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Analysis of Feminism I

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IBPP initiates a 5-part series on an analysis of feminism based on the research of Yvon Provençal. Dr. Provençal has been teaching philosophy at the Cégep de Granby (Québec) for nine years. He received his PhD in philosophy from the Université de Montréal in 1979. Dr. Provençal is the founder of the Respect Project. The Project focuses on research related to the integral respect of cultures and persons, is the source of Dr. Provençal's work on feminism, and is located at http://pages.infinit.net/provyvon/index_eng.html. Dr. Provençal can be reached at yprov@videotron.ca. What follows is a slightly edited version of his work on feminism.

Part I: Important Remarks on Feminism. The feminist movement today is one of the most important political movements. I think that it is possible to show that the feminist movement, such as it has developed until now, constitutes a first application, in human history, of the principles of the Respect Project. One can say that there exists now a very particular kind of culture--a "women culture"--in which the many women's groups tend to behave towards each other in accordance with the idea of integral respect, as defined in this Project.

Here is a precis of certain features of the feminist movement. Feminist discourse had several accents in order to express the desire to do women justice, to invite them to find their own identity, and to affirm their autonomy. One may observe today that their emancipation was only partially realized and that much remains to be done. Certain feminists have remarked that the relationships of power and domination have remained, in fact, the same as before (1). The themes to be considered also have remained the same: economic equality, acknowledgment of women's work, violence against women, etc. One may note that the global situation of women has not changed, even though the discourse has evolved and one recognizes more easily than before the right to be present in every domain of society.

The claim for equality by women was held to be abnormal in nearly all known societies, until the eighteenth century. Today, in the so-called developed societies, women can hope to have the right to have more freedom, a greater choice of careers, and more diversified goals. During the last twenty years, the feminist movement has found more and more interest in women cultures in the world. This latter point appears to be particularly significant about the importance that the movement could have from the standpoint of the ethics of respect.

One thing appears more clearly than ever today in the feminists' claims: they refuse to reduce their own identity to a concept, whether it be biological or something else. A woman is neither the "reproductive gender," nor the "fair sex," nor the "less aggressive," or any other "eternal feminine" that would have the function of spiritually maintaining or raising humankind. All these definitions, in fact, are qualitative characterizations that are not at all tantamount to the acknowledgment of a true moral culture of women. Here, it is assumed that the disrespect observed towards this culture is only a particular case of the disrespect of moral cultures in general. Thanks to the works of feminist writers like Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Kate Millett and Luce Irigaray in particular, women today are more conscious of their own identity than the members of any other moral culture are. They have indeed insisted on the identity of an individual woman being not fixed in any particular qualitative feature--nor any particular

set of qualitative features. This fact, it seems, has directed the feminist movement towards its present tendency, characterized by openness and respect towards the numerous groups of women on the planet.

One can consider the feminist movement as the revolutionary movement that has put most emphasis upon difference. It is not like a unique and totalizing revolutionary reason that would indistinctly compel everybody and every group. For example, Marxism tends to neglect these differences. It considers them basically as being irrational and illusory. On the contrary, a representative feminist writer, Kate Millett, writes that "male and female are really two cultures and their life experiences are utterly different" (2).

In which way does a female's experience basically differ from a male's? This question has been often asked. According to the approach of the Respect Project, one must agree with feminists who put people on guard against using stereotypes. Stereotypes are generally particular "properties" that allow one to characterize a moral culture. This is most often done in a reducing and malicious way. As a matter of fact, one must admit that the experience of women is deeply different from that of men because they constitute a numerically distinct moral culture--that is to say, distinct without any characterization, and because taking over this distinction creates a kind of belonging that constantly tends to be considered as a deep and harmful dissidence, from the standpoint of the dominating culture. ((1) See for example Chantal Doré. *Etudes de la condition féminine ou études féministes? (Feminine condition or Feminist Studies)*, Cahier 31. Les Cahiers de recherche GREMF. Groupe de recherche multidisciplinaire féministe (Multidisciplinary Feminist Research Group) . Université Laval, Québec, 1989; page 28; (2) Kate Millett. *Sexual Politics*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday. 1970; page 31.)

IBPP Commentary. Provencal raises at least three very interesting points. First, there's the Issue of disrespect towards one culture being only a particular case of disrespect towards moral cultures in general. IBPP posits that variants of feminism have had positive consequences not only for other moral cultures as well as women cultures, but ethical and epistemological ones as well. In the latter case, feminist epistemologies have brought valuable contributions to hermeneutics, historiography, exegesis, and psychological assessment among other aspects of natural and social interpretation.

Second, there's the Issue of advancing moral cultures involving women by emphasizing differences between men and women, as opposed to advocating their similarities to the point of a forced conceptual equation. It is ironic that positive political consequences of feminism have usually involved achieving similarities among men and women as to civil and human rights--through the medium of emphasizing differences between men and women.

Third, there's the Issue of confluences and dysfluencies among social constructions and biological correlates of sexual identity, gender identity, and sexual orientation--and the various moral, ethical, and epistemological cultures associated with all constructions and correlates. This Issue is raised by omission, not commission. Can men be part feminists? Members of women's cultures? Can they share the differences separating women from men without imploding such differences? Are proposed similarities and differences among and between men's and women's cultures but subjugating discourses that coerce a respect masking a profound disrespect of the individuals constituting the respective cultures through thought, emotion, motive, and action?

Readers may wish to consider these comments as well as their own, as we proceed with the series on feminism in the following weeks. (See De La Rey, C., & Kottler, A. (1999). *Societal transformation: Gender, feminism, and psychology in South Africa*. *Feminism and Psychology*, 9, 119-126; Harrison, L.

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

(1997). "It's a nice day for a white wedding": The debutante ball and constructions of femininity. *Feminism and Psychology*, 7, 495-516; Hasso, F.S. (1998). The "women's front": Nationalism, feminism, and modernity in Palestine. *Gender and Society*, 12, 441-465; Zietkiewicz, E., Long, C. (1999). Speaking for a change: Strategies for a transgressive praxis. *Feminism and Psychology*, 9, 142-151.) (Keywords: Feminism, Respect Project.)