himself, the son disengages from the erotic drive, thus exposing himself to the death drive. Kristeva (1996/2000) stated that “we invest not in an erotic object (a partner) but a pseudo-object, a production of the ego itself, that is quite simply its own aptitude to imagine, to signify, to speak, to think” (p. 55). In other words, in the narcissistic formation of his self, the son is encouraged through his identification with a loving father to make use of the unbinding power of the death drive so as to release himself from his erotic involvement with the mother, and form a new object, which is neither the mother or father, nor an external object, but an internal object (i.e. a self) that is then capable of producing speech.

This paternal work of being the object of identification and idealisation is also at work in analysis. Like the father, the analyst, in the transference, enables the analysand to experience a renewal that comes through forgiveness. This is a forgiveness that takes place in the analytic setting and is the co-creation of the analyst and the analysand, who together compose a narrative which permits the analysand to imagine the existence of a new, coherent sense of self. Moreover, by identifying the source of human suffering as the absence of meaning produced by the structural effects of the unconscious on consciousness, Kristeva (1997/2002) described forgiveness as putting the unconscious into words, as “giving conscious and unconscious meaning to what did not have any” (pp. 18–19). For her, forgiveness is based on the imaginary self’s ability to “postulate” that “there is a meaning” (p. 20). However, she further noted that “while this variant of forgiveness that is analytical speech concerns the discourse of the analysand, it is impossible without the forgiving and interpretation-free listening it implies on the part of the analyst” (p. 19). This kind of forgiveness is the product of the loving encounter with the analyst, whose love “allows rebirth” (p. 20). In other words, by encountering a “loving” other who does not judge but “listens to” my truth, I *experience* forgiveness. As she put it: “forgiveness is not given by another: one forgives oneself with the help of another” (p. 19).

Despite the importance of the imaginary father as a paternal structure, Kristeva insisted that the paternal function must be transformed through the figure of the Oedipal father. Rather than separation through love, we now have separation in relation to the agency of the law, i.e. what Lacan (1981/1993) called “*Le Nom du Père*” ([The Name of the Father) which could also signify “*Le Non du Père*” (The No of the Father): “I must identify in relation to the law at the same time as I separate myself from it in order to create my own place” (Kristeva, 1997/2002, p. 84). The figure of the Oedipal father does not support the son but threatens him with prohibitions, and puts in front of him the father’s authority as a block to the son’s path. This creates the need in the son to entertain his unconscious fantasies of attacking the father and putting him to death. This putting to death of the Oedipal father and his authority is also present in analysis in the dissolution of the transference. Here, the analysand witnesses the time of separation from the analyst, as the death of the analyst; and, thus, the analyst is no longer the one who provides meaning. As Kristeva (1997/2002) has explained: “he no longer is, but since I am linked to him, now I no longer am” (p. 39). The analysand is now exposed to the full force of the death drive, which is not constrained by the imaginary structure of the self, but enables the subject to attain a radical interiority within which he can challenge the commandments of the law.

However, in addition and in contrast to Kristeva's argument, I agree with Richards (1990) who believes that the Oedipal father not only needs to function as the agent of prohibition but also has to survive the son's rivalrous attacks on him; and, in response to both, neither his love for his son nor his strength should be diminished. And, thereby, the son can feel less anxious and guilty about the consequences of his unconscious fantasies of killing the father. In this respect, if the Oedipal father presents himself only as a severe, prohibiting figure and not also as a loving and potent one, then the son's developing self will not be able to introject images of a strong and forgiving father. Accordingly, in the absence of an identification with a "good enough" father, the son will instead identify with an omnipotent, idealised father, an image created by the projection of his own omnipotence. This outcome should be understood as a *failure* in the development of a secure masculine identity rather than, as feminists argue, an inevitable element of masculinity *per se*.

POSTMODERN FEMINISM: DECONSTRUCTING THE DOMINANCE OF MASCULINE REASON

In the current intellectual climate, feminism and postmodernism have emerged as two leading currents of our time. They have discovered their affinities in the struggle against the dominance of Enlightenment rationality. Let us begin then by considering one of the more comprehensive characterisations of the "postmodern position" provided by one particular feminist theorist.

In her book, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West*, Jane Flax (1991) has characterised the postmodern position as subscription to the thesis of the death of man, of history and of metaphysics. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the feminist counterpart to the postmodernist theme of the "Death of Man", which can be named the "Deconstruction of the Male Subject of Reason". Postmodern feminists situate "Man", or the self-governing subject of the theoretical and practical reason, in historically changing and culturally variable social, linguistic and discursive practices. They also claim that "gender", and the various practices contributing to its constitution, is one of the most crucial contexts in which to situate the supposedly neutral and universal subject of reason. However, gender differences tend to be obliterated by the universal subject of reason as they do not fit with the nature of his identity. This is because the discourse of the universal, self-identical subject as posited by most Western philosophers, from Plato to Hegel and beyond, seems to promote a "masculine" position which excludes the presence of feminine otherness and difference.

Seidler (1989) has proposed that, at least since the Enlightenment, reason has been the dominant Western mode available for construing experience, and that, within this, reason and masculinity have been conflated so that each connotes the other. Given the way in which one's capacity to reason is conventionally employed to establish the boundaries between sanity and insanity, this is an important analysis, with implications for the exclusion of femininity and the implementation of a normative framework for action – which, indeed, we have seen in the field of mental illness (see, for example, Appignanesi, 2008). The goal of postmodern feminists and their supporters, therefore, is to deconstruct the dominance of masculine reason and to assert/promote the role of the excluded feminine other.

A CRITIQUE OF THE POSTMODERN FEMINIST DEPICTION OF MASCULINE REASON

What seems to be the case with certain postmodern feminist theorists (e.g. Cornell, 1991; Dimen, 2003; Harris, 2005) is that, in their attempt to criticise “masculine” reason’s exclusion of whatever belongs to the category of “the feminine”, they commit two errors. The first error is to characterise reason as intrinsically, necessarily and irredeemably exclusive of the “feminine”. The second error is to assert the claim of the excluded party against restricting and restricted reason. As a result, they seem to praise the woman, the body (its materiality and sexuality), love and intimacy which are perceived as dangerous to “masculine” reason and, therefore, suppressed or silenced by it. For example, both Dimen (2003) and Harris (2005) characterise “masculine” reason as irreducibly univocal, dualistic and imperialistic, and demand that we should start paying attention to the dialogical, relational and intimate voice of its marginalised “feminine”. However, to condemn “masculine” reason and to praise its abused other, i.e. “the feminine”, is to compound one mistake with another in three senses: it misrepresents the “otherness” of reason; it misrepresents the meaning of reason; and it misrepresents the use being made of reason (these three misrepresentations of reason were initially proposed by Rose, 1993).

The misrepresentation of the “otherness” of reason

The meaning of “the feminine” whose claim is redressed against reason is presented as utterly unambiguous and totally justified by the act of assertion. Once the tyrannical master, “reason”, has at long last been overthrown, the implication arises that “woman”, “the body”, “love”, freed from the rationality of “man”, “the mind”, “logic”, are no longer ambiguous. Their newly achieved authority imparts a *fixity and clarity* to them, even if they are defined as *fluid*.

This is also surprisingly noted by Dimen (2005) who, while ostensibly promoting the postmodern feminist view as a paradigm to replace the traditional one of gender essentialism, draws our attention to the incredible similarities between the two:

Insofar as essentialist-categorical thinking returns us to the bad old days when men were men and women were the second sex, deconstruction acquires political correctness, its moral implications warping unfortunately into moralism, a state characterized less by ethics than by rigidity. (p. 302)

For if exclusive and excluding reason which promoted gender essentialism was in the wrong, then the postmodern, deconstructive attempt to give voice to exclusive otherness, i.e. to what is *unequivocally other*, will be equally so. Far from highlighting and examining what is difficult and ambiguous about both reason and its “feminine” other, difficulty and ambiguity are brought to certainty. Thus it is only through the adoption of a type of thinking that rejects unequivocal and unambiguous “masculine” and “feminine” positions and embraces uncertainty as a necessary condition of life that new, empowering perspectives on gender could be achieved – for only thinking which has the ability to tolerate uncertainty is powerful without being violent.

The misrepresentation of the meaning of reason

Reason is not adequately described when characterised as solely dominant and imperialistic: it is only demonised. There is no doubt that there is a type of rationality (i.e. positivistic)

which, in its attempt to objectify reality, both supports and reproduces the existing oppressive social and gender relations. However, reason, and especially critical reason, defies objectification in the sense that it refuses to confirm the individual – man, woman, object, aspect of reality – as singled out and in separateness: it ascertains precisely this isolation as the product of the general social trend. Thus it works as a corrective against the current society's manic fixity. For example, it was the product of critical reason – in this case, Marxist reason – which knocked the so-called “healthy”, “reasonable” viewpoints held by various powers-that-be regarding the immutability of the course of the world (see Marx, 1867/1990). In this case, critical reason was characterised by these ruling powers as being “unreasonable”. Indeed, how “unreasonable” and “insane” was Marx's insistence, in the middle of the functioning exchange society, on the distinction between the total work hours expended by workers and those necessary for the reproduction of their lives? As Adorno (1951/1974) put it:

[Critical reason] cannot stop short before the concepts of health and sickness, nor indeed before their siblings reason and unreason. Once it has recognized the ruling universal order and its proportions as sick – and marked in the most literal sense with paranoia, with “pathic projection” – then it can see as healing cells only what appears, by the standards of that order as itself sick, eccentric, paranoid – indeed, “mad”; and it is true today as in the Middle Ages that only fools tell their masters the truth. The dialectician's duty is thus to help this fool's truth to attain its own reason, without which it would certainly succumb to the abyss of the sickness implacably dictated by the healthy common sense of the rest. (p. 73)

The misrepresentation of the use of reason

Postmodern feminists want to overcome the despotic, monolithic structure of “masculine” reason by exposing its false claim that it is universal and disinterested when it has always been discernibly interested and totalising. They are also equally disillusioned with the morality of the abstract, autonomous “masculine” subject and its ability to rationally account for its ethical responsibilities. They perceive this as a violent imposition of the “masculine” subject's ideas of morality and justice on the marginalised and excluded “feminine”. For this reason, they offer a new ethics of alterity which transcends the autonomy of the “masculine” subject by demanding that the latter substitutes itself for the “feminine” other. However, it is the ingrained immanence of the “masculine” subject to itself and to its “feminine” other that needs further exploration. Simply to demand the “masculine” subject to give way to the “feminine” other will produce intolerance and resentment as the insistence on the immediate experience of the “feminine” other will leave the “masculine” subject with no way to understand its mistakes and attempt to correct them.

A counterproductive remedy is therefore proposed by the prioritization of the category of “the feminine” other. The rigidity of this new category will be significant in determining its effective outcome in a way in which the abstract universality of “masculine” reason could not be. For, as Rose (1993) stated, “the difficulty with reason rests on whether the initial, abstract universal self comes to learn . . . whether it comes up against its own violence, its own abstractly universal self-identity” (p. 8). The violence of the individual self towards itself and its other(s) is then discoverable and amenable to change. This implies that traditional attributes of the universal “masculine” subject, like self-reflexivity, the capacity for acting on principles, and rational

accountability for one's actions, in short some form of autonomy and rationality, do not need to be discarded altogether but could be reformulated by taking account of the violence that the abstract "masculine" subject has committed to itself and its "feminine" other. Thus, in accordance with Hegel's (1806/1977) thought, reason insists on learning from its other(s), from what is still outside reason, that is, from the negative:

The life of the Spirit [*Geistes*] only attains its truth when discovering itself in what is absolutely torn apart. The mind is not this power as a positive which turns away from the negative, as when we say of something that it is null, or false, so much for that and now for something else; it is this power only when looking the negative in the face, dwelling upon it. (p. 93)

The postmodern feminist theorists who demand the overcoming of abstract, universal reason, produce in the category of "the feminine" the inflexible positivistic abstraction they condemn.

CONCLUSION

I hope that I have clearly demonstrated that if we want to help men overcome their psychological and social problems, we should stop treating masculine identity as an inflexible, "rational" defensive construction; and, if we want to fight oppressive modes of rationality, we should stop depicting reason as irremediably and unequivocally restrictive and tyrannical. After all, it is only through the promotion of the inclusive, critical and reconstructive qualities of reason that we will be able to find what is precisely wrong with both masculinity and reason and change them.

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