I argue that a feminist methodology can help liberal political theory get beyond the problems that it has been recycling since the seventeenth century. Taking political obligation as the focus for my analysis, I show how feminist psychoanalytic and psychological theory can help uncover the structural sexism of liberal theory and epistemology and point the way toward more consistent—and less biased—theoretical formulations. Rejecting the essentialist view of gender difference that has been attributed to this literature, I argue that it is more interesting and appropriate to read it as a symbolic language of power and as a heuristic device for uncovering the gendered dimensions of supposedly “neutral” concepts like obligation.

In the modern liberal state and the liberal doctrines that theorize it, it is fairly well established that obligation is a concept based on voluntarist principles; that is, an obligation is a limitation on behavior, a requirement for action or nonaction, that the actor or nonactor has chosen or agreed to. As opposed to duty—which may be a requirement that exists “naturally” (Rawls 1971) or “positionally” (Simmons 1979) but at any rate is not explicitly chosen—it is central to our understanding of obligations that they arise from our voluntary and free actions. The paradigm for obligations on the liberal model is the promise and contract (Hume 1948; Pateman 1985).

The political paradigm is the social contract, which founded the ideal that political obligations are based on the free choices of citizens, on their “consent” to a government’s authority. The reasoning of the social contract theorists was that if people are inherently, naturally, and (most importantly) equally free, how could any limitation on that freedom be imposed on an individual by another individual or a group? The only legitimate limitations are those imposed by the self; for if I am above all else free, a limitation of freedom can be legitimate only if it is simultaneously an expression of my freedom. Thus, the social contract is an expression of human freedom, of our ability to make choices and control our destiny. Of course, all of the social contract theorists imposed limits on people’s ability to consent (one could not consent to die or to be a slave or to do evil); but these limits, it was argued, only served to define—rather than further limit—freedom.

This theoretical framework of the priority of liberty carries over into contemporary obligation theory. Many of these theories overtly adopt consent as the basis of obligation but transform how consent is expressed and even its very meaning. For instance, in attempting to reconcile the centrality of consent to obligation in the face of the fact that many
people do not even think about their consent, Tussman (1960) suggests assuming that the majority of citizens give their consent like "political child brides," who let others protect and define their best interests. Pitkin (1965), through a creative reading of Locke, develops the notion of "hypothetical" consent: what perfectly free, rational beings would consent to determines what the average unfree, unequal person is obligated to. Flathman (1972) argues for a "good reasons" approach, holding that critical reasoning will reveal that we have (or do not have) good reasons for respecting the authority of a government; while obligation is a "practice" and must operate within the confines of language (this automatically limits what can count as a reason), the final repository is individuals' ability to judge and decide for themselves, one of the main problems that consent theory raises. Even Pateman (1985), who is highly critical of liberal obligation theory, argues for a "fully consistent" consent theory, which can be realized only in a Rousseauist participatory democracy.

Theories ostensibly challenging the idea of consent as the basis for obligation turn around and develop "alternative" theories of obligation that take as their cornerstone the same framework and assumptions that ground consent theory (and indeed, make consent the only possible basis for consent), namely, the basic priority of individual liberty and the necessity for active and individual choice. For instance, Rawls's "fair play" principle depends on the active acceptance of benefits within a cooperative scheme; while a context of justice is important, passive acceptance or nonavoidance of benefits does not generate obligations. This is juxtaposed to his concept of duty, which is "natural" and not the product of choice. Both duty and obligation involve "schemes" or ends that are just; but obligation, to be such, must be truly voluntary. However, within Rawls's structure, if one does not accept the benefits of a just scheme and hence has no obligation to it, one may still have a natural duty to it by virtue of its "justice." If it is just, one would have agreed to it in the original position. This fact calls into question the usefulness of Rawls's distinction between obligation and duty and highlights a blind acceptance of voluntarism as a prerequisite for obligation even when it does not make theoretical sense.

The problems with voluntarist conceptions of obligation, as numerous theorists have pointed out, are manifold. Since Hume, critics have rejected consent theory on descriptive grounds: When have we ever had a society where the citizens actually were able to give consent and did so? It is also rejected, however, because of internal contradictions and inconsistencies. Some contemporary theorists, such as Simmons (1979), have concluded that obligations simply do not exist. Others, like Pateman (1985), hold that it is not obligation or consent per se but their specifically liberal formulation that is to blame.

None of these critics goes deeply enough to articulate the reasons for the problems obligation theory displays. They address themselves to the symptoms, not the causes—with the predictable result that the exact same problems recur, albeit in altered form, in the "new" theories developed to replace the social contract. Even Pateman, who goes farther than many other theorists in tracing the problems of consent to a source, namely, abstract individualism, leaves unasked the question why abstract individualism is so important to these theories.

The answer to this question is extremely important for getting beyond the problems of liberal obligation theory to the creation of a truly new theory, which is my intent here. I assert that the inconsistencies found in voluntarist theories of obligation are inevitable and irresolvable at least in part because of a particular
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epistemological bias, namely, gender bias. Here I examine one particular avenue of that suggestion, exploring whether a feminist analysis can uncover the deeper roots of the problem of obligation. I will argue that the gender bias found in liberal obligation theory is not merely contingent but structural as well.

By contingent gender bias I mean cultural biases against women, which deny women opportunities for consent and pervert consent theory as a result. Practices of excluding women from standard means of consenting and of denying women the opportunities for choice afforded men present a contradiction to consent theory that it should and can rectify. A fully consistent consent theory would allow women full opportunities to choose their obligations.

This type of argument is not uncommon in political theory and in feminist politics (Jaggar 1983; Pateman 1980). But few have recognized the deeper, structural components of this exclusion. By structural gender bias I mean the bias of the very structure of obligation (its being defined solely in voluntarist terms, and the fact that nonvoluntary obligation is an oxymoron) toward a masculinist perspective which automatically excludes women from obligation on an epistemological level. In this light, the provision of “full opportunities” for consent begs, rather than answers, the question of obligation. By declaring that all obligations, to be such, must be taken on voluntarily, consent theory ignores or denies what women’s experience reveals, namely, that obligations do in fact exist that are not chosen but stem from the history and character of human relationships. A fully consistent consent theory would have to include (perhaps paradoxically) the recognition that not all obligations are self-assumed.

Object Relations and the Standpoint Approach

To establish this claim, I adopt an approach suggested by Hartsock (1983) called “the feminist standpoint.” The feminist standpoint is a variation on the more general conceptualization of Marxian “standpoint epistemology,” which was specifically formulated as “the standpoint of the proletariat.” A standpoint is the perspective from which one views the world, social relations, and hence reality. It is composed of factors such as race, class, gender, and the kind of work one does; I add psychosexual development. The standpoint approach holds that different people will develop different knowledge frameworks depending on their experiences and circumstances. These experiences form a crucible for perception, interpretation, and understanding by moving many of the unconscious aspects of experience into the realm of consciousness. To the degree that a particular group of people (e.g., women) share socially and politically significant characteristics, they will share a standpoint. Since “epistemology grows in a complex and contradictory way from material life,” the standpoint “structures epistemology in a particular way” (Hartsock 1983) that reflects experience.

This does not mean that the feminist standpoint is natural to all women, however; it is not a mere unconscious bias but must be “achieved” or at least acknowledged. This is where political theory is important; it can help translate experience into political meaning or articulate the political significance of women’s experience. Feminist standpoint epistemology rejects the idea that epistemology is objective or universal; it holds that epistemology is itself a product of particular social relations. Not just knowledge (what we know) is shaped by particular experience and the relations we have to others, but so are how we know and how we conceive of
knowledge. Thus, if experience differs among groups of people, their epistemological orientations will differ as well.

But it is not just "difference" that is at issue; the standpoint approach further holds that the standpoint of oppressed groups enables them to see more aspects of the social relations that oppress them. Thus, just as the proletariat has a potentially superior vantage point from which to understand the relationship between worker and capitalist, women have greater potential to understand more fully the relationship between men and women. This might suggest that the feminist standpoint is gender-exclusive, but Hartsock would not agree. She specifically uses the term feminist rather than female to point out both "the achieved character of a standpoint and that a standpoint by definition carries a liberatory potential" (Hartsock 1983, 289). The process of "feminist struggle" welcomes male participants. Other theorists, (e.g., Harding [1986]) are very ambivalent about this conclusion—not because they do not want men to be feminists but because they doubt whether the standpoint approach will allow them to participate in "the struggle."

Not surprisingly, there are opponents of the standpoint approach to feminist epistemology, most notably feminist postmodernists. I will not enter the discussion in great detail here (but see DiStefano 1988) except to say that I think the debate is cast in overly dichotomous terms and that I recognize the problems inherent in a concept of the feminist standpoint. I will be arguing here for only one of many possible feminist standpoints. The concept of a standpoint, no matter how any given standpoint is defined or determined, is philosophically and politically useful and educative in the attempt to understand and analyze mainstream political theory.

The aspect of a possible feminist standpoint that I find most illuminating is offered by object relations theory. This is a school of psychoanalytic theory that maintains that because women, not men, "mother" (that is, have primary if not sole responsibility for the care and nurturance of young children), boys and girls will develop different senses of themselves as gendered subjects as well as different conceptions of their relation to the "object-world," or world outside the self. The power of object relations theory lies in its epistemological implications, for it suggests two very different ways of seeing and "knowing" the world. One fits the dominant discourse of political theory (and political obligation in particular); the other is at odds with it. One speaks the language of rules and rights codified in theory; one challenges that perspective.

Before infants come to have a sense of self (at about six months), their primary identity is subsumed in the one who supplies their needs, who is most generally, across all cultures, female (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974). Thus, both boys and girls are originally, psychically female. But because gender is culturally an exclusive category, the boy must "become" male. In learning his gender, the boy perceives a fundamental difference between himself and his mother; the girl will learn she is "the same." And because the primary caretaker represents the entire object-world to all infants, the girl comes to see herself as connected to the world: self and other will constitute a continuum for her. In contrast, the boy will come to perceive the self as fundamentally separate and different from the object-world; self and other will be a dichotomy. Becoming male entails making a radical break from primary femininity, represented by the mother, resulting in an overemphasis on separation; a boy defines himself against the mother, as "not-mother."

Such a defensive conceptualization of the self produces what Chodorow (1978) calls "reactive autonomy," a separateness and independence that is a reaction
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against others. It produces a conception of agency that abstracts individual will (the ability to make choices and act on them) out of the context of the social relationships within which it develops and within which it is exercised, because it sees those relationships as threatening by definition. Furthermore, because the boy's identity is partly formed by the roles that patriarchy dictates for males, the "reaction" is not even to the mother as a person but to what she symbolizes—the boy's primary femininity. Becoming male means becoming "not-female." So while autonomy is defined as independence, its reactive character ensures that others set the terms of one's identity. This contrasts with "relational autonomy" (Bakan 1966), wherein the self derives its strength from its context of relations, not from the absence of others. Thus, "true" autonomy can develop only through a close personal relationship with a mother who is recognized as her own subject (Flax 1978; Mahler 1968); but in mother-only child rearing, this subjectivity is denied. The resulting concept of autonomy as reactive separation is, like consent theory, mythologizing; for autonomy is a highly relational concept, intrinsically tied up with a qualitatively particular relationship.

These contrasting senses of self and resulting views of the world translate into differing "standpoints" and particular moral perspectives. According to Chodorow, girls' greater sense of connectedness with mother and the world means that they have "a basis for 'empathy' built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not" (1978, 167). This is supported empirically by Gilligan (1982), Johnstone (1985), and Lyons (1983), whose studies maintain that females perceive themselves as more connected to others while males tend to see themselves as separate. These contrasting perceptions of the self and its relation to the world result in males who reason more in terms of competing individual rights and rules and females who conceive morality in terms of relationships and overlapping responsibilities. Gilligan in particular argues that women's worldview of connectedness results in a morality of care. Thus, object relations theory suggests that by producing gender-related differences in males' and females' sense of themselves and their relation to the world, exclusively female child rearing provides the material basis for a feminist standpoint, a feminist vision of reality.

I am not suggesting that we take this literature as an essentialist statement about how men and women think. While we can take object relations theory as partly empirical hypothesis, it is also useful to view it as a theory of power. Psychology and psychoanalytic theory—in spite of their misogynist history—gives us a language and vocabulary of power that are very useful for political theory and that can transcend gender. After all, men such as Martin Luther King (1969) have expressed the voice of connection and care and have been just as marginalized as women. At the same time, that voice has a history, as does obligation. It is not just coincidence that women have been for the most part powerless and expressed the voice of connection. Indeed, the activities of the private sphere to which they have been assigned—child care, nurturance, affection—have required women to draw on and develop that voice. So while this is not exclusively a "woman's voice," there is a loose gender relationship deriving from history, material experience, and socialization as well as psychology. This grounding in women's experience is the whole point of calling it feminist.

But if we use terms like the boy or the girl as abstractions that idealize and represent relationships of power, object relations can be seen as a heuristic device for uncovering the epistemological gender bias of Western thought. Most importantly, by identifying individual development as in part the product of created institu-
tions, namely, the social relations of child rearing, object relations can translate individual experience into cultural phenomena or at least explain the institutional and cultural aspects of a supposedly individual experience. If the processes of psychic development produce a view of the self as fundamentally separate or fundamentally connected, this will inform one’s view of the world, which in turn will shade one’s perception and interpretation of truth, or reality. And of course, if such self-conceptions are gender-related, the accompanying world view will differ by gender as well. Thus, this work suggests that the dominant epistemology that defines political concepts such as obligation, as well as the method of our dominant political theoretical discourses, may themselves be an essential locus of gender bias. So object relations can be an important means of understanding how the problems of liberal democratic theory go beyond the empirical exclusion of women from politics to the fact that the epistemology from which these theories operate is premised on that exclusion.

The Priority of Liberty

Viewing object relations in this way has great potential for challenging many ideals of liberal obligation theory, such as the public-private dichotomy and the inviolability of the individual; for it suggests that what happens in the private relations of child rearing influences how we maintain and define the public. It further reminds us that individuals are not static entities in a state of nature but dynamic beings created and shaped by a variety of factors, particularly relationships with others.

But the strongest link to obligation is through the notion of liberty. As I suggested earlier, liberal voluntarist theories of obligation operate centrally from a notion of what Berlin (1971) has called “negative liberty,” consisting of absence of restraints. The individual is free to the extent that she is not restrained by external forces, primarily viewed as law, physical force, and other overt coercion. As anyone familiar with the debate between positive and negative liberty can attest, a central difficulty with the concept of negative liberty is that of determining what exactly constitutes a restraint (Preston 1984). However, Berlin’s general concept that restraints come from outside the self is an important basic tenet of negative liberty; specifically, other humans’ direct or indirect participation “in frustrating my wishes” is the relevant criterion in determining restraint: “By being free in this sense I mean not being interfered with by others. The wider the area of non-interference, the wider my freedom” (Berlin 1971, 123).

Note the resonance between this concept of liberty and object relations. The quotes selected particularly echo the boy’s infantile dilemma. But first I want to look at the term liberalism, held by some to be rather amorphous. It may include views ranging from a Hobbesian rational egoism to utilitarianism to Dworkin’s and Rawls’s concern with the welfare state. Indeed, it is amazing how much liberalism can continually revise itself and still be called liberalism, a privilege generally denied other ideologies. (Could that be testimony to its hegemonic entrenchment?)

The view of liberalism taken by its stronger critics, including a number of feminists, links liberalism inextricably with abstract individualism (Hartsock 1984; Macpherson 1962; Pateman 1985). But I wish to focus on what is less controversial, namely, that one thing common to the various liberal theories is the priority of liberty over other values. Indeed, the very root of the word liberalism derives from liberty; as Cranston (1967, 458) says, “By definition, a liberal is a man [sic] who believes in liberty, but because different men at different times have meant different things by liberty,
liberalism' is correspondingly ambiguous.” This, of course, is the positive-negative liberty debate; and it can be argued that the welfare state sort of liberalism in fact adopts a positive libertarian view. Yet I maintain that liberalism adopts a consistently negative, not positive, conception of liberty and that positive libertarians like Rousseau are mis-described as liberals.

For instance, while Rawls ostensibly takes justice as his focus, this is actually subordinate to, and defined in terms of, a real priority of negative liberty. Justice is established through the lexical ordering of principles that give a priority to liberty over equality. Equal worth of liberty—something we might associate with a positive, political liberalism—must take a back seat to liberty per se. Rawls's seemingly innovative ways of addressing inequality, such as the difference principle, serve to justify inequality by veiled appeals to such negative liberty principles as opportunity. Similarly, his theory of the natural duty of justice, as indicated earlier, is unnecessarily complicated by a voluntarist theory of obligation, in an attempt to preserve voluntarism in a nonvoluntarist construct (see Pateman 1985; Simmons 1979).

It can be argued that theorists like Locke are really not so extremely negative as they have been portrayed. Indeed, Locke asserts that "Law, in its true notion, is not so much the Limitation as the direction of a free and intelligent Agent to his proper interest" (1964, 347-48), suggesting positive liberty. In this respect Locke may lead the way to a more social appeals to such negative liberty principles as opportunity. Similarly, his theory of the natural duty of justice, as indicated earlier, is unnecessarily complicated by a voluntarist theory of obligation, in an attempt to preserve voluntarism in a nonvoluntarist construct (see Pateman 1985; Simmons 1979).

By confining myself to obligation, I hope to establish even more strongly the claim that freedom is central. Social contract theory begins with the assertion of natural freedom and equality; and its more explicitly liberal versions, such as course, laws of nature are to be obeyed because they come from God, not because of consent per se. But because God makes all men rational and coherent with the divine order, they will all naturally want to obey the laws of nature. For example, even if I am too dim or evil to see that the law of nature prohibiting waste is what God wants, I will at least be able to see that violating it is irrational, in that it wastes my labor. So even laws of nature would seem to be legitimized on some level by consent.

The third reason is the most convincing, if most complex; the very fact that Locke felt compelled to develop the doctrine of tacit consent demonstrates his beliefs concerning liberty. Though Locke binds the average unfree, unequal citizen to the state without explicit free choice, he feels compelled to assert that consent is nonetheless given. Through tacit consent he articulates a myth of choice to legitimize coercion through voluntarist language. This is not likely a conscious deception on Locke's part but rather a sincere attempt to reconcile freedom with authority. But it betrays Locke's agenda, for the only justification for the very awkward ideology of tacit consent is the belief in the need for negative liberty. A positive libertarian would not need such a myth (but might need others, as Rousseau demonstrated). A positive libertarian would simply say, “Obey the law because it is in the interest of your higher will, whether you are aware of that yet or not.” Thus, the priority of liberty is demonstrated through the assertion that citizens consent even if Locke must use circuitous (if not circular) reasoning to establish it; and the concept of liberty Locke endorses is decidedly negative.

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Locke's, further define equality to serve primarily as a means to define and protect freedom. The absolute natural freedom of the state of nature outlined by the social contract theorists entails an absence of restraint except for the restraints imposed by competing and alienated others. The absolute freedom of the state of nature—particularly in Hobbes and Rousseau and to a less obvious degree in Locke—is marked by a lack of control. Fear of ceasing to exist, fear of losing one's possessions, hostility, and suspicion are dominant characteristics (Flax 1983). Even for Locke, the state of war inevitably follows from the state of nature, either because money creates rational reasons to violate the laws of nature concerning hoarding (Macpherson 1962) or because there is no known judge (Dunn 1980). The state of nature is a kind of prison; for within it people cannot realize themselves, they cannot create and control. People in the state of nature seek to escape this chaos by turning to the social contract, thereby trading absolute freedom for "effective freedom," the freedom to act with assurance that one's actions will produce desired results.

Civil society thus seeks to protect the natural freedom that is threatened through war and conflict. It does this in two ways. First, civil society protects possessions and property. By having control over possessions, the individual has control over personal identity. For Locke, for instance, who you are is importantly determined by what you have; and civil society is established first and foremost to protect property. Property is central to freedom. Life, liberty, and property are the basic rights God gives to humans; it can even be argued that property subsumes life and liberty in the liberty to contract one's labor in exchange for wages and in the absolute centrality of property in the social contract. The expansiveness of the term property (Locke uses it alternately to refer to land and the body) also indicates its priority. Similarly, for Hobbes, acquisition and the fulfillment of passions is central to his concept of a person. People must be able to acquire things (property) to fulfill their natural passions and perpetuate their motion.

But civil society also exists to ensure that the individual can act rationally. Rules and laws provide predictability, assurance that individuals can act with certainty and hence control their lives. By protecting property and preserving (or making possible) rationality, the social contract not only preserves the citizen from nature but also assists the individual's preservation of autonomy, defined reactively as self-control and self-mastery. From the perspective of this reactive autonomy, obligation necessarily exists only by an act of free will. If I am free above all else (if freedom is what makes me human) I can only be bound (I can only have connections and relationships) by an act of my own free agency.

The logic of the contract thus follows inescapably from the premises of the state of nature. The necessity of consent to obligation must logically derive from the freedom of individuals and from the concept of freedom defined negatively. A positive libertarian like Hegel would force people to be free by forcing them to obey and thus would not necessarily require consent for obligation. Also, by focusing on individual consent in the state of nature, these theories make consent to greater or lesser degrees a sufficient condition for obligation. If no relations among people are considered natural, they can only be the product of agreements. As Simmons (1979) argues, the tendency of consent theorists to put limits on consent is not a consistent extension of their theories but a contradiction to the core principles underlying consent. The necessity and sufficiency of consent, in turn, rely on a concept of liberty as absence of restraint, because only such a concept is fully compatible with the extremely indi-
individualist view of consent and choice endemic to consent theory.

Freedom and Recognition

If we grant that this negative conception of freedom lies at the heart of voluntarist conceptions of obligation, this gives us a richer perspective on the gender bias of liberalism; for it can be seen in important ways to cohere with the symbolic language of "masculine experience" under mother-only child rearing. According to object relations, the girl, perceiving sameness between herself and her mother, incorporates that sameness into her self-definition and view of the world. She views her relationship with the world as continuous: other is self. For the boy, perceptions of difference cause him to view self and other as totally separate. And these perceptions feed on themselves as the boy actively engages in the conceptualization of the mother as completely other and outside the self.

In dissociating masculine mind-self from the female body-other, restraint is for the boy embodied in the very presence (i.e., the body) of the mother, as the reminder of the boy's primary femaleness and how it is at odds with his masculine gender identity. The mother is viewed as a controlling force that seeks to keep the son imprisoned, that is, merged with her. Her presence thus presents a "barrier" to self-realization of (nonfeminine) masculinity, a limitation and restriction on the boy's ability to become male, to become "himself." Furthermore, this restraint evident in the mother's presence is seen as coming from completely outside the self. Its genesis seems totally other, in spite of the fact that what he is trying to escape—his psychically female identity—is his primary self.

In reaction, the boy "cuts loose" from the (m)other. He detaches, tries to escape her influence and control. By projecting his psychic femaleness onto the mother and by viewing the mother as completely separate, the boy can dissociate himself from his primary femininity. On this reading, a primary goal of the emerging Oedipal boy is to achieve freedom from the constraint of his mother—to excise his femaleness, detach thoroughly from the mother and be free of the female, and thereby "escape the body-female." In short, he seeks absolute freedom from her and from all "others."

But the "freedom" defined by this reactive autonomy further entails domination and contest. Precisely because the deep nature of the boy's psychic femaleness makes it impossible to truly excise, the mother is viewed as a powerful controlling force, inhibitive of self-realization by virtue of her very presence. The search for freedom thus becomes a struggle for control in the boy's subconscious. If he can dominate his mother, who represents his primary identity, he can master that identity. Thus, the boy devalues the mother and his relation to her, belittling all relationship (i.e., "others") in the process. He seeks to deny her subjectivity, her self-hood, and particularly her sexuality. Thus, this "freedom" is viewed as the product of a struggle; the boy achieves freedom only by subordinating the woman.

In reality, however, this freedom is a false abstraction; for in the effort to escape the restraints embodied in the mother-woman, the boy must erect other, artificial barriers; that is, in order to prevent loss of self to the mother, the boy erects barriers to keep her "out" and him "in" his self-identity and gender identity. These barriers range from socially approved institutions of female-exclusive masculinity (from all-boy sports to male-dominated professions) to more pernicious ones, such as widespread belief systems about women's natural inferiority ("the normal male contempt for women" that analysts document in boys from age five on [Brunswick 1940]). These belief
systems are partly produced by empirical observation and teaching. The boy can see that women are socially devalued even by observing relations between mother and father. He experiences privileges over his sisters or his friends' sisters. He observes the restraints placed on women by virtue of their sex. But other beliefs develop by extension of these observations because they fill a deep need in the boy to believe that women are inferior; for if they are, his mother's power is perhaps not so threatening after all. These belief systems, rules, and practices serve as barriers—restraints—to prevent the boy's return to the mother. Like Locke's "natural law" preventing men from consenting to slavery, these belief systems and rules serve as restraints on action to the end of preserving freedom.

Thus, while this concept of freedom may ostensibly be defined as an "absence of restraint," the conceptual framework afforded by object relations would suggest that it can also be defined as an "absence of the female." Indeed, the notion that freedom in this sense is the hallmark of humanity provides another means of asserting women's nonhuman status. If women were human, they would have a right to freedom. To enact this freedom they would have to seek dominance; and such a search would destroy men, not to mention the fact that it would subvert the very purpose of defining freedom this way in the first place. As long as women are not considered to be human, freedom is not relevant to their existence. They are inhuman and therefore dominatable (like all things in nature) and therefore dominated. But this domination is what asserts women's inhumanity in the first place.

It goes even deeper than this; for if female is "other," freedom entails the absence of the other. This, as Beauvoir and Hegel both brought into our collective intellectual consciousness, constitutes the problem of recognition. Recognition is a key issue to the negative conception of freedom in the masculine psyche; and it is key to the conception of freedom found in liberal voluntarist theories of obligation.

In The Phenomenology of Spirit, particularly in the chapter "Self-Consciousness," Hegel argues that the self seeks affirmation by declaring a radical independence. In this, of course, it requires recognition by another being; but self-consciousness seeks to gain recognition from an other without making a simultaneous recognition. Self-consciousness seeks to be perpetually the self, keeping the other perpetually other. Self-consciousness is prepared to die for this recognition. And even though it realizes that death would bring a dubious (if not Pyrrhic) victory, this readiness is what creates masters. Those not so prepared become the slaves, the perpetual objects. The slave is thus "the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another" (Hegel 1977, 116).

This presents a parallel to the "male model" of pre-Oedipal development. For the boy, recognition of the mother as a subject is "dangerous," for it would entail recognizing and accepting his own femininity. Yet because repressing primary identification and excising the female is so difficult (if not impossible), the need to deny the mother as the embodiment of his own femininity, becomes intense. And the struggle for recognition becomes, in the boy's unconscious, a life-and-death struggle for dominance. The boy thus resorts to the defensive reaction of taking difference—specifically masculinity as "not-female"—as ostensible validation of his separation or differentiation (Flax 1983). This, however, is an artificial solution with mixed results: it "involves an arbitrary boundary creation and an assertion of hyperseparateness to reinforce a lack of security in a person's sense of their [sic] self as a separate person" (Chodorow 1979, 56).

Not prepared to die for the ideal and perhaps even oblivious to the struggle it-
self, the mother-woman becomes the slave. She is a thing, the perpetual object. Furthermore, because of her perspective—one that values the concrete and real over the abstract and ideal and takes relationship as primary—the mother-woman does not readily perceive this as oppression. She cannot conceive of wishing to die for recognition, which seems to her an inherent contradiction. Her realism and relationship orientation, however, ensure her "enslavement" (objectification, dehumanization, oppression). She, like Hegel's slave, is doomed to "live for another." Yet the reason she does so is not the natural outcome of the dialectic but the result of masculine action. Because of the male's intense need for unidirectional recognition, he creates institutions that solidify woman's role as other.

But in keeping with the standpoint approach, just as the master is in many ways in an inferior position to the slave because he is blind to the importance of material life to self-consciousness, so the boy develops a stance that, while keeping him master, also keeps him from a true realization of his self. For the one-sided recognition he achieves through patriarchy is far from the full recognition required for "relational autonomy," or the full autonomy that can only be achieved through the mutual interaction of subjects and of the location of the self in relationships of mutuality. Rather, we have relationships of domination, which "fail to promote mutual recognition because they prevent individuals from seeing others as anything but totally other; and they accomplish this false othering by promoting differences meant to keep individuals on one level of a hierarchy from being able to recognize individuals on different levels" (Aboulafia 1984, 182-83).

Implications for Obligation

What does all this have to do with obligation? I contend that liberal obligation theory has primarily embodied a "reactive" concept of autonomy. The previous discussion has overtly articulated some of the central issues and relevant problems involved in the application of object relations and standpoint epistemology to political theory. It enables us to examine the issue of recognition in a deeper way than liberal obligation theory would at first glance suggest. The themes of the desire for dominance and nonreciprocal recognition have evident parallels in liberal theories, particularly in theories of obligation. They are merely represented more subtly and covertly.

Agency is one of the most important concepts of individualism and consent theory; the individual has the capacity to make choices and thus can assume obligations. But this capacity also carries a moral imperative that obligations can be created only by exercising this agency. Agency is the hallmark of independence, autonomy, and adulthood. To be able to make one's own decisions indicates an end to dependence on the will and abilities of another. Hence, agency is what justifies the rejection of divine right and the adoption of the social contract. But because it is a reactive, rather than a relational, autonomy that this agency embodies, it is also what justifies—indeed, creates and perpetuates—the radical and abstract individualism of liberal democratic theory, the market model of society, a theory that obligation can exist only by virtue of voluntary assumption. And these stem in part from the nonrecognition of women.

That is the primary significance of object relations theory for political theory. Because he must become masculine in a world where mother-only child rearing ensures that he is psychically female, where gender is an exclusionary category, and where the female is devalued while the male is elevated, the boy cannot afford to grant recognition to the mother nor, by extension, to any women nor, indeed, to any others. The conception of
people as absolutely separate, which the boy develops both from his perception of difference from his mother and from his exaggeration of that difference to bolster his differentiation from her result in a framework in which those separate individuals can resolve conflicts only at discrete and controlled points of contact, only through rule-governed and role-defined structures. This "inability" to grant mutual recognition is the vital seed from which the self-other dichotomy grows, as well as other dualisms that are variations on that theme: subject-object, mind-body, public-private, fact-value, exchange-use. Not coincidentally, these dualisms involve identification of male with the former (the public world of fact, the subject, and the ego) and female with the latter (nature, the id, privatized objects), thus taking as a primary value the denial of women's subjectivity and personhood. On this reading, then, and within this language of symbolization, inequality and dominance serve as a basis for liberal voluntarist obligation. And this suggests important things about its theoretical, ontological, and epistemological grounding and characterization.

If the conception of freedom as negative is premised on the struggle for recognition, particularly on the ability to be recognized without reciprocation—if non-recognition is (as it is for the Oedipal boy and Hegel's master) a form of power and violence—freedom, too, must be at least in part an expression of that same power and violence. Within a negative conception of freedom, increases to my freedom will come from a lessening of restriction, such as fewer laws; as positive libertarians will point out, however, this may produce less freedom for those not as well off. Thus, freedom becomes zero-sum, a competitive relationship among beings, some of whom seek to win out over others.

Other concepts based on the premises of that freedom will then, likewise, be expressive of power and violence. Thus, "equality," in referring to abstract opportunity and rights, sets the stage for competition and dominance. Opportunity is equal until someone wins the contest, and even then only for those who start off equal in the relevant respects. "Rights" embodies the concept of claims against others, again suggesting competition and dominance; a right further provides a boundary line between various individuals' needs, desires, and wants and hence serves to divide individuals. In the concept of "equal rights," we must respect each other not because we are connected but because of rights, which highlights the line of demarcation between us. Justice Holmes's witticism, 'My right to swing my fist ends where the other man's nose begins' is illuminating as much for its articulation of separate and discrete individual spheres of action as it is for its image of violence; the potential for violence lies at the precise point where discrete individuals have contact.

Obligation, as self-assumed, is a particularly significant manifestation of this conception of freedom because, far more than equality, justice, or rights, obligation centrally involves connection, relationship, and bondedness. Yet a completely voluntarist notion of obligation depends on a conception of people as inherently separate and fragmented, and this resonates strongly with the model of male development within mother-only child rearing. The key principle of consent theory is that one has control over one's bonds or connections to others because one creates those bonds. If I do not wish to be obligated to X, I can simply choose not to incur an obligation to X, I simply need not create it. Creation is a form of power in the sense of control and mastery. The act of consent preserves my right to autonomy as self-determination; it thus asserts my separateness and self-control even as I give up some of that control by creating an obligation. By creating bonds through an act of "free will," I
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maintain control over myself, self-determination, and freedom.

Obligation within the social contract can be seen importantly as a relationship of exchange. Citizens exchange or trade absolute freedom for security, according to Hobbes; for effective and economic freedom, according to Locke; for the moral freedom of self-mastery, according to Rousseau. Humans give up some liberty to the government and agree to obey it; and in return they receive the goods of a "well-ordered society" (to borrow from Rawls).

But underneath the veneer of this exchange relationship is a relationship of power and domination. Within the logic of social contract and consent theory, one potentially puts oneself in another's power when one places oneself under an obligation by giving up part of one's freedom—one's essence—for something else. In this kind of obligation relation, the obligated person must recognize the obliger in performing the obligation, while the obliger need only accept whatever deed is performed in fulfillment and need not recognize the actor. The dangers inherent in this kind of relationship, this formalized connection, are what require the centrality of voluntarism as the legitimator of such a relationship. If obligation is viewed as a power relationship, being placed in such a relationship without active control over one's placement would seem to make such a relationship doubly coercive.

This is certainly most true for Hobbes, but it is also true for more "social" conceptions of consent theory, like Locke's. The purpose of promising as an institution is to ensure that people will keep their word; and the purpose of the social contract is to enforce such contracts with the threat of sanction. Voluntarism would seem to give the individual the power of control over that relationship. Furthermore, since it is an exchange relationship, each self recognizes the other only to the extent that it chooses, that is, to the extent that it is in its interest. Ostensibly, this would seem to pose a solution to the "master's dilemma"; for both parties, by expressing their interests, control the degree and form of recognition of the other. Consent thus seems to save us from authoritarian coercion.

But in reality it merely masks it. The seeming reciprocity of exchange is belied by the strict theoretical adherence to consent and voluntarism in face of the fact that such consent is nonexistent for all but a select few. In most of the social contract theories, political obligation is not in fact self-assumed in the full sense by very many people, as critics since Hume have pointed out. Certainly Hobbes's approach to consent, as a "rational fiat," leaves very little to actual human choice. Similarly, Locke's myth of tacit consent served to tell everyone that they had in fact consented when they had not even realized it was an option open to them. Further, those who had not actively (if at all) consented were nonetheless considered obligated to obey the law and government. It is rather widely accepted among modern theorists of obligation (see Flathman 1972; Pateman 1985; Simmons 1979; Tussman 1960) that the conditions for true consent are often absent even today. A large number of people are often not given the opportunity to consent, or they "consent" by performing acts about which they have little choice. Even acts of dissent are interpreted as acts of consent, and unfair bargaining positions belie the freedom implicit in free choice. "Tacit consenters" (usually the nonlanded workers, the poor, not to mention women and people of color) were—and many would say still are—subject to the political decisions of the "express consenters" (the landed and wealthy white men who vote and hold political office). Under a liberal voluntarist conception of obligation, then,
the class of “masters” is recognized in
every sense (political, social, economic),
while the “slaves” are not only denied
political voice but are told that their im-
posed silence is voluntary expression and
that they are obligated thereby.

Thus, we are led to the suggestion that
voluntarist theories of obligation can be
read, at least in part, as theories of power,
with power conceived as domination. The
“freedom and equality” that supposedly
founded all voluntarist theories of obliga-
tion are merely a patina that obscures the
degree to which the fundamental assump-
tions guiding our definitions of freedom
and equality actually apply to a particular
group of people and are at least potential-
ly oppressive to others.

The Feminist Standpoint and
Feminist Obligation

Why, however, is this a specifically
feminist analysis? Women are not the
only victims of this conception of obliga-
tion; and to that degree there is also a
class and race dimension to the problem
as well, which will not be analyzed here.
Furthermore, it presumes that men will
not also use other men of the same race
and class in seeking to fulfill the need for
dominance.

That the effect is not gender-exclusive,
however, does not mean that gender is
not an important cause. While object rela-
tions theory suggests that the problem of
recognition is particularly keen for males,
I have also argued that it reflects the expe-
rience of the powerful. Since men have
power vis-à-vis women, it is to that
degree a masculine problem, as well as a
white problem and a class, or “bour-
ggeois,” problem.

However, the gender dimensions of this
problem are particularly powerful be-
cause the double-edged exclusiveness of
consent theory has special significance for
women. The contingent gender bias of
voluntarist obligation has portrayed
women as incapable of expressing consent
and thus of creating their obligations. But
even when women’s capacity for consent
is granted, the structure of voluntarist ob-
ligation in fact excludes women by deny-
ing the validity of women’s experience.
Women have been bound historically to
an entire series of other obligations—
child care most obviously—to which con-
sent is not only often unavailable but
often of questionable relevance. Are these
“obligations” entirely invalid? Or do they
suggest a need to redefine the concept of
obligation itself?

The answer is probably a bit of both.
Yes, women have been denied opportuni-
ties to choose and create their own lives;
and these opportunities need to be provid-
ed and restored, in part through a “fully
consistent” consent theory. Indeed, En-
lightenment principles of freedom and
equality can be seen as important sources
of modern feminism. Many women have
left their families, children included; and
it can be seen as a form of sexism for us to
be horrified by this. But many more
women have attempted to carve out
choices for themselves without severing
relations and responsibilities, for exam-
ple, by taking their children when they
leave a marriage. Many women would
balk at the prospect of abandoning their
“obligations.” One cannot merely blame
“false consciousness” or socialization for
this. As Gilligan (1982) has argued, “the
different voice” engages in moral reason-
ing from a perspective of relationship and
connection, not rights and rules. Such a
perspective attunes the reasoner to the
needs of others. If a woman takes her chil-
dren when she leaves her husband, it may
well be out of fear for their safety, even
though taking them may pose a greater
risk to her own safety. Or women might
recognize that just as they have been
denied choices, so have their children.
Should they be the sacrificial lambs to
women's realization of their oppression? To say that the women described here have engaged in the process of assessing their options, and have in fact made choices and thus consented, however (even if true consent to their role as mother was not originally given), is disingenuous; for it denies the context within which women are already embedded, a context that places restraints on choice analogous to Locke's tacit consent argument. Rather, the concept of responsibility is the central issue: specifically, responsibility in the positive sense of "responsiveness" (Gilligan 1982).

Obligation needs to be reformulated to account for these values and perspectives, for the very human experience of choicelessness, and for the fact—so adamantly denied by consent and social contract theory—that choices exist in contexts. Indeed, choices are so deeply embedded in contexts of relationship, emotion, value, and taught beliefs—all of which are social phenomena, deriving from relations with others and not from a purified or natural self—as to make consent theorists' construal of choice difficult to fit into a realistic picture of human life.

But how would obligation be reformulated along these feminist lines? If the philosophical priority of freedom in part reflects an orientation toward conceiving the self as separate and if women define themselves in relation to others, it follows that a feminist ontology and epistemology would operate from the philosophical priority of obligation. Object relations would then provide us with the basis for suggesting how individual experience at least impinges on institutions like the state as well as on the political philosophy that defines or justifies it.

Accordingly, then, a feminist conceptualization of obligation would operate from a different framework, namely, the givenness of connection and responsibility. The epistemological perspective of enmeshment in a web of relationships leads to the moral conclusion that freedom—the central element in social contract theory—is, while certainly important to the concept of a person, not necessarily the primary, or central, element. A prior and more central concept would be responsibility in the sense of response, or even obligation itself; that is, from a "feminist standpoint," perhaps obligation needs to be taken as given.

To make sense of this suggestion requires a new framework of inquiry. Working from an assumption of separateness and freedom, consent theorists seek to understand how separate individuals can develop and sustain connections and still be separate, how they can engage in relationships and still remain free. Thus, the central approach involves determining how obligations "arise," how they come into being. But if obligation is given, it does not really make sense to ask how it can arise. Obligation is the standard against which other things, such as the freedom to act as one wishes, are measured. In liberal obligation, the assumption of freedom demands an explanation of any curtailment of that freedom, such as obligations impose. In this feminist conception, such a demand violates the imperative of responsibility and care, and it is the assumption of obligation that demands an explanation of nonfulfillment. This different orientation requires inquiry into the contextual conditions surrounding an obligation and obligated person so as to understand the content of an obligation, rather than the process, as well as to understand possible justifications for nonfulfillment. Such an inquiry would examine the concrete particularities of a situation to articulate the conflicting pressures that lead to a particular action as the fulfillment of the obligation, or that provide a possible reason for not fulfilling it. Put rather simplistically, this approach can be seen as more interested in what particular obligations consist of than in how they come to be.
Thus, a feminist method profoundly alters the very terms of the discourse. Beginning with the self as separate, liberal voluntarist obligation seeks to find areas and modes of connection that are safe—that can provide for needs without risking the loss of self. This feminist model, beginning with connection, tries to determine how to carve out a space for the self without violating care. While freedom is certainly achievable in the context of human relationships, it must be achieved, it is not a given. Freedom is an entity that must be created, as an individual carves out space for him- or herself. And since freedom is created by a stepping away from, or out of, obligations, freedom must also be justified. Relations cannot be severed by a "mere" desire or act of will. There must be, to borrow from Flathman (1972), "good reasons" for the desire not to fulfill obligations.

This does not mean such justification is not possible or even likely for a wide variety of cases. In a century that has seen Hitler, Stalin, and Jim Jones, the concept of a given obligation may make some uneasy. A second source of unease comes specifically from women's experience. Nonconsensual obligations have been imposed on women all their lives. Isn't it time the yoke was shaken off? Should not women be able to choose their obligations, just as men have?

I share these concerns: within the liberal framework, such a construal does not make sense and is indeed nightmarish. But at the same time, these objections miss the depth of the reformulation suggested here. The purpose of a feminist approach to obligation is not to bind us more tightly to the state or to relations; nor am I suggesting that we model political obligations on the relationship between mother and child. Rather, object relations points out that women's experience, which is systematically eliminated from such public ideologies as political theory, can tell us important things about human life. It enables us to see the reality that women's lives reveal, that is, that we—men and women alike—are often in fact nonconsensually bound more tightly than our public discourse admits.

Consent theory tells only part of the story of human experience; it presents, therefore, a biased and distorted picture of obligation. The ideology of consent allows us to believe that all obligations are created. We can thus deny the obligatory force of any relations that we do not create or do not wish to maintain. This we, however, is largely masculine; for this belief exists, operates, and flourishes in the public realm. In the private realm, women's realm, obligations are often not at all consensual.

At the same time, one cannot merely add women's experience to the dominant discourse because the two utilize different ontological and epistemological frameworks. The problem of women's obligation exists within the context of social institutions and thought that create two different sets of values for men and women—men are naturally free, women are naturally obligated. Within this context, of course, feminists do not wish to maintain the givenness of obligation for women, for that would perpetuate their inferiority. Rather the context must be changed.

But to reverse this order simplistically—to obligate men nonconsensually, as women have been obligated, to "drag them down" to women's oppression—is certainly not a goal. Rather, the point is to call attention to the fact that men already are nonconsensually obligated in many ways and that these obligations are appropriate to human relations but that our public ideology will not allow us to recognize this fact. Such a refusal obliterates the hope of a human theory of obligation that recognizes choice and givenness.

Similarly, women have the capacity to create many of their obligations but are effectively denied the opportunity to do
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so. This denial, similarly, obliterates the hope of a human theory of obligation.

Conclusion

Thus, one must realize that the claim that obligation should be considered as given is an epistemological and methodological claim. It strikes to the heart of how we conduct theoretical inquiry, what sort of questions we ask, and how we formulate them. Certainly, I have provided only a sketch of the positive side of my task, the beginning of an answer to the question of how to reformulate obligation. But the critical dimensions of this feminist theoretical approach are clearly powerful. Through application of the standpoint epistemology method, I have shown how the gender-related experiences that object relations theory articulates can be used to gain a deeper understanding of the epistemological grounding of obligation and of the structural gender bias that voluntarist theories embody. A similar method could be applied to other concepts, like freedom and rights. By asking this very different set of questions, a feminist approach to obligation redefines the issues and problems that political theory needs to address. In doing so, it points new directions for theory to take.

Notes

A version of this paper was presented at the 1988 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. Thanks to Richard Flathman and Nancy Hartsock for their comments on an earlier draft.

1. While I will make several remarks on the concept of duty throughout the essay, I will not undertake a detailed discussion of the concept. There are aspects of duty that would prove useful to my analysis, but that is not the project I am engaged in here. My point is that liberal theory places consent at the heart of politics by making it the model for all human relationships. In circular fashion, this is precisely why duty has not been as central to liberal theory, as obligation, justice, rights, and freedom have been. Fishkin's (1979) notion of "general obligation" is also potentially useful to my theory, but I disagree with his claim that nonvoluntary obligation is compatible with liberalism. See Hirschmann n.d. for a fuller discussion of Fishkin.

2. Gilligan's thesis has bred considerable controversy, for which I refer the reader to other discussions (Kittay and Meyers 1987; Tronto 1987).

3. The obvious, if ambivalent, exception is women's relation to the family. It would bring us into an entirely different discussion, but the family plays a curious and varied role in these theories, as relations between men and women are alternately cast as natural and contractual. But even when the latter prevails, women do not have the same powers and rights as men.

4. I refer here not only to using the roads, which fairly clearly does not correspond to any meaningful interpretation of consent, but also to such liberal democratic practices as voting and civil disobedience as well. See Hirschmann n.d., Pateman 1985, and Piven and Cloward 1988 for relevant discussions.

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