Whatever Happened to Feminism?
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Genevieve Lloyd (ed.)
FEMINISM AND HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY
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THE ESSAYS in this collection represent a range of styles and approaches, variously scholarly, hermetic, reflective, boldly argued or tightly dialectical. All are well-written and intellectually worthwhile. The quality and interest of the project are a credit to both the editor, Genevieve Lloyd, and Susan James, the general editor of the Oxford Feminism series of which this book forms part.

And yet I have a sense of unease about the make-up of *Feminism and History of Philosophy*. What were the criteria for selection? The title seems to promise insights into how feminist thinking (however understood — of which more below) might illuminate some of the great texts or intellectual movements of the past. We might have expected an anthology of path-breaking essays drawn from the last quarter century or so of intense feminist engagement with philosophy. Such a collection might have included, in addition to Bordo’s present essay on Descartes, an extract from Lloyd’s own *The Man of Reason*, together with other landmark texts.

Alternatively, it might have comprised only recent essays, reflective of current feminist philosophising. As it is, the anthology sits somewhat uneasily between different models. Some of the essays first appeared decades ago in earlier feminist collections. Other essays, by contrast, have at best a barely discernible feminist focus. Irigaray’s discussion of Socrates’ distortion of the absent Diotima’s thought will probably be read as feminist only by those who perceive in it the shadow of the rest of Irigaray’s oeuvre, while Oksenberg Rorty’s finely wrought piece on love in Spinoza has a vanishingly distant connection with feminist concerns (unless love is taken to be women’s business).

If this book is not a collection of classic essays, nor yet of current writings, nor yet again of always recognisably feminist texts, what is it? The principle of selection appears to have been to seek contributions from a number of respected women philosophers with feminist credentials. Interestingly, inviting contributions only from women itself reveals an ideological position. While feminism is no doubt a broad church, some women philosophers who accept the label are idiosyncratically and perhaps even questionably feminist. Oddly enough, an article in this very volume illustrates the point: James astonishingly describes the ground-breaking feminist critiques of the canonical great philosophers as demonising and vilifying, and suggests that such critics (but not, apparently, herself) are led philosophically astray by partiality. Contrariwise, there are male philosophers who robustly endorse feminist conclusions in their writing. A case at hand is Simon Blackburn’s *Being Good* (2001), a very short introduction to ethics for the general reader. Blackburn’s reprobation of the burning of women as witches and the genital mutilation of girls is effortlessly introduced into his discussion. The mainstreaming of such ‘feminist’ questions shows that feminism has done at least some of its work.

Thus far I have assumed that, in some general sense, we understand what both feminism and the history of philosophy are. But these ideas are trickier than they seem. While Lloyd’s explanatory introduction is in some ways one of the most interesting parts of the book, it leaves the ambit of her collection tantalisingly vague.

How does the history of philosophy differ from philosophy tout court? Lloyd’s anthology confines itself to examinations of texts or traditions from the relatively remote past, starting in the Greek golden age with Plato and Aristotle, and ending in the nineteenth century with Hegel and Nietzsche. This is a manageable framework. However, endorsing these limits might all too swiftly lead us to believe that the tasks of feminism have now been accomplished: after all, egregious wrongs lie in the distant past. But is not the more recent past also part of philosophical history? Drawing a line that excludes modern philosophy precludes scrutiny of misogyny and patriarchal blind spots closer to home. Irigaray and Le Doeuff found both alive and well in the late twentieth-century academy.

What about feminism? This is more problematic still. In the most general sense, feminism can be said to seek the liberation of women from disadvantage and oppression suffered by virtue of their sex. While some of the essays in this collection do indeed reflect feminist concerns, others do so only in an attenuated way, and some don’t at all. Philosophy of feminism theorises both the struggle and the underlying concepts: liberation, women and oppression, and beyond that examines the confining power of language, thought and culture.

In her introduction, Lloyd gestures towards the rich unfolding history of feminist philosophy, including her own part in it. But will this be sufficient for those of her audience — general readers and undergraduates — who may know little or nothing of feminist philosophy, and suppose it to be concerned only with ancient feminist battles (long won, as they suppose) for formal equality? Such readers may already believe that feminism has had its day; they need to be gently led beyond this view. The challenge for philosophers of feminism who think of themselves as feminists is to show the continuities and connections within feminist thought, avoiding both the Scylla of disavowal and the Charybdis of unsubtle repetition. The best essays in this collection — most notably, perhaps, those of Herman and Baier — rise to that challenge.