



Rational Woman: A Feminist Critique of Dichotomy 2nd edition

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This book, revised so as to be up to the minute, has tightly linked political and intellectual agendas. Politically, Prokhovnik urges the maintenance of gender visibility through women's politics and feminism, made possible through an intellectual project of conceptual and issue-related deconstruction of the hierarchical binaries of both gender and sex. Impressively, the deconstruction proceeds through an engagement with mainstream/malestream logic, the philosophy of mind and social theory. The overall goal is 'a situation in which the hierarchically valued significance of "men" and "women" is dissipated' (p. 163).

Along the way, Prokhovnik dialogues in an intense and stimulating way with a very large number, and a very wide range, of contrary or half-way views, which will be familiar to most readers, or if not, her accounts will make a good introduction. Conceptually, the argument, adumbrated in the works of Genevieve Lloyd, Elizabeth Grosz and Moira Gatens (among others), is that the man/woman and (reproductive) heterosexuality/(nonreproductive) homosexuality boundaries, deployed in theoretical and everyday concepts of sex and gender (themselves increasingly confused and contradictory), are a crucial support for dichotomous thinking in general. Prokhovnik identifies common habits of 'reasoning' involving opposition, hierarchy, exclusivity and transcendence. Building on the work of the late Gillian Rose (and treading very lightly around Hegel), she develops a concept of relational thinking that recommends itself as positive, constructive and practical. As if this weren't a large enough project, she then takes on the relation between emotion and reason, balancing feminist and malestream work with great political skill, and arguing that emotions are constitutive within reason and an important register of the integration of mind as part of body. Or to put it the other way, Prokhovnik urges the rejection of mind/body dualisms, a notable naturalization of which is the view that men possess and represent mind and rationality, whereas women possess and represent emotion and body and are therefore irrational. In short, the book is well written to convince hardcore philosophers (male) that feminism and woman are crucial categories in considering the nature of human thought and action at the most abstract levels, thus making new conceptions of practicalities in thought and action seem logical and possible.



There are further subtleties of engagement with ‘second wave’ feminist theory and practice, with the men’s studies and masculinities literature, with the gay male and lesbian literatures, with queer theory and theorizations of sexuality ... so it is hard to find anything that is missed out. The tone is appreciative and constructive, rather than hectoring and self-righteous, yet one is left in no doubt how Prokhovnik’s thesis aligns with other writers. However, I would have liked more direct discussion of how non-dichotomous, relational thinking relates to linguistic and postmodern philosophies, for example, post-Wittgensteinian positions such as that of Richard Rorty (absent from the bibliography). And I’m sure that more direct engagement with the men’s studies literature would have produced some very interesting observations on men’s inability to sustain anything like the emotionless rationality supposedly naturalized within them and which they supposedly represent. As a Nietzschean strategy of noticing, denying and forgetting, while maintaining an evident contradiction, it really is first-rate. ‘Masculinity-watching’ is rightly appearing as part of the feminist project (I am thinking of recent remarks by Cynthia Enloe), and I would urge Prokhovnik and others to see what the feminist lens will reveal, when turned in that direction.

Prokhovnik’s version of a new ‘third wave’ of feminism will provoke controversy, not least for its forthright and focused judgement that the ‘second wave’ is history and for her trenchant summary and defence of younger women’s ‘problems’ with it (pp. 173–180). While guarding herself against any identification with the backlash literature, Prokhovnik argues that ‘second wave’ writers are still rooted in the mind/body dichotomy and unsustainable attempts to stay within the sex/gender binary (pp. 180–185). ‘Third wave’ feminism would continue to promote gender visibility so as to engage with practical struggles for equality in order to shift the current dichotomously organized gender order in the right direction with respect to (purported) binary differences of sex and sexuality (pp. 185–190). Beyond that Prokhovnik envisages a corporeal subjectivity ‘when the integral interdependence of mind, body and emotion within all persons ... is recognised in particular persons in the form of differences’, recognizing that diversity is expressed non-dichotomously (p. 190).

It is one thing to state a bold new conception and to differentiate it from what has gone on before. It is another to illustrate it, perhaps novelistically, so that the reconstitution of language and life becomes thinkable in practice. Given that current forms of life are somewhat self-deconstructing, here and there, it would be interesting, and a further persuasive strategy, for Prokhovnik to look closely at the language, relations and politics of reproductive technologies, for example, through which new diversities (and evident denaturalization) reach the courts and the legislature. Other examples concern the ‘gay marriage’ and ‘civil partnership’ proposals, laws and judgements.



Almost anything in the literatures and practices relating to adoption and ‘sex-change’ is fruitful ground for diversity studies, precisely because so many hierarchical and dichotomous presumptions of ‘nature’ are so difficult to state precisely and consistently, so variously conceptualized, so strongly defended and so poorly realized in practice.

Having noted that ‘equality feminists’ lack ‘a comprehensive and theoretically grounded discussion of the meaning of gender equality’, so limiting the value of their research, Prokhovnik perhaps owes us some more practical and on-the-ground discussion of her first stage of ‘gender visibility’, as well as her second stage, when diversity rules. Her view of the latter order seems to lack organizing principles of — if not equality, then justice. Once we are non-dichotomously and relationally diverse, where then does anyone draw a line? It may be that there are power dichotomies that must be in place, and must be enforced in practice, in defence of certain ends (and excluding others). Prokhovnik mentions unequal power relations in connection with queer theory, noting that its concept of transgression is (usually) limited by taboos, such as that on sex between children and adults (p. 150). But the conceptualization of unequal power relations, and the politics of rearranging or transcending these, gets little attention otherwise.

If Prokhovnik’s views are truly going to move us beyond the ‘strategic essentialisms’ that deconstructive diversities have provoked, then we are going to need more details about how one maintains a two-stage political outlook. This is not a new problem, for feminists or for anyone else, and discussion alone never resolves it. I am sure that if Prokhovnik turned her energies in this way, though, her interpretation of the world would definitely help to change it.

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