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Topic : Introduction to Liberal Feminism

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Introductory Remarks

Liberal feminism is a form of feminism that focuses on the equal rights and opportunities for women within a liberal democracy. It seeks to achieve gender equality through individual rights, equality before the law, and the protection of individual freedoms and liberties.

Liberal feminists believe that women, like men, should have the same rights and opportunities in education, employment, and political participation. They argue that gender discrimination and inequality are the result of social and cultural practices, rather than innate differences between men and women.

Introductory Remarks

To achieve gender equality, liberal feminists advocate for legal and policy changes that promote women's rights and opportunities. This includes fighting for equal pay for equal work, addressing discrimination and harassment in the workplace, and promoting women's representation in leadership roles.

Overall, liberal feminism aims to create a society in which all individuals, regardless of their gender, have equal rights and opportunities to thrive.

Some Important Figures in the Liberal Feminism Tradition

- Mary Wollstonecraft
- Harriet Taylor Mill
- James Stuart Mill
- Elizabeth Cady Stanton
- Sarah Grimké

Philosophical and Historical Background

- Liberal Political Thought
- Enlightenment/Age of Reason in Europe - emergence of humanism
- Certain developments in the natural sciences in Europe that set the context for liberal thought to develop

- American declaration of independence (1776)

- French declaration of the rights of man (1789)

Philosophical and Historical Background

Basic theoretical premise of Liberal
Political Thought :

- Emerged within the dualist framework of Cartesianism which endows the mind with autonomy and mastery over the the body
- Predominance of *Reason* - It believes that irrespective of social, cultural, and geopolitical location, every human being is a rational agent.
- Rationality is understood as a mental faculty that every human being has the capacity of exercising

“Good sense is the most evenly distributed thing in the world; for everyone believes himself to be so well provided with it that even those who are the hardest to please in every other way do not usually want more of it than they already have. Nor is it likely that everyone is wrong about this; rather, what this shows is that the power of judging correctly and of distinguishing the true from the false (which is what is properly called good sense or reason) is naturally equal in all men, and that consequently the diversity of our opinions arises not from the fact that some of us are more reasonable than others, but solely that we have different ways of directing our thoughts, and do not take into account the same things.”

Discourse on Method, René Descartes

What is Reason?

Liberal philosophy understands Reason as the capacity to think, understand, and form judgment by impartial analysis and logical considerations. Reason is seen as an essential tool to facilitate the pursuit of truth and knowledge, and the practice of justice and fairness. Liberal philosophy emphasizes the importance of Reason in informing our moral and political decisions. Reason is seen as a way to evaluate the evidence and arguments of others, and to make decisions that are in the best interest of society as a whole. Reason is also seen as a means to challenge unjust laws, institutions, and ideas. In essence, Reason is seen as a critical element in the advancement of liberty and justice.

Philosophical and Historical Background

Basic theoretical premise of liberal political thought :

- Normative Dualism - split between mind (reason) and matter (the body).
- Reason is at the core of human existence, and human beings are measured by their ability to think rationally.
- Individualist Metaphysics - atomistic view of society and the individual.
- Emphasis on the autonomous individual as the primary unit of politics and knowledge. Individuals are claimed to possess rationality.

Philosophical and Historical Background

Basic theoretical premise of liberal political thought :

- It believes that rationality is possessed equally by everyone. Given the difference in socio-cultural markers, it may happen that many might not be able to access and deploy their rational faculty equally, but it does not alter the fact that every individual human being is, by right, inherently possess this faculty. In other words, it can be said that within the liberal political framework, it is Reason, or the rational faculty, that defines the essence of human beings.

Women and Reason

Since ancient times, women have been seen as lacking the capacity for rational thought. Examples of this idea can be found in the works of famous philosophers, scientists, and writers from the time of the Greeks. Plato and Aristotle, as well as modern liberal philosophers such as Kant, Locke, Hume, and Rousseau, all argued that women were not capable of reasoning. Despite liberalism's central tenet that every human is capable of rationality, it contradicted itself by considering women to be devoid of rational faculty. Therefore, the exclusion of women is an integral part of liberal philosophy, liberal political thought, and the very notion of Reason itself.

Dualist Metaphysics in Western Thought

- Man
- Reason
- Rational
- Abstract
- Mind
- Universal
- Assertive
- Speech
- Culture
- Thought
- Idea/Forms
- Essence

- Woman
- Unreason/Hysteria
- Emotional
- Concrete
- Body
- Particular
- Submissive
- Writing
- Nature
- Expression
- Sensible
- Appearance

Early feminists pushed the concept of Reason to its rational limit

“When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one portion of the family of man to assume among the people of the earth a position different from that which they have hitherto occupied, but one to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to such a course.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their powers from the consent of the governed. Whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these rights, it is the right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it, and to insist upon the institution of a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.”

Liberal feminism is centred upon the application of the central tenets of liberalism to women's lives. Therefore, liberal feminism, much like liberal philosophical and political thought, is characterized by -

- Absolute faith in rationality. Every individual, including women, has the ability to think rationally
- Belief in ontological equality between men and women in terms of reason and rationality
- A conviction that education is the only tool to generate the necessary skills for thinking rationally
- Presupposes that every individual is a free and autonomous agent.
- Believes that like men, women should have the right to property and vote.

“I have turned over various books written on the subject of education, and patiently observed the conduct of parents and the management of schools; but what has been the result? – a profound conviction that the neglected education of my fellow creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore; and that women, in particular, are rendered weak and wretched by a variety of concurring causes, originating from one hasty conclusion. The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity”

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Mary Wollstonecraft

“Why must the female mind be tainted by coquettish arts to gratify the sensualist, and prevent love from subsiding into friendship, or compassionate tenderness, when there are not qualities on which friendship can be built? Let the honest heart show itself, and reason teach passion to submit to necessity; or, let the dignified pursuit of virtue and knowledge raise the mind above those emotions which rather embitter than sweeten the cup of life, when they are not restrained within due bounds.”

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Mary Wollstonecraft

“Men complain, and with reason, of the follies and caprices of our sex, when they do not keenly satirize our headstrong passions and grovelling vices. Behold, I should answer, the natural effect of ignorance! The mind will ever be unstable that has only prejudices to rest on, and the current will run with destructive fury when there are no barriers to break its force. Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless,”

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Mary Wollstonecraft

“Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience; but as blind obedience is ever sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavour to keep women in the dark, because the former only want slaves, and the latter a plaything”

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Mary Wollstonecraft

“Reason is...the simple power of improvement; or, more properly speaking, of discerning truth. Every individual is in this respect a world in itself. More or less may be conspicuous in one being than another; but the nature of reason must be the same in all, if it be an emanation of divinity, the tie that connects the creature with the Creator; for, can that soul be stamped with the heavenly image, that is not perfected by the exercise of its own reason? Yet outwardly ornamented with elaborate care, and so adorned to delight man, ‘that with honour he may love’, the soul of woman is not allowed to have this distinction, and man, ever placed between her and reason, she is always represented as only created to see through a gross medium, and to take things on trust. But dismissing these fanciful theories, and considering woman as a whole, let it be what it will, instead of a part of man, the inquiry is whether she have reason or not. If she have which, for a moment, I will take for granted, she was not created merely to be the solace of man, and the sexual should not destroy the human character...”

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Mary Wollstonecraft

“[a]ny of the mental differences supposed to exist between women and men are but the natural effect of the differences in their education and circumstances, and indicate no radical difference, far less radical inferiority, of nature. Let us consider women only as they already are, or as they are shown to have been; and the capacities which they have already practically shown. What they have done, that at least, if nothing else, it is proved that they can do. When we consider how sedulously they are all trained away from, instead of being trained towards, any of the occupations or objects reserved for men, it is evident that I am taking a very humble ground for them, when I rest their case on what they have actually achieved. For, in this case, negative evidence is worth little, while any positive evidence is conclusive. It cannot be inferred to be impossible that a woman should be a Homer, or an Aristotle, or a Michael Angelo, or a Beethoven, because no woman has yet actually produced works comparable to theirs in any of those lines of excellence.”

The Subjection of Women, John Stuart Mill

“[i]n the first place, the opinion in favour of the present system, which entirely subordinates the weaker sex to the stronger, rests upon theory only; for there never has been trial made of any other: so that experience, in the sense in which it is vulgarly opposed to theory, cannot be pretended to have pronounced any verdict. And in the second place, the adoption of this system of inequality never was the result of deliberation, or forethought, or any social ideas, or any notion whatever of what conduced to the benefit of humanity or the good order of society. It arose simply from the fact that from the very earliest twilight of human society, every woman (owing to the value attached to her by men, combined with her inferiority in muscular strength) was found in a state of bondage to some man. Laws and systems of polity always begin by recognising the relations they find already existing between individuals. They convert what was a mere physical fact into a legal right, give it the sanction of society, and principally aim at the substitution of public and organised means of asserting and protecting these rights, instead of the irregular and lawless conflict of physical strength. Those who had already been compelled to obedience became in this manner legally bound to it.”

The Subjection of Women, John Stuart Mill

“As [men] have determined that Jehovah has placed woman on a lower platform than man, they of course wish to keep her there; and hence the noble faculties of our minds are crushed, and our reasoning powers are almost wholly uncultivated...”

“He has adorned the creature whom God gave him as a companion, with baubles and geegaws, turned her attention to personal attractions, offered incense to her vanity, and made her the instrument of his selfish gratification, a plaything to please his eye and amuse his hours of leisure.”

“During the early part of my life, my lot was cast among the butterflies of the fashionable world; and of this class of women, I am constrained to say, both from experience and observation, that their education is miserably deficient, that they are taught to regard marriage as the one thing needful, the only avenue to distinction; hence to attract the notice and win the attentions of men, by their external charms, is the chief business of fashionable girls”

Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman, Sarah Grimké

Criticisms of Liberal Feminism

- Abstract Individualism
- Normative Dualism
- Liberal notion of rationality
- Positivist outlook
- Male bias of the liberal theory of Human Nature
- Problem with the logic of Identification

References

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