

Redefinition and Reconceptualization: Feminist Projects in Epistemology

(Contemporary feminist discussions on reason and rationality)

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Abstract

Many of contemporary discussions on reason and rationality within feminist philosophy have arisen from attempts to overcome the dichotomic thinking of mainstream philosophy and from attempts to redefine the old conceptions of reason, rationality, objectivity, etc. My intention in this article is to outline the feminist critique of the traditional conceptualization of reason/rationality in several respects. The purpose of feminist epistemology: to develop new alternatives to the traditional concepts - is not only a theoretical but also a practical one: the latter should be a contribution to democratization in the sphere of the production of knowledge.

In the last decades the idea of reason and rationality as the core-idea of the enlightenment movement has become the target of several critiques. The target of the critic was the thought of an autonomous reason, of an independent object of knowledge, the capability of the subject to take a stance from a value- gender or emotion-neutral platform, the instrumental, transparent character of the methods, etc. But it was also the claim for universality what has been strongly questioned and – in contrast to it - the conception of knowledge as historically and culturally determined process was suggested as a new, better epistemological alternative. One of these critiques is the feminist critique which also contributes to the discussion concerning „the crisis of reason/rationality“.

My intention in this article is to outline some modes of the feminist critique of the traditional conceptualization of reason in several respects and to show what feminist theorists understand by the frequently used term "the critique of reason" and "the crisis of reason". It should be said at the beginning that this crisis has not only epistemological, but also methodological, ontological and social (political, historical, cultural) sources - and that it has similarly broad influences as well.

According to many authors, the starting point of the feminist critique of reason is primarily the fact that the concept of reason has masculine connotations; I can not but - to cite Georg Simmel's diagnose of this masculinization of reason: „Artistic claims,... the soundness of practical judgment and the objectivity of theoretical knowledge... all these categories are, in fact, generally human, according both to their form and demands, but in their actual historical manifestation they are thoroughly masculine. Let us simply name such ideas which appear as absolutes ‚the objective‘, such that in the history of our kind, the following equation can be said to hold: objective=masculine”¹.

It is known that in our culture man has been traditionally connected with reason and objectivity - woman with emotions and subjectivity; moreover, this gender polarization which is typical for our culture, does not create a symmetrical, complementary type of order, and has a hierarchical character: reason is valued more than emotions and is superior to them; objectivity is as a positive value more valued than subjectivity (as a negative value). The main goal of the feminist critique of reason from this point of view is: to analyze the historical roots of the link between reason and masculinity; to develop new alternatives to the traditional concept of reason and of rationality.

It is necessary to note that there is no unified basis for the critique of reason within feminist theory; several differences in analysis and in the suggested alternatives exist. The heterogeneity of the feminist critique of reason is linked with various theoretical bases which the authors use

for their arguments; we could mention, for example, the psychoanalysis as the source of argumentation (for example Evelyn Fox-Keller, Susan Bordo); or marxist theory which inspired the feminist standpoint theory (Nancy Hartsock, Dorothy Smith, Hilary Rose and others); strong influence also came from the Frankfurter "kritische Theorie" (for example Seyla Benhabib) or French post-structuralism, and post-modernism (Luce Irigaray, Helen Cixous and others). The heterogeneity of argumentation in feminist critique is emphasized in its interdisciplinarity which requires cooperation between feminist epistemology, the theory of science, the history of science, the sociology of science and other disciplines concerning knowledge.

It would be possible to survey completely all modes of feminist critique of reason/rationality, in such a case we could find several kinds of critical approaches and of typologization of this critique within feminist philosophy which focus on the different dimensions of the problem. I would rather try to turn my attention to the common aspects of these approaches and divide them into the following 3 types: 1/ since the concept of reason has masculine connotations, some authors argue that this concept must be completely rejected; 2/ another argument is based on a dualistic model; this model "of two reasons" supposes the legitimization of feminine reason besides the masculine one; 3/ some authors require the redefinition of the concept of reason - so as not to have masculine connotations, not to be one-dimensional, defined in the dichotomic way – and at last but not least – they require the reconceptualization of the reason/rationality so as not to lead to the exclusion of women and to all kinds of exclusions which have ties to the female and femaleness.

A very useful attempt to make the typologization of these feminist critical attitudes has been made by Alessandra Tanesini, according to her we can distinguish also at least three kinds of criticism of traditional accounts of reason that have been elaborated within the feminist philosophy. For some feminists is typical the radical criticism but at the same time it is necessary to add that the total rejection of reason is only one position among several different positions and even those radical theoretists do not abandon rationality altogether. In opposite, several feminists argue that feminism needs to hold on to some notion of reason, and to struggle for the widespread acceptance of the claim that women are as rational as men², moreover, they say that to abandon rationality would mean not only to undermine philosophy itself but also to go against some important feminist theoretical and political projects. According to the first kind of feminist criticism of reason the traditional views are too narrow, because they identify reason with one style of reasoning, these theoretists claim that there are different styles of thinking, which can be appropriate for different subject or for different situations and we can consider all these styles as equally rational. The second kind of criticism is more radical, its representants object to the reduction of rationality to one mode of thinking and they criticize the dominant style of thinking in modern society – instrumental reason - because - according to them this type of reason can lead to control, mastery, and domination. The third kind of criticism is the most radical and it is directed against the reason as a whole because mastery and control pertain to all forms of rationality³.

It should be said that there is a wide spectrum of approaches and of ideas how to improve the traditional concepts of reason and rationality. Another author, Elisabeth Stjernberg divides the feminist critique of reason and rationality in the following groups:

1/ those who reject rationality as something evil and destructive and who argue for the opposite – irrationality; 2/ those who argue for a modified type of rationality; 3/ those who want to radically change the map by rejecting the mere division into dichotomies such as rational and irrational⁴.

Concerning the first group Stjernberg criticizes the irrationalists – their critique of rationality is tied to the question about the character of the subject: they postulate an universal female nature which is the bearer of all positive values – tied to the irrational – but it is evident that such mode of critique can lead into the pure biologism and to dichotomies⁵. The second group is often called „the revisionists“; they claim the need to revise not only the concept of reason but also the views of the human subject - as it has been formed throughout the history of philosophy. This

historical development is described by Genevieve Lloyd, her analysis of the concept of rationality are based on the assumption that this concept has been accompanied by a series of exclusions which all have to do with ties to the female. I'll come back to these analysis later and show how the ideal of the disembodied reason/ rationality were established as a new epistemological paradigm and how this paradigm was connected with the changes in the definition of the rational human being in the 17 and 18 century (the rational is in this case tied to the ideal of the male subject). Some theorists belonging to the revisionists emphasize emotion and intuition in the process of acquisition of knowledge, others claim for the necessity of redefining of the concept of rationality by focusing on the moral aspects. In contrast to both above mentioned groups the radicals argue against the dichotomies and the hierarchies (rationality/irrationality, reason/emotions, mind/body, etc.) They stress difference and diversity, they argue that rationality as a way of thinking which is „typical for an idealized form of maleness“ cannot be reformed and they demand „a counter-system to crush the dichotomies and their built-in hierarchies“⁶.

A very inspiring typologization of the feminist critique of reason we can find in Herta Nagl-Docekal's work, she distinguishes four different modes of feminist critique of reason and as a result of their analyzes she suggests to reformulate this critique. In her essay „The Feminist Critique of Reason Revisited“ she has selected several feminist texts that - as she says - have gained paradigmatic relevance. She concentrates on the inner structure of the arguments given by the authors of these selected texts and on this basis she reconstructs four modes of argumentation patterns within the feminist critique, „each targeting a different concept – or aspect – of reason“⁷. In her reconstructions she focuses on the argument that scientific rationality is based upon the male claim to dominance over women (Keller); on the psychoanalytical critique according to which scientific rationality has its roots in the aggressive separation from the mother which is characteristic for the male child's development (Keller, Bordo); next she centers on the critique that is directed not only against scientific rationality, but which critically concerns the occidental „Logos“ and „Phallogocentrism“ in general (Irigaray) and finally, she deals with feminist objections against conception of „practical reason“ (Butler). After the critical rereading of several selected texts H. Nagl-Docekal outlines four issues that no feminist critique of reason should ignore. First, no feminist critique should exclude a critique of domination, as she says, „reason must clearly be criticized as an instrument of male domination“ and similarly „the claim to masculine monopolization on the use of reason“ must be criticized. The second issue is that „androcentric concepts need to be exposed“, from this follows that –with respect to the political dimension - „women must demand equal participation in intellectual life“ and – with respect to the theoretical dimension „the concept of objectivity must be reevaluated“. The third claim important for feminist critique of reason is that „the notion of masculine and feminine character must be dismissed altogether“, Nagl-Docekal advocates the argument that human capacities and virtues are distributed among the two sexes and that men and women should have the possibility to unfold individually their rational and as well their emotional capacities. The last element important for the feminist critique of reason is according to Nagl-Docekal the necessity to reanalyze and reformulate the traditional conceptions of reason – and this in connection with the overcoming the traditional masculinization of reason⁸.

It is evident that one of the most important and innovative contribution of feminist theory to the critique of reason is the analyse of the connection between reason and masculinity. On one side there is an principal agreement among feminists when they argue that reason has connotations of masculinity but on the other side there are different opinions on the consequences of such connotations and on the possibilities to develop better conceptions of rationality. Historically, as known, men were seen as rational beings and women as emotional beings, this difference was explained as based on the different biological characteristics of both of them. Again we can distinguish several different approaches to this problem, the common point is the belief that modern conceptions of rationality are too narrow, they exclude emotions or desire from the

nature of rationality and as a consequence they exclude women – characterized as emotionally beings - from the sphere of the rationality (for example from the public life). The problem is: how to react to such (historical) situation? For some feminists “asking women to embrace rationality is tantamount to asking them to reject femininity”⁹, other theorists argue that it is necessary to examine how the notion of reason has been constructed on the basis of the exclusion of women and to reevaluate this traditional notion and to develop alternative conceptions of reason which would be more inclusive.

Feminists innovate the critical debates on reason also by focusing on the problem of embodiment of reason, they claim that contemporary ideals of mainstream conceptions of reason do not see properly the implication of the fact that our reason is embodied. Dominant views of the mind and reason do not see them as separate from the brain, such beliefs would make for them their commitment to science impossible. But for feminists it is not sufficient to see reason embodied in this sense. When feminists criticize traditional conceptions of reason that they are still dependent on Cartesian mind-body dualism they have in mind something different: they stress the fact that we cannot consider reason as autonomous from the body, but also from the history, from the social position or cultural conditions, briefly said: we cannot consider reason independent on the whole context in which it operates¹⁰.

I think it would be important in this moment to come back to the claim of the feminists that the ideal of autonomous, disembodied reason which has been formed by Descartes’ s dualism and developed by Kant and other philosophers is bound up with masculinity. As G. Lloyd has showed, the whole history of philosophical conceptions of reason is masculine and reason and rationality have been conceived in this history as transcendence of the feminine¹¹. Lloyd points out that the ideals of rationality have not remained unchanged and that different ideals have substituted one another, but at the same time she claims that it would be simplification to say that constitution of reason has been constituted through an exclusion of women - this exclusion, however, has a complex nature and it has varied in the history. Moreover, she shows, that this exclusion of women is not a consequence of a male conspiracy but that it happened despite the conscious intent of the authors¹². It should be stressed that Lloyd’ s critique of the maleness of reason is not a critique of any conception of reason but only of the dominant conceptions which lead to exclusion of women and to dichotomical thinking, to hierarchical principles. It is important also to note that she is concerned more with the metaphors surrounding the ideal of reason than with the reason itself, in other words: she intends to capture the symbolic and metaphorical content of the various historical conceptions of reason¹³. From this point of view it would be useful to analyze the different modalities of the relationship between reason and what is symbolized by women. In general we could distinguish three accounts, the first account presents women as symbolizing something what is less rational than the male ideal, so they are not outside reason but they are represented by the lower functions of this faculty (Plato). The second account of reason presents women as symbolizing what stands outside reason (Bacon) and reason and rational knowledge are understood here as a matter of power, mastery, domination, and control. The third account of reason also focuses on reason as transcending the feminine, for example Rousseau sees the ideal character for a woman as quite different from the ideal for a man. Briefly to say, the first model of reason sees woman as less rational, the second identifies her with a disvalued irrationality and the third sees her as the symbol of something what supplements rationality¹⁴.

Many of the discussions on reason and rationality within feminist philosophy have arisen from attempts to overcome the dichotomic thinking of mainstream philosophy and to overcome the crisis of the old conceptions of reason and rationality. As Elizabeth Grosz points out, the contemporary crisis of reason is a consequence of the historical privileging of the purely conceptual or mental over the corporeal or, in other words, it is a consequence of the inability of Western knowledges to conceive their own process of (including material) production¹⁵. First of all, we can speak of the inability of our reason to understand the role and importance of the body

(including the senses) and emotions for the process of knowledge - production, which yields the dichotomy between mind/body or dichotomy reason/ emotions. Such an approach to knowledge and its production has many effects for epistemological, ontological and social-political theories; one of the most relevant is, in my opinion, the tendency to reduce the complexity of the processes where knowledge is created and informed. According to Elizabeth Grosz and many other theorists, the body is an unacknowledged or an inadequately acknowledged condition of knowledges¹⁶; if this condition is not regarded or if it is quite ignored in thinking about knowledge-production, the result will be a false, one-sided and therefore distorted notion of reason and knowledge.

One of the most influential texts that has been produced on the feminist critique of traditional conceptions of reason and rationality is the work of Susan Bordo analysing the intellectual and cultural background of Descartes' philosophy. Bordo believes that Descartes and other philosophers after him tried to control their epistemological uncertainty and anxiety by a "flight to objectivity". Bordo examines the connections between the autonomy/ separation obsession and between this epistemological insecurity showing that this approach can be reconstructed as a position of detachment from nature and control over it. This position also informed the most positive values for mainstream epistemological projects. Bordo points out that the main principles of Descartes' philosophy manifested particularly in the Meditations can be seen as a product of the loss of the medieval worldview. She describes Descartes and the many other philosophers who followed him as victims of "a double distancing": It was a distancing from the world of their senses, from their bodies, bodily experiences and emotional lives – and it was a distancing from the world as an organic unity and from others. In both cases this distancing-stance is connected with the end of the cultural traditions of the Middle Ages. The knower had been conceptualized by Descartes not only as an abstract and self-sufficient individual, but also as a disembodied individual. According to Descartes, knowledge seeking is an introspective activity of an individual reason for which embodiment or the cooperation with the senses of the knower and other "reasons" (knowers as complex persons) is unnecessary. In many later epistemological projects was the process of knowledge seeking/production understood as the activity of the autonomous reason (as something purely mental), unaided by bodily (sensory) experiences and unsupported by other knowing persons. The question about the historical, cultural and social circumstances in which "independent reason" provides its cognitive activity had not been at the center of interest¹⁷.

This idea of autonomy is also deeply rooted in the later versions of empiricism and positivism: the basis of knowledge claims is here a belief in a detached, value-gender and other neutral, objective observations repeatable by all "normal knowers" under "normal observation conditions". These epistemologies have defined themselves around ideals of pure objectivity and value-neutrality. According to these conceptions knowing agents can achieve a neutral, objective and perspectiveless "view from nowhere" and perform the acquisition of knowledge through their autonomous reason which is able to transcend their particularity, their location in a special (social) space, time and conditions. Actually, there is no "pure" reason producing "pure" knowledge as opposed to "social" reason and "social" knowledge: social (psychological, cultural, political etc.) forces are inherent in "reason" and knowledge at all times. And similarly, there is no "pure object" existing independently of its knowers, because all these objects always appear to the scientists only as they are already socially constituted. Such objects are already effectively removed from pure nature into social life, into social reality, into sphere of social activities and interests - they are social objects which get cultural and social meaning. Feminists focus on the critique of the ideals of autonomous reason and the dislocated, disinterested observer; they do not deny the principle of objectivity, but say very openly that feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledge, and that there is no knowledge which would not be socially situated. As all epistemological ideals and all epistemologies are derived from specific human interests, why they should not bear the marks of the knowers who made them?¹⁸

Elisabeth List analyzes the „mistaken theories“, the mainstreams theories of rationality, of society and of the subject based on the doctrines of a self-sufficient, universal reason, and she distinguishes three arguments against these theories:

1/ they deny the contingencies and situatedness of all human practices,

2/ they celebrate the ideal of an isolated, solitary and self-sufficient individual,

3/ they claim an unlimited sovereignty over the emotional and affectual dynamics of conscious embodied human life.

As Elisabeth List says, seen from a feminist perspective, the crisis of reason and self-deconstructiveness of rationalization is a „logical“ outcome of the suppression of those aspects of humanity which have been related to the female and excluded from the concern of a masculinized idea of reason...“¹⁹

Many contemporary theorists make the conclusion that the crisis of reason is connected primarily with the inability of knowledge to understand and analyse its own self-development as knowledge; to understand its own history, location in a specific social time and space, its own structures caused by social forces or with the inability to understand the importance of the relations between power and reason (knowledge). They point out that the crisis is connected with the reason's inability to rationally know itself, the inability to come outside of itself and to know itself from outside. The contribution of the feminist critiques of the reason is also in showing that the process of knowledge-production, the subject of knowledge are always determined by power-relations. This is often the subject not only in feminist discussions but in discussions among many contemporary philosophers; M. Foucault also argues in his works that such relations between power and reason must be considered not external, but internal to knowledge-production and to knowledge itself - but only feminists analyze the connection between the “crisis of reason” and the gender polarization/hierarchization in the patriarchal society.

Feminist epistemologies are trying to remap the epistemic terrain and challenge some of the most important principles of mainstream epistemology: they argue against the possibility of a distanced, detached, dislocated and disinterested view from nowhere. Feminist authors criticize the view that knowers are detached, neutral spectators, and that objects of knowledge are separate from them; according to them, knowledge is a construct produced by cognitive agents within social practices across various social groups. Feminist theory emphasizes the contextual character of knowledge, the interactional pattern of knowledge acquisition (including communication or communicative awareness), and the "in-the-bodiness" of the knowing process. These authors criticize this abstract knower and they formulate questions about the origin and character of knowledge emphasizing these issues: whose is the knowledge we are talking about? Where (in which social space and time will be this knowledge produced?) Moreover, they expose in their works that the cognitive autonomy of reason in mainstream epistemological projects excludes all forms of dependence, both on other people and on the knower's own bodily and sensory apparatus and on the knower's emotions as well (so rationality will be conceived here as the opposite of emotionality, fact as the opposite of value, etc.). This approach is connected to the claim that there is a radical split between rationality/emotionality, objectivity/subjectivity, facts and values. Positivistic epistemologies argue that it is necessary to protect knowledge from emotions, because they make it suspect and denigrated, purely subjective. Knowers should be unemotional, they should keep a safe distance from the objects of their inquiry. Emotions - as the sources of epistemological unclearness - should be controlled: scientists should neutralize all traces of unruly emotionality. In contrast to the positivistic theories of knowledge many feminists call for a new model of rationality which does not exclude emotionality but in which emotionality is an important component: they put forth a so-called emotional rationality, which contains the elements of reason and emotions as well. According to them, it is necessary to redefine the notion of reason so that it integrates sensory and emotional experiences; some theoreticians suggest the notion of "open reason" and "open rationality" which

would be flexible enough to be able to take the senses and emotions into account or they suggest a pluralism of rationalities; they speak of communicative or emotional rationality.

As I tried to show feminist critiques of reason/rationality have relevant consequences for epistemology and also for the whole philosophy because they challenge not only the traditional conception of reason but also the conception of subject of knowledge and the self-conception of philosophy. Although many questions concerning the character of "reason" and its "crisis" are still open, I am sure that feminist theory can contribute to the problem of reason/rationality and to redefinition of other categories by throwing a new specific light on it.

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