
The central themes of this exciting, erudite, and brilliantly-written book are well captured in the following quotation:

Feminism insists that 'value' is not an exclusively economic category, but an ethical, affective, and genetic one. It...presents and represents a fundamentally different experience of the relation of people and nature than that posed by male dualism. It insists, further, that the principle of integration can form the basis for a political praxis which is rational, humane and far more progressive than any genderically one-sided praxis...can ever be. (p. 166)

The book stands in its own right as one cogent and impressive answer to the frequently (and often antagonistically) posed question: “But what would it be like to do female philosophy?” It might well be like this: bringing philosophical thought into close contact with the actuality of human experience; showing that questions about the principles of knowing, doing, and participating in human institutions are questions that engage whole persons in all aspects of their lives (i.e. not just the intellectual aspect) —and that the answers to these questions matter profoundly; pointing up the limitations of pure intellect separated from the world of action and affectivity. Yet in so doing, as O'Brien amply demonstrates, it need sacrifice none of the standards of rigorous argument and intellectual integrity in which the best of philosophers in general, and political philosophers in particular, have long taken pride. Such standards are preserved and importantly enriched in O'Brien’s work: they are neither diluted nor compromised.

In O'Brien’s view, it is the recognition of its close connection with the reproductive process which requires us to see value as “ethical, affective and genetic,” rather than purely economic. Indeed, reproductive labour stands as the a priori condition for the existence of value per se. Without it — i.e. without the human beings who are its products — there could be no value, economic, social, aesthetic, or other, O’Brien argues. Nonetheless, in the history of political thought (a domain in which she moves with the ease of an expert), she points out that biological reproduction is usually taken for granted, and so passed over in silence. This is the case, for example, in Marxist thought, where “the labour of reproduction is excluded from analysis, and children seem to appear spontaneously or perhaps magically” (p. 175).

On the rare occasions when reproduction is considered worthy of philosophical attention, on the other hand, the purpose of such consideration may be simply to display the philosopher’s contempt for the process in the name of 'higher' value (as when Diotima instructs Socrates on the nature of Eros — p. 130-1); or to assert, as Hannah Arendt does, that the grounds of worthwhile, human public activity “are ontological rather than biological” (p. 100). The vita activa, as Arendt sees it, is only genuinely possible for man (in the non-generic sense) when he succeeds in performing his political activities “in a public realm uncontaminated by life process” (p. 101). And de Beauvoir’s analysis of reproduction appears to yield the conclusion that "parturition is non-creative labour, [and] that the product, the human child, has no value” (p. 75, emphasis in original). This is a curious way indeed, O’Brien maintains, to view the process which has as its product a child who “has a human value simply by virtue of being human, of growing and maturing in all the wonder of nature’s most stunning performance” (p. 59).

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In fact, she holds that it is not just a curious way; it is deeply pernicious both in itself and in its implications. For in this devaluation of reproduction, O’Brien sees the source of a fundamental human alienation. Hence, the politics
of reproduction has as its primary aim the over­
coming of this alienation, the integration of the
alienated.

But in order properly to found a political pro­
gramme, it is first necessary to understand the
origins of the alienation. O'Brien sees these to be
in the dualisms which permeate "male-stream
thought": dualisms of mind and body, object
and subject, theory and practice, reason and
emotion, spirit and matter, public and private,
universal and particular. These dualisms are not
merely descriptive of the structures of human
existence. They carry with them normative impli­
cations such that the second of each pair stands
for a characteristic of lesser value, for the dark
and dangerous elements which one must strive
to overcome if one would be a good member of
society. And, throughout the history of Western
thought, the female is, in each case, associated
with the lesser of the two characteristics: with the
bodily, the subjective, the emotional, the mate­
rial, the particular, the (unthinkingly) practical,
and the private. The productive/reproductive
dichotomy reflects this evaluative pattern in
such a way that only productive (male) labour is
considered to be of worth.

Viewed still more fundamentally, these dual­
isms have their source in a deep masculine
unease about historical continuity, O'Brien main­
tains. The process of reproduction, by its very
nature, imposes a temporal gap between sexual­
ity and parturition, for men. They are separated
from all stages of the process except copulation:
here the whole of human history is shot
through with masculine efforts to establish con­
tinuity, to forge this broken link, to resolve male
alienation and feelings of separation from natu­
ral process. This manifests itself in the elabora­
tion of complex institutions which provide pub­
clic structures for the appropriation of children—
and hence of the labour (woman's) that goes into
their creation. Central among these are marriage
and family structures, structures of inheritance,
and of patriarchal domination. With these goes
the creation of the private realm to which
woman is relegated: in part to ensure her iso­
lation from other men. For if she has no associ­
tion with other men, 'her' man need not fear that
his children may not be his own. Continuity will
be easier to maintain.

Consigned to the private realm, woman is
rendered invisible not only to other men, but
also to other women, from whom she might (and
now, in the upsurge of feminist thinking, does)
gather sustenance, both moral and spiritual.
Thus removed from the public realm, she is
almost invisible to herself; for the value of her
labour, both productive and reproductive, is so
low as to be virtually imperceptible. And through
this deeply divisive public/private dualism, the
other above-mentioned dualisms are perpetu­
ated. Man is universal, spiritual, theoretical,
public, and moral; woman is, in each case,
opposite — and Other. Her very integration
with continuity and history is a dark and myster­
ious threat which must be suppressed, and
ultimately denied. "For men, sexuality is the
basis of a free appropriation right, a power over
women and children. ...The social relations of
reproduction are relations of dominance pre­
cisely because at the heart of the doctrine of
potency lies the intransigent impotency of uncer­
tainty, an impotency which colours and contin­
uously brutalizes the social and political rela­
tions in which it is expressed" (p. 191).

O'Brien contends that we are not yet ready to
spell out in full what kind of social theory must
be developed to set these wrongs to right. But she
sees in the feminist perspective a clearer vision,
governed by the ideal of a praxis wherein there is
a unity between knowing and doing, thinking
and acting. Such a praxis bears the potential to
mediate dialectically between these long-standing
dualistic modes of thinking and being, and thus
to move toward a progressive integration of
human beings both within themselves, and with
one another. "Female reproductive conscious­
ness...transcends the isolation of women in their
domestic prisons; women grasp the reality of a universal consciousness, the sisterhood of which we already have primitive but profound adumbrations” (p. 208).

The analysis of the problems is a compelling one, and the indications of where we might look for solutions are, on the whole, both persuasive and appealing. I remain troubled by only one problem; but it is, I think, a significant one. I am not persuaded that reproductive labour can bear the full weight of female self-realization. Too much seems to be excluded from its scope. The genuine and valuable creativity, and the need for self-esteem, of the women who do not, whether by choice or by chance, ever produce children, is difficult to place within this domain where reproductive labour is the primary creator of value. So, too, is the life and work of women both before and after (and often also during, but apart from) their child-nurturing activities. In order to have a full integration of persons into a world of cooperative human interaction, we must avoid thinking in terms which make the childless perceive themselves as ‘other.’ It would be an unhappy solution which would replace old dualisms with new ones: dualisms whose evaluative implications would lead to the devaluation of lives in which reproductive labour has no place.

O’Brien might well respond that we should not strive to universalize; that we are only too familiar with the results of a prolonged struggle to do just that. Piecemeal solutions may be the best we can offer: optimally, they will ultimately converge to form a whole. But if we are not to universalize, we must still make space for those who stand outside the central focus of our new evaluative structures. Their numbers are increasing as effective contraception makes reproductive labour into a matter of genuine, rational choice. We must allow that it can be a good choice, either way.

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In A Working Majority, Pat and Hugh Armstrong’s goal is to let women speak for themselves about their working lives. The result is a useful, occasionally depressing, but consistently interesting antidote to the statistical analyses which have so frequently represented women’s labour force participation. The authors, working with five researchers, interviewed 65 women who held a wide variety of jobs in five provinces. The jobs these women work are ‘women’s jobs’—the ‘bad’ jobs such as waiting, bank clerking, factory work and so forth and not the prestigious, professional careers that a much publicized minority of women have managed to attain. Although the authors briefly review the general features of women’s labour force participation in Canada, it is these interviews (which are extensively excerpted throughout the book) which are used to examine and illustrate the structure of women’s work and the nature of the work process.

The resulting book is an extremely comprehensive discussion of a wide variety of work-related issues: hours, unions, job tenure, unemployment, relations with fellow workers, the impact of technology, health hazards, sexual harassment, etc. In each instance, women workers relate their personal experiences. Not only are the issues brought into the realm of ‘real life’, but also important details are highlighted. For example, in the section, “Unemployment Insurance: ‘You have to fight for every cent you get’”, women discuss the frustration and humiliation of struggling to maintain their benefits qualification. Under “Health Hazards: ‘The whole place is dangerous’”, women talk about psychological as well as physical hazards; for example, the single