

Beyond a Master or Slave Morality

An Engagement with Feminist Conceptions of Power

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ABSTRACT

This thesis confronts a fundamental dilemma at the centre of the feminist engagement with power: how to unmask and challenge domination without denying the capacity of oppressed subjects. It demonstrates how second-wave feminist approaches to power, whether domination or empowerment focused, were constrained by gender difference. Both viewed domination as being exercised exclusively by men; consequently, domination was given a moral value as 'evil' because it was primarily understood as an external, dangerous and even monstrous force that women were subject to but not participators in. As a result, women's complicity in domination went unacknowledged; at the same time, the potential for agency was limited to benign forms of empowerment cleansed of dominative power.

Feminist criticism of this polemical opposition to domination has been widespread, but the focus of this thesis is on critiques made in the late 20th century, in particular by Wendy Brown, which aligned with Friedrich Nietzsche's theory of slave morality and the will-to-power evident in *ressentiment*. For Brown, *ressentiment* underpins feminist approaches to power but also fundamentally limits them: revaluing powerlessness as moral virtue in order to mount a critique of domination reflects a fear of power and a reluctance to exert it. This thesis builds on Brown's account, further demonstrating how *ressentiment* informed and weakened feminist accounts of power within and beyond the second-wave. However, it rejects Brown's contention that feminists must adopt a postmodern-inspired dismissal of identity that entails substituting 'moral' claims against domination with contested 'political' debate, in order to overcome *ressentiment*. It is argued that far from alleviating *ressentiment*, postmodern imperatives provide fertile ground for it to flourish. Moreover, feminism should not have to jettison all normative dimensions from its engagement with power.

By creatively re-working and synthesizing the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, this thesis proposes an alternative basis for a feminist moral opposition to domination. Nietzsche's distinction between 'bad' and 'evil' in the master and slave moralities is enlisted to better define the normative dimensions of Foucault's work, challenging the widely-held view that his approach to power is morally neutral. It is argued that Foucault follows Nietzsche to debunk the evil nature of domination, but departs from him by remaining committed through all stages of his work to unmasking and challenging domination and its bad effects. Foucault's greater compassion for the slave means that he does not celebrate the will-to-power beneath all types of power, instead differentiating between them and seeking to limit the most dominative forms that restrict the relative powers of all subjects. The original contribution this thesis makes to the feminist engagement with power is to re-conceptualise Foucault's opposition to domination as the basis for an alternative moral position; one that extends beyond either a masterly or slavish approach. When domination is explicitly opposed as morally 'bad' but not 'evil', and the complicit and accountable feminist subject is embraced as 'good', it is possible for feminist theorists to identify and challenge the negative forms of power *over* as domination and account for the oppression of women, without sacrificing the idea of a female subject with the power *to* act individually and *with* others.

DECLARATION

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Kylie Heneker
6 September 2017

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