

CONTESTED POSITIONS: MODERNITY, POSTMODERNITY, AND THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF SAINTLY ETHICS

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Several years ago, feminist theorist Nancy Hartsock illuminated the central weakness of postmodernist theory with a simple question: "'Why is it, exactly at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes 'problematic'?"¹ Although posed from a specifically feminist perspective, Hartsock's question touches the underlying regressive political tendencies of postmodernism which come to light most vividly in its treatment of Enlightenment conceptualizations of subjectivity, or human agency, and its role in the production of history. The repudiation of the subject and autonomous moral agency occupies a central place in postmodern thought. Its firm insistence on the 'death of the subject' has disturbing political and ethical implications not only for women and their struggles for freedom, but for any subjugated group. Rosi Braidotti's description of postmodernism's regressive and oppressive tendencies is valid beyond the concerns of an emancipatory feminist theory: "contemporary philosophical discussions on the death of the knowing subject...have the immediate effect of concealing and undermining the attempts of women to find a theoretical voice of their own...in order to deconstruct the subject one must first have gained the right to speak as one."²

A critical inquiry into the theoretical ambiguities and regressive political implications of the postmodernist dismissal of the subject may be most effectively, although not exclusively, undertaken by feminism. The theoretical ambiguities of postmodernist discourses are constituted by a conscious commitment to heterogeneity and difference on the one hand that is undercut by a totalizing and identitary logic on the other. This ambiguity emerges in those postmodernist treatments of alterity and Other(ness) which deny or ignore materialist insights of social analysis into the concrete workings of domination. With respect to feminism, the diverse and interlocking forms of domination of women (for example, on the levels of race, class, sexual orientation) are recognized as coalescing in a sustained, historical denial of women's autonomous subjectivity and moral agency. Integral to forms of domination and discrimination of women (or any other marginalized, subjugated group) is the refusal to acknowledge their full humanity which necessarily includes their autonomy, their right to speak for themselves and demand equal treatment with full participation in society. Only persons recognized and treated as full human beings can be viewed as ends, never as means, with the attendant rights to freely pursue their aspirations and life goals.

1 Nancy Hartsock, "Rethinking Modernism: Minority vs. Majority Theories," *Cultural Critique*, No. 7, (Fall 1987), p. 196.

2 Rosi Braidotti, "Patterns of Dissonance: Women and/in Philosophy", in *Feministische Philosophie*, ed. Herta Nagl-Docekal, Oldenbourg, Vienna/Munich: 1990, pp. 119-120. Cited in Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 236-237, n. 39.

The postmodernist denial of the ethical validity and theoretical coherence of subjectivity undermines the emancipatory aspirations of feminism by driving women further into the obscurity generated by empty constructions of alterity. The abstract and meaningless category of 'Other' is just as problematic for living women as its forerunner, 'Woman'. Both the concept of 'Woman' and the concept of 'Other' generate new mythologies that offer consolations for what is basically impotence to solve the growing problems of human misery and injustice. The real needs and social conditions that result in reduced lives for concrete women dissolve into invisibility in the abstract category 'Woman.' The concept of 'Other' is even less helpful as a means of understanding and addressing oppression because it is even less specific. As women fade into invisibility within the universal conceptual vacuity of 'Woman', so they become even further erased as concrete human beings with a variety of specific needs in the amorphous, all-inclusive nullity of the concept of 'Other.' The vaporous comprehensiveness of the 'generalized Other' obscures its exclusionary action toward the 'concrete other.'³ The repudiation of concepts of subjectivity and the postmodernist celebration of 'Other' blurs the locus of ethical responsibility while dismissing the need for social-political analysis. Without these, women's struggles against oppression are seriously compromised. *Who* struggles for freedom, and *who* is responsible for oppression, along with an inquiry into the conditions that produce oppressed and oppressor as such, are questions that cannot easily be asked in postmodernist discourses.

Feminist theory, then, is well positioned to mount a critique of postmodernist ethics precisely because the history of women is marked by a multiplicity of suppressions, the most notable of which is the sustained negation of their full humanity as autonomous, self-directed moral and social agents. The form of domination that erases the subjective agency of a human being is pivotal to all other forms of domination: non-persons have neither opportunity nor power to demand full egalitarian treatment. Their voices are silenced, trivialized and marginalized. Only when they demand to be heard and taken seriously as full human beings with as much right as anyone else to equal participation in society on all levels of experience and action, do they begin to claim their autonomous subjective agency.⁴ This struggle remains critical for many women in the striving for emancipation. These insights of a feminist theory that locates itself within the traditions of the Enlightenment and modernity lend themselves not only to a more expansive critique of postmodern themes, they also expose the conservative, regressive political implications at the heart of postmodernist thought. These implications are sharpened in a critical feminist analysis of the interrelated concepts of subjectivity, autonomy, and moral agency.

The question of subjecthood is deeply tied to questions of morality and ethical responsibility, so that questions of ethics are indivisible from political issues. In this respect I support the view of Richard Bernstein that, "we cannot understand ethics without thinking through our political commitments and responsibilities. And there is no understanding of politics that does not bring us back to ethics.

3 Seyla Benhabib, "The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Feminist Theory," *Feminism as Critique*, Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell, (eds.), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, pp.77-95.

4 This point is central to Franz Fanon's analysis of the efforts of the victims of colonialism to break free from internalized as well as external forces of domination. See *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, New York: Grove Press, 1963.

Ethics and politics as disciplines concerned with *praxis* are aspects of a unified practical philosophy."⁵ Ethical-political action, or praxis, can only be carried out by subjects, individuals who possess some understanding of themselves as makers of history, and as such, realize that the conditions of misery, injustice and oppression do not exist through ahistorical necessity, but by humanly produced contingency. This realization carries the potential to mobilize human beings to carry out acts of political resistance and social transformation that are animated by the ethical desire for "radically improving human existence."⁶ Such individuals enter into relationships of solidarity with other human beings in a conscious effort to bring about more reasonable, humane conditions of life, where people may pursue their aspirations in a material context of satisfied needs and through social-political structures that enable and support human beings becoming who they may be within their communities.

However, activities oriented to the actualization of human well-being, happiness and freedom cannot be realized within social contexts of injustice, unfreedom and want. Unless a social theory directed toward an analysis of the complex material conditions that weave oppression both throughout people's lives and within their personalities is at least attempted, there remains the constant danger of spinning illusions of liberation that are little more than varied reproductions of what is. Postmodernist theories which celebrate the 'death of man' as the death of the autonomous, self-reflective subject "undermine the feminist commitment to women's agency and sense of selfhood, to the reappropriation of women's own history in the name of an emancipated future, and to the exercise of radical social criticism which uncovers gender 'in all its endless variety and monotonous similarity.'"⁷ Protest and resistance of what is, in the name of what could be, requires the presence of individuals who can think independently and critically. According to Max Horkheimer, the growing tendency to "liquidating the individual" in modern culture constitutes the most serious threat to the "evolution toward the humane." The ability to resist, for Horkheimer, is constitutive of "true individuality."⁸

Concepts of justice, freedom, and happiness through the satisfaction of needs realized through egalitarian democratic political structures, and the primacy of the human being as an end in him/herself are part of the Enlightenment legacy which is disregarded by postmodernist critiques. These Enlightenment ideals, especially as they became radicalized in the revolutionary theory of Marx, are oriented toward a rational utopian hope in the possibility of a future society committed to the fulfilment of the material⁹ needs of all human beings. A rational utopian impulse is one that does

5 Richard J. Bernstein, The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992, p. 9.

6 Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," Critical Theory: Selected Essays, trans. Matthew O'Connell, New York: Continuum, 1972, p. 233.

7 Seyla Benhabib, "Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance", Praxis International, Volume 11, No. 2, July 1991, p. 146.

8 Max Horkheimer, Eclipse of Reason, New York: Continuum, 1947, pp. 156, 157, 161.

9 The term materialism requires some explanation. Although there is an enormous body of literature on the subject, I will refer to Marx's Theses on Feuerbach where he defines the "human essence" as "the ensemble of the social relations" (VI), and the materialism that informs his theory as arising out of "Human society, or socialized humanity."(X) Thus by materialism, Marx includes all dimensions of human experience and sensuous activity that are lived in the concrete conditions of human history, effecting human beings on all possible levels. This notion of materialism is quite opposed to reductionist notions that identify materialism with a vulgar empiricism.

not intend to fall behind the achievements of current productive forces and technological development, but rather seeks to humanize them by meeting human needs as opposed to the primary focus on the accumulation of wealth.

The emancipatory social theory of Karl Marx is also dismissed by postmodernist thinkers such as Jean-Francois Lyotard as another 'master narrative' of domination and legitimation. For postmodernists like Lyotard, "[t]he task has become, not to seek any revolutionary change, or even to articulate the political aspirations of a particular oppressed group, but to 'wage a war on totality'."¹⁰ The postmodernist critique and repudiation of Enlightenment values as so many 'totalizing discourses' rely on an equally totalizing condemnation of those values. The struggle to overcome concrete oppression is now displaced in favour of a struggle that pits one set of abstractions against another. The postmodernist interpretation of Enlightenment thought as mainly serving the purposes of a corrupt humanism centred around a Masterful Subject who dominates nature and everything living within it, reduces the Enlightenment to a one-sided rationality that Enlightenment traditions themselves have always contested. Such postmodernist critiques are carried out oblivious to the fact that "most people's lives are still...shaped by their lack of access to productive resources and their consequent need to sell their labour-power in order to live."¹¹

The postmodernist critique of the tendencies to power and domination inherent in Enlightenment concepts and discourses does not need to result in an outright rejection of Enlightenment ideas. What postmodernism ignores is the dialectic of enlightenment that is capable of generating critiques of its own self-betrayal where reason triumphed as mere technique and control, thereby undermining the practical rationality of freedom. Rather than a repudiation of enlightenment based on undifferentiated criticism, what is required is a critique of enlightenment that can "prepare the way for a positive notion of enlightenment which will release it from entanglement in blind domination."¹² Instead of this, postmodernism resolves the contradictions of enlightenment thought into a new mythology whose central theme is alterity and the Other. The intense and almost exclusive focus on alterity and Otherness displaces concrete human beings as the proper object of ethical thought and jettisons social analysis. The 'Other' has become a kind of conceptual burial ground of the very diversity and plurality of human experience it wishes to protect. Social theory and materialist analysis have given way to the construction of an ubiquitous, amorphous category that obscures and blunts insight into the multi-varied, interlocking, complex forms of domination.

The concept of 'Other' and 'Otherness' floating free of a materialist social analysis of domination results in the construction of abstract categories that tell us nothing about the living people who suffer nor why they do. This happens because these categories are merely formal and empty, concealing rather than revealing the dynamics of oppression that structure much of human experience. From a feminist perspective, the equation of 'woman' and 'Otherness' "deprives the feminist struggle of any kind of specificity. What is repressed is not *otherness*, but specific, historically constructed agents"--

10 Alex Callinicos, Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989, p. 86.

11 Ibid., p. 90.

12 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, trans. John Cumming, New York: Continuum, 1972, p. xvi.

in other words, *women*.¹³ The concealment of concrete women within the category of 'Other' occurs in part because of the repudiation of the subject and its dissolution into sheer alterity. Several feminist critiques of postmodernism have pointed this out, and are unwilling to engage in a wholesale repudiation of those Enlightenment values which make resistance and struggle against oppression possible. In the words of Toril Moi, "[t]he Enlightenment we seek to dismantle in the name of our political values is precisely a major source of such values."¹⁴

In order to bring about social change within historical circumstances, concepts of the individual and subjective agency are indispensable; as human beings create history, only human beings can change it. "Only a materialist analysis can provide a credible explanation of why the burden of Otherness has been placed on this or that particular group in a given society at a given time."¹⁵ A feminist materialist analysis needs to interrogate the annexation of women by 'Other'--which is basically no improvement on the abstract category of 'Woman' which also said nothing about women. In fact, the category of 'Woman' is a regulatory mechanism compelling conformity of women to its definition, with the result that no woman fit with its measure of real femininity. Abstract categories of 'Woman' and 'Other' operate by means of an identitary logic which colonizes human beings within its conceptual borders while mystifying the concrete realities of suffering. To reduce women to 'Other' and from there to provide an account of injustice that claims to be emancipatory is to erase women once more from history. "[S]imply to equate woman with otherness deprives the feminist struggle of any kind of specificity. What is repressed is not otherness, but specific, historically constructed agents."¹⁶

The strong critique of subjectivity with its ensuing rupture between ethical responsibility and political agency can be effectively interrogated from a feminist perspective. This is in part because women have historically suffered from being reduced to abstract categories of womanness or femaleness while being robbed of the opportunity to realize themselves as autonomous moral, political, and social agents. The severing of emancipation struggles from subjectivity and autonomy can only undermine and destroy the emancipatory process. In fact, the project of women's liberation is in danger of falling into "self-incoherence" and is unthinkable "without such a regulative principle of agency, autonomy, and selfhood"¹⁷.

A feminist challenge to postmodernist rejections of Enlightenment notions of autonomy and subjectivity allows for a deeper interrogation of the ethical and political implications of postmodernism itself. In many respects, postmodernist ethics disintegrates into theoretical incoherence and political conservatism largely because of its hostile treatment of the autonomous subject, or self, as well as its monolithic view of reason as identical with instrumental, calculative rationality. Edith Wyschogrod's *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* provides an illuminating example of some of the problems which arise in such postmodernist critiques. In contrast to Wyschogrod, the critical reconstruction of Jürgen Habermas' discourse ethics and

13 Toril Moi, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Style: Recent Feminist Criticism in the United States", Cultural Critique, Number 9, Spring 1988, p. 12.

14 Ibid., p. 17.

15 Ibid., p. 12.

16 Ibid.

17 Seyla Benhabib, "Feminism and Postmodernism", p. 140.

communicative rationality undertaken by Seyla Benhabib address some concerns of postmodernism without sacrificing the autonomous subject which is so crucial to emancipatory discourses and social theories.

Although Wyschogrod's proposal that saintly lives and hagiographic texts offer insights that can help to bridge the divide between moral theory and practice has nothing explicitly to do with feminism, nonetheless reading her work from a feminist perspective reveals some of the deeper, hidden problems within her moral theorizing. Wyschogrod argues that saintly narratives demonstrate "what moral lives are," yielding insights into "how one might go about living a moral life while still avoiding the two difficulties associated with moral theory:" one the one hand, the "gap between theory and practice," and on the other, the "incommensurate propositions" of moral theories which fail to result in the production of "moral dispositions."¹⁸ The way she resolves the contradiction between moral theories and practices is to situate the 'saint' with respect to 'the Other' such that the saint, motivated by an excessive desire to negate the destitution and lack that defines the Other as such, puts him/herself "totally at the disposal of the Other."¹⁹

This "radical saintly generosity" which enacts the "postmodern expression of excessive desire...on behalf of the Other...seeks the cessation of another's suffering and the birth of another's joy."²⁰ The saint is motivated by the recognition of the "primacy of the other person" which arises out of the "dissolution of self-interest;" saintly life is defined as "compassion for the Other, irrespective of cost to the saint," based on a two-fold negation of self and the desire to eradicate the Other's want.²¹ Wyschogrod, in true postmodernist fashion, emphasizes repeatedly that saintly self-sacrifice is rooted in the negation of selfhood and subjectivity as such, so that the principle of the individual subject is replaced by a postmodern hagiography of "saintly singularity"²². The saint is a "radical altruist, one who is dedicated to the alleviation of the suffering of others irrespective of the cost to herself/himself."²³ Read from a feminist perspective which is fully aware of how self-sacrifice on behalf of others has been and remains a central feature of women's suppression, Wyschogrod's saints unwittingly provide the justification for women's oppressed condition.

The core of Wyschogrod's moral theory is structured in terms of a reverse subjugation where the moral actor--insofar as there can be an 'actor' of any kind--totally submits to the "primacy of the Other;" in her view, this is the only way that human existence might be preserved in "the face of the possible extinction of humankind."²⁴ Anticipating the critique that her moral theory "grounds ethical relations in self-humiliation," she counters with, "I am not only commanded by the Other but am also capable of issuing commands: I am, as it were, commanded to command the Other to command me."²⁵ Not only for women, but all historically oppressed people, this moral imperative entrenches

18 Edith Wyschogrod, Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 4.

19 Ibid., p. xiv.

20 Ibid., p. xxiv.

21 Ibid., xiv; xxii, xxiii.

22 Ibid., p. 235.

23 Ibid., p. 58.

24 Edith Wyschogrod, "Man-Made Mass Death: Shifting Concepts of Community", Journal of the American Academy of Religion, LVIII/2, p. 174; 173.

25 Ibid., p. 174.

and legitimates their subjugated condition by asking them to collude with it: the oppressed must 'command' that they be harnessed into submissiveness. Under the widespread conditions of unfreedom and domination, this is what altruistic service too often looks like for oppressed people, especially women. A 'good' wife and mother, for example, serves her husband and family irrespective to the cost to herself and the realization of her aspirations independent of family life. Furthermore, Wyschogrod's argument in favour of a "radical altruism" depends upon a self-humiliation that is only possible through the prior eradication of the subject and concepts of subjectivity. In her moral universe, moral agency dissolves into a 'saintly singularity' where moral responsibility is "without agency" or "prior to agency;" there is "no I who is the subject of responsibility."²⁶

The substitution of alterity and Other[ness] that takes precedence over the existence of a coherent concept of self, subject or autonomous agency in Wyschogrod and postmodernist ideas in general, generates an obfuscating abstraction that undermines the very ethical aim that is professed: the alleviation of human suffering. The moral command of the abstract Other for self-abasing and self-erasing devotion conceals and is predicated upon a deeper rupture in solidarity with the concrete other which is its precondition. The category 'Other' is a generalized Other, a conceptual 'black hole' or vortex into which living human beings in their sensuous existence and life activities are drawn and disappear. The generalized, abstract Other is an acontextual, unsituated entity which is bereft of the aid of an immanent critique of the social conditions that produce the destitute and lacking 'Other' as such. Wyschogrod's Other exists so far beyond considerations of social theory that the dynamics of gender domination become irrelevant to the alleviation of his/her suffering. "The hagiographic body...is a neuter. No sexual identity can be inscribed on its surface because the saintly body accommodates all sexual identities...and none. The disinterested love of the Other requires the totality of the body of the one who loves as an ever shifting point of reference."²⁷ The disavowal of gender refuses to recognize and analyze gender as source of domination and of the suffering endured by most women throughout history. A critique of the dynamics of gender domination requires an immanent critique of concrete human beings in their particular circumstances, which is exactly what Wyschogrod refuses. Without a recognition of the needs and experience of the concrete other, there is no basis for consideration of the moral dignity of the generalized Other, which means that Other remains an empty construct utterly detached from human reality. Wyschogrod does not ask that we communicate with the Other and hear him/her articulate his/her needs and aspirations for a fulfilled life. Her moral theory is at its root non-relational, non-dialogical and profoundly anti-humanist insofar as the object of moral concern is an empty, formal Other bereft of human characteristics.

Concepts of responsibility without subjects, of unquestioning devotion to the Other irrespective of the cost to the self (which doesn't exist in any case), proposals for a radical altruism without social analysis and thus without material context, reinscribes rather than challenges domination. Wyschogrod fails, or perhaps even refuses, to ask the question as to what submitting oneself to the needs of the Other which take complete precedence over everything else means under current social

²⁶ Ibid., p. 174.

²⁷ Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*, p. 116.

conditions of exploitation and widespread injustice. More specifically, she does not consider what the absolute command to serve the Other means for women suffering from sexist practices inherent in culture, society and the family. Within the conditions of injustice and unfreedom, moral commands to put oneself completely at the disposal of the Other do not alleviate the suffering of women, they merely entrench and strengthen it. Wyschogrod's insistence on saintly self-sacrifice "has its hazards in a context of inequality."²⁸ Since she ignores the fact that all relationships are mediated by social conditions and arrangements of power, Wyschogrod fails to see that her idea of saintly service can easily become another instrument for exercising domination over vast numbers of people.

The postmodern revisioning of moral theory outlined by Wyschogrod is based on a broad denial of subjectivity which includes an identifiable, personal, gendered and situated self without which there is no possibility of ethics. There is no "responsibility without agency," as Wyschogrod claims. While her critique of subjectivity in terms of a masterful, dominating monadic Self is well taken, this is not the only concept of subjectivity bequeathed by the Enlightenment. Wyschogrod overlooks possibilities for reconstructed notions of subjectivity as autonomous, self-reflexive and interactional which are historically situated and relational. This concept of the subject goes back at least to Hegel and Marx. Like many postmodernist thinkers, Wyschogrod identifies Enlightenment concepts of subjectivity exclusively in terms of a transcendental, masterful Self without considering that such a simple identification is based on a reductionist concept that borders on caricature. In some respects, her notion of 'Other' reflects the very logic of Enlightenment subjectivity she criticizes in that her 'Other' is an identitary, cover concept that elides the very differences and plurality of diversity she intends to promote.

One of the more troubling aspects of Wyschogrod's treatment of subjectivity, which is a common feature in many postmodernist thinkers²⁹, relates to the anti-humanist tenor of her discourse. If saintly action requires a radical effacement of the self, one may well wonder "not at how much [the saint] loves morality, but at how little [he/she] loves" him/herself³⁰. If one repudiates or denies oneself, from where does one find the capacity to love the other? According to Michel Foucault, "One must not have the care for others precede the care for self,"³¹ since caring for the self is connected with a self-knowledge that in turn yields knowledge about one's duties and responsibilities to and for others. Knowing oneself is connected with knowing oneself-in-relation, which harkens back to Marx's definition of 'human essence' in the sixth thesis on Feuerbach as "the ensemble of the social relations." For Foucault, domination and tyranny over others "comes from the fact that one did not care for one's self and that one has become a slave to his desires. But if you care for yourself correctly...you cannot abuse your power over others."³² As well, if one has no sense of self or autonomous moral agency, it can hardly be expected that one could perceive the selfhood of others which demands that every 'you' be treated as another 'I'. I-you relations of reciprocity are

28 Genevieve Lloyd, "Reason, Gender, and Morality", *Social Research*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (Autumn 1983), p. 512.

29 See, for example, Nancy Fraser's comment on the language of Judith Butler in "False Antithesis: A Response to Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler", *Praxis International*, Volume 11, No. 2, July, 1991, p. 170.

30 Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume LXXIX, No. 8, August 1982, p. 424.

31 Michel Foucault, "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom." p. 7.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

expressed in a universal interactionism or intersubjectivism where the 'I' takes as a binding universal moral imperative that the 'you' be treated as the 'I' would wish to be treated. In this way the ethical demand to treat human beings as ends preserves particularity and guarantees it through the establishment of universal value imperatives of justice and fairness.

An interactionist, intersubjective ethical relationship raises another question that must be addressed. That is, by what means can one know that one is acting ethically, and that one's ethical actions toward others are genuinely ethical? How can one know that the other person actually benefits from one's actions, and that the actions directed toward the alleviation of the suffering of another person is not motivated more by that person's desire to be saintly than by the real needs and desires of the one who is the object of the radical altruism called for by Wyschogrod? The most striking aspect of the relation between the saint and the Other envisioned by Wyschogrod is the silence that exists between them. Wyschogrod's concept of radical altruism does not acknowledge the need for discursive relations between saint and sufferer; it is as if the condition of destitution of the Other speaks for itself and is sufficient in itself. Thus, it is not necessary that the Other articulates how he/she sees the world nor say what would satisfy her/his need. Moreover, there is no possibility to contest the legitimacy of certain needs nor submit them to critical scrutiny.

For Wyschogrod, the mere existence of need generates its own command to satisfaction. In the absence of such dialogue, the radical altruism Wyschogrod proposes could become a 'benevolent' version of authoritarian action, where the saint assumes that he/she knows exactly what the Other requires, proceeding from the saint's assumptions of what the Other needs, not what the Other says he/she needs. Under these conditions, there is the danger that the saint becomes missionary, and that the Other's misery and need becomes yet another site of colonization. On the other hand, the uncritical acceptance of the legitimacy of need could also generate a reverse tyranny of demands that could be harmful to the larger community where the destitute person dwells. Wyschogrod's remark that "I take the sphere of ethics to be a holding open of a discursive and ontic space for becoming, specifically the becoming of moral change,"³³ does nothing to resolve the problem of the absence of a discursive, intersubjective *relationship* between the saint and the Other.

Intersubjectivity is impossible in Wyschogrod's saintly morality, because there are no subjects to engage in such a relation. No matter what efforts the saint may undertake to alleviate the distress of the Other, in the absence of dialogue and the mutual understanding that may be achieved by it, the Other provides little more than an object field of the saint's desire. The constitution of Other *as destitute* renders the saint possible, while the saint requires the Other *as destitute* in order to be constituted *as saint*. One can only wonder whose interests are being served in this way.

Ethics has less to do with creating a discursive *space* than with establishing a discursive *relationship*. Language and the dialogue that takes place between self and other "inscribes the gap between I and Thou"³⁴ through intersubjective relations mediated by democratic, egalitarian social structures. The relationship between care of the self and care of others requires a well-developed

33 Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*, p. 55.

34 Jürgen Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, trans. Ciaran P. Cronin, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993, p. 143.

critical self-reflexivity which indicates an ability to submit one's actions and motives with respect to others to rational self-scrutiny, aided by attending to the views of others about one's actions toward them. This kind of discursive, interactional activity can only occur through free dialogue among the members of a given community. Postmodern ideas of 'responsibility without agency' mystify ethics and cloud 'right relations' between human beings. In the absence of a "coherent sense of self" where "autonomy and solidarity"³⁵ coalesce, moral accountability and responsibility evaporate. Devotion and care can themselves become forms of domination and control in the absence of intersubjective communication, so that the saint decides how and why the Other suffers and what needs to be done irrespective of what the suffering person thinks about his/her own condition. On the other hand, a dialogical, intersubjective relationship "makes harmony between the integration of autonomy and devotion to others possible for us--in other words, a reconciliation that does not efface differences."³⁶

A further problem with Wyschogrod's postmodern moral theory is that the Other is not only an abstract 'Other', it is also an undifferentiated 'Other.' The Other of saintly response conceals the living reality of suffering others whose experiences and identities constitute a diversity and plurality of desires and needs as broad as the spectrum of human experiences themselves. Wyschogrod's designation of 'lack' and 'destitution,' which constitutes the basic attributes of the 'Other' are not even attributes in the sense of characteristics. Rather, they are indicators of a social condition which give no clue as to the subjective identities of the inhabitants of the category 'Other' or the varying degrees of their suffering. Who these Others are and why and by what means they suffer is a question Wyschogrod never poses. However, 'destitution' and 'lack' are the preconditions for saintly response and the exercise of saintly 'desire;' without the existence of the *destitute* Other, the saint could not exist. As the destitute Other provides the ground of the possibility and objective field of saintly action, the Other becomes a necessary ideal whereby its equally ideal counterpart--the saint--exists at all. The eradication of the material conditions that produce destitution and lack would bring about the eradication of the saint as well. In the absence of concrete, material analysis of the conditions of suffering in particular contexts along with the failure to consider the hierarchy of power which exists among and within oppressed groups, suffering human beings remain concealed and frozen within abstract, vague categories of Other which produce little more than idealizations of suffering. In this way, the needs of real human beings and the social, economic and political conditions that produce concrete misery disappear and dissolve into idealizations of destitution and lack. The idealized destitute Other as object of saintly solidarity generates and requires a severing of solidarity with concrete others.

Addressing the issues that threaten the "preservation of human existence"³⁷ that justifiably concern Wyschogrod demands a moral theory that cannot afford to dismiss notions of the subject, autonomy, reason, and justice as 'master concepts.' As suggested earlier, like many postmodernist thinkers, Wyschogrod reduces the Enlightenment and its legacies in modernity to a monolithic block of oppressive forces, where reason is identical with and confined to instrumental, technical rationality

35 Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, p. 198.

36 Jürgen Habermas, *Justification and Application*, pp. 143-144.

37 Edith Wyschogrod, "Man-Made Mass Death", p. 173.

of the domination of nature. From this perspective, theory is nothing more than a "body of true propositions" producing a "master discipline for interpreting being" that annihilates difference.³⁸ The critique of reason as identical with calculation and technique, and knowledge as the mere exercise of power over the human and non-human world, is part of the counterdiscourse of modernity that is generated out of the logic of modernity itself. The idea of the autonomous subject possessing the ability to use his/her own understanding "without the guidance from another," with the "courage to use [his/her] own understanding" that Immanuel Kant formulated as the "motto of enlightenment,"³⁹ is the basis of the possibility of ethics and political action capable of challenging the status quo. The Enlightenment focus on human beings finds its radicalization in the centrality of notions of human freedom, justice, solidarity and happiness. These notions need to be reconstructed in the light of contemporary needs and human experience, not rejected.

In a time when the credibility of theological and philosophical idealisms and their consolations remains radically questioned and where heteronomous authority has lost widespread endorsement, the challenge posed by modernity requires that we create normativity and individual and social identity from out of ourselves. According to Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; *it has to create its normativity out of itself*."⁴⁰ Under these conditions, the autonomous subject is the source of resistance and protest, the locus of change that has the possibility to orient history to the prevailing norms of justice and peace. Not the mastering subject championing an abstract humanism, but the concrete, situated and gendered subject of history in dialogue with other subjects treated and recognized as such has the power to realize the longing for "purer and freer conditions," as Hegel observed.⁴¹

The resolution of global problems such as man-made mass death and poverty cannot take place through appeals to radical altruism and devotion to alterity that direct the saintly actions advocated by Wyschogrod. The position of saint and destitute Other is a non-dialectical, non-discursive and non-relational positioning that cannot address the condition of human beings in modernity because there are no concrete human beings to address. A more adequate moral theory addresses itself to establishing moral relationships that challenge us all to cultivate what Seyla Benhabib calls an "enlarged mentality" that enables us to see the world from the "standpoint of others". This ability can only be cultivated through a commitment to relating to others through a sustained, continuing 'conversation' as a daily life practice.⁴² The ethical commitment to sustained dialogue as a procedural value allows for questions of justice and need to be articulated and heard. It also requires action oriented to bringing about the social and political structures that allow dialogue to occur.

This is an approach to moral theory as a "critical discourse theory" whose basic presumption promotes the "radical democratization" of discursive processes, where the locus of moral discourse

38 Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*, pp. 132ff.

39 Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?", *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983, p. 41.

40 Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990, p. 7.

41 G.W.F. Hegel, cited in Habermas, *Ibid.*, n. 13, p. 390.

42 *The Communicative Ethics Controversy*, Seyla Benhabib and Fred Dallmayr, (eds.), Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990, p. 346.

is not exclusively in the arena of public discussion (although this is also necessary) but is situated more in "the continuation of ordinary moral conversations" whereby we exercise the ethical commitment to appropriate the concrete other's point of view.⁴³ Relations structured as dialogical and intersubjective, which include an ongoing commitment and conscious effort to see the world from another's perspective results in a contextual, shared negotiation of what is best for human beings in their communities. Such a process requires that we attend closely to difference and particularity, so that we do not assume what the other needs based on *our* interpretation of his/her destitution and lack. As well, dialogue under the conditions of free intersubjectivity allows for a critical discernment that is capable of adjudicating norms.

With these considerations we may begin to see an alternative to postmodernist ethics that does not depend upon a repudiation of Enlightenment ideas which themselves allow for ethical action under the conditions of modernity. Wyschogrod's legitimate concern with formulating an ethics which can address human need without engaging in practices of domination is not well served by a rejection of moral agency in favour of the primacy of alterity in the name of an abstract Other. Wyschogrod does not offer religious consolations in the traditional sense by turning to established moral theology as providing possible ways of resolving the ethical dilemma of bridging ethical theory and practice. Her critical suspicion of master narratives and unifying reason could not allow her to do this. However, the unifying power of an instrumental rationality and totalizing discourse that she seeks to overcome is replaced in her thought by the unifying power of alterity which is the former's equivalent. Alterity and Other[ness] become conceptual entities of totality that replace and mirror the totalizing rationality that Wyschogrod identifies without reservation as definitive of Enlightenment thought and moral theory.

Postmodernist condemnations of Enlightenment discourses which stand "under the sign of subjective freedom"⁴⁴ become trapped in their own aporias because their attempt to dismantle totalizing theories result in their reconstruction in a new guise. Although the possibilities for human freedom championed by the Enlightenment have been seriously weakened by the Enlightenment's self-betrayal, this does not mean that its humanistic ideals are completely bankrupt and without hope. The Masterful Subject of instrumental reason must give way to the situated, gendered, and interactional self of communicative rationality and shared discourse. The abstract humanism that produced the monadic, transcendental moral subject of Kantian ethics need not be totally abandoned, but reconstructed in terms of a concrete humanism that promotes the dialogical, particular and relational individual as an end in him/herself that can never be treated as an instrumental means to a non-human purpose. Such a reconstruction of the subject requires a corresponding set of social conditions and arrangements whereby this form of subjectivity may be realized. That is why an ethics that aspires to any degree of adequacy to address the needs of contemporary human beings requires a material social analysis. Thus, ethics and politics are interlinked activities that cannot be adequately pursued in isolation from each other. A postmodernist ethics which abandons many of these Enlightenment themes and their potential reconstruction by placing its exclusive focus on abstract notions of alterity resolve one contradiction

43 Ibid., p. 353; 358.

44 Jürgen Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, p. 83.

in favour of another, thus abandoning a politics and ethical practice of intersubjective engagement for the safer ground attained by withdrawal and retreat.

Many people genuinely do not wish to be saints, and it is probable that some who achieve or aspire to sainthood have never felt much temptation to be human beings.

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