

## CHAPTER ONE

# READING PHILOSOPHY AS A WOMAN

### SUSANNA AND THE ELDERS

**S**usanna was the wife of Joakim of Babylon. She was renowned for her great beauty. This beautiful wife had righteous parents who taught her to fear the Lord.

As Joakim was both very rich and the most honored of all men in Babylon, his house was a meeting place. Among his many guests were two Elders that the people had appointed as judges to govern them. Because of their frequent visits, the Elders often saw Susanna walking in the garden of her husband; they began to desire her.

Confessing their lust to one another, the Elders conspired to entrap her by hiding in the garden and waiting until Susanna was alone. Emerging from the house wishing to bathe, Susanna sent her maids indoors to fetch ointments. The moment she was alone, the two Elders sprang out of their hiding place and demanded that she lie with them. They threatened that if she refused, they would denounce her publicly, claiming to have caught her in the arms of a young man, a charge punishable by death. "Susanna sighed deeply, and said, 'I am hemmed in on every side. For if I do this thing, it is death for me: and if I do not, I shall not escape your hands. I choose not to do it and to fall into your hands, rather than to sin in the sight of the Lord.'"<sup>1</sup> And Susanna cried out loudly, preventing the rape.

The Elders testified against Susanna. The assembly believed them because they were Elders of the people and judges. Susanna was condemned to death. Susanna cried out, "These men have borne false witness against me. And now I am to die! Yet I have done none of the things that they have wickedly invented against me!"<sup>2</sup>

She was saved at the last minute by Daniel, who demanded a new trial. By separating the Elders and interrogating them individually, he received conflicting stories, thereby proving that the Elders bore false witness against Susanna. The Elders were put to death for their wickedness. All the people rejoiced. We are told that Joakim and all of Susanna's kindred praised God

for their daughter "because nothing shameful was found in her."<sup>3</sup> We are told that from that day onward Daniel had a great reputation among the people.\*



A woman reading philosophy† must decide where to place herself. When the philosopher speaks of the nature of man, informs us of the rationality of man, provides us with the rules a man must follow in order to act morally, does the woman include herself within the referent of the term "man"? Often, without thinking about it, we assume that "man" is used with its gender-neutral meaning and read ourself into the text. But the doubt persists. The word carries both meanings regardless of the philosopher's intention and thus carries our exclusion alongside our inclusion.

Because of the ambiguity of the term "man," the texts of philosophy are experienced differently by women than they are by men. Take the following passage from Hegel:

A man actualizes himself only in becoming something definite, i.e. something specifically particularized; this means . . . to make oneself a member of one of the moments of civil society by one's own act, through one's energy, industry, and skill, to maintain oneself in this position, and to fend for oneself only through this process of mediating oneself with the universal, while in this way gaining recognition both in one's own eyes and in the eyes of others.‡

For a man reading this text, this statement asserts the equation of maleness with humanity. Whether or not he agrees with Hegel's view, in reading this passage he experiences his own identity with the universal, that is, with the paradigmatic human, simply because he is male. The woman reading this text is left with the question of her inclusion. Is she included because she is human? Or excluded because she is female?

\* The frontispiece and the cover are both depictions of the story of Susanna and the Elders.

† When speaking of philosophy in this chapter, I am referring to canonical Western philosophy. Although the academy is beginning to expand its offerings beyond the list of "great philosophers" taught in the typical history of philosophy course, the majority of classes and readings remain focused on this canon.

‡ *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 207. My particular expression of the problem of reading Hegel's text is in part due to Knox's translation. This passage opens with "*Der Mensch*" ("A human"), not "*Ein Mann*" ("A man"). It is Knox who renders it into English as "A man. . . ." Still, as I will argue in detail in Chapter Five, Hegel excludes woman from such actualization. So even though Hegel used the supposedly gender-neutral "*Der Mensch*," his usage of the term was nevertheless gender-marked.

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But I have stated the problem too simply. Although, as I will illustrate in Chapter Five, when Hegel here refers to "a man" he does in fact exclude women, his referent also excludes non-European men. Race, as well as class, is often a factor in exclusion. Although I will focus in this book upon the ways in which a woman's gender affects the issue of her exclusion from the texts of philosophy, it is also imperative to be aware of issues of race and class. Issues of exclusion are often structured differently for race and class than for gender. Hegel's exclusion of non-European men from the above passage has a form different than that of his exclusion of non-European and European women. He saw the exclusion of non-European men as a contingent fact of history. That is, according to Hegel, non-European men had not yet evolved to the point where they were capable of actualizing themselves. But he did not deny their inherent capacity for such actualization. The difference of gender is significant, for in Hegel's account, all women, regardless of race or class, would never be capable of such actualization. Thus women's exclusion is absolute. Nevertheless, issues of gender, race, and class are interrelated in that philosophical and scientific justifications for the superiority of one group over another, justifications which have varied significantly over the centuries, have been influenced by and have in turn reinforced racist and classist biases, as well as sexist biases.<sup>4</sup> Hence, my analysis of gender exclusion would be enriched by studying it alongside concomitant examinations of exclusions based on race or class within the history of philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

The problems of the woman reading philosophy intensify when the talk turns to woman. She has no doubt that she is the subject of the discourse, but she cannot recognize herself in what she reads. The woman reading Aristotle cannot identify with Aristotle's description of woman, for his construction of woman's nature entails that she is unable to undertake the very thing in which she is engaged—philosophy. The woman reading Hegel in order to identify the nature of the good state cannot locate herself in the text as woman, for he tells her that woman is unable to achieve awareness of the universality of the state. The woman searching for a moral philosophy in reading Kant cannot internalize what he says about woman, for to do so would mean that she would have to accept that she is precluded from moral agency and should therefore cease her investigation.\*

The woman reading philosophy soon finds that she is presented as "Other" rather than as "Subject" in the texts of the philosophers. Consider the following passage from Rousseau:

Woman, who is weak and who sees nothing outside the house, estimates and judges the forces she can put to work to make up for her weakness, and those forces are

\* My supports for these claims are to be found in Chapters Two, Five, and Four respectively.

men's passions. Her science of mechanics is more powerful than ours: all her levers unsettle the human heart. She must have the art to make us want to do everything which her sex cannot do by itself and which is necessary or agreeable to it.<sup>6</sup>

It is to a man, albeit a man of the white European upper class, that Rousseau addresses this passage. For the man who reads this text, whether or not he agrees with Rousseau, whether or not the above passage represents his experience, the discourse constructs him as Subject. It is he to whom Rousseau speaks. The woman reading the text realizes immediately that she is the Object of the discourse; she is presented as Other. She is being talked about, but is not addressed. The woman reading Rousseau finds herself confronted by a paradox. She is, on the one hand, being defined as Other; on the other hand, she is invited to identify herself as male, yet all the while being told that to be male is to be not female.

The woman reading philosophy thus finds herself alienated from the text. To insert herself into the text—to insist that she is capable of rational thought, to perceive herself as a moral agent, to believe that she too can understand and participate in the workings of the state—is to believe that she can act “like a man,” for, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters, each of these abilities is defined within philosophy as “male.” At times, the option of acting “like a man” may seem acceptable to the woman reading philosophy. We attempt to suppress our knowledge that we are being defined as Other, and we say to ourselves, “Women, after all, are capable of anything men are.” But this “solution” often only adds to our alienation. As we attempt to force ourselves into the categories so defined, many of us discover that these categories omit qualities and abilities we value, qualities and abilities defined as “feminine”—emotion, empathy, connectedness—qualities and abilities which are a part of our conception of ourselves as women and as human which we do not believe should be rejected. In other words, we discover that philosophy omits the experiences of being women.

For the woman reading philosophy, this alienation can be more or less apparent. It often manifests itself in an amorphous discomfort we experience while reading the text, something difficult to express, an open-ended disquiet with no obvious source. As a woman reading philosophy, I experienced this unease for years. The writing of this book has been my journey to uncover the source of my discomfort. I believe that in order to reveal the basis of women's alienation from the texts of philosophy, we must read “as a woman.”

Reading as a woman involves a particular focus of attention. This focus includes an examination of the ways in which the conception of woman is being constructed by the text. What, for example, are we told, either explicitly or implicitly, about woman's nature? And what of woman's abilities? Are

there certain physical or mental pursuits that women are seen as more capable of than others? For what types of roles are women depicted as suited? How do these compare to the roles perceived as suitable for men? Reading as a woman also requires attention to the construction of the feminine. That is, how do traits and characteristics perceived as feminine compare in treatment to those defined as masculine? What role do such traits play within activities and faculties a philosopher sees as central to being human?

Reading in this way, with this focus of attention, reveals the ways in which philosophers' culturally inherited beliefs about women and the feminine affect their theories. We very quickly discover that the discourses of philosophy are not gender-neutral. Questions like those listed above provide a framework for exposing the ways in which gender assumptions are imbedded within philosophical texts.

Many will be tempted to object that a philosopher's gender biases, although perhaps historically interesting, are not philosophically significant. Such individuals might be willing to admit that philosophers would be influenced by the sexist attitudes of their culture and historical period and would, in descriptions of woman's nature and role, reproduce these biases. But these individuals would object that although we might be moved to castigate a philosopher for his lack of enlightenment on this point, we must allow that he was, after all, a man of his times.\* What remains implicit in this objection is the belief that a philosopher's gender biases, although perhaps reprehensible, are independent of his larger theoretical framework.

It is this hidden assumption, that a philosopher's gender biases are irrelevant to his philosophical system, that is undermined by the reading strategy that I propose. Focusing attention on the subject of woman exposes the fact that philosophers have inscribed gender biases on the central categories of their theories—what it is to be human, to be rational, to be moral; to be a political agent. Reading as a woman we discover that we cannot treat the philosophical narrative as offering a universal perspective. Philosophers, like other theorists, privilege some experiences and ways of seeing over others.

The ability to read as a woman as I am defining it is a strategy open to women and men alike. It is a form of critical reading with an emphasis on gender issues. To illustrate this reading strategy, let us return to the story of Susanna. The story is typically read as exemplifying the theme of salvation or deliverance: Susanna, falsely accused by evil men, is saved at the last minute by Daniel, the agent of God. The story is interpreted as an assurance that those, like Susanna, who have faith in God will ultimately be protected

\* Since my discussion is limited to canonical philosophers, the masculine pronoun is appropriate.

from harm. We perceive the evilness of the Elders in the lust of their gaze and in their acts of deceit, and we admire Daniel for his wisdom and shrewdness. Such a reading focuses on the content of the story. The gender of the reader, we are to suppose, is irrelevant. But is it?

By acknowledging the fact that I am a woman reading the story of Susanna, not a generic, genderless reader, I begin to experience a tension. Where do I place myself in the text? With whom do I identify? I am initially tempted to identify with Susanna—a woman so courageous she would face death and dishonor rather than submit to rape. But then I become aware of how Susanna is being defined within the text. Her act of resistance, an act I see as one of bravery, is minimized. When the false witness of the Elders is revealed, no one expresses compassion for Susanna, and no one sings her praise. It is God who is praised, Daniel who is honored. But is it not Susanna who is the hero of this text? Why then is her courage suppressed? In attempting to place myself within the text, I experience a tension between my image of Susanna and that conveyed by the text.

To identify the source of this tension, I will attend to the story of Susanna in a different way. I focus on what I am being told about woman's nature, about woman's proper role. To see this, I must become aware not only of the gaze of the Elders who construct Susanna as an object of their sexual desire but also of the gaze from outside the garden walls, the gaze that defines Susanna as woman. And I must resist this gaze.

In the Gospel of Daniel, Susanna is depicted as a virtuous woman, a woman to be emulated (by other women). But look at how this woman, Susanna, is constructed within this text. Susanna is defined as a wife. She has no role, no function but as wife. She owns nothing. We are told that the garden is Joakim's, and we must presume that so too is the house, and perhaps the children, and perhaps, too, Susanna. Her beauty is emphasized. Does that make her a better wife? More virtuous? Or just more likely to be desired by men? In reading the text, it becomes clear that a good wife is to have nothing shameful in her. But when it is found that Susanna had nothing shameful in her, no one praised or applauded her. Rather they praised God, thereby crediting another agent for her honorable behavior. Are women incapable of independent agency? Or perhaps it is just expected that the good wife will have nothing shameful in her. Maybe this is one of those traits only commented on when missing. And we are told that Susanna fears the Lord. It is this fear that enables her to resist the Elders. But she is not praised for it by the people. Only the men, or rather the good men, are praised or honored. Are women, even good women, perhaps not deserving of praise or of honor?

By reading in this way, the source of my discomfort becomes clear. I

resist the definition of woman solely as wife. I am angered by the exclusion of woman from praise or honor. Imbedded within the text is a particular image of woman, an image which is often overlooked yet is unconsciously accepted while we focus on other aspects of the narrative. The story of Susanna is traditionally read as illustrating the power of faith. Accepting this interpretation and similarly disregarding the way in which woman is constructed within this text serves to perpetuate this conception of woman. My discomfort arises from my refusal to ignore the ways in which woman is defined within this text.

In reading as a woman it is important to shift our focus in this way, that is, to privilege the conception of woman being offered, often implicitly, within the text. In this way beliefs about the nature of woman can be identified and made subject to critical analysis. In addition, such a shift makes the relations, if any, between the concepts of femininity and masculinity an object of critical attention. And equally important, such a reading enables us to determine if certain traits or abilities are being defined as gendered, that is, marked as feminine or masculine. Such a process often carries a text beyond its stated topic by examining the assumptions behind it. Reading as a woman we become aware of the fact that the texts of philosophy are neither autonomous or universal. A philosopher writes from a particular perspective and is influenced by the cultural values she or he has inherited. Thus to understand a philosophical text, we must read it within the framework of this larger context. In this book, I will focus on one aspect of this context, the question of gender.

My conception of reading as a woman, then, is about the reader's focus of attention. It has nothing to do with one's genes or the parts of one's body. It has rather to do with a concern for enabling the varieties of women's experiences to be included within the paradigms of human experience. But this can only be done if the reader takes control of the reading experience and reads the text differently than the author intended it to be read, that is, reads it as a woman without putting oneself in the position of the Other. To do this, the text must be read in such a way as to undermine the presuppositions which define woman as not male, as limited, and as Other.

My goal in writing this book is to enable one to read as a woman. To do this, I privilege "woman"; that is, I take a philosopher's views on the nature of woman as an important basis for understanding her or his philosophical system. My aim is to reveal the process of definition of woman in Western culture as not male, as Other. I will also endeavor to explain how the discourse of exclusion works even when a philosopher does not mention the topic of woman.

It is my thesis that a systematic examination of the subject of woman in the history of philosophy reveals a set of assumptions having to do not only

with the nature of woman but also with the concept of the "feminine."\* In using the terms "feminine," "female," "masculine," and "male," I am referring to traits, characteristics, and activities historically associated with women or with men. But this history of associations is neither static nor consistent.<sup>7</sup> Recognizing this fact, I attempt to be sensitive to the meanings and relations of these terms contained within the writings of each thinker. Whenever possible I examine a philosopher's explicit delineations of woman's nature or of femininity. But this is only a beginning. To understand a theorist's conception of femininity or masculinity, one must read between the lines, with careful attention to unspoken assumptions.

One of the most basic gender assumptions found throughout the philosophical canon is the tenet that man is the true form of humanity; that is, masculinity is equated with humanness.† This axiom is then implicitly inscribed on all of the categories central to philosophy. The definitions of rationality and of morality, for example, often emphasize traits which are viewed as masculine and minimize or exclude traits seen as feminine.‡ The practice of excluding the feminine in turn reinforces the view of woman as Other and as inferior by devaluing her capacities and her achievements, and thereby justifies her exclusion from what are considered the higher realms of human endeavor.

In constructing this text, I have elected to focus only on canonical philosophers, that is, those philosophers who have come to be seen as presenting well-developed and highly influential philosophies. I do not intend to imply that these philosophers are the best or that they together represent the entire range of possible philosophical systems. I focus on them because these are the philosophers who have been repeatedly anthologized and who are regularly studied in the Western academy.<sup>8</sup> It is my conviction that understanding the gender system in their writings reveals a pattern of depreciation of woman and the feminine that is still prevalent in much of contemporary Western philosophy.

I have not attempted to survey the entirety of the history of philosophy,

\* It is my position that femininity and masculinity are socially constructed. In other words, I do not accept the essentialist view that a woman's femininity is an innate characteristic. Nevertheless, I caution against the view that biology is irrelevant. Although for the purposes of this analysis, I remain neutral regarding the very problematic question of the source or causes of the association of women and femininity, I caution the reader against falling into the quagmire of nature/nurture debates. It is my opinion that it is the dichotomy between biology and culture or environment that is at fault. See my "Re-Fusing Nature/Nurture," in *Hypatia Reborn*, ed. Azizah al-Hibri and Margaret Simons (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

† As I will later illustrate, this bias goes hand in hand with the belief that some groups of people are superior to others. Because of this not all men in fact achieve full humanity, but *only* men, and no women, are capable of it.

‡ These claims receive support in Chapters Three and Four.



for that would condemn the analysis of each philosopher to a thumbnail sketch and would require simplification to the point of distortion. I chose instead to organize the text thematically and develop my analysis by selecting pairs of philosophers that represent different positions in the spectrum of thought concerning each topic.

I begin in Chapter Two by examining the equation of humanness with maleness, that is, the belief that man is the true form of humanity and that woman is inferior to him, lacking in just those traits which are seen as most distinctively human. To construct this chapter, I contrast the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle on the subject of woman. A comparison of their positions is revealing, their similarities being as important as their differences. Moreover, despite Plato's reputation as the "first feminist,"<sup>9</sup> he, like Aristotle, views woman as inferior to man. But there is an important difference in their convictions concerning the origin of woman's inferiority to man. Aristotle, like the majority of philosophers after him, associates woman's defects with her reproductive role. Plato, in contrast to Aristotle, denies that woman's generative role has any effect on her abilities. However, I will demonstrate that although Plato denies the importance of the bodily differences between the sexes, he posits significant differences between the souls of women and men. Despite their differences concerning the cause of woman's inferiority, Plato and Aristotle agree on its effects. In particular, both argue that woman is less capable than man of developing the "higher" faculties of rationality and morality.

In the subsequent two chapters, I examine the philosophical construction of woman in terms of theories of rationality and morality. In Chapter Three I address the issue of woman's rational abilities and examine the extent to which philosophical theories of rationality privilege characteristics perceived as masculine. To frame this chapter, I compare the philosophies of Descartes and Rousseau. Although their conceptions of rationality are similar in that both of these theorists associate traits viewed as masculine with reason, they differ in their response to the emotions and the passions, traits they associate with the feminine. Descartes' theory denigrates emotions, condemning them to the realm of the irrational. Rousseau, on the other hand, argues for an integration of reason and emotion, seeing emotion as reason's guide. My focus in this chapter is on the gender implications of these two models of rationality. That is, I analyze how woman fares when the emotions are seen as antithetical to reason versus when the emotions are viewed as reason's guide.

In Chapter Four I turn to theories of morality, the second of the two "higher" faculties. For my comparison I have selected the moral philosophies of Kant and Hume. Kant, accepting the Cartesian opposition of reason and emotion, argues that an action is moral only if it is based solely on reason.

Hume, unlike Kant, does not exclude the emotions from the moral realm, but rather finds moral action on the sentiments and affections of humans. My concerns and my questions in this chapter are similar to those of the previous chapter. Is morality being conceived as male? Are women viewed as incapable or less capable than men of moral agency? The comparison of these two competing moral theories offers a clear illustration of the variety of ways in which woman can be excluded from philosophy.

Beliefs concerning woman's capacity for rational thought or moral agency directly affect the construction of political theory and philosophies concerning woman's proper role. If participation in the public realm of government is seen as requiring possession of well-developed rational and moral capacities, then theories of woman's nature which define woman as less capable than man in just these areas will have a direct effect on a philosopher's view of woman's proper role in the state. In Chapter Five I compare the political philosophy of Locke with that of Hegel. I selected Locke as a representative of the liberalist view that all individuals, women and men alike, in the original state of nature are free and equal, and that relations of authority are the result of rational consent. I contrast his political philosophy with that of Hegel, who subscribes to the tenet that the natures of woman and man are different and complementary. My concern is to see how this difference in their basic tenets affects their views of woman's proper role in the state. In addition I am concerned to examine the value each theorist places on what he perceives as woman's proper role. In this chapter I argue that the prejudice that man is the true form of humanity is so strong that both philosophers contravened their most basic doctrines in order to uphold it.

I conclude this examination with a brief discussion of the feminist challenge to philosophy. I discuss some of the contemporary feminist responses to the denigration of woman's abilities and activities in the texts of philosophy, as well as to the tendency in philosophy to associate rationality and morality with traits viewed as masculine. Although my discussion is selective, my intent is to end the book with an outline of the consequences of reading as a woman, that is, the realization that some of the central categories of philosophy must be transformed in order to include woman and the variety of women's experiences.<sup>10</sup>

My book is not exhaustive. I could not discuss all canonical philosophers; thus there are numerous positions omitted from this investigation. Nor could I examine all themes of importance to the conceptualization of woman in philosophy. What I have provided is a blueprint for such investigations. My goal in writing this book has been to offer my reader the tools for conducting this type of reading every time she or he picks up a philosophical text. By focusing my analysis on the fundamental assumptions concerning woman's nature which are uniformly accepted by diverse theorists, I hope I have

provided measures for reading philosophy as a woman. Similarly by focusing on the types of strategies that lead to the exclusion of woman from the texts of these philosophers, I have intended to sensitize readers to similar exclusions in other writings. Thus, I have written this book not only to reveal the gender system in the philosophy of selected theorists but also to introduce readers to a different strategy for reading philosophy that extends far beyond the limits of this particular text.

In this opening chapter I stress the latter aspect of my book because I see it as crucial to the transformation of philosophy. I believe that my analyses of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Rousseau, Hume, Kant, Locke, and Hegel reveal the complexity of woman's exclusion from their philosophies. Reading my chapters will enhance one's understanding of these theorists' philosophical systems, for, as I will demonstrate, their position on the nature of man cannot be fully understood without also comprehending their conception of woman and the feminine. Nevertheless, if the reader does not also walk away from this book with an awareness of the importance of reading philosophy differently than she or he has been taught in the academy, then I have not been fully successful. This book is not simply about the history of philosophy. The assumptions about woman's nature that I discuss in these chapters, as well as the ways in which woman is excluded from the central categories of philosophy, still function within modern philosophical systems and debates. We can question or reject such prejudices only if we first unveil them and understand their effects on our own beliefs. Thus, if you use this book well, it will serve as the basis for a transformation of how you read and do philosophy.

Remember the gaze outside the garden wall. It was not only the Elders who condemned Susanna.

## FURTHER READING

### READING AS A WOMAN

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See also bibliographies contained in issues of the American Philosophical Association *Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy*.