CHAPTER FIVE

Feminist Epistemology and Political Obligation

The previous chapters may seem to have taken us away from my main line of argument; for how can these feminist epistemological theories enhance our understanding of obligation? I maintain that application of these theories will not only help us understand the fundamental masculinism of consent theory but will also point to a feminist reconstruction of obligation. It is to that task that I turn in the present chapter. I explore ways in which gender psychology provides a powerful heuristic device for understanding liberal obligation theory as a language of power and exclusion, and how women’s experiences provide ideas about how obligation needs to be fundamentally reconceptualized and restructured.

It is important, however, not to overstate the case: the concept of consent and contract is appropriate, even vital, to at least some (perhaps many) aspects of human existence. But when it is used to characterize all of social reality, including most significantly reproductive and other affective relationships—or, conversely, when it denigrates as nonhuman any relationship that cannot be viewed as a contract—and when it systematically depends on women’s status of inferiority as it simultaneously espouses the principle of equality, then it reveals the pathology of the construct on which it is based: specifically, how the male fear of connection with a woman serves as a basis for establishing how and why obligation is always, and can only be, self-assumed.
Freedom, Recognition, and Masculinity

The central issue in the relationship between this fear, the masculine model of development, and self-assumed obligation is that of freedom, which is also a central issue of liberalism. Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau all base their theories of obligation on the initial premise of natural freedom. This freedom—as well as, for Locke and Hobbes at least, the civil freedom that follows from it—uniformly coheres with what Isaiah Berlin has called "negative liberty," which holds that freedom consists in an absence of external constraints. The individual is free to the extent that she is not restrained by external forces, primarily viewed as law, physical force, and other overt coercion. As anyone familiar with the debate between positive and negative liberty can attest, a central difficulty with the concept of negative liberty consists in determining what exactly constitutes a restraint. Yet Berlin's general concept that restraints come from outside the self is a basic tenet of negative liberty; specifically, other humans' direct or indirect participation "in frustrating my wishes" is the relevant criterion in determining restraint. "By being free in this sense I mean not being interfered with by others. The wider the area of non-interference, the wider my freedom."3

This conception of freedom can be seen in several ways to arise from masculine experience under mother-only child rearing; indeed, Berlin's choice of words significantly echoes the boy's infantile dilemma. According to object relations, the primary goal of the emerging oedipal boy is to achieve freedom from the constraint of his mother: to excise his femaleness, detach thoroughly from the mother and be free of the female, and thereby "escape from the body." The mother is viewed in the boy's unconscious as a controlling force that seeks to keep the son imprisoned, that is, merged with her. Her presence thus presents a barrier to his self-realization of masculinity (or nonfemininity), a limitation and restriction on his ability to become male, to become himself. And this restraint, furthermore, is seen by the boy as coming from completely outside the self, in spite of the fact

1Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in Berlin (1971), pp. 118–72. Rousseau is certainly considered a positive libertarian when it comes to his concept of moral freedom in civil society, but here I am specifically focusing on natural freedom, which for Rousseau is much like Hobbes's concept. And just as natural freedom provides the rationale for constructing a state on consent, it is natural freedom that causes Rousseau to attempt to reconcile the general will with voluntarism, as I argued in Chapter 1.


4Chodorow (1978).

5Flax (1983), p. 258. Gilligan (1982) also asserts that males attempt to escape or keep free of connection and an entangling, strangling web of relationships.
that his psychically female identity—that is, his primary self—is what he is trying to escape.

According to object relations theory, the girl, perceiving sameness between herself and her mother, incorporates that sameness into her self-definition and view of the world. She sees her relationship with the world as continuous: self is other. For the boy, perceptions of difference cause him to view self and other as totally separate, and these perceptions feed on themselves as the boy actively engages in the conceptualization of the mother as completely outside the self. By projecting his psychic femaleness onto the mother and viewing the mother as completely separate—as well as by viewing her as "bad"—the boy can dissociate himself from his primary femininity. Furthermore, in the dissociation of the masculine mind/self from the female body/other, restraint for the boy is embodied in the very presence (the body) of the mother as the reminder of his primary femaleness and how that is at odds with his masculine gender identity. This restraint evident in the mother’s presence is viewed as coming from totally outside the self; its genesis is totally other. In reaction the boy cuts loose from the (m)other; he detaches, tries to escape her influence and control. In short, he seeks absolute freedom from her and from all "others."

But freedom, defined by this masculine psyche, further entails domination and contest. Because the mother is viewed as a controlling force, inhibiting self-realization by virtue of her very presence, the search for freedom becomes a struggle in the boy’s mind for control. Gender psychology challenges the liberal-positivist self-other duality by showing that others—and one other in particular—are intrinsically part of the self. Yet it also reveals that the boy cannot accept this fact without a fundamental challenge to his identity. The mother appears an omnipresent force, precisely because she represents the boy’s primary identity. Furthermore, in spite of his efforts, the deep nature of the boy’s psychic femaleness makes it impossible to truly excise. The boy thus perceives his mother, as the embodiment of this aspect of himself, as the obstacle to be overcome. If he can dominate his mother, who represents his primary identity, then he can master that identity and rid himself of it. Thus, the boy devalues the mother and his relation to her, belittling all relationship in the process. He seeks to dehumanize her (and by extension all women as embodiments of the female). He denies her existence by denying her humanity, her presence, her subjectivity and selfhood, and particularly her sexuality. Thus this freedom is viewed as the product of a struggle: the boy achieves freedom only by virtue of the woman’s subordi-

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In reality, however, this freedom is a false abstraction; for contradictorily, in the effort to escape the restraints created by the mother, the boy must erect all sorts of other artificial barriers, in the form of rigid rules of masculine behavior, limiting social labels, categories, and sex roles, which are equally restricting if not more so. In order to prevent loss of self to the mother, the boy erects these barriers to keep her "out" and him "in" his self-identity and gender identity. These barriers range from socially approved institutions and practices of female-exclusive masculinity (from all-boy sports to all-male professions) to more pernicious aspects such as widespread belief systems about women’s natural inferiority. "The normal male contempt for women" has been documented by analysts in boys by age five.6 These belief systems are, of course, partly produced by empirical observation and teaching. The boy can see that women are socially devalued even by observing relations between his mother and father; he experiences privileges over his sisters or his friends’ sisters; he observes the restraints placed on women by virtue of their sex. But other beliefs develop by extension of these observations because they fill a deep need in the boy to believe that women are inferior, for if they are, then his mother’s power is perhaps not so threatening after all.7

These beliefs serve as an externalized superego. The boy’s turn to the father is a turn to an abstract role, as male gender identity comes to consist in principles, ideas, and norms rather than a direct affective relationship. Since the goal in being male is to be not-female, the boy seeks out principles and rules to help prevent the return to the mother and primary femininity and to guide his behavior and identity. That is, the boy’s positional identification ensures an identity and a superego that vitally depend on abstract principles that are articulated by others and rules that are defined by an absent father role. The boy’s superego thus comes not from within but from without. And these belief systems, rules, and practices serve as barriers—restraints—to prevent the boy’s return to the mother, to the supposed end of self-identity, self-realization, and self-creation. Like Locke’s "natural law" which prevents men from consenting to slavery, these belief systems and rules serve as restraints on self-creative action to the supposed end of preserving freedom.

Thus, although this concept of freedom may ostensibly be defined as an absence of restraint, perhaps it is better defined as an absence of the female. Indeed, the notion that negative freedom is the hallmark

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7 Keller (1983). An example she offers from personal experience is a favorite of mine: "‘Science,’ my five-year-old son declared [after his first few days at kindergarten], confidently bypassing the fact that his mother was a scientist, ‘is for men!’" (p. 189).
of humanity provides another means of asserting women's nonhuman status. If women were human, they would have a right to freedom. To enact this freedom they would have to seek dominance, and such a search would destroy men, not to mention the fact that it would subvert the very purpose of defining freedom this way in the first place. As long as women are not considered human, then freedom is not relevant to their existence. They are dominatable, like all things in nature, and thus dominated. Yet this domination is what creates the conditions for and defines women's inhumanity in the first place. Although it may be true in one sense that freedom defined negatively is not appropriate to women's historical self-conception and experience, the simultaneous denial of other conceptions of freedom and of the priority of other values (such as relationship) ensures that women's subordination will provide a self-referential justification.

But of course the concept goes even deeper than this; for if female is other, then freedom entails the absence of the other, which, as de Beauvoir and Hegel both brought into our collective intellectual consciousness, constitutes the problem of recognition. Indeed, many readers may already have perceived the parallels between the boy's struggle for freedom and identity and the struggle between Hegel's master and slave for recognition. Recognition is a key issue to this negative conception of freedom in the masculine psyche, and it is a key to the conception of freedom found in the market and liberal voluntarist theories of obligation. Viewing the object relations "story" through the issue of recognition can yield a powerful means of understanding the epistemological gender bias of political theory.

Recall that at about the age of three months the infant begins to perceive itself as a separate being from the mother. For the next few years the processes of differentiation and individuation proceed and regress as the infant explores its independence and motor skills and yet seeks to return to the mother and symbiosis. If differentiation is successful, the child is able to resolve its ambivalence by understanding itself as a self in relationship, by accepting both connection and separation. The sense of agency and an "internal continuity of being" can then develop fully; and these are "fundamental to an unproblematic sense of self, and provide the basis of both autonomy and spontaneity." So it is through differentiation that the infant develops autonomy and agency.

Differentiation thus begins with the child's conceptualization of the mother as not-me and of the self as not-you. But this negative ele-

\*Chodorow (1979a), p. 60.
ment is not enough to create a successful differentiation: “True differentiation, true separateness, cannot be simply a perception and experience of self-other, of presence-absence. It must involve two selves, two presences, two subjects. Recognizing the other as subject is possible only to the extent that one is not dominated by felt need and one’s own exclusive subjectivity.” That is, differentiation is a product of the mother-infant relationship. It happens in relation to the mother and, moreover, to a mother who is her own subject, not, in spite of the phrase object relations, an object that exists only in the infant subject’s perception. Nor can the infant be used by the caretaker as a symbolic object for working out her or his own unresolved problems. As Jeffrey Blustein argues, “The achievement of autonomy is a developmental process.”¹⁰ That is, the achievement of this full, complete agency can arise only through relationship with a caretaker, and specifically (in object relations parlance) a “good enough” caretaker who does not project her or his own experiences or feelings onto the infant and at the same time does not let the outside environment impinge on the infant indiscriminately. The development of an infant’s autonomy and agency cannot occur without “empathic caretakers who understand and validate the infant’s experience as that of a real self.”¹¹ Agency can thus develop only through a relationship with a mother as subject. It is for this reason that Chodorow says, “Differentiation is not distinctness and separateness, but a particular way of being connected to others.”¹²

Yet differentiation is usually not completely successful for either gender: girls experience too little separation and an overly strong identification with the mother, and boys experience far too much separation in trying to distance themselves completely from the mother. One reason for this situation is linked to the issue of recognition. It is only through recognition that true separation, and hence full agency and autonomy, can be achieved; for the self depends on relationship, and relationship is impossible without recognition of the subjectivity

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¹⁰Blustein (1982), p. 10. Of course, the originators of object relations theory—Klein, Mahler, Winnicott—did in fact choose the name object relations to refer to the notion that the mother is an object to the child. My point, however, is to highlight the faultiness of such a conception of the mother by the child, and to assert that autonomy requires individuals to transcend such a vision of the mother as object.


¹²Ibid., p. 59. The need for the caretaker to be empathic might suggest that bringing men into the practice of child care is not itself sufficient. If men, because of their child-rearing experiences, have had to repress their capacity for empathy, then simply giving them the responsibility of child care will not likely be sufficient to draw it out again. Conversely, however, it could also be argued that participation in this responsibility will in fact require men to draw on their repressed capabilities.
of the other. This is where the masculine model displays serious shortcomings, and it is to this that one central cause of the gender bias of political theory can be traced; recognition of the mother would entail the boy’s recognizing and accepting his own primary femininity. To forestall this, the boy resorts to the defensive reaction of assimilating difference to differentiation, taking difference—specifically masculinity as not-female—as ostensible validation of his separation. This, however, is an artificial solution with mixed results: it "involves an arbitrary boundary creation and an assertion of hyper-separateness to reinforce a lack of security in a person’s sense of their self as a separate person."¹³ It also leads to images of the mother as nonhuman, both powerful monster and helpless animal. This defensive conceptualization of the mother does not produce true relational autonomy, an understanding of the self that draws strength from connection and relationship, but rather creates reactive autonomy, a separateness and independence that is fragile and unstable, and entails great psychic and emotional cost. It produces a conception of agency that abstracts individual will, the ability to make choices and act on them, out of the context of the social relationships within which it develops and within which it is exercised.¹⁴

**Freedom, Recognition, and Liberal Theory**

In political theory these themes are displayed most obviously in Hegel’s writings. Although Hegel is not a social contract philosopher, his theory is relevant to this discussion because his dualism of conflict and domination is in many ways the paradigm for western ontology.¹⁵ His theory offers a particularly stark presentation of the problem of domination in recognition. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, particularly in the chapter titled "Self-Consciousness," Hegel argues that the self seeks affirmation by declaring a radical independence. In this, of course, it requires recognition by another being, and hence must have some sort of relationship with an other. Self-consciousness seeks to reconcile this contradiction by gaining recognition from an other without making a simultaneous recognition. Self-consciousness seeks to be perpetually the self, keeping the other perpetually the other. As Mitchell Aboulafia says: "If this subject were to speak it would declare: ‘I am above the things of nature, for they have not the power to

¹³Ibid., p. 58.
resist me. I deny them any independent status; as a subject, a self, I am the only self-conscious, independent being.'"

Self-consciousness is prepared to die for this recognition. And even though it realizes that death would bring a dubious if not a Pyrrhic victory, this readiness, in Hegel’s theory, is what creates masters. Those not so prepared become the slaves, the perpetual objects: “Locked into thing-hood for not being prepared to die for an ideal [the slave] remains part of the merely natural world, and as a living ‘thing’ it is ‘the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another.’”

This description presents an obvious parallel to the infant boy’s development. In the effort to grow up and separate from the mother, the boy asserts a total independence, denying the subjectivity of the mother. Because of the difficulty of repressing his primary identification and excising the female, the boy finds that the need to deny the mother becomes intense, and the struggle for recognition becomes a life-and-death struggle for dominance. The mother obviously does not experience this intense need her son feels. In the first place, she is not emerging as a person. But moreover, girls, being tied to their mothers in acceptable and fundamental ways, do not need to separate from them by denying their existence, and so this need is not (usually) part of the mother’s psyche or personality. Indeed, because the girl’s identity is so closely entwined with the mother’s existence, she cannot even fathom such a denial. Finally, such a struggle is antipathetic to the practice of mothering. As Whitbeck notes, “If a mother saw the emerging person who is her child in the way that Hegel describes, human beings would not exist.” As a result, not prepared to die for the ideal—one that is contrary to her very being in the first place—the mother (woman) becomes the slave. She is a thing, the perpetual object.

Because of her perspective—which values the concrete and real over the abstract and ideal, and which takes relationship as primary—the mother/woman does not readily perceive this as oppression: she cannot conceive of wishing to die for recognition, which seems to her an inherent contradiction. Her realism and her orientation toward relationship, however, ensure her “enslavement”—her objectification, dehumanization, oppression. She, like Hegel’s slave, is doomed to

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16Aboulafia (1984), p. 176. He also compares the male-female relationship to the master-slave relationship but focuses on relations between adult men and women. This is quite different from my analysis in which the relations between men and women are influenced by the relations between parents and children.

17Ibid., p. 177. See also Hegel, The Phenomenology of Spirit, p. 115.

live for another. Yet the reason she does so is not the natural outcome of the dialectic but the result of masculine perspectives and action. Because of the male’s intense need for unidirectional recognition, he creates institutions that solidify woman’s role as other. And because of the female’s assumption that there will be mutuality in recognition and trust, she has no reason to reject such institutions, for their oppressiveness is not immediately apparent to her.

This one-sided recognition is far from being the full recognition required by trust, mutuality, and reciprocity, or indeed by agency and autonomy. "Mutual recognition entails a basic respect for the other, which is impossible in a master-slave, independence-dependence, relationship." Rather, there are relationships of domination. But these "fail to promote mutual recognition because they prevent individuals from seeing others as anything but totally other; and they accomplish this false othering by promoting differences meant to keep individuals on one level of a hierarchy from being able to recognize individuals on different levels."

While this part of the master-slave dialectic is most reflective of the son’s emerging struggle against the mother, Hegel’s account of the struggle does not end here. The struggle moves on to the slave’s transcendence of his dependence on the master and to his achievement of an independent self-consciousness. The master, as a recognized being, merely consumes the fruits of the slave’s labor, who produces solely for the master. But this situation provides the slave with the potential for a kind of recognition not available to the master. That is, because the slave works on objects in the world, he gains an affirmation of his own existence. "Through work . . . the bondsman becomes conscious of what he truly is. . . . Consciousness, qua worker, comes to see in the independent being (of the object) its own independence." This recognition which is achieved through objectification provides the slave with the ability to emerge, to achieve a superior position over the master, to become more human. Once the slave has achieved this position, he will no longer tolerate his status as slave; and this will transform the struggle itself into new modes of interaction.

20Ibid., pp. 182–83.
21I return to the use of he because this is Hegel’s usage, and because I believe that the very structure of the master-slave dialectic, the structuring of human relations in oppositional ways, is itself androcentric. I should also note that I realize that the Hegelian dimensions of the present work are sorely underexplored, but because of the enormity of that task it must be reserved for future work. Balbus (1982) and I undertake very different projects, but his Marxism and Domination provides one neo-Hegelian reading of object relations theory that the reader might find helpful.
22Hegel, Phenomenology, p. 118.
In mother-only child rearing, however, the mother does not come to this realization; or at least, perhaps, she has not been able to until recently. That is, although this part of the dialectic would not seem directly applicable to the mother-son relationship as I have described it, it does point out the Hegelian origins of standpoint epistemology as well as the usefulness of gender psychology in developing a feminist standpoint. Hartsock’s version of the feminist standpoint in particular bases itself on the material activity of women: women’s labor on objects in the world in the process of creating use values provides the grounds for a feminist consciousness in which women recognize their own subjectivity. On this reading, and from the perspective of my focus here, women’s recognition of the quality of labor involved in raising children might enable mothers to achieve their own self-consciousness.

The feminist standpoint goes beyond Hegel’s dialectic in important ways, however. In the first place, this parallel cannot be carried to the conclusion that the mother achieves a superior or more human position than the son, for it would be part of the mothering relationship to use this self-consciousness to help the son, as well as the daughter, become more human. Second, the feminist standpoint allows women to achieve a collective self-consciousness, to develop relations with other women, and to overcome the institutionalized bondage of privatization.\(^2\) Hegel, by contrast, does not truly provide for relations among (former) slaves.

Hegel does discuss a new concept of human relationships, however. By the end of the *Phenomenology*, he argues for a conception of reciprocity or unity that forms the basis for the truest and highest self-consciousness. As Isaac Balbus notes, for Hegel, “labor is only one mode of the struggle for recognition; it by no means exhausts the forms through which human beings strive to achieve integration with nature and among themselves.” Objectification gives way to a “higher form of recognition that entails a purer or more perfect unification between humans and the world in which they live.”\(^2\) By the eventual assimilation of the master-slave relationship into *Geist*, human relationships of the highest form can be achieved. Indeed, on Balbus’s reading, Hegel goes beyond the standpoint because he goes beyond objectifying material labor to a universal telos.

But Hegel’s concept of human relations is qualitatively different,

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\(^2\)This point echoes Marx’s criticism of Hegel that the concept of self-consciousness did not allow for relations among slaves. But see Balbus (1982), esp. chap. 8, for an argument that Hegel in fact had a more complete and human picture of human relations than did Marx.

and perhaps even less human, than the feminist standpoint conception, because Hegel seeks to achieve specifically self-consciousness, and this raises questions about the possibility of individual self-consciousnesses forming real relations of mutuality. Furthermore, the feminist standpoint is not limited to objectification. One aspect of women's material experience is that in their labor women must work "with" nature rather than against it, for instance in childbirth and nursing. In this light nature is not "devoid of any subjectivity," but rather its subjectivity is recognized. On this reading, the feminist standpoint could take us further toward liberation and recognition than mere objectifying labor.

So the feminist standpoint both can and cannot be interpreted as one stage in the Hegelian struggle for recognition. Hegel's transformation of human relations has a different genesis and foundation. Nevertheless, a reading of Hegel from the perspective of the feminist standpoint argument can yield a more complete picture of the relationship between master and slave (or men and women). That is, one could argue that the standpoint achieved through material labor ultimately enables the slave to see that it is the struggle for dominance itself, and not just his or her role within it, that creates the inability to achieve true self-consciousness. The slave would be permitted to see that although relationship with the master per se must end, relationship with the person in the master's role must continue on a new basis of equality. Equality, on this reading, would provide the only potential for reciprocal and noninstrumental recognition.

In the same vein, a feminist standpoint creates the potential for men and women to achieve fully human relationships of reciprocity and mutuality. In the context of my discussion of the mother-son relationship, it would enable the mother to appreciate fully the quality and significance of her activity, and it would enable the son to recognize the mother as her own subject. It would thus allow parents and children of both sexes to achieve unity and mutuality of recognition. This is not achievable through a nonfeminist understanding of Hegel, for he rejected the parent-child relationship as the model for human relationships of recognition and instead chose the brother-sister relationship. It would take us too far afield to pursue this matter, but his choice of the brother-sister relationship (rather than sister-sister, for instance), his account of that relationship, and his rejection of the

25Ibid., p. 279.
26I say this rather than a Hegelian reading of the feminist standpoint because the latter is much more problematic, owing in part to Hegel's sexism. Both projects should be carried out but must be reserved for future work, as they would be far too involved to undertake here.
parent-child (that is, mother-child) relationship, rather than recasting that relationship in terms of mutuality, further suggest the sexist limitations of Hegel's argument.27

These thoughts have taken us away from my main line of argument, but they help provide a deeper understanding of the theoretical possibilities of gender psychology. The discussion of Hegel has made it possible to examine the issue of recognition in a deeper way than liberal theory would at first glance suggest. But in reality, while less obvious and direct, these themes, and the desire for dominance and nonreciprocal recognition, have evident parallels in liberal theories, and particularly in theories of obligation. They are represented more subtly; but now that they have been identified and defined, their place in liberal theory will be easier to see.

To begin with, agency is one of the most central concepts of individualism and consent theory; the individual has the capacity to make choices and thus can assume obligations. Moreover, this capacity also carries a moral imperative that obligations can be assumed only through the exercise of this agency. Agency is the hallmark of independence, autonomy, and adulthood. To be able to make one's own decisions indicates an end to dependence on the will and abilities of another; hence, agency is what justifies the rejection of divine right and the adoption of the social contract. This is a vital historical move. But because it is a reactive rather than relational autonomy that this agency embodies, it is also what justifies—indeed, creates and perpetuates—the radical and abstract individualism of liberal democratic theory, the market model of society, substantive theories that require the dehumanization, oppression, and nonrecognition of women, a theory that obligation can exist only by virtue of voluntary assumption.

That is the primary significance of gender psychology as far as political theory is concerned. The boy—because he must become masculine in a world where mother-only child rearing ensures that he is psychically female, where gender is an exclusionary category, and where the female is devalued while the male is elevated—cannot afford to grant recognition to the mother, and hence to all women and indeed to all "others." This inability to grant such recognition is the vital seed from which the self-other dichotomy grows, as well as all other dualisms which are variations on that theme: subject-object, mind-body, public-private, fact-value, exchange-use. Not coincidentally, these dualisms involve identification of men with the first member of each pair—the public world of fact, the subject, and the ego—

and women with the second—nature, the id, privatized objects—thus taking as a primary value the denial of women’s subjectivity and personhood. But as a way to secure independence, autonomy, and selfhood, this strategy is hopelessly self-contradictory. The need to dominate “arises not so much out of empowerment as out of anxiety about impotence.”

Numerous feminist theorists have identified this dualism as a central element of liberal theory and as a key to liberalism’s difficulties. The need to deny recognition is what gives rise to the need for artificial constructions that present such inaccurate and skewed visions of “man,” “nature,” and social relations, and for theories that insist on the individual’s complete control over “his” connections to the political community. Hartsock’s description of the market model of society and masculinist conceptions of power are a particularly important case in point. In her theory masculinist ontology gives rise to a market model of community that is, like the boy’s reactive autonomy, “fragile and arbitrary, structured fundamentally by competition and domination.” The notions that the individual is fundamentally isolated from all others and that contact must thus be based at least initially on opposing interests and established through formal agreements and contracts are part of the problem of recognition, or the failure thereof. Just as the boy’s severed relation with the mother will ensure the repression of femaleness and relationship because they are confusing and threatening to the masculine psyche, so will relationship based on competition rather than cooperation ensure that “the very social character of activity can appear as something alien and puzzling.” In such a situation it is certain that relationships of domination will become apparent; that is, it is certain that “exchange” is a power relationship rather than one of association, reciprocity, or mutuality.

Recognition will be sought through this form of interaction, but only the unidirectional recognition that Hegel outlined: to be acknowledged not as equal but as superior and privileged. Thus men compete in the market to establish their preeminence by establishing the preeminence of their interests over others’, by accruing wealth and property. The “fetishism of commodities” that this ethic makes apparent means that things, not people, become the objects of pri-

29Indeed, this is such a basic building block of most feminist theory that it may not need citation; but in addition to the theorists discussed in the previous chapter, see Eisenstein (1981), Elshtain (1981), Okin (1979), Pateman (1988), Sargent (1981).
31Ibid., p. 45.
mary attachment and mediate human thought and activity. In this world, "attainment of complex and deep-going series of relations with others is indeed difficult." The extent to which men enter into contracts that promote the interests of another is determined by the good to themselves. As Mancur Olson argues, the only reason man gives up anything is to gain more for himself; the only reason man participates in a group action is to benefit his individual life by a manifold factor over and above his contribution to the group.

This one-sided individualistic concern with one’s interests as an extension of the self, the identification (or sublimation) of interests with passions, the focus on desired objects and the self-absorption apparent in market man’s striving to fulfill his interests echo the preoedipal concern with objects, the self, and escape from the body/mother. The liberal market, in providing a means of expression for the repressed passions of infancy, contributes to this concept of interests as misogynist, as expressive of the desire to dominate women. That does not mean other desires are not expressed in the concept of interests, of course; but it is in this particular aspect that the problem of recognition lies. For in the market model that Hartsock and Macpherson analyze, the relevant point is not just that individuals are atomistic, nor is it just that atomism creates duality. What makes individuals atomistic is the fear of and refusal to recognize the subjectivity of others because to so recognize would be to lose the self; that is, to give in to others without the struggle of competition is to relinquish one’s interests and hence to lose one’s self. But this in reality only perverts the self and makes genuine individuality, agency, and autonomy unattainable, for without mutuality in recognition, domination persists and relationship fails.

Obligation and Recognition

The implications for political obligation are powerful and manifold. On the most obvious level, the institutionalization of unidirectional recognition and sexual inequality ensures an absence of genuine choice for women, a condition often decried by liberal theorists as coercive when applied to the male citizenry. In the theories and practices of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, women were denied the means of consenting, such as the vote and other forms of political expression, but political obligations of obedience to law ex-

33Olson (1971).
34Hirschman (1977).
tended to them equally as to men. And even with the granting of women's suffrage, the pervasiveness of sexual inequality in laws and opportunities to this day, it can easily be argued, seriously undermines women's ability to consent and participate fully in the public realm.

The question of unequal starting points or de facto inequality raises a serious problem for consent theory. As Rousseau argued, the liberal contract, rather than securing freedom, presents in institutionalized form the same relations of dominance and servitude found in the state of nature.\(^{36}\) Whereas liberal consent theory works from stated premises of formal equality, gross substantive inequality ensures political inequality not only in political voice in determining the laws but also in the ways the laws apply to people: the laws apply unequally to those who are unequal. But because equality is defined in the liberal democratic contract solely in formal terms, this deeper inequality can never be redressed; and so the inequality becomes not merely de facto or contingent but structural. The prior political group in power has already been able to structure social institutions, as well as conceptual definitions, to benefit itself, and it will always be ahead as long as freedom, equality, and obligation are defined abstractly and negatively because such conceptions leave it to the worse-off individual to pull herself up by her own bootstraps.

In contemporary theory, often working off the principles of the early social contract theorists, the problem persists, though in perhaps subtler ways. Joseph Tussman's characterization of the non-fully participating citizens of both sexes (the modern counterpart to Locke's "tacit consenters") as "political child-brides" supports the notion that women are considered by modern theorists to be incapable of true participation in the social contract, and that such inability is nothing to be alarmed about.\(^{36}\) The point is not just that Tussman chose such an image (and hence was contingently sexist), but that such an image *made sense* and was acceptable to theorists in a way that, say, a racist image would not (consider the difference in our reading of his theory if Tussman had chosen an equally offensive racist image such as "Uncle Tom"). While racism is just as pernicious as sexism, I am suggesting among other things that the reluctance to see sexism in such terms reveals the "deep structure" of masculinity, to invoke Di Stefano once again, that pervades obligation theory.\(^{37}\)

The notion that inequality and dominance serve as a basis for obligation suggests important things about its theoretical, ontological,

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\(^{36}\) See Rousseau, *The Origin of Inequality*, in Cole, esp. p. 89.

\(^{36}\) Tussman (1960).

and even epistemological grounding and characterization. If the conception of freedom central to consent theory, namely negative liberty, is premised on the struggle for recognition, and particularly on the ability to be recognized without reciprocation, and if nonrecognition is, as it is for the oedipal boy and Hegel's master, a form of power and violence, then freedom too must be at least in part an expression of that same power and violence. Other concepts based on the premises of that freedom will then likewise express power and violence.

Thus, equality, in referring to abstract opportunity and rights, sets the stage for competition and dominance. Opportunity is equal until someone wins the contest, and even then only for those who start off equal in the relevant respects. The idea of rights embodies the concept of claims against others, again suggesting competition; and a right further provides a boundary line between various individuals' needs, desires, and wants and hence serves to divide individuals. The concept of equal rights says we must respect one another not because we are connected but because of rights which highlight the lines of demarcation between us. The old adage that your right to swing your fist ends where my nose begins is illuminating as much for its articulation of separate and discrete individual spheres of action as it is for its image of violence; that is, the potential for violence lies at the precise point where discrete individuals have contact. Freedom, defined negatively, is to a certain degree zero sum: my greater freedom by definition consists in the existence of fewer laws, lower taxes, and so on, but this will yield unfreedom for those who are not as well off, who depend on redistribution of income and state regulation of potentially exploitive relationships, such as between a capitalist and a child laborer. So freedom becomes a competitive relationship among beings, some of whom seek to win out over others, establishing their freedom at the expense of others'.

Obligation as self-assumed is a particularly significant product of this conception of freedom, because far more than equality, justice, or rights, obligation centrally involves connection, relationship, and bondedness. The absolute natural freedom of the state of nature outlined by the social contract theorists entails a total absence of restraint: people must fight against the restraints imposed by competing and alienated others. The absolute freedom of the state of nature—particularly in Hobbes and Rousseau, and to a less obvious degree in Locke—is marked by a mean existence and lack of control; fear of ceasing to exist, fear of losing one's possessions, hostility, and suspicion are dominant characteristics. The state of nature, like the boy's relationship with his mother, is a kind of prison, for within it man cannot realize himself, he cannot create and control. He is constantly
reminded of his fleshliness and mortality. "Natural man"38 seeks to escape this chaotic prison by turning to the social contract, thereby trading absolute freedom, which produces absolute terror, for effective freedom, or the freedom to act effectively, with the assurance that one's actions will produce the desired results. Civil society exists to protect possessions and property. By having control over his possessions, the individual has control over his identity; for Locke in particular, for example, who you are is determined largely by what you have.

But civil society also exists to ensure that the individual can act rationally. Rules and laws provide predictability; they provide assurance that the individual can act with certainty and hence control "himself." By protecting property and preserving (or making possible) rationality, the social contract not only preserves the citizen from nature but also assists in the individual’s preservation of autonomy, defined reactively as self-control and self-mastery. And this reactive autonomy is intrinsically tied up with the notion that obligations are always and only created by voluntary actions. The conception of people as absolutely separate, which the boy develops both from his perception of difference from his mother and from his exaggeration of that difference to bolster his differentiation from her, results in a structure in which those separate individuals can resolve conflicts only at discrete and controlled points of contact. From this perspective, obligation necessarily exists only by an act of free will: if I am free above all else, I can be bound—that is, I can have connections and relationships—only by an act of my own free agency.

The concept of obligation as self-assumed depends on a conception of people as inherently separate and fragmented, and this resonates strongly with the conception the boy develops as a result of mother-only child rearing. The significant aspect of self-assumed obligation is that one has complete control over one's bonds or connections to others because one creates those bonds. Creation is a form of power in the sense of control and mastery. The act of consent preserves my right to autonomy as self-determination. It thus asserts my separate-ness and self-control even as I give up some of that control by creating an obligation. By establishing bonds through an act of free will, I maintain control over myself, self-determination, and freedom.

Indeed, obligation within the social contract can be seen as a rela-

38In this section I again use masculine terminology to indicate not males per se as much as a masculinized conception of the individual. Again, although consent theorists may assert that this model applies to women, and their exclusion is merely contingent, my point is that "the individual" is specifically masculine, and women are structurally excluded from the world of politics constructed by these theories.
tionship of exchange. Citizens exchange or trade absolute freedom for security according to Hobbes, for effective and economic freedom according to Locke, and for the moral freedom of self-mastery according to Rousseau. Man gives up some liberty to the government and agrees to obey it, and in return he receives the goods of a "well-ordered society," to borrow from Rawls.

But within this exchange relationship also lies a relationship of power and domination. One potentially puts oneself in another's power when one places oneself under an obligation by giving up part of one's freedom—one's essence—for something else. In a relationship of obligation, the obliged person must recognize the obliger in performing the obligation, while the obliger need only accept whatever deed is performed in fulfillment and need not recognize the actor. The dangers inherent in this kind of relationship—in this formalized connection—are what require the centrality of voluntarism as the legitimator of such a relationship. If obligation is viewed as a power relationship, then being placed in such a relationship without active control over one's placement would seem to make such a relationship doubly coercive. Voluntarism would seem to save the individual from nonreciprocated recognition—from connection itself—by giving the individual the power of control over that relationship. Furthermore, since it is an exchange relationship, each self recognizes the other only to the extent that he chooses, that is, to the extent that it is in his interest. Ostensibly this would seem to pose another solution to the "master's dilemma," for both parties, through the expression of their interests, control the degree and form of recognition of the other.

Yet the apparent reciprocity of this exchange is belied by the strict adherence to consent and voluntarism in the face of the fact that such consent is nonexistent for all but a select few. In social contract theories political obligation is not in fact self-assumed in the full sense by very many people, as critics since Hume have pointed out. Yet those who have not consented are nonetheless considered obligated to obey the law and government. It is rather widely accepted among modern theorists of obligation—even those who put forth variations on the consent theme—that the conditions for true consent are often absent from political society; that a large number of people are not given the opportunity to consent, or else "consent" by performing acts about which they have little choice; that even acts of dissent are interpreted as acts of consent; that unfair bargaining positions belie the freedom implicit in free choice. These "tacit consenters"—usually, as in Locke's theory, the nonlanded workers, the poor, not to mention white women and men and women of color—are subject to the political decisions of the "express consenters," the landed and wealthy
white men who have historically been the voters and holders of political office. The class of masters is thus recognized in every sense—political, social, economic—while the slaves are not only denied their political voice but are told that their enforced silence constitutes voluntary expression, and they are obligated thereby.

The Feminist Standpoint and Feminist Obligation

On the most obvious level, the definition of obligation as determined exclusively and unavoidably by consent conveniently denies the fact that women have historically been, and indeed in many ways still are, obligated to the state without consent. In this denial, however, lies a more significant factor, which is that women are and have historically been bound to an entire series of other obligations—child care most obviously—to which consent is not only unavailable but of questionable relevance. And it is in these obligations that we may find the beginnings of a feminist theory of obligation.

I earlier suggested a hypothetical case in which a woman is raped and becomes pregnant to highlight how women’s lives challenge the clear standard of consent in determining obligation. But less extreme examples provide similar challenges. Consider, for example, a married woman who conscientiously practices birth control but becomes pregnant anyway, and fears that having an abortion will drive her husband not only to beat her but perhaps even to abandon her and their three existing children. Are not her choices sufficiently unfairly limited to problematize any notion of obligation to care for this child within the standards of consent theory? Or even consider a couple who decide to have a child. Suppose the child is born with a severe mental or physical disability that will require full-time care well into adulthood. Do people “consent” to all contingencies when they decide to have a child? Indeed, most couples who decide to have a child often do not really know what they are consenting to. 39 Do women, and in more recent years men, who become the caretakers of such children really consent to such situations, or do they recognize obligations of care that are not explicitly chosen? These examples may appear to lie on a continuum of sorts—most people would probably concede that rape is by definition nonconsensual, while there would be substantial disagreement about whether a couple’s ignorance of the risks in childbearing excuses them from consent—but each of

39The idea for these alternatives was originally suggested to me by Christine Di Stefano.
these cases problematizes a liberal individualist notion of choice and consent.

And the fact that it is largely women who are subject to the obligations of care is significant to the claim that women’s options are generally restricted in comparison to men’s. Not only have men historically escaped responsibility for the actual raising of children, but socially tolerated (if not officially condoned) practices of paternal abandonment and spouse abuse locate such practices within a sexually oppressive context. Yet we cannot say that women have been enslaved against their will. Throughout history, women have participated to some extent voluntarily in many of the practices and activities socially required of them. Does love, for instance, negate the absence of choice and free will in any of these examples? Does it justify the fact that women’s participation in such sexually oppressive practices perpetuates their own political and social powerlessness? Do these factors negate the obligatory force of care? From gender psychology I derived the notion that women’s moral reasoning begins from premises of connection, responsibility, and response. In terms of a feminist standpoint approach, we can take these values as important premises for a feminist conception of obligation. This conception is very different from that of consent theory; for if relationship is the overriding feature of women’s lives, as these theories suggest, if it is the core of their being, the source of their vision, then connection is given and obligation is a presumption of fact.

This is particularly evident in Gilligan’s analysis of the Heinz dilemma. Amy assumes an obligation to do something for Heinz’s wife. The question for her is which action will be the most responsible, which action will best respond to the needs of everyone in the story. The girls in Johnstone’s porcupine dilemma do not entertain the notion that the porcupine can be forced out of the burrow; they assume that a relationship exists and try to find a solution that literally leaves nobody out in the cold. Women contemplating abortions in Gilligan’s study speak in terms not of freedom or rights but of responsibility and care. Obligation is assumed—to the father, one’s family, the potential child whether or not the pregnancy was intended, and finally oneself—and the dilemma becomes how to reconcile the conflicting obligations stemming from this complex web of relationships.

In these examples, women’s conceptualization of the substantive principle operates from their ontological framework, the givenness of connection and responsibility, just as obligation determined solely by consent derives from a masculinist ontology of individualism. The ontological perspective of enmeshment in a web of relationships leads to the moral conclusion that freedom, while central to the concept of a
person, is not the only or even the primary value. Indeed, it also suggests a different definition of freedom from that found in liberal obligation theory. A prior and perhaps more central concept would be obligation itself; and the examples I have given suggest that obligation, from a feminist standpoint, needs to be considered from a perspective that takes obligation as given.

Such a perspective requires a different conceptual and epistemological framework for understanding obligation and not just another definition within the existing framework. This understanding can be achieved only by developing a different approach to the question, and indeed perhaps different questions altogether. In consent theory, working from an assumption of separateness and freedom theorists seek to understand how isolated individuals can develop and sustain connections and still be separate, how they can engage in relationships and still remain free. Thus, the central approach involves asking how obligations arise, how they come into being. But if obligation is given, then it does not really make sense to ask how it can arise; from a feminist standpoint, obligation is the standard against which other things, such as the freedom to act as one wishes, are measured. Beginning with the self as separate, the rights model seeks to find areas and modes of connection that are safe, that can provide for needs without risking the loss of self. The responsibility model, beginning with connection, tries to determine how to provide space for the self without violating the moral imperative of care. This perspective would indicate that although freedom is certainly achievable in the context of human relationships, it must be achieved; it is not a given. Freedom is an entity that must be created, as an individual carves out space for herself. And since freedom is created by a stepping away from or out of obligations, freedom must also be justified. Relations cannot be severed by a "mere" desire or act of will. There must be, in a sense, "good reasons" for the desire not to fulfill obligations.

This does not mean such justification is not possible or even likely for a wide variety of cases. In a century that has seen Stalin, Hitler, and Jim Jones, the concept of a given obligation may make some uneasy about the "totalitarian menace." A second source of unease comes specifically from women's experience: nonconsensual obligations have been imposed on women all their lives. Isn't it time the yoke was shaken off? Why fall back into the mire of Kinder, Kuche, und Kirche? Should not women be able to choose their obligations, just as men have?

I certainly share these concerns. But at the same time, these objections miss the significance of the reformulation I am suggesting and the depth of the reorientation it requires. The purpose of a feminist
theory of obligation is not to bind us more tightly to the state or to relations but to enable us to see the reality that women's lives reveal: that men and women alike are often in fact nonconsensually bound more tightly than our public discourse admits. The ideology of consent allows us to believe that all obligations are created. We can thus deny the obligatory force of any relations that we do not create or do not wish to maintain. This "we," however, is largely masculine, for this belief exists, operates, and flourishes in a public realm separate from the private. In the private realm, by contrast, obligations are often not consensual at all for those who occupy it, that is, women. This creates a dichotomy; but more than that, it creates a dichotomy that is doubly oppressive for women, particularly in the modern era. The modern world ostensibly rejects the notion of natural inferiority. It ostensibly grants women equal rights, such as the vote, and takes the provision of these rights as evidence of equality. Women, it is claimed, can now choose all of their obligations, just as men do. Therefore, it is concluded with Hobbesian logic, women must in fact have chosen the situation they are now in. If they are in the private realm still, if they are responsible for child care, it is because they have chosen these roles.

Yet the reality is that such choice is systematically denied. The denial of political rights is often a de facto phenomenon, ignorance of which is made possible by the continued political ghettoization of women. And the continued assertion that women do in fact have equal rights in the face of the fact that these rights cannot be realized begs, rather than answers, the question of obligation. Rather than trying to create a situation in which women meet the criteria for obligation defined by consent, what theorists need to do is redefine obligation to articulate and accommodate women's experience as well as men's.

In using gender psychology to articulate differences between men's and women's experience, however, and in arguing for the basing of political theory on concrete experience, I do not wish simply (or simplistically) to model obligation on women's experience, or on child care in particular; nor am I arguing that political theory should model political obligations on the relationship between mother and child. Rather, the point is that women's experience, which is systematically eliminated from public ideologies such as political theory, can tell us important things about human life. Consent theory tells only part of the story of human experience; it presents, therefore, a biased and

\[40\] Nelson's (1984) work on the feminization of poverty is one of the more powerful illustrations of this ghettoization.
distorted picture of obligation. The answer is not to reject this part and adopt another (feminist) part but rather to fit together the various pieces: gender, class, race, history, geography, age, and so forth. And in order to do that, we have to be able to adopt a different framework. We cannot merely add on women’s experience to the dominant discourse because the two operate from different starting points and within different frameworks.

This is why grafting the feminine model onto the masculine distorts the feminine. The reverse strategy, grafting the masculine onto the feminine, may distort the masculine as well; but because of the dominance of the masculine model, because of the deep entrenchment of rights and consent in our consciousness, ideologies, and institutions, this is much less likely, and is even, perhaps, a necessary methodological stage. Much as an unbalanced scale dips out of alignment in the opposite direction when an equal weight is placed on the lighter side, feminism may appear to overemphasize the advantages of the care model in the attempt to achieve equality. As Hartsock says about the “bodily aspect” of the sexual division of labor, we may need to “grasp it overfirmly in an effort to keep it from evaporating altogether.”[^1] Yet considering my analysis in the context of patriarchy reveals how very carefully that equal weight is being placed on the scales by feminist theorists, precisely because of their sensitivity to the problems of hegemony. Because of this self-conscious, self-critical approach to theorizing, a feminist theoretical perspective is likely to afford a clearer vantage point from which the two models can be mixed together, if perhaps not in unbiased fashion, at least in a less biased one.

As standpoint epistemologists argue, a feminist standpoint can provide a perspective on social relations that is more “real” than the dominant ideology. Oppression does not provide the oppressed with pure objectivity by any means. But in oppression there lies the potential to see more objectively, as Harding puts it, to come closer to the truth by being able to see more sides of the question, and hence to get beyond the causes of oppression. As Joan Ringelheim’s work on the women of the Holocaust suggests, the experience of oppression can produce, in dialectical fashion, what one might call growth in both our relations with others and our understanding of ourselves. Part of my own previous argument has been that powerlessness and oppression have contributed to the development and articulation of the voice of care. Yet Ringelheim also points out that few people, herself included, would argue that oppression is desirable or good. I agree,

and would further argue that it would be incorrect to presuppose from these arguments that oppression is inevitable or necessary to human development. Rather, given that oppression does exist, it may tell us something about human capacities that we are able to learn and derive good things from oppressive experiences and conditions. It is not oppression per se that produces the good but human responses to it. We cannot say that these responses, and the valuable things humans have extracted from oppression, could not have been learned from other, nonoppressive experiences.  

Thus the purpose of reorienting our inquiry to the consideration of obligation as given is not merely to redefine it but to articulate a different perspective from which to view social and political relations. A difference in perspective changes the terms of the discourse. The questions we ask ourselves and others shift into another framework altogether. The problem of women’s obligation exists within the context of social institutions and thought that creates two different sets of values for men and women: men are naturally free, women are naturally obligated. Within this context, of course, feminists do not wish to maintain the givenness of obligation for women, for that would perpetuate their inferiority. The context needs to be changed. But it is not merely the case that feminists want men to be nonconsensually obligated as well, for that would give way to totalitarianism if it occurred within the current ideological and epistemological context (and if such a situation developed from the current state of affairs, it would be run by men; it would not be a “feminist” totalitarianism).

Rather, the point is to call attention to the fact that men already are nonconsensually obligated in many ways, but that our public “male-stream” ideology refuses to recognize this fact. Again, some would say that men themselves refuse to accept this fact, as opposed to blaming it on a generalized ideology; and one could cite the incidence of paternal abandonment and failure to pay child support to defend such a claim. But that would be a gross overgeneralization. I believe it is much more accurate to argue that our public ideology of consensual obligation creates a framework that men find easier to adopt and use. It is also more desirable to men than to women owing to circumstances they have not entirely chosen or consented to, given the gender differences in self-other orientation I outlined previously. So although it is true that individual men make the decision to abandon their families or refuse to pay child support, it is the context within which that decision is not only made but socially and politically upheld and approved that is of greater significance; for it is this context

4Ringelheim (1985).
that must be changed if gender equality is to be achieved. Without a change in the context, individual change is possible but perpetually crippled.

In denying men's nonconsensual obligations—or even the nonconsensual dimensions of their supposedly voluntary obligations—such a context obliterates the hope of a human theory of obligation that recognizes choice and givenness. Simultaneously, women should and do have the capacity to create many of their obligations but are often effectively denied the opportunity to do so. This denial similarly obliterates the hope of a human theory of obligation. We need to get beyond the current framework of the dominant discourse in order to begin to make sense of the claim that obligations should be considered as given. Within the existing framework such a construction not only does not make sense but is indeed nightmarish.

This different conceptualization of obligation can be achieved only if we ask different questions. Rather than asking, How does an obligation arise? a feminist concept of obligation might need to ask, Is there a legitimate justification for not fulfilling this obligation? In the rights conception, the assumption of freedom demands an explanation of any curtailment of that freedom such as obligations impose. In the care conception, such a demand does not make sense because it violates the imperative of responsibility; the assumption of obligation demands an explanation for nonfulfillment. This different orientation requires inquiry into the contextual conditions surrounding an obligation and an obligated person so we might understand the content of an obligation as well as possible justifications for not fulfilling it. Such an inquiry would articulate not a justification for restraint of action but the conflicting pressures that lead to a particular action as the fulfillment of an obligation or that provide a possible reason for not fulfilling it. This approach can in many ways be seen as interested more in what particular obligations consist of rather than in how they came to be. It also requires an entirely different approach to theory in redefining what the goals of a theory should be, how a theorist should attempt to reach those goals, and what the criteria are for judging success in reaching those goals. The issues of structural sexism indicate that a fundamental rethinking of obligation is in order. A feminist conception of obligation thus entails not just a new definition or formulation but an entire reorientation of what is meant by a theory of obligation.

The foregoing analysis reveals liberal obligation theory to contain many elements that link it epistemologically and structurally to a masculinist conception and representation of the world. I have attempted
to show that the problem of political obligation really constitutes a set of problems that result from gender bias. This bias exists not only in the values that theories of political obligation endorse and promote but also in the frameworks within which the theories are created. I have argued that the tension between individualism and community found in original social contract theory and its modern revisions originates in part in an ontology and an epistemology that reflect specifically masculinist concerns and perspectives. The analysis reveals that women's exclusion from the public realm of politics, and indeed from political theory in general, is not just the historical, temporal, and contingent result of gender-biased views of individual theorists. It is not merely the case that women were absentmindedly forgotten, that theorists simply did not think of them when picturing the public. It is not merely the case that theorists failed to carry through to its logical end the Enlightenment attack on the historical legacy of patriarchy, that they simply did not see far enough. It is not merely the case that theorists were confused by an ideology of nature that seemed to support but actually contradicted the principles of freedom they sought to expound. It is not merely the case that certain theorists were overtly sexist and sought actively to disempower women for their own personal reasons. All of these things are true, but they do not go far enough to give an adequate account of the treatment, ignorance, and exclusion of women from political theory. They take for granted and fail to question the very genesis of the key concepts employed by this genre of theory. The ways in which consent, freedom, choice, individual, society, authority, and obligation are defined, applied, and utilized in liberal obligation theory are themselves important loci of the structural and epistemological gender bias of liberal political theory. This exclusion extends well beyond either the choices or limitations of any individual theorist to the epistemological structure within which these theories of obligation, and their construction of the political, were created and are maintained.

The negative dimension of feminist theorizing utilized in the present chapter—critique, analysis, deconstruction—is thus exceedingly powerful in unmasking the gendered dimensions of constructs and concepts that have long been accepted as completely devoid of gender content. Feminist methods can thus help political theory understand itself more profoundly and can help theorists conduct the theoretical enterprise in a more self-conscious and self-critical, and hence intellectually responsible and productive, manner. It contributes to the development of theories that are more consistent with the principles (we think) we wish to espouse, and in particular for modern theory, which takes democratic ends and means as constitutive underpinnings of almost all of its conceptual and intellectual categories,
it can create theories and epistemological frameworks that are more egalitarian, inclusive, democratic.

This leads to the constructive side of feminist theory. A feminist epistemology is vital not only to the feminist analysis of dominant "malestream" theories but to the creation of feminist alternatives as well. I have argued that a feminist standpoint suggests that obligation should be considered the starting point for understanding political institutions and social relations. The analysis so far indicates that a feminist theory of obligation will require some thoroughgoing re-conceptualizations of the standard categories of analysis. It suggests that feminist theory must engage in the articulation of a new epistemology and ideological framework, that it will not succeed as long as it continues to operate solely within the dominant discourse. In order to develop feminist understandings of substantive political concepts such as justice, freedom, and obligation, theorists must redesign the existing framework itself.

In particular, I have suggested that a feminist theory of obligation would have to begin by considering obligation as a given. But in order to make sense of this idea, we must understand it from the perspective of feminist standpoints. It will not make sense to consider this theoretical construction from the standpoint of existing ideology any more than it is possible to understand women's experience fully from the dominant masculinist perspective. The problem of cross-translation means that we must engage in a certain degree of philosophical schizophrenia, moving back and forth between two ostensibly opposed worlds. I have shown here, however, that, although they are very different—and even fundamentally so—in fact they are not opposed; each model has something to offer a human theory of obligation which incorporates the values of connection and separation, which enables us to theorize self-in-relationship to the level of political community.

This enterprise has its dangers. At the very least, the problem of cross-translation can create difficulties in communicating the depth of the reorientation that feminist theory requires. This in turn can result in the continued marginalization of feminist theory because of its supposed incomprehensibility in terms of the dominant discourse. The foregoing analysis, however, by making clear the character of this difficulty, can help tackle the problem of how to approach and develop feminist theories of concepts such as obligation. It points the way to the articulation of this alternative epistemological framework through the existing one. It thus does more than straddle these two worlds of political theory and feminist theory; it begins the process of bringing them together.

Yet the problem of cross-translation once again invokes postmod-
ern challenges, which threaten to undermine from the start the fundamental project of positive feminist theory building. Indeed, postmodernists hold that feminism should be devoted to ending this kind of positive theorizing altogether. Particularly through the invocation of Foucault, feminist postmodernism decrees the attempt to replace an old sexist hegemony with a new hegemony that may well still be racist, ageist, speciesist, or even sexist in a different way. As Julia Kristeva claims, the only task that feminism can face with a clear conscience that it is not buying into the mind set of the ruling intellectual class, gender, race, and so forth is the negative method of deconstruction. "If women have a role to play . . . it is only in assuming a negative function: reject everything finite, definite, structural, loaded with meaning, in the existing state of society." In keeping with the deconstructionist's imagery Kristeva argues, "A feminist practice can only be . . . at odds with what already exists so that we may say 'that's not it' and 'that's still not it.'"43 It can only be the intellectual watchdog, so to speak, of theory.

Yet politically, if not theoretically, this view is in many ways anti-feminist; for postmodern strategies cannot in themselves give rise to any alternate vision of politics that empowers the heretofore excluded, such as women, people of color, the poor, the very young and old, animals. Although there are methodological advantages to be gained from a post-structuralist approach to theory, I am also somewhat suspicious of its claims from a feminist point of view. As Hartsock asks:

Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic? Just when we are forming our own theories about the world, uncertainty emerges about whether the world can be theorized. Just when we are talking about the changes we want, ideas of progress and the possibility of systematically and rationally organizing human society become dubious and suspect. And why is it only now that critiques are made of the will to power inherent in the effort to create theory?44

On the one hand, the attempt to build theory based on feminist analyses such as the foregoing is to run the risk of creating new hegemonies, new power structures through the creation of new forms of knowledge, as Foucault held. On the other hand, it is a risk that must be taken. I realize that this is a controversial and problematic

44Hartsock (1990), pp. 163–64.
view. Why should feminists accept the standard of what political theory is supposed to be and do if that theory has been premised on women’s epistemological exclusion? This question may best be addressed by analogy. After women’s claims of the 1970s to equal rights and opportunities to succeed at traditionally male professions, many women found that the standard (classist and racist) definitions of success—say, working a seventy-hour week to become a partner in a law firm—are also sexist. That is, they put a double burden on women because such definitions are premised on an economic and social model of the family in which one member is responsible for precisely those areas of life that the business world by definition excludes. What has made the seventy-hour professional work week possible is that such workers have generally had wives, people who did not work outside the home, who made that home possible by raising children, cooking, cleaning, hostessing (particularly for the partners), and providing for affective life in general.

So on the contingent level, we find that women are still burdened unequally because they are held responsible for domestic obligations. Thus, if men shared more equally in child rearing and household work, women would not suffer from the “double day.” On the structural level, however, such sharing is still not enough. Much as John Stuart Mill suggested the “exceptional woman” had to do if she was to combine the career of wife and mother with work outside the home,45 these white, middle-class working parents must rely on a new “ghetto” of workers in child care and housekeeping, often third world immigrant women who are not paid for their work nearly as well as the working parent. By refusing to recognize child rearing and housework as socially valuable, by continuing to demand the seventy-hour work week, the social structure of success makes the achievement of affective life either exploitive or impossible. Furthermore, existing definitions have denied the ways in which professions were effectively closed off to large segments of the population—particularly women of color—whose family life did not necessarily conform to the white, middle-class model. The subject of success thus retains its privileged gender, race, and class. On this view, the problems of gender inequality lie not with women per se but with the socioeconomic model within which they seek both to work and to maintain their personal lives. The structural barriers to gender equality are built into the system. The difficulty of introducing into the workplace such innovations as on-site child care, job sharing, and flextime, the pervasiveness of pay and promotion differentials, and

45Mill, On the Subjection of Women.
the speed with which the "mommy track" mentality was embraced by
the business community* all suggest that the problem is not how to
get women to achieve success by the old standards but how to change
the meaning of success itself.

Perhaps political theorists need to take a lesson from these experi-
ences. Just as feminists are saying not that women should stay out of
the workplace but rather should change it, so I maintain that feminist
theorists need to engage in positive theory building, but in the pro-
cess they must change the enterprise to allow for new kinds of theory
and new approaches to it. Postmodernists effectively claim that posi-
tive theory building is inherently corrupting and should be avoided
altogether. I contend rather that through feminists' participation in
these structures and practices of political theory, the structures and
practices themselves are being not merely reformed but profoundly
transformed. Their political concerns lead feminists to analyze and
deconstruct differently from nonfeminists. Certainly feminists are more
eager to deconstruct in the first place than are liberal theorists. But
more than that, they need to be more concerned with building new
structures out of deconstructed material than postmodernism allows.
This does not mean that feminism provides the final word on obliga-
tion, that its theory is airtight, perfect, comprehensive, exclusive, or
even "true." Rather, it provides a step toward a new theoretical fu-
ture, one in which women, with all the subdivisions that postmod-
ernism insists on, can tell their stories.

I largely defer my disagreements with postmodernism until my af-
terword, but I make these comments here to foreshadow my concerns
about both theory building and postmodernism, and simultaneously
because the theory that I develop in the next chapter demonstrates
some affinity with postmodern methods and ideas, even as it seems
to keep one foot planted, if somewhat ambivalently, in post-Enlighten-
ment modernism. This "principled ambivalence," or position in
between modernism and postmodernism, I argue, is an important
strategy for feminism; but, as will become apparent, it also has its
costs. Thus, aware of the dangers of the enterprise I undertake, with
repeated self-conscious and self-critical warnings that I am not claim-
ing to have a true, full-blown feminist theory of obligation, that I
doubt that "one" even exists, I shall plunge headlong into the dan-
gerous abyss of answering the, as Di Stefano points out, often hos-
tile question, Can you do any better? Can feminist theory offer us
something in place of what it has just torn down?

*Harding (1991) uses this phrase.