

THE FEMINIST DEBATE

Much has been written about the essentialist-postmodern debate in feminism. In my usage of the terms, “essentialists” are those whose understanding of self assumes an intrinsic and universal womanhood. “Postmodern” feminists, in contrast, see all aspects of self, including gender, as constructed. To this constructionist position, they add skepticism about the classic Enlightenment categories of self, language, truth, and knowledge.⁵

Historically, claims that women possess an “essential nature” have been used to curtail their choices: if it is woman’s nature to be mother, caretaker, and nurturer, conventions that enmesh her in these roles will prove highly resistant to change.⁶ Most feminist essentialists today, however, do not passively accept cultural notions of womanhood; they themselves claim the power to define what women are. Insofar as they understand a womanly essence to be dynamic and open to multiple possibilities, their definitions belie older essentialist understandings premised on the “natural” functions of home and hearth. Mary Daly’s discussion of “biophilic be-ing” and Luce Irigaray’s descriptions of fluidity are prime examples of such open definitions.⁷ But can they avoid too much generalizing about “women”?

Irigaray is certainly aware of the problem of overgeneralizing womanhood and explicitly writes against it: "Woman is not to be related to any simple designatable being, subject, or entity, nor is the whole group (called) women. One woman + one woman + one woman will never add up to some generic entity: woman."⁸ But although she writes that "one must assume the feminine role deliberately," she shares with Daly the suggestion of an essential femininity. "Assuming the feminine role" for Irigaray involves discovering the nature of femininity as fluid: "Why is setting oneself up as a solid [as men do] more worthwhile than flowing as a liquid from between the two [lips]?" she asks.⁹ Yet if the essence of woman is fluid, it is hardly capturable; indeed, it is barely nameable and displaces itself continually. It is thus perhaps a quintessentially "postmodern" essence, except that it does not really acknowledge individual particularity.

Essentialist theories draw on an empowering sense of being clearly located within one's own mind and body. Male influence, it is argued, must be offset by cultural expressions that stem from womankind. For this reason, essentialists are sometimes called cultural feminists (even though the latter category also includes feminists who recognize "womanhood" to be historically produced).¹⁰ An essential nature offers a place to rest in oneself, as well as coherence and strength, but an emphasis on essence tends to overlook particularities of social, political, or psychological circumstances. Largely for this reason, many feminists in Europe and North America—what I refer to here as "the West," even though there is no such demarcation on the globe—today emphasize that all self-experience is a construction.¹¹

The term "postmodernism," as has often been pointed out, is too broad to be very useful.¹² But it is also by now too common a term to eschew completely. Especially important for our discussion is the postmodern emphasis on the complex processes by which selves are constructed, and on the crucial role of language in that process.

When all identities are regarded as culturally constructed, the category "woman" can no longer be taken for granted. For postmodern feminists, a female body does not a woman make; it takes culture and history to produce gender identification, and that identity is constructed through variable and specific social and historical circumstances. Even one's most intimate thoughts are constructed from impersonal forces.

For Teresa de Lauretis, subjectivity arises from "a complex of habits resulting from the semiotic interaction of 'outer world' and 'inner world,' the continuous engagement of a self or subject in social reality." Judith Butler, equating the subject with the "I," finds that identity is something that cannot exist prior to language, and furthermore, that identity is above all a *practice*. What kind of practice? One that "inserts itself in the pervasive and mundane signifying acts of linguistic life."¹³

Language, that most elusive and culturally diverse phenomenon, is hardly a stable anchor for a sense of self, and thus both de Lauretis's and Butler's positions are in keeping with postmodern emphases on the formative role of language in self-experience. But from a Buddhist perspective, it is insufficient to conceive of subjectivity and selfhood only in relation to language; the insistence on doing so is particular to Western intellectual history. Indeed, the split between essentialist and postmodern positions is often a split between emphasizing the realm of mind, and language (as do Judith Butler, Chris Weedon, and Teresa de Lauretis) and emphasizing the body (as do Mary Daly, Luce Irigaray, and Adrienne Rich).¹⁴ In this way, the feminist debate replicates a Western cultural tendency most feminists decry: the bifurcation of mind and body.

The lines along which essentialist-postmodernist debates are currently drawn often obscure the potentially fruitful balance between them. Through postmodern perspectives, for example, I understand the endless connections of which my life is comprised. To rec-

