If you have wondered about the meanings or relevance of feminism, or if you are interested in women’s intellectual traditions, or in connections among race, class, gender, and sexuality, or if you would like to know more about general philosophical methods and contemporary controversies, you have selected the right book. But we should alert you—studying feminist philosophy does require some courage. Serious attention to the pervasive human problem of women’s subordination can lead to deep questioning of just about anything. Commerce, religion, government, morality, science—all tend to reflect the perspectives and interests of those with more power and reinforce their sense of superiority, while keeping others in subordinate roles and substandard locations. Gender distinctions and hierarchies have long been fundamental features of social existence, and so they inform most understandings of what it means to be human, and infuse nearly every institution and every sort of relationship. Feminist investigations of sexism and its myriad effects began as critical explorations of women’s “second class” positions vis-à-vis men, but as you will see, those explorations have led to intense philosophical examination of the conditions of violence and subjection, analyses of many specific social norms and practices, and further inquiries into the deep relations of embodiment, power, and identity.

At the heart of feminism is a moral judgment from the perspectives of the subjugated—usually women—and an argument that the systematic mistreatment and devaluation of females cross-culturally is a paradigmatic human harm with grave and pervasive consequences. Feminism is therefore also a positive judgment that with emancipation for women will come widespread human improvement. Feminist philosophy is grounded in the premise that in patriarchal, sexist, or male-dominated contexts, women’s wisdom on the matters that affect them is crucial. However, in such contexts, “woman” is seen as a diverse social category, not a universal experience or body type, because women and their interests are immeasurably diverse. Instead of promoting a female essence, feminist philosophers investigate the patterns, histories, and systemic nature of women’s oppression and feminist resistances. Yet the practical and moral mission of feminism remains at the core of its more abstract projects. Feminist philosophy is built on the hope that intellectual understanding can lead to ethical and political improvement in our own lives, and in bigger and wider realities as well.
The authors included in this volume utilize the tools of philosophy—deep conceptual interrogation, self-reflexive critical dialogue, phenomenology, and precise argumentation—to foster resistance to oppression, and to help engender fruitful alternatives. In addition to investigating the primary topics of feminism (such as sexism, gender, racism, sexuality, mothering, and rape), feminist thinkers generate compelling insights concerning many core questions in philosophy. When viewed through feminist lenses, perennial philosophical puzzles, such as the meaning of goodness and evil, the importance of rights, the reliability of knowledge, and the possibility of positive change broaden and take on new relevance. Feminists have also been at the forefront of investigating the fact that different forms of oppression are deeply related and indebted to each other. It is therefore not surprising that in the last half century or so, feminist philosophers have made valuable contributions to our knowledge about some of the most basic and influential aspects of modern and postmodern life. As it turns out, there are few areas of philosophy where critical questions about history, power, and perspective are not somehow germane.

But feminist philosophy goes beyond a simple application of “traditional” philosophical methods to “new” sets of topics and questions. It also develops innovative methods for bringing marginalized and revolutionary perspectives to the forefront. Questions about the matters and the methods of feminism are deeply entwined, for the prejudices of sexist worldviews inform conceptions of intellectual virtues, and christen some methods as more “rigorous” or scientific than others. Feminist philosophers discuss methods in relation to values and ethics, as well as epistemological ideals. For example, the inclusion of the perspectives, interests, and voices of women in theories about women benefits both accuracy and democratic ideals, and exemplifies the view that the moral and epistemological dimensions of research can augment each other.

Questioning false and unjustly biased premises and starting points is a hallmark of feminist philosophy. As you will see throughout this volume, a very common philosophical premise rejected by feminists is the ideal of the “universal” human subject, or knower, who is fundamentally independent, constitutionally isolated from others, ideally unemotional, and driven by the maximization of his own interests. Feminist philosophers show that such conceptions of selves are not universal truths, but projections of particular masculinist cultural ideals. In contrast, by initiating questions about subjectivity and knowledge from the perspectives of women, feminists find that the patterns and inevitabilities of human life tend more toward interdependence than independence, and toward a need for mutual caretaking that is severely compromised by oppressive relations. Articulating and examining the implications of the foundational importance of relationality in human experience raises compelling questions, such as how should we conceive of individual blameworthiness if moral beings are inevitably primarily “social”? Or, how can we best negotiate the conflicts that arise when we are physiologically inclined toward dependence, yet socially inclined to be independent?

Perhaps most importantly, feminists apply their own methods reflexively and self critically. Understanding the production of knowledge to be fundamentally social and historical, feminist philosophy provides an abundance of evidence that any perspective is partial and interested. And so feminist theories must acknowledge and address their own partiality. This is one reason why feminist philosophers have so often approached their work as a communal endeavor, and a site for intellectual cross-pollination. Notably, the philosophers represented here display a strong sense of political and intellectual community. Yet, perhaps because there is so much at stake, struggles between feminists over appropriate responses to conditions and histories of oppression can get quite heated. Some would say feminists have raised the philosophical and political practice of “reflective equilibrium” to a high
art. As predominantly white and Euro-American feminists criticize the hidden prejudices and problematic biases in the history of “male-stream” philosophy, so women of color and outsiders to the academy question theories developed by privileged academic women, whose own experiences are often rather cloistered, and whose comforts systematically depend on the exploitation of others. As the Euro-American dominance of the field indicates, feminist philosophies have been shaped by the interests and perspectives of privileged women who inevitably write from their own cultural and class biases, despite their attempts to be “inclusive.” A primary warning of feminism is that the solipsisms of the privileged are often disastrous, and so such issues must always be addressed. Feminist philosophy may not always live up to its own high ideals, but the fact that its methodologies tend to encourage pluralism (openness to all relevant viewpoints), democracy, and self-reflexivity, and that it is motivated by ethics of caring and solidarity, helps feminism maintain its noteworthy integrity and success amidst diversity.

ENGAGING TRADITIONS

Another project of feminist philosophy has been to recover and study the work of forgotten women philosophers, a radical act in itself. Most of today’s scholars describe philosophy as something born in ancient Greece, but of course if we think of philosophy as a distinct human practice rather than a specific intellectual tradition, no one knows where philosophy first began, or how the practices of philosophical inquiry first developed. In some sense, feminist philosophy is probably nearly as old as resistance to patriarchy or sexism, for becoming a resistant or revolutionary subject often includes “getting philosophical” about the state of oppression suffered by one’s class, and about whatever keeps the dominant group or groups in positions of power. Whether or not they had the power to publish or distribute their work, women intellectuals throughout the ages and in nearly every context have probably presented critical arguments addressing masculine domination and related issues. In many cultures philosophy has also been a professional activity housed in institutions of education, government, religion, science, and art, but philosophy can occur anywhere, and grassroots political movements tend to have their own philosophers, whether or not those individuals are people who write books or give lectures or have jobs in academia.

As far as the Western canon goes, we know that influential and brilliant female (and some male) thinkers have been questioning sexist practices and engaging in philosophical discourse about sexual equality since before Sappho. In A History of Women Philosophers, Mary Ellen Waithe lists sixteen women philosophers from the classical world, seventeen from 500–1600, and over thirty from 1600–1900. While women philosophers are not necessarily feminist philosophers, it is an understatement to say that there is a strong historical correlation between women intellectuals and feminist ideas, for the correlation is enormous, and the pantheon of feminist and “pre-feminist” philosophers throughout history is well worth recalling. Hypatia of Alexandria, a very influential mathematician of the fifth century, was put to death by a mob in 415 CE, because of her political and religious alliances. In The Book of the City of Ladies (1405), Christine de Pisan defended women against stereotypes of them as lacking intellect, virtue, and strength. Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia corresponded with René Descartes on the problems generated by his theory of substance dualism. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s La Respuesta (1690) appealed to natural law theory to bring out the inconsistencies in the church’s position that scholarly activities were improper for women. The contributions Harriet Taylor Mill made to On Liberty (1869) and Principles of Political Economy (1848) were acknowledged by John Stuart Mill, but for many years were ignored by historical scholars. The work of black philosophers such as W.E.B. DuBois, Eugene Clay Holmes, and Alain L. Locke suffered similar disciplinary erasure. Women philosophers and
social reformers of the early twentieth century, including Jane Addams, Jessie Taft, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Anna Julia Cooper, were influential in the development and dissemination of American pragmatism. In 1963, Hannah Arendt published a work of philosophical nonfiction, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, which has had an enormous impact on modern and contemporary understandings of the lessons of the Holocaust, and the problem of human evil.

In addition to recovering and reclaiming historical works that are of particular interest, feminist philosophers also reconsider and reinterpret works from traditional philosophical canons. To name just a few well-known examples, feminists have drawn on Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ accounts of class exploitation through labor in capitalism to help explain women’s subordination through sexual divisions of labor, John Rawls’s theory of justice to clarify the requirements of democracy, and Michel Foucault’s discussions of the relationships between disciplinary institutions and bodily practices to theorize the reproduction and performance of sexuality and gender. The field of feminist philosophy includes a great wealth of work on canonical philosophers. For example, a well-known book series that offers feminist reinterpretations of the “Western philosophical tradition” includes collections on thirty major figures from different contexts and historical eras.

But this is not to say that the relationship between feminist and traditional philosophy is a happy one. Scholars looking for blatantly derogatory remarks about women and non-Europeans need not dig very deep in the history of philosophy. In *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle offered a “biological” explanation for women’s inferiority, arguing that because heat is a fundamental principle of perfection in animals, and women have a cooler nature, women are monstrosities in comparison to the proper (male) human form. (Tuana 1993, 18–19). Despite John Locke’s philosophical attachment to the idea of democracy, he held investments in the slave-trading Royal African Company, and assisted in the writing of the slave constitution of Carolina. Immanuel Kant is renowned for his philosophies of ethics, reason, and existence, but he was also a founding theorist of the modern concept of race, and his comments on women and non-whites in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) are notoriously degrading. Kant held that women have strong inborn feelings for all that is beautiful, and they therefore should not trouble themselves with intellectual matters: “A woman therefore will learn no geometry... The fair can leave Descartes to his vortices to whirl forever, without troubling themselves.” Of African peoples, Kant remarked, “So fundamental is the difference between [the black and white] races of man... it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color” so that “a clear proof that what [a Negro] said was stupid” was that “this fellow was quite black from head to foot.” Clearly, for Kant, some peoples had more personhood than others. Arthur Schopenhauer’s “On Women” described women as having no sense of justice, due to their “defective powers in reasoning and deliberation,” as they are “dependent not upon strength but upon craft; and hence their instinctive capacity for cunning, and their ineradicable tendency to say what is not true” (Witt 2004). In a passage from *Being and Nothingness* that reads like a chauvinistic cliche, Jean Paul Sartre wrote that “one of the most fundamental tendencies of human reality [is] the tendency to fill... A good part of our life is passed in plugging holes, in filling empty places... It is only from this standpoint that we can pass on to sexuality. The obscenity for the feminine sex is that everything which ’gapes open’.”

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3 For a specific discussion of this view of female sexuality see Irigaray, in this volume. For more disturbing examples of misogyny and racism in the history of Western philosophy, see Nancy Tuana (1992 and 1993), Charlotte Witt (2004), Beverley Clack (1999), and Andrew Vallis (2005).
Passages and works such as these from the history of philosophy indicate the prevalence of prejudicial views, as well as the fact that teachers and scholars throughout the ages have mostly been quite unperturbed by them. They merit feminist attention because they lead to more thorough understandings of influential philosophical traditions (for example, how racism is embedded within them), and because they may expose relationships between ideas, cultural values, and major and minor misuses of power. Overall, contemporary feminist philosophers mine the history of philosophy in search of clues and tools that might further feminism’s critical and liberatory projects. It is interesting to note how many of the philosophers who have been criticized for their misogyny, racism, and xenophobia have also provided valuable resources for feminist thought. Perhaps we should take this to be testament both to the usefulness of philosophy, and to the resourcefulness of feminism.

A FEMINIST TURN

The work highlighted in this volume focuses less on the history of philosophy, and more on the meanings and implications of feminism itself, and on feminist analyses of relevant philosophical and political issues. These essays represent a specific academic and intellectual tradition that emerged, especially but not exclusively in North America and Europe, from women’s, civil rights, labor, antiwar, black power, and anti-imperialist movements for social change, and that continues to evolve today in relation to specific social realities, and in complex conversation with other critical and cultural discourses. This turn toward feminist topics, questions, and methods in the discipline of philosophy has had radical impacts on the discipline as we know it, by introducing the position that power, privilege, and social identities are philosophically fundamental issues, and by improving the intellectual and professional climate for scholars who find questions about gender, race, difference, sexuality, etc., to be of interest.

Many factors contributed to the development of the field of feminist philosophy in the 1970s. Greatly expanded numbers of women, working class students, and students of color had entered the academy in the 1950s and 1960s, and the role of students and intellectuals in social movements of the sixties made the academy a highly significant site for political innovation and struggle. The growing awareness that women’s contributions had been systematically erased or de-emphasized in nearly every academic discipline, along with growing impatience over differential treatment, sexual harassment, and sexist academic cultures, resulted in fiery demands for change in institutions of higher learning.

Ironically, a book written by someone exceedingly close to the masculinist tradition of European thought marked a turning point in feminist philosophy. Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, first published as Le Deuxième Sexe in 1949 (and published in English in 1953), is considered by many to be a founding text of modern feminism. Beauvoir’s project was to ask how patterns of female subordination are formed in relation to specific cultural and metacultural views about femininity, and to examine relationships between those patterns and the inevitable conflicts and constructs of human existence. The text is interdisciplinary, drawing on sociological, biological, and historical data, although Beauvoir’s guiding framework is philosophical and existentialist. Her central themes and arguments, regarding cross-cultural patterns of female oppression, comparisons between women’s oppression and other forms of “otherness,” and the idea that “woman is not born, but made,” remain extremely influential today, especially in Western feminisms. As the most extensive feminist philosophical work published in its day, The Second Sex provides a unique model, reference point, and foil for feminist thinkers. In the discipline of philosophy the book has come to symbolize the beginning of a shift toward the instantiation of
feminist philosophy in its own terms. In addition to the influence of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir’s persona as a well-known “independent” woman intellectual (she was a lifelong lover with Jean-Paul Sartre, but they never married) was inspirational to a generation of activist intellectuals who strongly identified with her personal and philosophical commitments.

In the early 1970s feminist philosophy gained momentum as a field in the new interdisciplinary area of Women’s Studies, which inspired many women (and a few men) in the academy to expand their research and teaching to include data on women and girls, hidden histories, and attention to feminist topics and inquiries. Yet at first there was precious little work that addressed contemporary issues from feminist perspectives using the particular tools and methods of philosophy. When courses on “Women and Philosophy” were first offered, teachers drew from the work of historical figures such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Emma Goldman, Jane Addams, and texts such as Fredrick Engles’ *Origin of the Family* (1884), and John Stuart and Harriet Taylor Mill’s *On the Subjection of Women* (1869). *The Second Sex* was one of the few contemporary philosophical works available, although many professors also taught the work of movement writers like Ti-Grace Atkinson, Shulamith Firestone, Francis Beale, and Barbara Deming. Several anthologies of feminist political thought had just been published—Robin Morgan’s *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement* (1970), Toni Cade Bambara’s *Black Woman* (1970), and Alice Rossi’s *The Feminist Papers: From Adams to de Beauvoir* (1973), a collection of European and American feminist writings from 1770 to the early 1950s.

Out of a hunger for better course material and an interest in developing explicitly feminist philosophical works, scholar-activists carved a space for feminist philosophy by creating contexts for presenting and discussing feminist works, and then publishing, teaching, and distributing those works. They also created professional organizations and institutions to build communities of engagement and support, including most notably the Society for Women in Philosophy and the academic journal *Hypatia*. The growth of feminist culture, such as bookstore and coffeehouse movements, also contributed to the flourishing of feminist thought and theory throughout the 1980s, and created a lively if short-lived sense that a fruitful and productive bridging of academic and nonacademic political discourses was possible. For better or worse, like most areas of political theorizing, in recent years feminist philosophy has become more firmly ensconced in the academy.

By now an abundance of compelling and pertinent work has been published by feminist philosophers, and the field has evolved into a recognized subfield of the academic discipline, a prominent discourse in feminist theory, a major voice in critical studies, and an unusually activist intellectual community. Feminist philosophers have provided a wealth of ideas about resisting and transforming oppressive systems and the values that sustain them. Contemporary feminist philosophy does not shy away from making practical suggestions, or from using its institutional power to help create positive change. Although there is no denying that the interests and perspectives of privileged writers have shaped the development of feminist thought throughout history, one of the great tenets of philosophy is that we try to face up to uncomfortable truths. As the rules and norms of gender are always diverse and subtly shifting, feminism is also constantly under construction in multiple venues, and so feminist philosophy continues to play a vital and dynamic role in charting the paths of ongoing movements for social justice.

The nine sections of this book address issues and questions that have been central in the development of feminist philosophy in its own terms. The first four sections are constructed around core concepts—oppression and resistance, sex and gender, sexualities, and race and racism. These
concepts are important because they are much more than words and ideas—they are lived by all of us, in idiosyncratic ways but also in response to powerful and deeply engrained social patterns. The remaining five sections are organized around areas of philosophical inquiry—postcoloniality and transnationality, ethics, politics, epistemology, and ontology. Although there are many other topics that could be included in an anthology of feminist philosophy, we hope to have provided a fairly wide and deep survey of the field. For further exploration we have included references and media resources so that you may go on to develop your own feminist knowledge in the matters that interest you.

FOR FURTHER READING