

Laura Lyn Inglis and Peter K. Steinfeld (Editors)

Old dead white men's philosophy

AMHERST, NEW YORK : HUMANITY BOOKS, 2000

Reviewed by Alison Stone

ISBN: 1573928232

Inglis and Steinfeld read philosophers' explicit arguments and values as premised on the suppression of an alternative, woman-centered, form of wisdom, which they aim to rearticulate or 're-member'. They see this alternative as a 'subverse' which can be accessed through the overt text, by tracing how the overt text denies or precludes it.

Inglis and Steinfeld's book is an unusual and original addition to the expanding area of feminist history of philosophy, focusing deliberately on mainstream texts by male authors (Plato, Anselm, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger). Informed by hermeneutics, they propose that multiple readings of texts are possible, although these must be informed by what the texts actually say. Inglis and Steinfeld draw, more specifically, on the interpretive method of those feminist theologians who have read the bible as intentionally rejecting the 'woman-affirming religious traditions' (xi) that pre-existed Hebrew culture. Similarly, Inglis and Steinfeld read philosophers' explicit arguments and values as premised on the suppression of an alternative, woman-centered, form of wisdom, which they aim to rearticulate or 're-member'. They see this alternative as a 'subverse' which can be accessed through the overt text, by tracing how the overt text denies or precludes it.

Inglis and Steinfeld's approach departs interestingly from current trends within feminist history of philosophy. As Genevieve Lloyd has recently noted (2002), feminist historians of philosophy have shifted away from analyzing the 'masculinism' of traditional texts—their reliance on networks of symbolism which privilege qualities understood as male or masculine (such as mind or reason). Instead, over the 1990s, feminist scholars have increasingly studied how traditional texts regularly revalue symbolically female elements (such as body or emotion), providing a positive starting-point for contemporary feminist theorizing. In contrast, Inglis and Steinfeld maintain that the canonical texts are masculinist, predicated on the suppression of 'woman-centered' cultural, religious, and epistemic traditions. But since the pattern of this suppression provides information about what is suppressed, canonical texts still provide a starting-point for fleshing out an idea of a culture 'based on women's truth, not men's' (197). Canonical texts are fruitful for feminism not because they intermittently revalue the female but, ironically, because they *deny* women's culture.

Inglis and Steinfeld's interpretive method becomes clearer in the course of their readings. Beginning with Plato's *Republic*, they identify two places where he defines philosophy in opposition to female-centered religious traditions. The first is when Socrates distances himself—as a rational philosopher—from the surrounding festival of Bendis (Dionysus' Thracian wife), which was associatively linked to the earlier women's mysteries. The second is the myth of the cave. According to Inglis and Steinfeld, in the Greek context, Plato's cave would have suggested the temple and cave complex where the Eleusinian mysteries (recreating Persephone's and

Demeter's experiences with death) took place. In recommending that we leave the cave, Plato is urging us to transcend mortality, obscurity and mystery, and forms of knowing that require sensory, bodily, participation. Thus, by tracing what Plato wishes to overcome, and seeing that he associates it with women's mysteries, Inglis and Steinfeld reconstruct an idea of these mysteries and, by extension, of women's culture as premised on a mode of knowing that is not narrowly intellectual but learns, through bodily experience, of the link between birth and death.

Perhaps Inglis and Steinfeld's most creative reading is that of Anselm's ontological argument, which is relatively under-examined within feminist philosophy. Inglis and Steinfeld argue that Anselm's argument effectively has two parts: (1) that God exists; (2) that he is the traditional Christian God. Anselm only really provides a proof of (1) (that God, by definition, is that than which nothing greater can be conceived, so cannot exist only in thought). Anselm simply assumes that this greatest being is the Christian God. To support this assumption, he interprets 'greatness' as superiority in the social hierarchy and in the great chain of being as envisaged by Christianity (for instance, he equates greatness with the independence characteristic of an autocratic sovereign). However, Inglis and Steinfeld show, some of Anselm's prayers and meditations attribute feminine features to God. Yet ultimately he rejects the idea of a female deity, due to women's association with mortality and everyday labor. Against Anselm, Inglis and Steinfeld suggest that the 'greatest' being can plausibly be reinterpreted as a Goddess who is 'greatest' in being central to cycles of death and rebirth, and in being embodied in all-encompassing nature. Again, then, Inglis and Steinfeld analyze Anselm's overt argument for the Christian God, tracing its predication on the denial of a greatest female being, and of mortality and everydayness, and using these denials to sketch an alternative faith in a female divinity. As they state, though, they are partly building on hints of a female deity that Anselm's non-discursive writings offer. One therefore wonders whether their reading could be recast as eliciting ambiguities, moments of revaluing the female, that occur *within* Anselm's texts.

Inglis and Steinfeld next turn to Kierkegaard, focusing on his contrast between the genius and the apostle. Kierkegaard's genius initiates social change, adopting a standpoint which rejects and negates existing social structures. Feminists, then, are geniuses: they cannot 'participate in the structures of meaning that inform our cultural life' (109) but must negate these. Kierkegaard, however, sees the apostle as the higher type since apostles have faith; faith reveals that everyday life is ultimately meaningless anyway, so that social change is unnecessary. Inglis and Steinfeld infer that 'Kierkegaard is very close to making his religious system mirror a patriarchal social system' (114). But, they argue, his conception of faith contradicts itself here: if the religious is to be fully separate from the 'ethical' (everyday social life), as Kierkegaard wishes, then the religious must *oppose* existing social arrangements, to avoid being absorbed by them. Developing this, Inglis and Steinfeld again propose a socially critical, feminist, religion that reconceives God as female. Again, here it seems that their reading of Kierkegaard works towards an alternative faith which he does not deny as such but which, rather, is implied by his own insistence on the ethical/religious disjunction. Moreover, the woman-centered religion pictured in this chapter is not obviously compatible with that envisaged in preceding chapters. Can one simultaneously value both critical, negative, opposition to everyday structures of meaning *and* everyday, embodied, life? Inglis and Steinfeld need to integrate their ideas concerning a female culture more coherently.

The next chapter, on Nietzsche, is arguably weakest. Inglis and Steinfeld contend that Nietzsche aims to restore ancient hierarchies by alerting the ‘strong’ to the dangers posed by the weak—paradigmatically, women—and their values of compassion and gentleness. He hopes to prompt the strong to fight back; although the masters can never decisively vanquish the weak, they need to struggle unendingly against them. This struggle is, simultaneously, against women and their ordinary, small, everyday lives—which Inglis and Steinfeld attempt to reclaim. This reading of Nietzsche is problematic, firstly, because it assumes that he simply supports the ancient warrior-caste and their descendants, whereas he actually values the asceticism and psychological complexity that the weak have introduced into humanity over the course of history. Secondly, Inglis and Steinfeld do not substantially engage with recent feminist interpretations of Nietzsche, which highlight the ironies and ambiguities in his statements on women. Although Inglis and Steinfeld consider Irigaray’s readings of Nietzsche, they accuse her of espousing his elitist values and remaining ‘within the circle created by men’s meanings’ (142). Irigaray could reasonably reply that she is responding to ambiguities within Nietzsche which Inglis and Steinfeld overlook.

Finally, Inglis and Steinfeld discuss the later Heidegger’s attempt to undo the meaninglessness of modern western life by letting language reverberate with the original meanings sedimented within it, and returning to the sources of these meanings in pre-Socratic Greek poetry/thought. Heidegger teases out from poetic language traces of three gods – Hercules, Dionysus, and Christ – who no longer hold for us their former meaning. But, Inglis and Steinfeld object, each of these gods is ‘symbolically tied to myths of the overcoming of the Goddess’ (181): Hercules physically defeats her in various incarnations, Dionysus appropriates her, and Christ provides a gathering-point for men. Because Heidegger takes patriarchy for granted, he does not try to return to the meanings of pre-patriarchal cultures against which these male gods fought. This undermines Heidegger’s own project: since the male gods existed only to defeat the goddess, they no longer have a function and cannot be restored to us. However, because the gods valued by Heidegger oppose women-centered cultures, his work, again, allows Inglis and Steinfeld to identify the nature of those cultures by contrast and so to conceptualize an alternative to patriarchal religion.

Inglis and Steinfeld’s interpretive approach has problems. Firstly, their view that canonical texts are fully masculinist or patriarchal can be limiting: partly because their alternative is sometimes suggested or implied *by* those texts, and partly because Inglis and Steinfeld neglect positive contributions which some texts (such as Nietzsche’s) might make. Secondly, since they aim to draw out a positive vision of a woman-centered culture—a religious culture in which women are bearers of truth, wisdom, and positive values—they should expound this vision more systematically and consider the problems of essentialism that it raises. Are all women to identify their ways of being and knowing as participation in those of the Goddess? Must all women subscribe to the same values and cognitive practices? Such questions go unanswered. Despite these difficulties, *Old Dead White Men’s Philosophy* remains an original, lively, book which contributes provocatively and imaginatively to feminist interpretation of the history of philosophy.

Alison Stone is a reader in European philosophy at Lancaster University, UK. She is the author of *Petrified Intelligence: Nature in Hegel's Philosophy* (SUNY Press, 2004), *Luce Irigaray and the Philosophy of Sexual Difference* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), and *An Introduction to Feminist Philosophy* (Polity Press, 2007). Her most recent book *Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Maternal Subjectivity* was published by Routledge in late 2011. (a.stone@lancaster.ac.uk)