Resisting Essence

Kristeva's Process Philosophy

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A familiar criticism leveled against Julia Kristeva's philosophy is that it is essentialist.[1]. Feminist critics such as Nancy Fraser, Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, and Toril Moi take issue with Kristeva's conceptions of the *chora*, maternity, and the semiotic arguing that in invoking these Kristeva is positing some female essence. Critics link her idea of the *chora* with a maternal receptacle, which they link with her semiotic aspect of signification and with woman. They make claims about Kristeva's supposed "compulsory maternity," about her quietude in the face of an "implacable symbolic structure." The concern among many feminists is that in Kristeva's philosophy woman is linked necessarily with the maternal and that she is powerless to change a male-driven symbolic order.

"Ahistorical, biologically reductive, . . . universalist—the list of crimes of which Kristeva is found guilty, under the guise of essentialism, abounds," notes Tina Chanter (Oliver 1993a, 182). The charges revolve around two points. One is that Kristeva works within a psychoanalytic model, which many critics take to be patent proof that she accepts the sex roles that psychoanalytic theory recognizes. Accordingly, Chris Weedon criticizes Kristeva on the grounds that "to take on the Freudian and Lacanian models is implicitly to accept the Freudian principles of psycho-sexual development with their universalist patriarchal implications and their reduction of subjectivity to sexuality" (as quoted in Chanter 1993). This charge makes three questionable assumptions: (1) that to use psychoanalytic theory is to accept it in toto; (2) that psychoanalytic theory necessarily relies on universal rather than culturally specific sex roles; and (3) that it recognizes only sexual or biological influences. The other charge often leveled against her is that in her own linguistic theory the semiotic (poetic, disruptive, potentially revolutionary) aspect of communication supposedly draws on or is identified with the maternal body and that this semiotic aspect is ultimately powerless in the face of the symbolic (logical, orderly) aspect of communication that is none other than the law of the father. Accordingly, Jacqueline Rose writes that "Kristeva has . . . been attractive to feminism because of the way that she exposes the complacent identities of psycho-sexual life. But as soon as we try to draw out of that exposure an image of femininity which escapes the straitjacket of symbolic forms, we fall straight into that essentialism and primacy of the semiotic which is one of the most problematic aspects of her work" (Oliver 1993a, 53).

Nancy Fraser's criticism is less subtle:

> Despite [Kristeva's] explicit criticisms of gynocentrism, there is a strand of her thought that implicitly partakes of it—I mean Kristeva's quasi-biologistic, essentializing identification of women's femininity with maternity. Maternity, for her, is the way that women, as opposed to men, touch base with the pre-Oedipal, semiotic residue. (Men do it by writing avant-garde poetry; women do it by having babies.) Here Kristeva dehistoricizes and psychologizes motherhood, conflating conception, pregnancy, birthing, nursing, and childrearing, abstracting all of them from sociopolitical context, and erecting her own essentialist stereotype of femininity. (Fraser 1992, 190)

In this passage, Fraser faults Kristeva for being essentialist, and here clearly she has biological essentialism in mind. But Fraser also notes another, seemingly opposite, theme in Kristeva's

work. Fraser writes that Kristeva "reverses herself and recoils from her construct, insisting that 'women' do not exist, that feminine identity is fictitious, and that feminist movements therefore tend toward the religious and the proto-totalitarian" (190). Fraser is clearly mystified, writing, "she ends up alternating essentialist gynocentric moments with anti-essentialist nominalistic moments, moments that consolidate an ahistorical, undifferentiated, maternal feminine gender identity with moments that repudiate women's identities altogether" (190).

Is Kristeva truly so schizophrenic? Or is Fraser missing something? I think Fraser is trying to understand Kristeva's texts with the handy tool of the sex/gender distinction. Fraser is drawing a parallel between Kristeva's semiotic/symbolic distinction and the feminist sex/gender distinction.

Tina Chanter describes the "unspoken feminist commitment to the ideology of sex and gender" as follows:

> The story that feminism tells itself is a story in which gender plays the lead role. Once we realized that femininity was culturally constructed, and not inscribed in our natures, we could change the ways in which gender was constructed. Since we can transform culture, whatever natural differences distinguish the sexes become insignificant. In effect, then, sex, nature, biology, and bodies are written out of the feminist picture. What is important for feminism is gender, culture, society, and history. (Chanter 1993, 185)

As Chanter argues, Kristeva's critics find fault with Kristeva by mapping the feminist distinction between sex and gender onto Kristeva's distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic, equating the semiotic aspect of signification with biological, including sexual, processes and the symbolic with culturally-defined gender. Chanter argues that, to the contrary, Kristeva's work unsettles the sex/gender dichotomy: the semiotic rhythms and pulsions are part of our signifying practices. So we cannot mark a tidy break between bodies and culture, making it impossible to siphon off gender from sex.

Let me add that the sex/gender distinction sets the pair up in opposition: we are either going to talk about femininity (or masculinity) as a sexual-bodily-biological-determinist matter or as a cultural-linguistic-provisional construction. Kristeva's notions of semiotic and symbolic operate quite differently. The two are both moments, always present, in the discourse of speaking beings. I might try to stand here before you and speak as logically and methodically as possible, but the semiotic aspects of signification will have their way. Insofar as I am embodied and desiring, that is, *alive*, my attempts at purely logical discourse will always be disrupted. While the critics worry that any talk of biological processes is essentialist, our embodiedness will always have its say.

Kristeva's critics argue that her notion of the semiotic prediscursively naturalizes femininity and thus collapses into biological essentialism. As Oliver and others have pointed out, this is inaccurate because the semiotic operates discursively, after the speaking being enters language. Kristeva's defenders have shown that Kristeva does not locate biological processes prior to or anterior to culture and language, so her theory is not, properly speaking, essentialist. Insofar as the body is mediated through language it becomes a cultural construction as well. But I don't think this response would fully satisfy the critics, because they are averse to any talk of bodies.

I think it is important to look at the roots of this aversion, which I take to be a background acceptance of the fundamental presupposition of Cartesian metaphysics: that the true self is a thinking and not an extended substance. The Cartesian dualism of two substances, with mind over matter, sets up human nature as being essentially mind, as being the glassy essence whose job is to perceive essence, the ground for all knowledge, the possibility of representing the world. As a consequence of this dualism, anything that evoked extended substance, biological processes, emotion, the

body, etc. was seen as incapable of taking part in the epistemological project of humanity—thus the philosophical and historical fate of woman, relegated to being a being whose essence was bodily and thus unable to realize the ideal of being *res cogitans*. Women have historically been identified with their bodies and thus seen, in the history of philosophy, more as extended rather than as thinking things. To the extent that women are equated with their bodies, they are put on the wrong end of the Cartesian map of human identity.

With regard to subjectivity, Cartesian dualism postulates two substances, one essential to being, the other not. For women to be assigned to bodies ties them essentially to being beings without essences. The problem then is not essentialism but a metaphysics that makes women disappear. No wonder so many feminists shun metaphysics; Seemingly, it bodes only ill for women. When a Cartesian, substance ontological framework is presupposed. no feminist in her right mind would talk about women's bodies. Understandably, then, many feminists have bristled at Kristeva's valorization of maternal experience in essays such as "Women's Time" and "Stabat Mater" (both in Kristeva 1986).

In response let me offer a reading of "Stabat Mater" that shows Kristeva defying this Cartesian dualism. In "Stabat Mater" Kristeva describes maternity both from the point of view of being a mother and of representing maternity. In the left hand column of the essay, Kristeva writes very poetically, relating how, in her own pregnancy, she experienced herself as both rational and desiring, as seeking jouissance, as knowing a profound love for this "other" within who was not really an other but a part of herself. She found that the distinction between self and other blurs in the experience of pregnancy. And the wonder of giving birth is that what was once a part of oneself now becomes other, but never entirely. One acts for this other neither out of altruism or selfishness or duty/law.

As she relates her own experience, the infant is protected by the mother, nourished by her body, soothed by her flesh and her voice. And the mother too is taken in/over by her near unity and imminent division of/from this child. The relationship between mother and the unborn and newborn child begins prior to language. But for the newborn to attain subjectivity it will have to learn language, submit to "the Law," etc. But it will not relinquish its desire to transgress the Law.

In the right hand column, writing more prosaically, Kristeva discusses representations of maternity and the functions these serve:

> Man overcomes the unthinkable of death by postulating maternal love in its place—in the place and stead of death and thought. This love ... psychologically is perhaps a recall . . . of the primal shelter that insured the survival of the newborn. (*Tales of Love*, 252)

In other words, we need a representation of maternal love in order to deal with our mortality. We cannot live well with the thought of death unless we also have a thought of a mother's plentiful love. The semiotic aspects of our signifying are evidence of this. Unlike Lacan who thought that the child left the mother behind when it fell under the paternal law and began speaking, Kristeva argues that we never leave this origin behind once or for all. We need the thought of, a representation of, maternal love in order to live within the limits of the Symbolic and with the knowledge of our own coming death. This thought serves as a wellspring for being able to experience joy.

I am putting Kristeva's theory in positive terms, but still this all may strike the reader as ample reason to think that Kristeva is an essentialist after all, taking as she does the experience of motherhood as so important. At first glance she may seem to be committing the sin of biological essentialism, equating women with their bodies and the biological function of bearing children, denying the importance of their symbolic signifying practice. But when read closer, she appears to defy the usual substance ontological frameworks that reduce women to their bodies.

In "Stabat Mater," Kristeva takes the binary opposites culture and nature and does something very odd with them:

> The unspoken doubtless weighs first on the maternal body: as no signifier can uplift it without leaving a remainder, for the signifier is always meaning, communication, or structure, whereas a woman as mother would be, instead, a strange fold that changes culture into nature, the speaking into biology. Although it concerns every woman's body, the heterogeneity that cannot be subsumed in the signifier nevertheless explodes violently with pregnancy (the threshold of culture and nature) and the child's arrival (which extracts woman out of her oneness and gives her the possibility—but not the certainty—of reaching out to the other, the ethical). Those particularities of the maternal body compose woman into a being of folds, a catastrophe of being. (*Tales of Love*, 259–60)

Instead of taking culture and nature as mutually exclusive terms, she sees that they can be folded into one another—via the maternal body. Our symbolic language tries to signify neatly, to capture truth without a remainder, but the experience of pregnancy and mothering shatters this attempt. A pregnant women who has otherwise been an established member of the symbolic community may find herself heeding her biology minutely. Where before she could parade as an individual, affirming our culture's individualistic ethos, now she is undeniably at least two. While her other ethical relationships could have been treated as deontological exchanges, she now will have a relationship with someone who is neither strictly self nor other.

And everyone, being born of mothers, will have some archaic knowledge of this, whether this love was given well or miserly. In Kristeva's view, maternal love performs a crucial function:

> Now, if a contemporary ethics is no longer seen as being the same as morality; if ethics amounts to not avoiding the embarrassing and inevitable problematics of the law but giving it flesh, language, and jouissance—in that case its reformulation demands the contribution of women. Of women who harbor the desire to reproduce (to have stability). Of women who are available so that our speaking species, which knows it is mortal, might withstand death. Of mothers. For an heretical ethics separated from morality, an *herethics*, is perhaps no more than that which in life makes bonds, thoughts, and therefore the thought of death, bearable: herethics is undeath [*a-mort*], love. (*Tales of Love*, 262–63)

So, we need mothers. Again, this might seem essentialist, good fuel for conservatives. But Kristeva does not make generalizations about women themselves. In her poetic column she is giving a phenomenological account of her own experience. In the right hand column she is discussing symbolic representations, not women per se. And her own view is hardly conservative. The function of motherhood depicted here is radical: to be a fold between nature and culture, self and other, life and death, a fold that is a catastrophe of being that shatters the usual representations. I prefer to read "catastrophe" here as meaning "an event that produces a subversion of the usual order of things" rather than as an end or cataclysm.

Moreover, Kristeva is not calling for, as some critics have put it, "compulsory maternity," that it be a woman's duty to bear children. Yes, the women who do bear children are providing a gift to humanity, ensuring our survival. Kristeva's main point is that we need a better way of thinking, a new representation of motherhood. The Virgin Mary won't do.

In my reading of her work, Kristeva is offering a representation based upon a metaphysics radically different from the substance ontology of Cartesian metaphysics. I see her working out of another metaphysical tradition, a process philosophy that perhaps originated with Heraclitus and is now associated with Whitehead. But it is also an approach central to the continental philosophies of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Deleuze. All these share an approach to metaphysics that defies the central role that substance has played. Process philos-

ophy is not a system of philosophy; it has no strict tenets; rather the term captures a style of metaphysical inquiry that emphasizes events rather than substance. Standard metaphysics emphasizes substance, essence, fixity, persistence, identity, and continuity. It seeks the essence that can survive the comings and goings of accidents: what persists through time. Process metaphysics emphasizes change, event, novelty, activity, and fluidity. Process philosophers think that what things are is in flux. Whatever is is always changing rather than persisting. *To ti einai* is less a substrate or matter than perhaps a code. Think of human DNA: information, a script, a pattern, a form, which takes us right back to Aristotle's ruminations and ambivalence on the question of essence. Perhaps what is is not a thing (substance) but a pattern of change, a process.

To my knowledge, Kristeva never explicitly identifies herself as a process philosopher, though no doubt if the question were put to her she would say that she is, for all her key terms—from the subject in process to the *chora* to abjection and transference love—invoke movement, change, and dynamism. It is also evident in her choice of psychoanalytic models. Instead of adopting a model of ego psychology and the realist ego, Kristeva draws on Lacan's model, which draws from Freud's theory of the narcissistic ego. The theories of the realist ego and ego psychology hold that the ego is a substance of sorts, which implies that the ego is a fixed entity. Alternatively, a Freudian-libidinal model suggests that the ego evolves.

From a Kristevan point of view, language is both a biological and a cultural process by which the speaking subject constitutes history and society. Kristeva says she holds "the dramatic notion of language as a risky practice, allowing the speaking animal to sense the rhythm of the body as well as the upheavals of history" (Kristeva 1980, 34). For Kristeva, subjectivity originates with the drives and processes that psychoanalytic theory describes. Even after subjectivity arises, it is never a stable, fixed entity. In her words, it is an open system. Drawing on Freud's narcissistic model of libidinal energy in cathexis, Kristeva argues that the psyche, as an open system, is the shape of its attachments. This does not mean that subjectivity arises *ex nihilo*. There is an origin, though this origin is not a substance; it is a movement. Borrowing from Plato, Kristeva calls this movement the *chora*, the Greek word for enclosed space or womb. It denotes "an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases" (Kristeva 1984a, 25). The term *chora* represents "a *disposition* that already depends on representation. . . . Although our theoretical description of the *chora* is itself part of the discourse of representation that offers it as evidence, the *chora*, as rupture and articulations (rhythm), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality" (Kristeva 1984a, 26).

Clearly there is a fold in Kristeva's work between culture and bodies, what others might call gender and sex. In some essays it is the maternal body. But in many others it is simply the speaking being, a person who happens to have been born into a network of relationships, kin, language, law, who must negotiate these as well as the knowledge of her or his own coming death.[2] So this speaking being has many passages to negotiate, and is a fold in them all. Where other process philosophers might be content to identify these folds, events, movements, and other assorted catastrophes of being, Kristeva also wants to ease the passage. This I think motivates her work not only as a philosopher but as a psychoanalyst.

In her own psychoanalytic practice, Kristeva takes the analytic experience as a process of heeding the folds and reconfiguring the relationship between bodies and culture. As she says in *Sens et Non-Sens de la Révolte*,

> Distancing myself, then, from psychoanalysis as the matheme of the signifier, or theory of 'the mind', and also as a transaction of organs and drives, I will attempt, for my part, to maintain that the originality of Freud's discovery lies in this: psychoanalysis is a clinic and a theory of

> the *co-presence* of the development of thought *and* sexuality. This bilateral (thought-sexuality) way of listening to the speaking subject, which I reveal at the heart of the analytic experience, is an original variant of an ancient dualism. And, far from 'biologizing the essence of man', this way of listening centers the study of the psychic apparatus, its growth or impediments, in the bi/one-to-one dependence of thought-sexuality/sexuality-thought. Language being the domain of this interaction, it is understandable that this is where Freud delved into the 'other scene', that of the *unconscious*, with its component parts (representatives of the drives) and its logic (primary processes), which are both irreducible to conscious linguistic communication. (Kristeva 1996, 198–99, translated by Lisa Walsh)

In other words, psychoanalysis is a way of listening for and to both thought and sexuality. Language is the site of this interaction, but the interaction is never reducible to language. So it would be mistaken to try to siphon language and culture off from bodies as some feminist critics want to siphon gender off from sex. In the psychoanalytic setting, our minds and bodies, culture and biological processes are inextricable. The analysand's speech renders her naked, giving lie to any attempt in other settings to set off civilization from desire. So we could take the analytic setting as paradigmatic, as the bare bones of what speaking beings reveal when they speak.

What is revealed is that the self is not mappable onto a Cartesian scheme of substance. The analysand's language folds biology and culture. Bodies come into play in the signifying process, but signification can never be reduced to bodies. As a folding, language is a process. As a process, it undoes any essentialist notion that the self is a mind apart from a body. So Kristeva's talk of bodies, of the semiotic, of sexuality cannot be reduced, as Fraser and other critics would have it, to being essentialist. What could this essence be? Instead of a reduction, we find in Kristeva's work an explosion of the old categories.

In adopting a process understanding of biology and the drives and seeing the self as a fluid, mobile, subject in process Kristeva disables or at least displaces the charge of essentialism. Despite feminist concerns that Kristeva is an essentialist, I have argued that Kristeva's philosophy invokes a metaphysics of process rather than substance and is thus fundamentally incompatible with essentialism. Feminism in Kristeva's philosophy could be seen as an attempt to resist the essentialism that would exclude all that is mobile and vital. In this sense, woman is not identified with the semiotic *chora*, rather, feminists can use the semiotic *chora* strategically to signify a sexual difference in which contingency, history, and transformation occur. With Kristeva, feminists can avoid the thicket of essentialism by adopting a process philosophical understanding of subjectivity and feminist agency.

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ENDNOTES

1. As Louise Antony noted in a post to the Society of Women in Philosophy e-mail list, the term *essentialism* has been used in many different ways (and I'd add often as an accusation): (i) as a practice of making false generalizations, (ii) as offering a biological explanation for a psychological trait, and (iii) as providing a substantive account of what it is to *be* a certain kind of thing. The third type can take a nominalist or a realist approach. Antony believes that essentialism regarding women is usually of the first sort, but I would say that those who claim that French feminists are essentialist usually mean a combination of the second and third sort. See also Schor 1994 and Heyes 2000.

2. Given what I have quoted earlier, regarding Kristeva's view that the maternal body in particular is a fold between culture and nature, I think there is a tension in Kristeva's work: She says that "the heterogeneity that cannot be subsumed . . . [also] concerns every woman's body." What about men's bodies? Insofar as men are also desiring beings who move from nature to culture and retain semiotic aspects of meaning in their own signifying practices, they are also folds. But Kristeva clearly thinks that the maternal body is more of a fold than others. This tension needs to be explored, but there is no room for that here.

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