Feminism and the problem of individualism

[Added July 2003/2009:] This is one of the papers referred to in 'Introduction to the refereed papers'.

During the writing of my PhD thesis, *Against the Dismantling of Feminism: A Study in the Politics of Meaning* (between 1993 and 1996), I became more and more aware of the crucial part played by the ideology of individualism in maintaining consent to domination. As a consequence, between 1996 and 1999 I did a lot of work on individualism and the ways in which appeals to individuals functioned to disguise and deny relations of ruling. This paper is one of four which came out of that work. The others are:

> 'Social welfare policy and "the unemployed": a case study in the ideology of individualism' (1997)
>
> 'Individualising the social: or, whatever happened to male domination?' (1998)
>
> 'The trouble with individualism …: a discussion with some examples' (1999)

All are on UNSWorks.

This paper was sent to the journals *Feminism & Psychology*, *Hypatia* and *Philosophy and Social Criticism* between 1997 and 1999, and was rejected by all three. This is the version sent to *Philosophy and Social Criticism* which was slightly re-written from the one sent to *Feminism & Psychology* and *Hypatia*, Following the paper is my commentary on the readers' reports.

Abstract: Feminism needs to develop a greater awareness of the ways in which references to individuals operate to disguise relations of ruling by focusing only on attributes of individuals, at the expense of any acknowledgement of the existence of the social structures of domination. This present paper is devoted to discussing some feminist attempts to theorize individualism, pointing out that, although they have important things to say about the problem, they do not go far enough, both because they equivocate on the question of male domination and because they fail to give an explicit account of 'the individual' appropriate for the feminism. I acknowledge that feminism does contain an implicit account of a form of genuine individuality, but that there is still a strong propensity for feminism to fall back into individualism in the pernicious sense. I point to a number of ways in which that can be overcome, and conclude by arguing that, while care must be taken to avoid the ideological aspects of the liberal notion of 'the individual', it still has its uses for a feminism concerned with a human status for women.

KEYWORDS: feminism, individualism, liberalism, male domination, masculinity

Within feminism, the task which arises out of the problem of individualism is: how to maintain an ethical commitment to those human individuals who are women, while at the same time avoiding complicity with that ideological form of individualism which serves to hide systematic domination.[1] The task has not been identified in these terms within the literature of 'second wave' feminism, although there has been some recognition that individualism in the ideological sense is a problem. But there is still more to be said about the ways in which the ideology of individualism operates, not least because it continues to exert a subterranean influence within feminism itself, both because of feminism's focus on women, and because too many feminist discourses are unclear about the nature, scope and importance of male supremacy. While feminism does contain a solution to the problem of individualism—through its recognition of and opposition to the social relations of male supremacy, and its insistence that those social relations can be challenged—the implications of that have yet to be fully explored.

Feminist critiques of individualism couch the problem in terms of the portrayal of individuals 'as atomized and disconnected from the social relations that actually affect his or her choices and options', as Zillah Eisenstein put it (Eisenstein, 1986: 114). But the nature of those 'social relations' is seldom spelled out as male supremacy. Instead, what is missing from explanations confined to facts about individuals is referred to on the whole only in terms of the politically and ethically

1. By 'domination' I mean those social arrangements which establish hierarchies of power, privilege and 'human' status, of which male supremacy is the paradigm case (Thompson, 2001).

empty category, 'society'. Eisenstein's description gives a little more detail—she mentions 'the economic, sexual, and racial relations that define [each person's] life' (p.191). But this wording does not, as it stands, identify the problem with these different forms of social relations as *domination*.

Neither does her distinction between 'liberal individualism' and 'individuality':

> By "liberal individualism", I mean the view of the individual pictured as atomized and disconnected from the social relations that actually affect his or her choices and options; by "individuality", I refer to the capacities of the individual conceptualized as part of a social structure that can either enhance or constrain his or her potential for human development. The first view promises equality of opportunity and freedom of choice and explains its absence in terms of the inadequacy or inability of the individual. The view of individuality tries to understand how the individual is not allowed to achieve the promises of liberal society given the structural constraints of society. (Eisenstein, 1986: 114)

This distinction contains the important insight that the liberal ideology of individualism holds people personally responsible for any failure to exercise freedom of choice and enhance their human potential, and ignores the actual social constraints that prevent them from doing so. But it does not tell us what kind of 'society' it is which requires 'individuals' to be depicted as 'atomized and disconnected'.

Moreover, defining 'individuality' only in terms of social constraints does not make sense in the light of feminism's foundational belief that righting the wrongs of women is within human competence. Feminism has certainly placed considerable emphasis on the many and varied ways in which women are constrained and victimized, but the purpose of that emphasis is to bring women's oppression on to the public agenda so that it can be seen for what it is and rectified. But Eisenstein's above description of 'individuality' supplies no account of agency, a notion that is surely central to any concept of the individual. Belief in individual agency is often deluded under conditions of domination, a point Eisenstein makes when she says 'the individual is not allowed to achieve the promises of liberal society given the structural constraints of society'. But while this is certainly the effect of the social relations of domination to the extent that they deprive people of control over the

conditions of their own existence, it is the opposite of individuality, not a form of it. Without a notion of agency, 'individuals' are not individuals at all.

Not surprisingly, Eisenstein's suggested solution to the problem of individualism is inadequate. She takes for granted that the way out is to insist that people belong to social groups. The radical potential she sees in liberal feminism arises out of what she sees as its chief strategy, its advocating of 'women's independence from men'. She says that this is not individualist in the liberal sense of 'the isolated, competitive individual', because it does not 'premise women's isolation from one another' (Eisenstein, 1986: 154 and passim). 'Liberal feminism', she says, 'by dint of speaking of women as a group, is in contradiction with "the principles of liberalism", which do not see people as groups' (p.191). But apart from the fact that this is not true—liberalism is quite compatible with seeing people as groups, as numerous discussions of 'interest groups' and 'our pluralist society' testify—the problem of individualism is not overcome simply by references to the existence of, or need for, 'groups'. If the main problem is social domination, individualism being a problem only to the extent to which it functions to disguise domination, the grouping together of certain kinds of individuals ('women' in this case) is no guarantee of an end to domination.

Eisenstein is not alone in this assumption that the way to avoid individualism is through some variant of collectivism. Given that the problem of individualism tends to be defined in terms of portraying individuals as isolated from others and separated from 'society', the feminist solution tends to be seen in terms of recognizing that women are a collectivity. Sarah Lucia Hoagland appeals in this way to 'community' as the way out of individualism. She rejects the term 'autonomy' as a way of describing the moral agency of lesbian ethics, because (among other reasons)

> it suggests separation and independence from others … one who is "autonomous" has no connections; one who is "autonomous" does not interact with others … if we are autonomous we can do things to or for others without being affected by them … it encourages us to believe that connecting and engaging with others limits us … and undermines our sense of self. (Hoagland, 1988: 144-5)

She suggests instead the neologism, 'autokoenony' (coined from the Greek words for 'self' and 'community'), as a way of designating a sense of self that is a 'self in

community'. She places primary importance on the insistence that 'what it means to be a lesbian is deeply connected with lesbian networking and the possibility of community', that 'who we are emerges through our interactions with others', and that 'our growth as lesbians is essentially related to the values that emerge in lesbian community' (p.145).

Celia Kitzinger and Rachel Perkins also argue for community, in this case as a counter to the individualizing tendencies of 'therapy' (or 'psychology'). They argue that it is the lesbian community that should provide support for women conventionally defined as suffering from psychological or psychiatric problems. They refer to these problems as 'social disabilities', and argue that they are a community responsibility, just as the community already attempts to provide support for those with physical disabilities. It is only in communities that lesbians and other women can come 'to accept misery, distress, anguish (as well as joy, delight, and happiness) as normal, nonpathological, ordinary human experience' (Kitzinger and Perkins, 1993: 88). Taking these problems to paid experts, they say, keeps the problems on the level of the personal, individual and private. They acknowledge that there are occasions when 'we are not able to cope on our own' (p.198). They also acknowledge that communities have failed in this respect. That 'lesbians in distress have nowhere to turn for a consistent source of support', is, they suggest, 'an indictment of our lesbian and feminist communities' (p.8). But, they say, 'we can take care of each other'. Indeed, we must, because the current alternative, psychology, 'is, and always will be, destructive of the lesbian/feminist enterprise' (p.198).

But the appeal to 'community' in itself says nothing about how the individual members of the 'community' are politically, ethically, and hence socially, located. Kitzinger and Perkins are quite correct in exposing the individualizing tendencies of therapy. But the solution is not 'community'. Rather, what is required is exposure of the social structures of relations of ruling. Kitzinger and Perkins themselves point this out. Psychology's exclusive focus on the individual 'substitute[s] personal explanations of problems for political ones, and … disguise[s] real material oppression as emotional disturbance' (p.5). It ignores 'external structures of male supremacy', and converts 'larger social and political issues … into individual pathologies' (pp.5-6). It does this in a number of ways—by co-opting the language of politics and converting it into personalized jargon, by placing a ban on moral judgment, by offering spurious reassurances about a 'power within' and 'choice'

unconstrained by social reality, and by explicitly attacking the feminist standpoint and reinterpreting it as character deficiency or moralistic, old-fashioned personal prejudice. It is clear from these authors' own account that what psychology lacks is any awareness of the social relations of domination within which individuals are embedded.

But appealing to 'community' does not, in itself, lead to that awareness. The meanings and values of feminism, and its opposition to the meanings and values of male supremacy, are not guaranteed by (in this case) a 'lesbian community' because we all carry both kinds of meanings and values with us. The important question is the extent to which we have exposed those male supremacist meanings and values for what they are, and refused to be implicated. That refusal, far from leading to 'community', may leave us feeling alone and isolated, bereft of recognition and support, or worse, under attack for daring to question deeply held beliefs and common understandings. As Jean Curthoys has put it:

> liberation theory posits as politically necessary something like a "dark night of the soul", a time when the only thing that is certain is that one can decide upon and live according to one's own values which here amount to the pursuit of dignity. The social risks of this transition, of rejecting the prevailing modes of human evaluation, are very high, possibly "not less than everything". But liberation theory, in principle optimistic, has a case that on the other side of this "dark night" is the ability to love and the beginning of wisdom. (Curthoys, 1997: 37-8)

Kitzinger and Perkins are, of course, talking about the isolation and alienation of another kind of 'dark night of the soul', mental illness, and psychology's propensity for explaining it in terms that make no reference to the social circumstances of male supremacy. But 'lesbian community' is no solution to the problem of individualism (or of mental illness). The category 'lesbian' (and any collectivity based around that category) is itself not automatically immune from the social relations of male supremacy, and hence from the individualism, ostracism and dehumanization which are its key characteristics.

There are other feminist critiques of individualism which do not fall back on an appeal to collectivity, but which nonetheless run into problems with their characterizations of individualism. There is Alison Jaggar's analysis of the Marxist

concept of 'abstract individualism', the idea that 'human individuals [exist] in abstraction from any social circumstances … that human individuals are ontologically prior to society … [and] are the basic constituents out of which social groups are composed'. In her view, abstract individualism does not deny the existence of social groupings, not least because speech is necessary to make one's needs, etc. known and speech develops only in groups. But it does hold that individuals' 'essential characteristics, their needs and interests, their capacities and desires, are given independently of their social context and are not created or even fundamentally altered by that context' (Jaggar, 1983: 28-9).

Jaggar cited the work of Naomi Scheman to the effect that '"psychological objects, such as emotions, beliefs, motives, and capacities"', far from being peculiar to individuals, are social from the beginning. As Scheman pointed out: 'The question is one of meaning, not just at the level of what to call it, but at the level of there being an "it" at all. And questions of meaning and interpretation cannot be answered in abstraction from a social setting' (Jaggar, 1983: 42-3; Scheman, 1983: 229). Jaggar went on to say that, if it is the case that even the most intimate aspects of the individual, one's thoughts, desires, emotions, etc., are socially constituted, it is 'pointlessly circular' to appeal to 'the existing desires of individual members of society' as justification for forms of social organization. As Jaggar said, if 'human desires and interests are socially constituted, then we can expect that the members of any society are likely to learn to want just those things that the society provides' (Jaggar, 1983: 43-4).

Once again this is an important insight, but again it does not in itself say what is it about 'society' that requires abstract individualism. What social purpose is served by the requirement that individuals be seen as abstracted from their social setting? What social arrangements are justified by appeals to already existing characteristics of individuals? What aspect of 'society' is being denied when people are portrayed as self-contained entities, sufficient unto themselves, with qualities and attributes already in place before the influence of 'society' makes itself felt? Given that we are never *not* in 'society', what are we being prevented from knowing when our desires and interests are presented as inherent in each of us, as arising from nowhere but our own individual selves? What is hidden from view by the idea that 'society' is something that impinges on us only after we have already been identified as who and what we are?

Jaggar does not ask questions like these in connection with the notion of abstract individualism. She uses the terminology of 'male-bias', but this terminology, and the arguments that go with it, remain too closely tied to the very individualistic paradigm she herself has already warned against. They rely on the assumption that men and women, far from being constituted by abstract individualism (or rather, 'the liberal conception of human nature' within which abstract individualism is framed), are themselves the unmoved movers of those conceptions. Men and women already have attributes such that 'certain features of the liberal theory of human nature are far more likely to have been produced by men than by women' (p.46). Those attributes are given in 'experience', not 'nature'—'it is unlikely that women's experience would have led them to frame the liberal conception of human nature' (p.46)—but they nonetheless exist prior to that conception. The 'men' and 'women' she posits as (in the case of men) responsible for the notion of abstract individualism and (in the case of women) excluded from it, are (in her own words) 'human individuals ontologically prior to' its conceptualization.

Perhaps this is a terminological quibble. After all, Jaggar is fully aware of the social relations of male dominance as the central problematic of feminist politics: 'All feminists are concerned to end male dominance, and all feminist political theory is designed to show how this can be done' (Jaggar, 1983: 147). And the reference to 'male bias' is a step in the right direction since it identifies a connection between individualism and male interests. But the fact that she was later to stop referring to male dominance, substituting instead expressions like 'strategic gender interests' (citing Maxine Molyneux)[2] (Jaggar, 1998), indicates that far more is at stake than terminological niceties. It suggests there is a closer relationship between individualism and male supremacy than Jaggar allowed, and that carelessness in theorizing individualism is also carelessness in theorizing male domination.

Scheman gives a more detailed account of how a male dominated society might construct what Jaggar referred to as the 'human desires and interests' of abstract individualism. Following feminist object relations theory, she links the 'separate, autonomous, sharply individuated self embedded in liberal political and economic ideology and in individualist philosophies of the mind' with masculinity. She argues that one of the reasons for the widespread acceptance of individualism is the cultural

[2] Both Jaggar and Molyneux agreed that men could have these too.

requirement that males be 'deeply motivated' to differentiate themselves from the women who are their primary caregivers in infancy (Scheman, 1983: 235).

She avoids one of the pitfalls of feminist object relations theory by *not* recommending 'mothering' by men as the chief solution to the problems supposedly produced by the fact that it is women who do the child rearing. But she still follows the theory too closely by placing her main emphasis on women's mothering, rather than on the social order of male supremacy which *requires* that it be women, and not men, who mother. In fact, by relying on the work of Dorothy Dinnerstein (1976), she retreats even further from acknowledging the primary importance of male domination than do other feminist object relations theorists like Nancy Chodorow (1978) and Jessica Benjamin (1988). Feminist object relations theorists tend to explain male domination in terms of women's mothering, rather than vice versa (Thompson, 2001: 82-90). But Dinnerstein (and Scheman following her) posits as well a sex neutral realm of 'deep ambivalence about birth, death, dependence, the body, its needs and demands'. This ambivalence is managed in a male supremacist manner by splitting off these experiences and allocating them solely to women, leaving men free to define themselves as 'pure, clean, free, uncontaminated humanness' (Scheman, 1983: 241). But in Dinnerstein's account, it still exists prior to male supremacy.

This gives rise to the question of how we know about this ambivalence in its existence prior to the social relations which organize it and make it meaningful. While male supremacy is not the only kind of social arrangement, other forms of social life would also have to take the ambivalence into account. But what if it were not pre-social at all? (Indeed, it is difficult to see how it could be). What if the ambivalence mentioned by Scheman (and Dinnerstein) is not an existential angst about grand issues of mortality in the face of which human beings are powerless? What if, instead, it is ambivalence about human status under social conditions which in so many ways deny that status to women, conditions structured around the principle that only men count as 'human'?

If that is the case, then mothering by women would arouse ambivalence because of male supremacy's own self-contradiction. Women are required to be 'not fully human', and yet as mothers, they are required to be all-powerful, absolutely essential and indispensable during the helpless dependency of childhood. Suppression of the knowledge of male dependence on those 'not fully human' beings, women, allows men to be seen, and to see themselves, as self-created,

autonomous motivators of their own destiny. It is that suppression which gives rise to the sharply differentiated masculine self who has come from nowhere, who has sprung up fully grown like Thomas Hobbes' mushrooms (to give just one absurd example of a masculinist attempt to avoid acknowledging what men owe to women). And it is that suppression which attempts to resolve the ambivalence—between male monopolization of 'human' status and the existence of women—at the expense of women and of a genuine human status for everyone. It should come as no surprise that the independent, self-motivating 'individual' is always male, since the female is his antithesis, what he is detaching himself *from*.

Carole Pateman also links individualism with masculine interests in her critique of classical social contract theory (Pateman, 1988). She identifies liberal social and political thought as a primary site of individualism (as does Jaggar). Pateman argues that, behind those stories providing justifications for modern civil society as a contract between 'free and equal individuals', lies a 'sexual contract' between men—an agreement to respect each other's sexual access to women. In this, the political institutions of democracy are no different from the absolute monarchies of feudalism—the 'freedom' and 'equality' of men depend on women having none, in the interests of being maintained as always available for men. What is constant is male domination of women; only its form has changed, from 'paternal patriarchy'—the rule of one man over all the people—to 'fraternal patriarchy'—the rule of men over women. In this account, 'the individual' is a political persona who has come from nowhere to take his rightful place in the public arena. Women, immersed in the private sphere of domestication and intimacy, or appearing in public inextricably attached to their sex, do not qualify as 'individuals'. Although required to enter into 'contracts' on the basis of their sex, i.e. marriage and prostitution, their human rights, for example, to physical safety or freedom of movement and association, can be violated with impunity on the grounds that sex is 'private' and hence outside the public sphere of political rights and obligations. (For an account of the ways in which Western philosophy has excluded women from 'Reason', that defining characteristic of the modern 'individual' see: Lloyd, 1984.)

These feminist critiques linking individualism with masculinity go part of the way towards exposing individualism as male supremacist ideology. But they remain too closely focused on certain kinds of discourses—Western philosophy, liberal social and political thought, or psychology. The critiques are valid enterprises in and of themselves, and important contributions to feminist knowledge, but the problem of

individualism is not confined to these frameworks. Individualism permeates the whole of the social world, since it serves to fragment any overarching consciousness of the structures of domination. It is to be found wherever most of the people most of the time are to be kept unaware of relations of ruling, that is, anywhere.

It even exercises a surreptitious influence on feminism itself. Pateman, for example, has warned against the individualism of interpreting marriage or prostitution as a kind of 'employment contract' (as some feminists have done). Not only is the employment contract itself a travesty of justice and equality between individuals, and hence not a good model for feminists to follow, it also places women in a double bind. To the extent that women are defined in terms of their sex, they are not the type of 'individual' whose 'equality' and 'freedom' to enter into contracts depends on being abstracted from all particularity;[3] while to the extent that their sex is defined as irrelevant, they are no longer women. As Pateman says, 'women are held both to possess and to lack the capacities required for contract—and contract demands that their womanhood be both denied and affirmed' (Pateman, 1988: 60).

But there are other ways in which feminism continues to be enmeshed in individualism, simply because of its focus on women. It is true that feminism is necessarily concerned with women. But while feminism must continue to focus its attention on women, care must be taken to avoid that ideological form of individualism which serves to deny relations of ruling by populating the world only with discrete individuals and their personal attributes. (For a further discussion of the limitations of defining feminism only in terms of women, see: Thompson, 2001).

Defining feminism only in terms of women has allowed the malestream to establish a foothold from which to effect a subtle shift in nomenclature, from 'feminism' to 'feminists'. The shift is from a moral and political framework of shared understandings, meanings and values, to a set of individuals who identify themselves as 'feminists'. As a consequence, 'feminism' threatens to become anything said or done by anyone (any woman) who says she is a 'feminist', that is, 'feminism' is reduced to anything a woman might want.

[3] Neither, of course, are men. Karl Polanyi, in *The Great Transformation*, argues that the idea of 'labor power' as a 'commodity', an idea based in the liberal notion of 'possession' of one's person, is a fiction. While commodities are things that are produced solely to be exchanged on the market, persons are not; and while a possession is something that can be alienated, that is, given away or sold to someone else, one's person cannot. Both types of falsehood—that women are individuals when clearly on the defining criteria of 'individuals' they are not, and that labor power is a commodity—serve the purposes of domination; and to the extent that they structure social relations, they are not false (in an empirical sense), but true because they have real effects.

To give just one example: an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (reprinted from *The Guardian*) posed the question of whether or not cosmetic plastic surgery was 'feminist'. The article discussed a number of writings by women, some of whom are referred to as 'feminists', defending their own 'eye jobs', 'face lifts' and surgical breast implants in terms of 'a woman's right to do what she wants with her body', 'it made me feel better about myself', and, inevitably, 'choice'. A careful reading of the quotes from these writings included in the article indicates, however, that these women were perfectly well aware that they were acting in defiance of feminist principles by subjecting themselves to cosmetic surgery:

> "OK, plastic surgery is a bit of a sell-out, but I don't think it means I have to hang myself on the feminist spike".
> "Of course our society is still sexist. But that's not going to change any time soon. Here's the choice: you can rail at an imperfect world, or go and get yourself a great pair of gazongas".
> "I know that aging naturally is the more honourable way to go, but I'm not there to be honourable to my gender".
> "The personal may be political, but the personal is also personal".

In the light of these statements, it would seem quite clear that cosmetic surgery is *not* a feminist practice, and that even the women involved know that.

And in fact, the author of the article, Katherine Viner, says so. She argues that it is a form of self-mutilation, differing from anorexia, bulimia or 'cut[ting] her arms with razors' only in that it is 'less messy'. She says that it is 'a very specific, uniform and male-defined ideal', and far from being 'about the rights of the individual, it is in fact about the removal of individuality'. She says that it 'breed[s] body insecurity in women' and reduces women to nothing but a set of body parts. She says that giving in to the pressures to have it done is 'defeatist' and 'giv[ing] up on the idea of equality'. And she says that it is an aspect of the 'quick-fix' culture, and that it is significant that it is performed largely by men on women. Hence, both the author herself, and the women quoted, are clear about the anti-feminist nature of cosmetic surgery.

But the editorial framing of the article gives no hint of this. The title, 'A Cut Above Feminism', is a sly dig implying that feminism has had no influence on what women want, that women still want cosmetic surgery whatever feminism might say. And

the editorial blurb at the beginning ignores the author's arguments, suggesting that the question remains open. It reads:

> As plastic surgery becomes more commonplace, does that mean it is also now acceptable to feminists? The debate is raging, writes Katherine Viner, over whether boob jobs or facelifts are the '90s version of women's rights. (Viner, 1997)

That the question could even be asked is a consequence of defining 'feminism' in terms of what women want. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, the blurb suggests that cosmetic surgery might still be 'feminist' because women who call themselves 'feminists' want it. Although the author herself, and even the women who have undergone cosmetic surgery, know that it is antithetical to feminism, the question can still be posed because women desire to undergo it.

Both the editorial treatment of the article, and the arguments of the women quoted, are classic examples of the ideology of individualism. They seek to disguise one of the manifestations of male supremacist relations of ruling—mutilating the female body to conform with a fetishized, masculinist ideal of female 'beauty'—as an attribute of individuals—women's own desire for that ideal. They are oblivious to any idea that 'human desires and interests are socially constituted', as Jaggar put it. They do not see both cosmetic surgery *and* women's desire for it as the consequence of a social system of meanings and values which constitutes as 'normal' a total disregard for female bodily integrity and safety, and defines women as objects for male consumption. Instead, they take for granted both the female desire and the surgery that supposedly satisfies that desire, placing them in morally neutral territory outside the realm of the social. There are only categories of individuals—'women'—whose desires and interests have sprung from nowhere but themselves. Defining individuals as simply existing with all their attributes already in place, disqualifies the possibility of asking awkward questions about what those attributes might mean and how to evaluate them. That feminism might be a moral and political framework which allows such questions to be posed is conveniently ignored.

But the problem is not confined to the malestream media. There is a tendency within feminism, too, to refer to 'feminists' rather than feminism, and to personalize feminism as just a matter of opinion or as an 'identity'. Too often, this leads to positions which contradict each other both being included under the banner of

'feminism'—if 'a feminist' says it, it must be feminism. It is a form of repressive tolerance which ensures that no feminist position can ever be asserted clearly and unambiguously as long as someone who calls herself 'a feminist' presents an opposing viewpoint. This problem has bedevilled many feminist issues, especially those involving sexuality. The radical feminist position on pornography, to take just one example, is that it is woman-hating ideology in its most virulent and shameless form, which teaches men what they ought to think of women and how they ought to behave sexually towards women if they want to be loyal followers of the meanings and values of male supremacy. And yet, there have been many feminists who have argued that pornography is harmless because it is just fantasized representations of sexuality, and not actual behaviour. But it is logically impossible for pornography to be both harmful and harmless at one and the same time, not to mention the diametrically opposed political implications that flow from each of these positions.

If feminism is a moral and political framework, it is not anyone's private property. It is not simply anything said, done or felt by anyone who says she is a 'feminist'. It has a logic of its own generated by its opposition to male supremacy, as well as its championing of women's interests. It is a set of understandings, meanings and values that are public in the sense that they are both shared and open for debate. Both agreement and disagreement must be argued through with reference to those common understandings, not secreted away behind a polite respecting of 'differences'.

Kitzinger and Perkins nearly succumbed to this common individualist trap for unwary feminists, when they raised the question of whether or not the therapists under discussion were feminists. They asked: 'who gets to define who is to count as a "real" feminist?' (Kitzinger and Perkins, 1993: 23). However, they slipped neatly out of the trap by redefining the question in terms of 'feminist goals'. By defining 'a feminist' as someone committed to feminist goals, they shifted the question from 'Who is and who is not a feminist?' to 'What is feminism?'

There is an urgent need for a greater awareness within feminism of the more subtle of the ways in which social domination operates. Male supremacy is maintained not only through coercion, imposition, constraint and violence, but also, and more efficiently, through 'consent'. 'Individuals' are constituted within social relations of ruling through their own desire and pleasure. One clue pointing towards the constitution of domination and subordination as pleasure is the common accusation

leveled against radical social critics in general, and feminists in particular, that they are humourless, carping kill-joys. Feminist critics are frequently labeled 'prudes', 'puritans' and 'anti-sex' for daring to place on the public agenda the argument that sex oppresses women. The assumption behind these accusations is that sex is fun and people want to do it, so anyone who criticizes sex must be against people having fun and doing what they want to do. But if the feminist critique of sexuality as central to women's oppression is correct, then women's oppression is maintained not only through coercion, but also through fun and pleasure.

The circularity mentioned by Jaggar, of appealing to the desires of individual members of society as justification for social arrangements when those desires were elicited by society in the first place, is not really as pointless as she maintained. The point of ideological individualism is to justify and maintain domination by disguising it as individual desire. Neither is it obviously circular. Certainly, ideological individualism uses individual desire to justify institutionalized forms of satisfying that desire. But it cannot afford to acknowledge that that desire has already been elicited by the social arrangements of domination, because to do so would be to expose domination as domination and defeat the whole purpose of the ideology of individualism. In the newspaper article discussed above, cosmetic surgery was justified by appealing to women's desire for it, but the origins of that desire, in social arrangements requiring women to want subordination to men, remained unexamined.

But is this not a social determinist account? Not only is it saying that individuals are constrained, that is, subjected to externally imposed limitations. It is also saying that those constraints are self-imposed. They are experienced as desire and hence willingly embraced as the individual's own most intimate and private sensations. In other words, the 'structures of male supremacy' are frequently not 'external' at all (as Kitzinger and Perkins put it), but aspects of the individual's own sense of self.

But to argue that the social relations of male supremacy penetrate (I use the word advisedly) the individual's own psyche and constitute her very identity does not mean that they cannot be challenged. On the contrary, identities can be brought into question, feelings can be modified, abandoned or not acted upon, and anyone can change her mind. If this is the case, then 'psychology' might not be as absolutely antithetical to feminism as Kitzinger and Perkins argued. If relations of domination damage us personally, there is a place within feminism for a therapeutic practice

which addresses the many and varied ways in which that damage affects each of us uniquely, and the ways in which we each of us accommodate ourselves to social domination in order to survive under inhuman conditions. Contrary to Kitzinger and Perkins, I *do* think 'we have an "unconscious" to uncover' (p.34), since amnesia is a crucial way in which the human psyche copes, both with the normal helpless dependency of infancy and with subjection to the intolerable. Domination cripples the soul and crushes the spirit. While there may be nothing that can be done about the inhuman conditions—they are in the past, or they are beyond our reach, or we are powerless to change them—the grief, rage and terror they evoke can be dealt with if we know them for what they are. Again contrary to Kitzinger and Perkins, I do think that there is a body of knowledge about the workings of the human psyche. I am at a loss to name it as an identifiable discipline, although it is somatic as well as psychic, since the body has its memories too (as any athlete, bike rider, or pianist knows).

Be that as it may, feminism also provides a set of common understandings whereby identities, feelings, beliefs (along with anything else) can be evaluated for the extent to which they are complicit with the meanings and values of domination. The women who underwent cosmetic surgery, for example, knew that their desire to undergo it was not feminist. They went ahead and did it anyway, despite feminism not because of it. They were already acquainted with feminist principles, and this set up a conflict between those principles and their desire for the surgery. They resolved the conflict in favour of the surgery and against feminism. But because a feminist morality says that cosmetic surgery is wrong, they had to trivialize and demean feminism in order to justify choosing the surgery. Although these women could be seen as constrained by the social pressures to make themselves into things for men, they were not passive victims. They actively chose the constraint in the face of the feminist alternative which they also chose not to exercise. Hence, far from being social determinist in identifying the individual's own desire as a crucial aspect of her oppression, feminism proffers alternative ways of evaluating and managing that desire.

As Scheman pointed out, it is a matter of meaning and interpretation. She argues against the view that 'we exist essentially as separate individuals', that such 'psychological objects' as emotions, beliefs, intentions, motives, capacities, virtues, vices, wants, needs, preferences, pleasures, pains, etc., are inherent in individuals, and that 'any social order has to begin by respecting these as attaching to us singly

and determinately' (Scheman, 1983: 231). On the contrary, she argues, what we need to know in order to identify our states of mind, in order to recognize, for example, an emotion *as* anger, say, or sexual desire, is social in origin. Desires, beliefs, emotions, opinions, etc. are not simply given as attributes the individual brings with her to her social interactions, although that is the way they are experienced on any particular occasion. Rather, they are generated in the social contexts into which we are born. We learn them in the same way and at the same time as we learn our native language, although they are not taught, any more than a native language is taught.

The point about 'society' for feminist political purposes is that, whatever else it is, it is male supremacist. In the light of that feminist interpretation, there is the ever present possibility that the desires, beliefs, etc. that 'society' gives rise to can be male supremacist too. To point this out, as feminism does, is neither to argue that everything is male supremacy, nor that individuals are nothing but constructions of the social order. On the contrary, the very existence of feminism is sufficient evidence of the possibility of social relations other than those of male supremacy. The existence of feminism says that social relations that do not involve domination are already conceivable. And pointing out how social relations operate at the level of the intimate, personal and private allows the possibility of resistance and refusal, because it provides us with knowledge we did not previously have, and hence with alternatives. As Kathleen Barry has put it:

> the power of political consciousness is that it is personally liberating because it enables vision of the world of patriarchal domination as it is. Without consciousness, in the suppression of consciousness, prior to consciousness, knowledge is isolated to individuals and in that isolation it goes unnamed, unspoken. (Barry, 1996: 70)

And as Janice Raymond has pointed out:

> Once upon a time, in the beginnings of this wave of feminism, there was a feminist consensus that women's choices were constructed, burdened, framed, impaired, constrained, limited, created, shaped by patriarchy. No one proposed that this meant that women's choices were *determined*, or that women were passive or helpless victims of patriarchy. That was because many women believed in the power of feminism to change women's lives, and obviously,

> women could not change if they were socially determined in their roles or pliant putty in the hands of patriarchs. (Raymond, 1990: 103—her emphasis)

It is in resistance to complicity with the meanings and values of domination that the possibility of a genuine individuality lies, a possibility which is already present in the feminist project. This is not an esoteric matter. It is not even peculiar to feminism, although it is feminism which has identified male supremacy as the primary form of domination. That resistance is contained in the notion of 'conscientious objection', a principled refusal to allow oneself to be coerced into doing something one has judged to be wrong. It can also take the form of a defiant determination to continue to do what one judges to be right, despite discouragement, lack of recognition, or active deterrence. This resistance does not happen from somewhere 'outside society'. Resisters must be social participants if they are to be able to distinguish right from wrong. The relations of domination must be part of the resister's own consciousness if they are to be recognized as such. Moreover, no one can do it alone. There must be others who also recognize the resistance and the reasons for it, in which case they will be resisters too. There must be some degree of common understanding and mutual recognition, however subordinated, denied and embattled. Again, no 'society', including male supremacy, is without contradictions. In the case of male supremacy, the chief contradiction structuring its social relations is that between the male monopolization of 'human' status and the existence of women which gives the lie to this masculinist hegemony. Feminist resistance to male supremacy involves exposing that contradiction by constantly bringing women to the foreground. It is a struggle for the return of male supremacy's repressed, the humanity of women.

In order to maintain the tension between continuing to focus attention on women and refusing to be implicated in ideological individualism, feminism needs to be aware that thinking in terms of individuals can be ideological, that is, it can be a disguised form of denial of the existence of social domination. On the other hand, individualism is not all ideology, although it is central to the consciousness of the age we live in.[4] Thinking in terms of individuals and what they can (and cannot) do, does not always function to hide relations of ruling by disguising them as inherent attributes of individuals. There are some connotations of liberal notions of 'the

[4] There is a long-standing debate revolving around the connection between individualism and modernity, a debate dating back at least to the seventeenth century and the writings of Thomas Hobbes (although see: Morris, 1972, for an account of the development of notions of the individual in the late eleventh century). For some examples, see: Macpherson, 1962; Rieff, 1966; Carrithers, Collins and Lukes, eds, 1985; Heller, Sosna and Wellbery, eds, 1986; Elias, 1991; Giddens, 1991.

individual' which feminism would not want to abandon because they can serve the interests of women (as Zillah Eisenstein quite rightly pointed out). The idea of the individual as a unique and irreplaceable end in herself is central to the feminist project of challenging male supremacist meanings and values which depict women only as objects for men's use and pleasure. The idea of the individual as entitled to certain rights and dignities is the motivating force behind feminism's exposure of violations of women's human rights and of the denial of a human status to women. Even notions of 'autonomy' and 'privacy' still have some utility for the feminist cause, given the systematic ways in which women are constrained and impinged upon. But individualism *is* also an ideology which functions to disguise social domination. In its exposure of the social relations of male supremacy, feminism already provides criteria for judging in any particular instance whether 'facts about individuals' serve to maintain male domination, or whether they contribute towards the feminist struggle for a human status for women.

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The peer-review process

My commentary on the reviewers' reports

[Added July 2003/2009:] *Feminism & Psychology* rejected the paper on the grounds (the editor said) that it didn't deal with the psychological literature. Given that it was a psychology journal, that might seem fair enough. However, the same journal had published other writings of mine that didn't deal with the psychological literature, and the journal frequently published whole issues with few if any references to the discipline of psychology (e.g. volume 13, number 4, November 2003—Special Issue on Marriage). In fact, the editors had themselves solicited the first paper I had published in the journal (after they had read my book, *Reading between the Lines*), and had shown some enthusiasm for my work. Oh well, nothing lasts forever, does it?

From what little feedback I got, I gathered the readers didn't like the paper. I received no report from 'Reviewer A' apart from some comments attributed to her in the rejection letter: 'Reviewer A—who commented on the paper in a covering letter … says that the paper "rehashes old materials" and "makes little headway"'. Reviewer A also sent back the checklist every reviewer is asked to fill in, with all the boxes marked 'Barely acceptable' or 'Not acceptable', including the query about 'Conformity to journal policy (are there sexist, racist, hetero-sexist language or assumptions?)' which received a 'barely acceptable' rating from this reviewer. The kindest thing I can say about this is that she wasn't thinking when she marked this box. She cannot possibly have meant that I used 'sexist, racist, hetero-sexist language or assumptions', can she?

The comments by Reviewer B were hand-written on the form 'To be completed by all reviewers'. She made four brief points: '1. Hard to follow

… 2. Too many *assertions* … 3. [Critiques of] pornography & cosmetic surgery … are hardly new or surprising … these insights are 20+ years old. 4. What does this say to *psychologists*?'

It was clear that no care had been taken in reviewing my paper. Reviewer A's 'report' was confined to two comments and the random ticking of boxes. (It's possible that Reviewer A's 'covering letter', referred to in the letter of rejection I received from the editors, was too insulting to pass on to me. Many academic journals have procedures for sparing the feelings of the reviewed). Reviewer B's report was only about 120 words long. In full, it was no less dismissive than the four points listed above.

Hypatia rejected it because (in the readers' terms) I didn't do what they were expecting me to do (Reader A kept repeating, 'I was expecting the author to …'). In my terms, it was rejected because the readers subscribed to the very views I was challenging and were oblivious to the nature of domination, their disclaimers notwithstanding. They were unable to detach themselves sufficiently from the paradigm I was criticising to be able to see what I was saying. Reader A wrote more in sorrow than in anger in defending the 'feminists' she saw me attacking, although she also chided me for being 'offensive' and for delivering 'a slap in the face' to someone or other. She didn't like my paper (although she did concede that a few things about it were 'nice'). And yet I feel that something in it must have touched her because of the length of her critique. She condemned what I wrote, yes, but she spent two and a half thousand words doing it.

Reader B trotted out the old 'race, class, gender' bit, and I guess she can't be blamed for not knowing I had actually argued against this. (See my 1994 paper, 'What does it mean to call feminism "white and middle-class"'—on UNSWorks).

Some of what these readers said I couldn't allow to pass without comment, although I didn't reply to them at the time. In 2003, I interpolated footnotes into these reports, clarifying what I *did* say. However, because I could not get copyright permission to place the reports in their entirety on UNSWorks, I have converted these footnotes into a series of comments, together with the statements in the reports to which they refer.

The reader at *Philosophy and Social Criticism* rejected the paper in two sentences, or rather, one sentence and a question. I suspect no one actually read the paper, since the answer to the question ('regarding the kind of individualism the author wants to support, i.e. something beyond the "liberal individual" not the "ideological individual"') appears in the last two paragraphs of the paper.]

Reviewers' reports

Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy

Reviewer A

> 1. Reviewer A: The paper … claims that the problem of individualism is not confined to Western philosophy or liberal theory, but permeates the whole of the social world … Does the author mean to be arguing that in countries with specifically non-individualistic ideologies individualism nevertheless permeates them? This could be an interesting argument, but there is nothing in this paper to support that claim

My reply: Of course there isn't, because I wasn't making that claim. My point was that feminist texts which critiqued individualism tended to focus only on the individualism of philosophy or theory, and not to look at the ways in which individualism permeated everyday life. The answer to the reader's question about 'countries' (etc.) is 'no' (probably), but anyway, the question doesn't have anything to do with what I was arguing.

[Added 2009:] The question about 'countries' (etc.) is part of the insistence that feminism is 'white and middle-class' and (in this case) 'western'. I profoundly disagree with this position (see: 'What does it mean to call feminism "white and middle-class?"' and chapter 8 of *Radical Feminism Today*), and I find questions about whether or not what I argue applies to other 'countries' (or more usually, 'cultures') meaningless. How would I know? How would anyone know? I do know, however, that every 'culture' I have ever known is male supremacist, and that the very word, 'culture', is too often an alibi for subordinating women. (See: Winter, Bronwyn 1997. *Symboles, moteurs et alibis: l'identification culturelle et nationale des femmes d'origine maghrébine en France*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of French Studies, University of Sydney)

> 2. Reviewer A: That people are kept unaware of the relations of ruling is not necessarily a result of individualism

My reply: Well no, but it's one of the ways. Since I didn't say that people's unawareness was 'necessarily the result of individualism', this statement doesn't constitute an objection to what I said.

> 3. Reviewer A: The author keeps making claims about feminism. But feminism isn't monolithic

My reply: No, but it has to be coherent if it's to have any credibility.

> 4. Reviewer A: Does she mean liberal feminists, lefty feminists, radical feminists, postmodern feminists, postcolonial feminists? She just says 'feminism'

My reply: because I disagree with the notion of 'feminisms', although I didn't say so in this paper. (I can't say everything in every paper). Neither do I see feminism in terms of 'feminists' (as I do argue in the paper).

> 5. Reviewer A: For example, I don't see how her argument could hold for postmodern feminists

My reply: In fact, they are the worst offenders in this problem of individualism, as she herself acknowledges in point 11 below, when she agrees with me 'that critique of our desires is lacking in present-day theory'

> 6. Reviewer A: she says that feminism needs to be aware that thinking in terms of individuals can be ideological. What feminist doesn't know this?

My reply: Herself for one. Vide the unacknowledged slide from 'feminism' to 'feminists', the consequent defence of unjustly accused individuals—'Which feminists don't know this?'—the tone of hurt feelings ('this is offensive', 'it is a slap in the face'), and the personalising of feminism as an identity. She constantly asks *who* I'm criticising instead of seeing the argument in terms of themes or discourses. Another aspect of her commitment to individualism shows itself in her appeal to a variety of 'feminisms'. Each of these is assumed to be a discrete entity in itself, since they are so different from each other the common term 'feminism' cannot be used to refer to them, it seems.

> 7. Reviewer A: If her argument about individualism is that it presupposes an ontologically prior being …

My reply: It's not. The argument is that feminism has an inadequate account of ideological individualism because it (and I give some examples) too often fails to acknowledge that the 'society' within which we're all constituted is male supremacy, because the solution it proposes is 'community', and because feminism is personalised as 'just a matter of opinion or as an "identity"'.

> 8. Reviewer A: I don't find anything in the paper that isn't something I suspect Jaggar already understands

My reply: Nonetheless it's there, she just can't see it.

[Added 2009:] My argument was that seeing the problem of individualism only in terms of the absence of an account of 'society' is inadequate for feminist purposes. What also needs to be said is that that 'society' is male supremacist, and what needs to be explored are the ways in which the focus on individuals functions to maintain male supremacy. The closest Jaggar comes to acknowledging male supremacy is the reference to 'male

bias'. But this is still individualistic – 'bias' is a property of individuals. The system that is male supremacy goes beyond bias.

> 9. Reviewer A: I don't see the consequences of the critique of feminists in part one

My reply: The version of the paper included here isn't divided into sections. The consequences *are* spelled out, and one of them is the use of feminism as an 'identity' to fend off criticism. Since this reader so clearly subscribes to this herself (i.e. the constant reference to 'feminists'), it's not surprising she couldn't read my arguments.

> 10. Reviewer A: At one point the author suggests that we should not focus on what individuals desire. And that could be developed into an interesting argument about tensions in early feminism. That is, one thing that was very important in early feminist work was to respect individual women's voices, precisely because they had been gaslighted by men for so long. And so there is a tension in some feminist theory between wanting to respect women and wanting to insist that a critical analysis of ideology is necessary to understand where desires come from.

My reply: In this paragraph she demonstrates that she does understand what I'm arguing after all. But she seems to see it as some kind of *dis*agreement with me, instead of agreement. The example she gives is another example of what I'm talking about. But why should I have used this example (I actually discuss it elsewhere) instead of the ones I did use?

> 11. Reviewer A: I agree that critique of our desires is lacking in present-day theory, and significantly lacking in some postmodern theorists who valorize butch/femme and sadomasochism by some oblique reference to what women want or are. And so there could be an interesting paper sniffing out individualist strains in such arguments. But if there is an argument to be had there, it is not going to be that this is because postmodernists don't get the point about social construction. (Or again, if it is, the author needs to develop such an argument, and I would be certainly eager to see it.)

My reply: In fact, libertarian defenders of butch/femme and sadomasochism *don't* get the point about social construction because they don't see the desires they defend as socially constructed. In the libertarian view, 'society' only switches in once the individual bearers of those desires have been recognised for what they are, and then they get censored, hounded and harassed. Their desire exists prior to this nasty treatment by 'society'. (Carol Vance actually argues this in her keynote address to the International Conference on Gay and Lesbian Studies held in Amsterdam in December 1987, called 'Social construction theory', in Dennis Altman et al, *Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?* London: GMP Publishers, 1988) But *my* point about social construction is that, in itself, to say that something is 'socially constructed' says nothing about

domination. I say that quite clearly in the paper. Why could this reader not see it?

[Added 2009:] This reader was not alone in her inability to see what I was arguing, and the reason is that she and others are committed to their own version of ideological individualism. Reviewer after reviewer saw my argument (in this paper and others) in terms of an attack on, or a defence of, individuals, instead of taking the actual content of the argument and dealing with it on its own merits.

> 12. Reviewer A: some postcolonial theorists argue that [the] US feminist focus on patriarchy itself is a result of individualism of the sort the author talks about. By trying to see each woman in any society as a woman oppressed by patriarchy, or through an analytic category of women, US feminists are assuming these women already exist ontologically prior to their respective cultures which have nothing to do with who they are, and that US culture has nothing to do with how US feminists approach women in other parts of the world. (See for example Chandra Mohanty's work in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*.) Thus it would seem that one of the author's arguments about individualism applies to her own work.

My reply: I have already noted my profound disagreement with this type of argument.

> 13. Reviewer A: The opening gambit of part one has the flavor of a mini history of feminism, starting with Peslikis and jumping to subsequent feminist critiques being inadequate. This is offensive.

My reply: The part of the paper being referred to here was deleted in this version. It originally read:

> As long ago as 1969, Irene Peslikis listed as one of the resistances to feminist consciousness: "Thinking that individual solutions are possible, that we don't need solidarity and a revolution for our liberation" (Peslikis, 1969: 379). She also pointed out that individual solutions" denied the existence of male supremacy by reducing it to a matter of "psychological privilege … as opposed to a class privilege with sexual and economic benefits". It is clear from this account, sketchy though it was, that there was a recognition in the early days of the Women's Liberation Movement that avoiding individualism involved seeing male supremacy as a social system and organising politically to challenge it.
>
> Subsequent feminist critiques of individualism have been less assertive about naming as male supremacy the social relations hidden by individualistic accounts. These critiques have clearly identified as a problem the portrayal of individuals "as atomized and disconnected from the social relations that actually affect his or her choices and options", as Zillah Eisenstein put it. (Eisenstein, 1986: 114) But they have equivocated on the nature of those "social relations", tending on

> the whole to refer only to the politically and ethically empty category, "society", to indicate what is missing from explanations confined to facts about individuals.

[Added 2009:] Whether or not what I said here is 'offensive', I still believe it's true. The published and public face of what counts as 'feminism' became less and less radical as time went on, and that process has continued to the present day. One only has to remember the ubiquity of the euphemism 'gender', instead of male domination, to designate what feminism is supposedly concerned with, to realise that what counts as feminist politics is no longer radical.

> 14. Reviewer A: Knowing the points about social construction or patriarchal meaning didn't stop the creeping individualism from appearing in these authors' work, but on the other hand, the creeping individualism didn't stop these authors from getting the social construction point. So it seems there is something more here that the author is not getting at.

My reply: Or the reader is not getting.

> 15. Reviewer A: I think the author should focus more on what she does want to say than on what other theorists don't say, because in each case she addressed a different element—in Hoagland, a reliance on groups, in Jaggar, an assumption that men exist ontologically prior, and [so] on

My reply: A fascinating reading, to see these arguments of mine as 'different' when they all had the same aim, i.e. to show how the feminist critique of individualism, exemplified by these instances but not confined to them, failed to acknowledge male domination adequately. The consequence of this in Jaggar's case is that she was later to stop referring to male domination altogether. It's also fascinating that this reader couldn't see this, especially considering how often she berated me for failing to tell her what the consequences were.

[Added 2009:] The focus 'on what other theorists don't say', i.e. that they don't give due (or any) recognition to male supremacy, was central to my argument that feminism's account of individualism was inadequate because of the failure to acknowledge male supremacy. That this reviewer failed to see this clearly shows that she didn't understand my argument.

> 16. Reviewer A: [Is the author] saying that those who argue for women's rights to enjoy pornography or engage in sm aren't understanding the point about individualism and desire being constructed? If so, then (a) she needs to argue this directly and show the creeping individualism in their arguments, not lefty, liberal and radical feminist arguments, and (b) she needs to do so overtly, not covertly under the guise that feminism is no one's private property

My reply: Nonetheless, even though I supposedly didn't 'argue this directly', she got the message, didn't she? She mightn't like it, but I must have argued something directly for her to have leapt so precisely on the solution. Of course, I don't see 'arguing for women's rights to enjoy pornography' as feminism, but as a grotesque anti-feminist parody of feminism.

[Added 2009:] Once again, this reviewer shows her incomprehension of what I was arguing. By 'arguing this directly', she means I should have said that it was the proponents of pornography and sadomasochism who 'aren't understanding the point' (etc.), instead of saying 'feminism' in general and thus including 'lefty, liberal and radical feminist arguments' in my criticism. But when I said 'feminism' that is exactly what I meant, as should have been clear from the theorists I cited, none of whom were proponents of pornography or sadomasochism. And my point about feminism not being a form of private property was not 'covert', but another way of saying that feminism is not an 'identity'.

> 17. Reviewer A: There are some nice points, including her main, last point, that resistance to complicity is where the possibility of genuine individuality lies. And yet I would challenge [it] on the very grounds early feminists articulated. One individual can't just challenge the whole realm of sense, she needs to work collectively, with others to create another frame of meaning.

My reply: Of course, but I wasn't silly enough to argue for challenging the whole of anything, alone or collectively.

[Added 2009:] However, there is an issue here about the extent to which what individuals do qualifies as 'political'. The traditional belief is that nothing can be done without solidarity and working together collectively, the paradigm case being trade unionism. But one of feminism's most important insights is that the personal is political, i.e. that what seems like a personal, individual, even intimate, problem is actually collective (e.g. rape, male violence in the home, the stultifying effects of domesticity). But if the problem manifests itself in personal life, then certain forms of political activism are essentially individual. Only I can decide the extent and limits of what I can do in my own life. Even though I take others into account – and it is hard to imagine any situation where there would be no one to take into account – what I do in my own life is my responsibility, not anyone else's. Take, for example, the feminist critique that heterosexuality oppresses women. Each woman's response to that critique will be as unique as her own life, even though the insight involves a realisation about the circumstances of women collectively. Each of us has to take responsibility for ourselves. This is not a collective enterprise (although other people can help or hinder), but it is political in the sense that we all have responsibilities in relation to power and

helplessness – about what we can and can't do, about what we ought and ought not to do. The kind of political activism that is public, organised and collective is important, but it is not the only kind there is.

> 18. Reviewer A: And that is what feminism is trying to do. And it has been stopped precisely because there are so many contesting what are the common values

My reply: That's why the work I'm doing is so important, of clarification and of demonstrating that it is possible, desirable and urgent that we start taking stands against some of the things called 'feminist'. And yes, the 'women of color/white women' bit has to go. (Once again, see 'What does it mean to call feminism white and middle class?').

> 19. Reviewer A: [and] there are so many contesting … whether unity through difference isn't the ground that will provide solidity to resistance to white racist patriarchy

My reply: What happened to capitalist?

Reviewer B

> 1. Reviewer B: My principal criticism of the essay lies in what I see as a flattening of the relevant politics, to the one dimension of male domination. The figure of the individual that haunts feminist theory and politics is a historically specific construction, as much tied to race and, especially, class hegemony as to gender

My reply: She doesn't notice that I don't use the word 'gender'. See *Radical Feminism Today* for my disagreement with the word. In the same text, I deal with the race issue in a different way from that recommended here. Class, or rather capitalism, I see as a form of male domination, as should be obvious once it is recognised that all the obscenely wealthy are men, or women who have inherited from men. Money (to vary an old phrase) is male power.

> 2. Reviewer B: Politically, for example, one could argue that the most problematic forms of feminist individualism have come from those aspects of feminist movement that have been unreflectively white and middle class

My reply: Been there, done that. See 'What does it mean to call feminism white and middle class?'.

> 3. Reviewer B: there is the assertion here and elsewhere that male supremacy is THE form of social relation that is hidden by individualistic accounts, but no argument as to why we should believe this: why not also, interactively, race and class forms of domination?

My reply: There is, actually, in the feminist object relations discussion—the necessity for males to see themselves as self-generated monads because of the necessity to deny their original powerless dependence on a woman. She may not like the argument, and she may disagree with it, but it's not true that it's not there.

> 4. Reviewer B: Such a view of the role of appeals to community does not entail any of what you point to (p.5) as problematic in such appeals: there's no need for one over-arching community of feminists, women, or lesbians; and the problem of how to reconcile the importance of community with recognition of tendencies toward conformity is just that: a real problem, one that has to be faced, not a theoretical artefact

My reply: The task as I identified it wasn't resistance to conformity, but acknowledging male supremacy.

> 5. Reviewer B: Scheman is chided for pinning masculine individualism on women's mothering simpliciter, while the quotes in the paragraph above says clearly that what's relevant is '… males raised by women in a patriarchal society'. Given that statement of the view, it's not clear where the difference in your positions lies. Your following paragraph, for example, seems not so much an argument with Scheman's position as a restatement of it

My reply: The difference is that Scheman and Dinnerstein postulate a 'deep ambivalence about birth, death, dependence, the body, its needs and demands' which exists prior to its being located with women, whereas I insist that the ambivalence is *created* by the fact that women are so devalued under conditions of male supremacy. In other words, what they are doing is essentialist in a quite strict sense, i.e. they are postulating the existence of a phenomenon—'ambivalence'—about which we can know nothing because it exists prior to the social relationships which alone can make it meaningful.

[Added 2009:] *Chided*? I criticised her argument, I didn't 'chide' her personally.

> 6. Reviewer B: individualism is a historically specific mode of domination—one that paradoxically operates under the aegis of egalitarianism. Aristocracy and theocracy, e.g., are not individualistic. One could even argue that patriarchy, strictly speaking, isn't individualistic: that it refers to the domination of men in their roles as fathers—over women, children, and other men—and that what we see with modernity is the breaking of the power of fathers as such in favor of the empowerment of individuals—meaning, of course, those men who are authorized to BE individuals. Granted, all these claims are contentious, and you may well have good arguments against them, but they're the sort of thing you need to deal with

My reply: I don't, of course, because I'm entitled to limit *my* project in any way I think fit, and the project being recommended here is another one. For my argument that feminism needs to use the term 'patriarchy' with care just because it means 'rule of the father', whereas male supremacy is the rule of men and fatherhood has nothing to do with it, see *Radical Feminism Today*.