

Commentary on Women's Choices: Philosophical Problems Facing Feminism

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Women's Choices: Philosophical Problems Facing Feminism. Mary Midgley and Judith Hughes. London: *Weidenfeld and Nicolson*, 1983.

In *Women's Choices*, Mary Midgley and Judith Hughes recommend that, in assessing any given feminist theory, we distinguish among questions concerning principle, policy, and programme. This is, we should ask whether the theory in question is advocating a particular principle (an account of what social change should be brought about) or policy (an account of what social changes can be brought about) or programme (how such changes should be brought about). This seems reasonable. It is no use disposing of a feminist theory of a futuristic/ideal society on the grounds that it does not provide us with a detailed account of how to get there. Nevertheless, emphasizing the distinction between policy, programme, and principle may lead us to ignore the fact that these are, to a significant degree, interrelated. Further, it blinds us to the fact that any given principle presupposes a descriptive account of the nature of the oppression of women. One must be able to perceive rape as oppressive to women before one can advocate, on feminist grounds, that it be abolished. One's theory or interpretation of the situation of women (the nature of their oppression) will determine what changes one thinks ought to be made, as well as one's theory of what changes are possible.

That our interpretation of the nature of the oppression of women does determine our principle, policy, and programme, is nowhere more apparent than in Midgley and Hughes' own writing. Midgley and Hughes attempt to purge feminist theory of its faulty premises by revealing the "false choices" which much feminist theory gives women. Unfortunately, the choices Midgley and Hughes come to regard as false are predetermined by their own

theory (set of assumptions and beliefs) about women and their "proper" place in society. Their theory is, in turn, presented to the reader for acceptance on the grounds that alternative feminist theories offer us false choices. In short, *Women's Choices* embraces a very obvious *petitio principii*. It seems Midgley and Hughes are faced with a serious philosophical problem of their own.

Throughout *Women's Choices*, radical feminism surfaces as the brand of feminism which offers women the most false choices. Unfortunately, Midgley and Hughes ignore the fact there are several splits within radical feminism, and, hence, there is no one brand of radical feminism; e.g., not all radical feminists are spiritualists or essentialists. In the following, I present one account of the radical feminist notion of the oppression of women, as developed most fully by Marilyn Frye in *The Politics of Reality*, and I address the criticisms of radical feminism advanced by Midgley and Hughes.

Midgley and Hughes claim that the radical feminist notion of the oppression of women is far too broad. They offer a narrow notion of oppression in its stead. Midgley and Hughes define oppression as "abuse of power" (p. 101). They offer this narrow definition in place of a wider definition which would allow that mere inequalities in power are (sometimes) oppressive. Their definition is narrow in the sense that it allows only certain relations of power to be counted as oppressive, namely, those in which power is abused. It is not clear what will count as abuse on their account. In another sense, their definition is very wide because it enables virtually any individual to be oppressive in one respect or another. Radical feminists propound a wide definition of oppression insofar as they claim that *all* women are oppressed by virtue of being women (within the context of patriarchy). This definition

implies that *all* men (in a patriarchal society) are oppressors, even those men who claim to be sympathetic to feminism. The mere difference in gender, which produces a difference in power, is itself oppressive.

Midgley and Hughes provide three reasons for considering the adoption of the wider sense of the term to be in poor judgment. First of all, the definition sounds exaggerated and is, therefore, likely to “put off the unconverted.” Secondly, this definition would imply that all women are equally oppressed which would result in blindness to the fact that many women are worse off (more oppressed) than others. A third reason is that it would likely foster a separation between two distinct classes: the oppressed and oppressors. Midgley and Hughes regard such a distinction as both counterproductive and false. They consider it counterproductive because women, even privileged women, will assume that it is not their responsibility—because it is not in their power—to alter patriarchal arrangements. They consider it false, because some women, apparently, oppress some men, and hence

There is not a solid block of oppressors, all males and none of them themselves oppressed, sitting elsewhere and profiting by women’s troubles. (p. 103)

If oppression is as wide and as deep as radical feminist claim, then it is understandable that people will find this off-putting. Perhaps, the paralysis, which may result from the shock, disgust, or sheer disbelief people often undergo when presented with the radical feminist perspective for the first time, will subside once familiarity with the issues radical feminism sees as central to the oppression of women is acquired. Things can seem less dismal once the depth of the problem is acknowledged and people combine forces to overcome it. At any rate, the claim that a given theory is unattractive or that it complicates things, says nothing as to the accuracy/truth of such a theory. Morality and justice should not turn on aesthetics or convenience, after all.

The second and third reasons Midgley and Hughes put forth are much more interesting, and much more potentially harmful to the radical feminist position. There is, however, reason to believe that Midgley and Hughes are mistaken in these claims. First, it is definitely true that many women are worse off than other women. This is blatantly apparent when we consider those women who are physically beaten by their husbands, in comparison to those women who are not; when we consider those women who have been the victims of incest and who have had to carry this burden in silence, in comparison to those

women who have not. Similarly, it is true that some women are more privileged in our society; perhaps, by virtue of being white and/or wealthy, or by being connected to a male who is white and/or wealthy. Midgley and Hughes claim that not only will these privileged women be less oppressed than other women, they may even contribute to the oppression of these other women. Further, such privileged women may even be viewed as the oppressors of (some) men.

There is some truth to this. It is likely, however, that if a white/wealthy woman is said to oppress some men—or to be thought to be superior to them—then she does so in virtue of her white-ness or her wealth, and *not* her femaleness. The oppression of women manifests itself in different ways and to varying degrees (in the sense that some ways are more clearly brutally life-threatening), yet, this is consistent with saying that all women are oppressed by the same thing, namely the patriarchal attitudes and values which justify certain practices towards women. Even a wealthy white woman can be reduced to a pornographic object—directly or indirectly. Further, it is a fact that victims of incest, and of rape in general, span all socioeconomic classes. A poor Black woman is indeed worse off than a wealthy white woman. She is the victim of three forms of oppression. Her physical existence is threatened daily, and feminists need to address this immediately. At the same time, feminists must be aware of the subtleties (depth) of the oppression of women and make certain that while tending to the more blatant cases we do not overlook those instances where women may seem, on the surface, to be free when they, in fact (perhaps with respect to their psychological well-being) are not. To say that all women are oppressed *qua* women, is not to say that the threat of rape results in an experience or way of being which is qualitatively the same as that which results from actually being raped. It is to say that the ever-present threat of rape and any given actual rape are two manifestations of the same oppressive force.

A broad definition of oppression would not cause us to overlook the fact that some women are beaten whereas others are not; these instances are just too brutal to be overlooked by any truly feminist consciousness. A narrow definition of oppression may result in blindness to the fact that even privileged women are oppressed (their privilege serves to camouflage this fact). They are oppressed by the same root forces which oppress unprivileged women.

The third claim which Midgley and Hughes make is related to the second one. The third claim states that a wide definition would serve to (unjustifiably) compartmentalize women and men into two distinct camps: the oppressed

(women) and the oppressors (men). This clear-cut division would discourage women from taking responsibility for change because they lack the power to make change. With respect to the latter part of this claim: to say that women generally do not hold positions of political/economic/social power is not to say that they do not have the power to affect political/economic/social arrangements. If feminist theory cannot convince women of this, then perhaps history can when one considers past revolutions of other oppressed groups who similarly lacked such positions of power. With respect to the former part of their third reason against adopting the wide definition of oppression: the claim that all women are oppressed, that women constitute a class distinct from the class of men, is far from being counterproductive—it is a prerequisite for feminist revolution, however one interprets “revolution.” Emphasis on the plight of individual women, along with emphasis on the likelihood that each woman experiences her oppression differently (presumably because it is “hers”) may have the impact of making women believe they must fight their oppression on an individual basis—alone. This may serve to lessen the likelihood of individual women succeeding in doing so. Strength, especially the emotional strength required here, does come in numbers. It is difficult to see what feminist theory can accomplish if it is not true that there are certain essential features of oppression common to all women (which renders them a class). If there is not, then we would require as many theories of feminist revolutions as there are women. This would be analogous to saying that—because a Black slave is allowed (by a relatively decent master) to eat properly, bathe occasionally, and sleep in clean quarters, while another is beaten regularly and otherwise treated like an animal—we need two different theories of their oppression. However, the fact that both are rendered “slave” by virtue of their skin pigmentation and that both are slaves to white men, gives us sufficient reason to believe that both are oppressed by the same forces, and hence, one theory will suffice.

Midgley and Hughes further claim that the line drawn between the oppressed (women) and the oppressors (men) is not so very distinct, and hence the claim that there is such a division is false. It is false because some women oppress some men. Recall my suggestion that women who can plausibly be said to oppress men, more than likely do so by virtue of their membership in some other economic or racial class. Midgley and Hughes, however, want to say that even within a given economic or racial class, some women can be said to oppress some men. This results from their narrow definition of oppression. Consider,

Since people do not understand either themselves or each other very well, it is perfectly possible at this

point, for both parties to be exploiting each other unconsciously, in a violent and painful see-saw. (p. 104)

What kind of exploitation are Midgley and Hughes speaking about here? This passage draws to mind stereotypical images of the over-bearing wife who hen-pecks her husband, or the manipulative woman who marries for money. Certainly men do get harmed, their feelings are sometimes hurt and their egos wounded. As well, it is not impossible that some women should use some men as merely a means to sexual pleasure. None of this indicates that men are oppressed as a *class*, even though individual men may lead lives made unpleasant by women. In order to determine whether men are oppressed by women, we need to consider the context in which these actions occur. Context is crucial in any consideration of oppression.

The concept of oppression warrants analysis. Just what do radical feminists mean by the oppression of women? Marilyn Frye, in *The Politics of Reality*, provides the clearest account of oppression from a radical feminist perspective. Frye explains why being hurt is not sufficient to render one oppressed. Further, Frye reveals how “mere inequalities,” whether in economic status, skin-pigmentation, or gender, can be oppressive. Frye’s argument with respect to this is powerful and needs to be addressed by Midgley and Hughes and other feminists who share their view. Frye’s account of oppression gives credence to the exaggerated claim that all men oppress all women—even those men who Midgley and Hughes claim are obviously not “tyrants plotting to dominate” (p. 119) women. It is interesting that in the quote above, Midgley and Hughes acknowledge that people can unconsciously oppress others, so it is difficult to see how the absence of “plotting” need tell anything about either the presence or absence of oppression.

Frye perceives oppression, in general, to be:

a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance...but which by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon. (Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality*, p. 5)

The key phrase is “systematically related barriers.”

Frye provides us with a wonderful metaphor for barriers which are oppressive: the bird cage. Clearly, the cage keeps humans out of the space which the bird occupies, and it keeps the bird out of the space external to the cage. In this sense the cage is a network of barriers (of individual wires)

to both the bird and those existing outside of the cage. It is only oppressive to the bird; for it is obvious that it is the bird's freedom which is truly restricted. This is analogous to the barriers imposed by patriarchy. This system of barriers serves to keep women within certain realms and out of certain other realms (of activity, thought, *etc.*). Occasionally, men will bump into these barriers as well, and they may even be hurt by such barriers. For example, a man may long to be a homemaker, and find that society makes it difficult for him to do this without compromising his "masculinity." As such, his choices and actions are restricted. The fact that he runs into these barriers does not render him oppressed. On the other hand, these barriers when viewed from the other side, when they make it difficult if not impossible for women to take on typically "masculine" roles, do constitute oppression of women.

Although the system of barriers restrict the actions of both women and men, that they are restrictive is not what renders them oppressive. Consider the obviously non-oppressive restrictions on behaviour which comprise traffic regulations, for instance. To determine whether such barriers are oppressive, and to whom, we have to ask a series of questions about them. Asking certain questions will help one determine which side of the barrier one is on (Frye, p. 12). One such question is "who constructs and maintains such barriers?" Another is "whose interests do such barriers serve?" Barriers such as sex role stereotyping may serve to keep men out of certain spheres, just as it serves to keep most women within certain spheres. This barrier works in the interests of men. It allows men certain privileges: access to women, access to political life. Some males, the well-intentioned ones, perhaps, may choose to deny themselves such privileges. Even so, this is indication of the freedom of their part to make such a choice. If things go sour, they can always fall back on such privilege. Even if they never do, this still renders them in a position of power over women, so long as the rest of society embraces the patriarchal view that "maleness" is synonymous with "superiority" and "powerfulness."

If it is true that, by virtue of being male, certain humans acquire certain privileges, then it does make sense to say that men and women comprise two distinct classes. This is to say that mere differences—mere inequalities—can be oppressive in a given context. Yet, Midgley and Hughes disapprove of "the wholesale dismissal of all men as damned because of the faults committed by some of them" (p. 97). If context is crucial, however, and if men can oppress simply by virtue of being male in a patriarchal society, then it is plausible that all men are "damned" to the status of oppressor.

That mere inequalities can be oppressive is perhaps more obvious when we consider mere economic inequalities within the context of a capitalist society. If we live in a society which distributes goods according to one's ability to pay for them, then clearly, the more money one has, the more goods one can buy. If a millionaire in this society chooses to spend only the minimum amount of her/his cash reserve necessary to subsist—that person still has more economic power than someone who can acquire only those minimal amounts of goods because of a lack of funds. Midgley and Hughes deny that mere inequalities are, in themselves, oppressive. If by this they mean that one must consider the context in which these inequalities occur before one can determine whether they are oppressive, then they will find substantial agreement among radical feminist theorists. That context is essential to any interpretation of oppression is made very clear by Frye's analysis of oppression. Given the context of patriarchy, it seems to be true almost by definition that differences in gender contribute to the oppression of women. People often respond to this by saying that, if it is true by definition that men oppress women within patriarchy, then there is nothing we can do about it. They totally ignore the obvious, and correct, response that we should dispose of patriarchy.

Frye stresses that those who are oppressed by a network of barriers share certain characteristics perceived to be "natural" to them and which render them members of a class. Thus, one is oppressed not as an individual (which Midgley and Hughes seem often to imply) but by "virtue of being a member of a group or category of people that is systematically reduced, molded, immobilized" (Frye, p. 8). The barriers of patriarchy: sex-role stereotyping, standards of femininity, compulsory heterosexuality, do this in a systematic way to women. Any one of these institutions viewed in isolation from the others can seem harmless, or at least not harmful to women as a class. After all, as mentioned above, not all women are battered. When viewed in context, and in light of the bird-cage analogy, we can see how these institutions together constitute oppression of women.

Given Frye's account of oppression, then, it seems we ought to be looking for the various bars of the patriarchy cage and the way they are interrelated, if we are to understand the nature of the oppression of women. Wife-beating, sexist language, pornography, and the like, are each seen as a crucial strand/bar of the cage. It becomes plausible to view women as a class (within the cage) and men as a class (on the exterior of the cage). As previously mentioned, Midgley and Hughes deny that there is such a clear-cut distinction (p. 97 and p. 103) on the grounds that

there are exceptions to the rule (a powerful woman, or an impotent man). Such exceptions apparently warrant the disposal of the entire theory on their view. In fact, these exceptions can themselves be explained by the theory. Radical feminists would wonder if the woman who takes sexual advantage of a man may be acting in self-defense. It may be her attempt at being the patriarchally defined "sexually liberated" woman. It is possible that she—having been victimized herself—has had to adjust to the patriarchal view that sex should be distant or removed from other emotions associated with love and commitment of some sort. It may be that she could not beat such attitudes about sex, and has attempted to "join" the tradition. More importantly, Midgley and Hughes propound a view which implies that women (as a class) are not oppressed. This means essentially that those individual women who somehow got a skimpy piece of the pie, were either simply unlucky or received such a portion because of factors of race or economic status: factors which have no relation to their being women at all. Insofar as Midgley and Hughes advocate this, they are perhaps best not referred to as "feminists." They are more appropriately referred to as liberals or perhaps socialists. It is not clear which. Midgley and Hughes appeal to the principle of fairness and a just distribution of benefits and burdens in their aim to rectify the situation of some/many women. In viewing oppression as the abuse of power, Midgley and Hughes are unable to account for the distribution of such power—prior to its abuse. That is, they cannot explain why some as opposed to others are in a position of power in the first place. One must be in a position of power before one can abuse it, obviously; nor can they explain why it is generally viewed as a good thing to be in a position of power, whether or not one abuses it.

Further, the fact that Midgley and Hughes adopt a narrow account of oppression, along with their refusal to see the various institutions of patriarchy as institutions of patriarchy and, thereby, part of the systematic oppression of women, allows them to say that rape, wife-beating, *etc.*, although indisputably wrong, are "not part of a discussion of *normal* problems...they are not the primary causes of discontent in *ordinary* life" (p. 127, my emphasis). For one thing, the wrongness of such acts is disputable within patriarchy. Consider, for instance, the myth surrounding rape. It is often assumed that women mean "yes" when they say "no"; that women find pleasure in their own pain and mutilation (and paradoxically, in their own death!); and that women at the very least "deserve" to be raped ("She went home with him, didn't she?" "That's what she gets for wearing tight pants!"). This myth makes it difficult to view women as victims of rape ("She loved it!"). Once you dispose of women's victimhood, you leave the

door open for rape being interpreted as an action between consenting adults. Many believe that this is sufficient to render any such act morally acceptable.¹

What is truly alarming about the claim which Midgley and Hughes make, is the ease in which they claim that these problems are not a part of "ordinary" life. It is not clear which women are "ordinary" here. It may be that Midgley and Hughes simply mean that many women, especially the privileged ones, do not have to worry about these things on a day to day basis. This is where Midgley and Hughes are mistaken. All women are ordinary from the perspective of patriarchy. No woman is immune to its threats. Whether one fears walking home alone at night, or whether one fears another beating from her husband, or whether one wonders how she can convince her husband to "let" her have a job, or whether one fears that one's views will not be taken seriously by one's academic colleagues; these concerns and fears have their source in a common pool of attitudes and customs which are oppressive to women. In the words of Frye:

Being a woman is...what selects me as a likely victim of sexual assault or harassment.... For any woman of any race or economic class, being a woman is significantly attached to whatever disadvantages and deprivations she suffers, be they great or small.

None of this is the case with respect to a person's being a man. Simply being a man is not what stands between him and a better job.... Being male is something he has going FOR him, even if race or class or age or disability is going against him. (Frye, p. 18)

The failure on the part of Midgley and Hughes to see this simple fact allows them to deny the significance of actions which lie at the opposite end of the spectrum of actual rape: wolf whistles, mild forms of sexual harassment, and so on. They advise women to stop being "paranoid" (p.150) for "mild cases of anything are mild" (p. 149). However, such mild cases are not harmless. They are indicative of the underlying, deep system of value which fosters certain attitudes towards women and these attitudes are the very ones which give rise to the more brutal forms of oppression. The message of a wolf whistle is that a woman is her body and that she is some THING to be consumed by men. It is a reminder of her perceived inferiority. That is harmful.

That such experiences (fear of rape, being whistled at) are experiences which ordinary women undergo in ordinary life leads radical feminists to believe that all women have a great deal in common. They will have certain experiences purely because they are women living in a

misogynist society.² Such experiences range from the more blatantly cultural ones (of wife-beating) to seemingly “purely biological” ones (of awareness of oneself as a reproductive being). There is no doubt that the mere process of menstruation raises concerns for women which men do not have. However, I believe it is cultural factors which make these concerns oppressive, and to that extent they can be altered. At this point, let me simply reiterate that women do have many things in common, including perspectives on life, which are significant and which are, to some degree, both a result of and a contributor to their oppression. Midgley and Hughes want to discredit this claim by emphasizing that different women experience their oppression differently, especially those women who are oppressed by virtue of their race and/or their economic status. Midgley and Hughes do seem to acknowledge at least some nontrivial commonalities among women. For example,

women do tend to find total disengagement harder, just as men find it harder to accept bonds. Even if this difference were produced only by culture (which it pretty certainly is not), it still poses a problem. (p. 140)

Indeed, as one reads Midgley and Hughes’ book, it appears that all sorts of commonalities, serious ones, exist among women (pp. 112, 133, 198, 201-202, 208, and 209). In their very discussion of the choices presented to women and their contention that many of these choices reflect false dichotomies which lead women to confusion, they must assume that women undergo the same (where “same” means “similar” and not “identical”) sorts of experiences. If they do not assume this, then the main premise of their book falls through: that there is a “woman’s point of view” (pp.39-40) and that this, among other things, renders women essentially different from men. This is the crucial premise in their argument that the concept of “equality” will not serve the feminist cause well. Further, Midgley and Hughes tell us that women and men differ essentially in character and that this results in a “universal division of men and women into separate groups, with distinct social roles” (p. 208). This seems to be inconsistent with their previous statement that there was no such clear-cut division between women and men. Midgley and Hughes justify their position by merely stipulating that this division cannot be viewed as “a case of the strong oppressing the weak, because that can be done without any division of roles at all” (p. 208). It is true that men could simply keep women literally in chains, but that would be inconvenient. It would be more efficacious to convince women (via the various systematically interconnected institutions of the bird cage) that certain roles (of servitude) are natural to them, that they fill such roles well,

and to reward them in some way (by calling them “virtuous” perhaps) for complying with them. That way, revolution is less likely to be a problem. Dominance can be manifested in numerous ways. It is likely that human male dominance is sustained by cultural forces. We need not look for similarities among human behaviour and the barring of the baboon’s teeth or the mating habits of apes, although male humans have been known to resort to these tactics when “reasoning” has failed.

In summation, I think Midgley and Hughes’ own account of the oppression of women is inconsistent with one of the main premises/themes of their book: that there is a woman’s point of view and that women are fundamentally different from men. I think that it is unfortunate that they have misrepresented the account of women’s oppression forwarded by many radical feminists, as it is precisely this account which could lend support to this main theme of their book.

1. It is interesting to note that the myth surrounding rape keeps company with other notions of patriarchal ideology such as “one ought not hit a lady.” Are these notions inconsistent? Some feminists believe that patriarchy conveys mixed messages which serve to keep everyone in a state of confusion and which, in turn, serves to sustain patriarchy. I do not believe the message is at all mixed. Consider, for instance, that rapists and child molesters are often roughed up—and sometimes killed—by their prison mates. One might think that this would indicate a repulsion on the part of these other prisoners towards the rapist or child molester because his act has shown a disrespect for a woman’s or child’s “person.” It is equally plausible that the repugnance these prisoners have toward the rapist or child molester arises from a sense of betrayal to the masculine conception of the “ideal” criminal. One ought not to beat on women and children, *not* because they are persons worthy of respect, because they are easy targets. A real criminal (man?) would “pick on someone his own size.” It is also plausible to view violence, from other prisoners directed as rapists and child molesters, as a battle over property rights. Women and children have traditionally been viewed as the property of men. The notion that one ought not beat on women and children because they are (only) women and children (as opposed to the notion that one ought not beat on anyone) is a prime example of the “phallic” morality which fuels patriarchy.
2. Not all experiences which women have in common will be relevant to a radical feminist political analysis of the plight of women. For instance, it is true that the menstrual cycle is in synchronization with the cycle of the moon. This obvious link with nature is truly a wonderful fact and it does render women “unique.” But this experience has political repercussions in only this minimal sense. It does not, as some may think, render women superior to men just as it should not (although in fact under patriarchy it does) serve to render women inferior to men. Removed from the context of patriarchy this fact is in itself neither politically significant nor insignificant. Social context is crucial in determining whether a given fact is either oppressive or liberating. The extent to which menstruation, a common experience among women, is a concern for feminist political thought is that under patriarchy menstruation has been viewed as a curse, a disease, and otherwise taboo, and consequently, makes life difficult for women.

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