

Do Women have souls? Feminine identity and the Western project of Self

Susanna Chamberlain

A discussion paper which explores the historical approaches to the Self and where these have left women.

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THE FEMININE SELF: THE MALE SELF AND WOMEN

<i>DATES</i>	<i>AUTHOR</i>	<i>SELF</i>	<i>ERA</i>	<i>WOMEN</i>	<i>LIVES</i>
427 – 347 BC	PLATO	SEPARATE BODY AND SOUL	CLASSICISM	SOULS	POTENTIAL POWER
384 – 322 BC	ARISTOTLE	RATIONAL SELF	HELLENISM	NO SOULS/ NO MINDS	NO POWER
4 BC – 1500 AD	CHRISTENDOM	SPIRIT	MYSTICISM	DANGEROUS SOULS	PROPERTY OF MEN
354 – 430 AD	AUGUSTINE	DISEMBODIED SOUL	MONASTICISM	SOULS	SUBJECT TO MEN
1225 –1274 AD	AQUINAS	MIND & SOUL	SCHOLASTICISM	NO REASON= NO SOUL	NO AUTONOMY
1390 – 1500 AD	RENAISSANCE	MORTAL SOUL	HUMANISM	HUMAN	POSSIBILITIES
1521 – 1650 AD	REFORMATION	PERSON	INDIVIDUALISM	DANGEROUS TO MEN	RESTRAINED
1596 – 1650 AD	DESCARTES	SELF AS OBJECT	SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION	NO REASON	NO AUTONOMY
1632 – 1704 AD	LOCKE	MECHANICAL OBJECT	CAPITALISM	NOT RATIONAL	NO AUTONOMY
1724 – 1804 AD	KANT	SECULAR MORAL AGENT	POLITICAL REVOLUTION	NOT RATIONAL	NO AUTONOMY
1760 – 1830 AD	ROMANTICS	AFFECTIVE SELF	IDEALISM	AFFECTIVE	POSSIBILITIES
1809 – 1882 AD	DARWIN	CONSCIOUSNESS PRODUCT OF BIOLOGY	MATERIALISM	BIOLOGICAL IMPERATIVES	PRIVATE DOMAIN
1842 – 1910 AD	JAMES	SELF-REFLEXIVE INWARDNESS	PRAGMATISM	POTENTIAL FOR REASON	EDUCATION OF WOMEN
1870 – 1945 AD	EXPRESSIVISTS	EXPRESSION OF AFFECT	EXISTENTIALISM	RATIONAL	WOMENS' RIGHTS MOVEMENTS
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
1980'S	NARRATIVE	LIVED SELF	POSTMODERNISM	LIVING SELF	ACCEPTANCE

Do Women have souls? Feminine Identity and the Western project of Self

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In this paper I am concerned with the political, social and cultural implications of the metadigms of the Self, particularly as they apply to the status of women. This is a story that it is easier to map than to tell. The map (fig1) is a superficial glance at the ways in which women's lives have been affected by the concepts of the Self that largely excluded women. This paper explores how those different overarching perspectives have had very real impacts on the lives lived by women. The paper largely focuses upon the Object Self as being key to understanding the links between the Self and social process.

The Traditional Project of the Self is the term used by philosophers to describe the historical process in which Western society has developed a particular view of what a Self might be. I have come to consider that what has been created over time is an Object Self, an object available to study empirically and which has certain key characteristics, such as internal components (cf Taylor 1994, Schneewind 1998, Schmidt 1994). The Object Self has dominated western philosophical and theological discourse for two and a half millennia, and it continues to serve as one of several competing metadigms of identity even today.

In the map, I have linked a philosopher with an era, that era with the view of women, and with a specific view of the Self. The final column indicates the implications for women's lives as a result of the dominant ideology of the Self at a given time. The map is, as all maps are, a simplification. The hegemony of Plato was replaced by that of Aristotle for hundreds of years, but the ideas never entirely disappeared, and resurfaced in the Renaissance; Christianity swung between the Augustinian view that women had souls only to have Aquinas take up Aristotle's position that women were incapable of reason and therefore had no souls. The vacillation between the mortal and the immortal soul had the effect of making the likelihood of feminine inclusion in the dominant hegemony of the Self almost impossible. The process of developing an Object Self was not a continuous smooth evolution (cf Taylor 1994, Schmidt 1994), but rather a reflexive/recursive spiral of changes.

Where women were considered to have no souls, no capacity for rational thought, they were not considered to have Selves and their lives were, consequently, often difficult. As women were considered to be incapable of reason, they were not allowed to be self-determining; they could not be permitted to make decisions for themselves, to be citizens, or own property. The traditional project of the Self is shown quite clearly in the map. The Self as an Object in Western philosophy is

quite clearly a Male Self- women barely had identities, let alone a claim on an independent and egoistic existence.

The woman who showed herself to be a brilliant student and/or thinker (e.g. Elizabeth I of England [1533-1603], Elisabeth of Bohemia [1596-1662], Hildegarde of Bingen [1098-1179], Beatrice d'Este [1475-97]) was assumed to be a man in woman's clothing or set apart from the rest of her sex by sanctity, royalty or some other special mark of God's favour. There are few names of women who wrote, particularly women who wrote on philosophical or political ideas, and even fewer whose names were familiar to scholars prior to the late twentieth century. Some who have come to light were rulers (Empress Matilda [1102-67], Elizabeth of England [1533-1603], Eleanor of Aquitaine [1122-1204]), more have been categorised as "Saints" or holy women (Julian of Norwich [c1342-1413], Catherine of Sienna [1347-80], St Brigid of Ireland [453-523], Hildegarde [1098-1179], Margery Kempe [1364-c1440], the unfortunate Heloise [1098-1164]). Not one of these rates much more than a passing mention in the monoliths of European philosophy.

For most women, until the Reformation and often long after, there was only a life of the body, and that body as the property of father, husband, son, and bishop. The question of women having Souls was only resolved for the Church in **1950** with the promulgation of "The Assumption of the Virgin Mary into heaven" and the Papal Bull (*De munificentissimus Deus 1950*) which accompanied the creation of a special feast to commemorate this event.

It was not until women began to be educated in the eighteenth century that the question of women being possessed of Selves could even begin to be raised. Apart from the political writing of Mary Wollstonecraft (1789/1792), which was not widely promulgated in her own time, little in the way of formal texts from women entered the canon of academic works until the 20th Century.

In the early 19th Century, women turned to fiction in trying to assert the reality of women as Selves: Mary Shelley [1797-1851], Jane Austen [1775-1817], George Eliot (a pseudonym for Mary Ann Evans)[1819-80], Georges Sand (Amandine Dupin [1804-76] and the Bronte sisters who all published under male pen-names (Anne 1820-49; Charlotte 1816-55; Emily 1818-48).

The older belief that women had no souls continued in the form of a belief that women had no minds. This belief prevented women from being permitted to enter universities, take up citizenship duties through voting, own property, enter white-collar workplaces, control money or make decisions concerning their own bodies – all practices that have been challenged during the last century.

For women, the acquisition of a self has not been noted as one of the major aims of the women's movements of the Twentieth Century; however, feminist writers have noted the phallogocentricism of western philosophy. Irigaray (1985) challenged Lacan's psychological

theories on the basis that the representations of women were as cyphers which served the development of the male but had no fundamental existence in and of themselves. Friedan (1963) argued that women in western society had no individual identity, only that bestowed by relationship to a male; Greer (1970, 1984) has pursued a similar line of argument, as have a number of feminist theorists (Daly [1979], Rich [1979], Steinem [1994], Millett [1971]).

In recent years there has been a mounting interest in restoring women philosophers to the canon of western philosophy (Bordo 1999; Dykeman(ed) 1999; Grimshaw 1986a, 1986b; Jagar & Young 1998; Lopez 1996; McNay 2000; Nicholson 1990; Probyn 1993; Tollefson 1999; Waithe 1991,1992;) and a consequent concern with recognising the distortions of the philosophical discourse towards phallogocentricity. The discourse of gender analysis has its sources in the later nineteenth century movement for female emancipation and franchise. The precipitating issue was the demand for birth control techniques, led by such reformers as Marie Stopes [1880-1958] and Annie Besant [1847-1933]. The control of women's bodies, in Europe and the British Empire, had traditionally rested with males, fathers, husbands, brothers. This system had originated in the Roman gens (Roberts 1996; Fisher 1960) and been perpetuated through Church, law and custom.

Haraway, (1991:135), in commenting upon Judith Butler's (1989) book **Gender Trouble**, has pointed out that

"a concept of a coherent inner self, achieved (cultural) or innate (biological), is a regulatory fiction that is unnecessary- indeed, inhibitory- for feminist projects of producing and affirming complex agency and responsibility."

In saying this, feminist writers are demonstrating awareness, if not stating explicitly, that the Self of the traditional project was: a) intrinsically assumed to be male, b) achieving a "Self" or taking 'Care of a Self' (Foucault 1986) is a project which has political underpinnings, c) to be restricted to discovering or creating a "coherent inner self" could lead women away from the practice and embodiment of agency.

Current feminist writers speak of three waves of feminism, each of which has made some inroads into the patriarchy (Greer 1970, 1984; Rich 1979; Threadgold & Cranny-Francis 1990). Amongst the vast discourse of feminism, there has been a range of diversified positionings from the separatist lesbian stance to the liberal/humanist/feminisms from the politically absorbed to the socially concerned, from the cultural relativists to the hegemonic white crusaders who see womanhood as a universal insuperable condition. What these have in common is an analysis of the significance of gender. All feminist discourse is predicated upon noting the social, economic, political status of women and comparing this status to that of the male (Andolsen, Gudorf & Pellauer 1985; Bacchi 1990; Bordo 1989,1999; Bottomley, de Lepervanche & Martin 1991; Burton 1985; Butler

1990, 1993; Cameron 1985; Daly, 1979; Davis, 1971; de Beauvoir 1953/60; French 1992; Friedan 1963; Greer 1970, 1984; Grosz 1989, 1990, 1994; Haraway 1991; hooks 1981; Irigaray 1985; Luke 1996; McNay 1992; Millett 1971; Moore 1988; Nicholson 1990; O'Brien 1981; Oakley 1984; Poynton 1985; Rich 1979; Steinem 1994; Stone 1976; Threadgold & Cranny-Francis 1990; Tomm, W. 1995; Walker 1983; Wollstonecraft 1792/1985).

Feminism itself has also diverged dramatically into a range of competing and complementary discourses, with the emergence of separatist feminism (Dworkin 1987,1990; Hall, Kitzinger, Lawlan & Perkins 1992; Kitzinger 1987), and cyberfeminism (Haraway 1991; Hawthorne & Klein 1999; Plant 1995; Spender 1995; Wajcman 1991), to mention just two of these new directions. There has also been an increasing critique of western feminism for being both the voice of privilege and being ethnocentric in its concerns (e.g. Angelou 1986,1989; hooks1981, 1989; Moreton-Robinson 2000; Te Awakotuku 1991). For women of colour, or non-European backgrounds, issues of gender and race take on a complexity that is not necessarily reflected in the feminist discourse which initially unreflexively assumed a uniformity in women's experience. Another critique of seeing gender issues only from feminist perspectives has come from the "men's movement" (Bly1991; Brod & Kaufman eds 1994; Connell 1995; Corneau 1991; Llewellyn Jones 1981; Pease1997, 2002) which has sought to bring attention to issues for men concerning gender.

The ways in which gender practices pervade the lives of women are under scrutiny, both in the academic discourses and in the legal arenas, as a result of a century of active feminism. What has not been so clearly apparent is the examination of the issues of identity, or the emergence of a Self which western women can claim as their own. While some commentators (like Irigaray 1985; Haraway 1991; Butler 1990, 1993; Flax 1990) have explored the distinctions between those characteristics that have been assumed to be masculine or feminine, and examined the interpretations placed upon those distinctions; others have seen issues such as agency (Archer 2000) to be gender-blind.

Not even Descartes truly believed that the Mind was totally separated from the body, however his "*cogito ergo sum*" spurred a discourse into being in which the body has been treated as both separate and less significant than Mind, Consciousness or Self. These three terms seem to have become almost interchangeable in the literature, Consciousness and Mind directly, and Self by inference appearing to be seated exclusively in the disembodied Mind/Consciousness.

The twentieth century has seen a steady procession of philosophers and, latterly, neuroscientists, who have challenged the discontinuity or disjunction of Body and Mind. Both Sartre (1957) and Merleau-Ponty (1962/2000) wrote of the "lived body"; Foucault (1979,1980,1984,1985,1986 and in Rabinow 1984) explored the discourses of power which were

"inscribed upon the body"; feminists like de Beauvoir (1953/600, Irigaray (1985), Greer (1970) and Grosz (1990, 1994) have all explored the positioning of women's bodies within their analyses of patriarchy; neurologists and neuroscientists like Oliver Sacks (1973,1985,1989,1995), Damasio (1994), Edelman (1992), and Mark Turner (1996) have turned their attention to the embodied nature of human consciousness; and other writers across a range of disciplines have struggled with attempting to reconcile the lived experience of humans with scientific objectification of a Self.

Some feminist writers have begun to explore the embodiment of women, not only as this is engaged in medical and psychological practices (Oakley1984; Rich 1979; O'Brien 1981; Steinem 1994; Friedan 1963) but also in terms of the symbolic significance of embodiment per se (Grosz 1989,1990, 1994; de Beauvoir 1953; Irigaray 1985).

In an article which I found particularly illuminating, S.Kay Toombs (1995) explores the phenomenological approach of Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Sartre (1957) in relation to the lived experience of disability. She writes:

*"As an embodied subject, I do not experience my body primarily as an object among other objects **of** the world. Rather than being an object for me-as-subject, my body **as I live it** represents my particular point of view on the world (Merleau-Ponty 1962-70), I am embodied not in the sense that I **have** a body- as I have an automobile, a house, or a pet- but in the sense that I **exist** or **live** my body."(1995:10)*

Toombs is concerned, however, with the theoretical implications as well as the representation of the embodied person. She notes (1995: 10-11):

"... the lived body is not the objective, physiological body that can be seen by others (or examined by means of various medical technologies) but, rather, the body that is the vehicle for seeing.

*Furthermore, the **lived body** is the basic scheme of orientation, the centre of one's system of co-ordinates. I experience myself as here over against which everything else is there....Additionally, the lived body is the locus of my intentions, I actively engage the world through the medium of my body."*

What Toombs is saying here encompasses several elements: she is emphasizing the centrality to one's life of embodiment, both as the means to recognize one's orientation in the world through one's senses, and as the site of agency. She is also reflecting on how one is positioned in the world and how the world positions the person "*in accord with my bodily placement and actions*"(ibid.11). Here she is drawing upon the phenomenological approach of Husserl, Schutz and Merleau-Ponty, to examine the theoretical implications of the experience of living the body.

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of books and articles written by and about the lived experience of mental illness, intellectual disability, blindness, deafness and neurological disorders (Sacks 1973,1985,1989,1994,1995;Williams 1992;Wood 1994;Taussig 1992; Schreiber 1973; Hastings 1997). In this literature, the story is told, re-told and told once more, of the lived experience of embodied persons whose interactions with the world around them is fundamentally based upon the particularities of their embodiment.

This brings me to reflect upon concepts of power and the discourses of power which, according to Foucault (1954, 1970,1972,1973,1979, 1980,1984,1985,1986,1988), have been inscribed upon the body. The overarching theme of Foucault's corpus was the exploration of the uses of power upon the body. He was particularly interested in examining the practices by which the body was constrained as a means of illuminating both the existence of structures of power and the mechanisms by which power was imposed, maintained and internalized. In his investigations into the institutions that purveyed the extremities of imposed power, the clinic, prison and asylum, Foucault paid particular attention to the practices that constrain the bodies of persons. In his later work, **The History of Sexuality**, the structures of power which were the focus of his archaeology of ideas were those of the social order.

The final volume, **The Care of the Self** (1986), specifically explored the ways in which the monopolisation of perception imposed upon persons to direct attention to the Self has been a politically motivated process of Western structures of power. By turning the person's gaze constantly inwards, dominant hegemonies can be both maintained and expand control. Whether this inward looking gaze has been exercised by the Church (searching one's soul for salvation) or by a political hierarchy (seeking the good citizen), the effect over time has been the individualization of the Self. A concomitant of individualization has been the separation of body and mind, the disembodiment of the person. Other writers, in particular feminist writers, have also explored the discourses "*inscribed upon the body*". For Greer (1970), Grosz (1990, 1994) Oakley (1984) and Rich (1979), women's bodies have long been seen the site of discourses of dominance. To be embodied as a woman is to be subject to both the normalizing gazes which constrain her presentation of her person and the discourses of dominant social orders such as patriarchy.

Grosz, in particular, has taken up the notion of woman as "corporeal" (1990, 1989, 1994), arguing that the constraints visited upon women's bodies in terms of having to conform to idealized and unattainable shapes and sizes are simultaneously constraints upon both behaviours and capacity for agency. I would argue, following Grosz, that the lived body, or the lived experience of being an embodied person, of a woman, is circumscribed within a gendered domain of identity.

In terms of gender as a domain of identity, there can be little argument that the gender of a person is both constitutive of and contributive to identity, both from the subjective locus of the "I" and from the social response.

The map that I present here is concerned with demonstrating, even minimally, the effects of western philosophy, of dominant discourses, upon cultural understandings and practices. While women were considered to have no souls, unless they happened to be saints or aristocrats, all women could be treated as persons without rights. If the Object Self applied only to men, and women were somehow "Self-less", then the role that women had to fulfil was to be self-less in that word's other meaning, i.e. to be utterly sacrificing of their own needs in service of those with a Self. While women were considered incapable of reason, there was no point in providing education, and even more significantly, without recognition of the capacity to reason (a fundamental element of the Object Self) they could not be permitted to be citizens, an idea as ancient as Aristotle (*opcitpp95-101*).

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