How do feminists envisage the human world they inhabit? And what, in consequence, are the assumptions that feminist researchers bring to their various forms of human inquiry?

These questions, formulated here to target feminism and feminist research, are questions we have already addressed to positivism, interpretivism and critical inquiry. In doing so, we have in each case been forced to take account of the pluralism that obtains. For a start, as we saw, there are many positivisms. The same must be said of interpretivism. Not only has interpretivism emerged historically in the threefold guise of hermeneutics, phenomenology and symbolic interactionism, but each of these assumes a range of distinct forms that are not easily reconciled and are sometimes irreconcilable. Critical inquiry too has a long history. The divergences found to arise within just one 'school' in this tradition are warning enough that we cannot facilely lump together theoretical stances whose differences are as striking as their commonalities. Nor can we ignore the differences in social research posture and procedure that these stances call for.

It would be unrealistic to expect feminism to be different. Here too we come up against a wide-ranging pluralism. People may speak and write of 'feminism' in the singular, just as they speak and write of 'positivism', 'interpretivism' and 'critical theory' in the singular, but there are, of course, many feminisms. Feminists make sense of the world in a myriad of ways and bring differing, even conflicting, assumptions to their research. Feminism speaks with one voice in characterising the world it experiences as a patriarchal world and the culture it inherits as a masculinist culture, but this unity is short-lived. What do patriarchy and masculinism mean? How do patriarchy and masculinism arise? What, in sociological terms, is the paramount locus wherein patriarchy and masculinism are encountered and identified? From where do patriarchy and masculinism draw their essential support? And are these, in fact, the questions it is most relevant to ask? Merely to raise issues like these is to point up the heterogeneity of feminist thought.

Here once more, then, there is place for some 'sorting out'.

For a male to presume to do such sorting out, even when relying overall on women's texts, calls for a good measure of courage or foolhardiness. Probably both. There are those who would assert without qualification that a man can have nothing valid or useful to say about feminism or feminist research. While the literature carries references enough to male feminists and feminist males, to a large number of feminist writers these terms are oxymorons.

We reject the idea that men can be feminists because we argue that what is essential to 'being feminist' is the possession of 'feminist consciousness'. And we see feminist consciousness as rooted in the concrete, practical and everyday experiences of being, and being treated as, a woman. (Stanley and Wise 1983, p. 18)

Given Stanley and Wise's definition of 'being feminist', theirs is impeccable logic. The definition is not unchallengeable, of course, and it surely has anomalous implications. On these grounds, a woman emerges as a genuine feminist if, espousing a weak form of liberal feminism, she is content to see meagre gains for women in workplace opportunities which leave all systems and structures in place and essentially intact, male-derived though they are. Not so a far more radically minded male who insists that sexism permeates the very fabric of society and the culture that sustains it and warns that women will never experience justice or achieve any measure of equality without fundamental changes to cultural thought patterns and societal structures. The mantle of feminism is denied to the latter because he is male and therefore unable to share feminine consciousness.

The same logic would deny to whites the possibility of their being in any formal sense members of the black movement for civil rights. However anti-racist their sentiments and whatever they might do for the cause, they are unable to share the consciousness and experience of people of colour. Yet the important role whites have played in
movements for emancipation and racial justice cannot be denied. Feminist writer Alison Assiter writes of how African people have revealed the Eurocentrism of modern science. Those who have played this role are 'African people who spoke from a commitment to the emancipation of Africans from white domination'. She adds, however: 'One does not have to be African to hold these values; potentially, anyone would be able to join the relevant community' (1996, p. 87).

Echoing around us, at the same time, is Freire's clear assertion, referred to in the previous chapter, that no one can liberate somebody else. As Freire sees it, no one can even liberate herself or himself. Instead, people together—yes, people in fellowship—liberate one another. That being so, there is no escaping the need for the women of this world, in solidarity with one another, to engage in a movement for deliverance from oppression and the attainment of equality. No one can do it for them. It can only be their movement. Women must lead it and constitute its core.

Nevertheless, a 'movement'—a much looser concept than, say, 'institution' or 'organisation'—allows for a broad range of affiliations and diverse modes of participation and action. Just as whites have joined blacks in their struggle, to the advantage of the movement as a whole, men can surely join women in theirs—periodically, to be sure, but not the less wholeheartedly for that. Nor is such involvement to be seen as some kind of exercise in altruism. Men's own interests are utterly at stake. They are, after all, victims as well as perpetrators of patriarchy and sexism. At one point it became something of a truism in feminist literature but it bears repeating: patriarchy and sexism are not fetters worn by females only; they severely limit human possibility for males as well.

The Many Feminisms

How does one go about sorting out feminist issues? Perhaps one should start by listing and describing the various forms that feminism takes? While it appears logical enough to begin in that fashion, offering a typology of feminisms turns out to be a tricky thing to do. It is not just that a movement of such intricate diversity resists categorisation but that the very act of categorising has implications of its own. Not the least of these implications is the 'maleness' of the act of categorising, which a number of feminist thinkers are swift to allege. Among them are Stanley and Wise (1983, p. 40), who judge 'one-dimensional forms of classification' to be 'dichotomous ways of construing reality'. It matters not whether these are established ways of construing reality or new ways of construing reality. In either case, categorisations of this kind 'are concerned with pin-pointing differences', 'portray political ideologies as clearly demarcated, fixed and unchanging', and privilege one side of the dichotomy over the other. This, Stanley and Wise conclude, is 'an essentially masculinist way of interpreting'.

Such misgivings about classification on the part of feminists have not proved totally inhibiting. Rosemarie Tong (1995), for example, offers us no fewer than seven forms of feminism to consider. In her much-cited typology, she suggests that feminism may be 'liberal, Marxist, radical, psychoanalytic, socialist, existentialist, or postmodern'. As the title of her Introduction proclaims, these are 'The Varieties of Feminist Thinking'. She refers to them variously as 'categories', 'labels', 'strands', 'perspectives' and 'views' (1995, pp. 1–9).

Liberal feminism is grounded in the humanism of liberal political thought. Such humanism privileges the autonomy of the person and views the just society as a system of individual rights that safeguard personal autonomy and allow self-fulfilment. There are liberals and liberals, all the same. Classical, or libertarian, liberalism wants the state to protect rights and provide equal opportunity, but to interfere as little as possible. Welfare, or egalitarian, liberalism has an eye for social justice rather than civil liberties and calls for forthright state intervention in the cause of equity. Tong believes that, in contrast to many nineteenth-century liberal feminists, who appear as classical (libertarian) liberals, most twentieth-century liberal feminists present as welfare (egalitarian) liberals.

Tong herself leans towards the egalitarian form of liberalism. 'An egalitarianism that worries about all women's basic needs is probably more feminist than a libertarianism that is concerned only about a few women's rights.' For this reason, she chooses for consideration liberal feminists in whom 'the drift of their thought is away from some of the less feminist assumptions of classical liberalism and toward some of the more feminist assumptions of welfare liberalism' (1995, p. 13). These are earlier feminists (Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Harriet Taylor) and, in our own day, Betty Friedan (the Betty Friedan of The Second Stage rather than the Betty Friedan of The Feminine Mystique).

Such egalitarianism takes feminists beyond liberal feminism's traditional invitation to individual women merely to cast off their conditioning and reject traditional sex roles. 'Sexual equality', Tong observes (1995, p. 38), 'cannot be achieved through women's willpower alone'. Even modest goals relating to equal opportunity tend to demand
a significant measure of economic reorganisation and resource redistribution and rather profound changes in consciousness.

Unlike liberal feminism, Marxist feminism is revolutionary, not merely reformist. Liberal feminism may be led to address issues of structure but this is less a matter of principle than a means to an end. It is not the same with Marxist feminism. For the latter, as we would expect from our considerations of Marxism to this point, structural change is the major goal. The structure that it targets, of course, is the class structure. From this perspective, without radical change to the class society, the equal opportunity sought by liberal feminists is a chimera. Women's oppression began with the introduction of private property and is now to be seen as 'the product of the political, social and economic structures associated with capitalism' (Tong 1995, p. 39). It is capitalism that has shaped the institution of the family as we know it. It is capitalism that leads women's domestic work to be dismissed as not real work. It is capitalism that ensures that women are generally given the most monotonous jobs and the smallest remuneration. How can women liberate themselves from oppression as long as the structures of capitalism remain in place?

Marxist feminists, understandably, concentrate on issues relating to women's work—both their paid employment and their unpaid work in the home. They expect that radical changes in the one will induce changes in the other. Margaret Benston (1969) insists that, as long as domestic work remains a matter of private production and the responsibility of women, equal access to jobs will not provide equality but will simply force women into carrying a double workload. What Benston wants to see is a socialisation of domestic work. This, she believes, will bring home to everyone how socially necessary domestic work is. Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (1972) go further, arguing that domestic work is not merely useful but productive, even in the Marxist sense of creating surplus value. By their work in the home, women are already in the productive workforce. This should be acknowledged and women should be receiving a wage for their domestic labour. While socialisation of domestic work and the provision of a wage for domestic work may not seem revolutionary targets, Marxist feminists are in a position to develop the revolutionary consciousness of working women and lead them into revolutionary action (Tong 1995, p. 69).

For radical feminism, the oppression of women is the oldest, most profound and most widespread oppression of all. It is the view of some radical feminists that the oppression of women causes more suffering than any other form of oppression. Some propose the oppression of women as the model for understanding any other form of oppression.

This awareness of the depth and extent of women's oppression has led some radical feminists into separatism. Despairing of ever forging a community with males in which there would be equality, freedom and respect, they have directed their efforts instead to developing an exclusively female culture. 'Woman culture' is likely to comprise a specifically female aesthetic (art, literature, music, dance), specifically female science, and specifically female religion. It may also include a specifically female sexuality wherein lesbianism, autoeroticism or celibacy replace heterosexual relations.

While not all radical feminists choose the separatist path, all are preoccupied in one way or another with women's sexual and reproductive issues. Tong (1995, p. 51) lists these as 'contraception, sterilization, and abortion; pornography, prostitution, sexual harassment, rape, and woman battering'. Addressing such issues starkly reveals just how radically disordered the patriarchal society is and how radically it must therefore be transformed. It will not be enough to make human society more libertarian or more egalitarian, as liberal feminism is suggesting. That might even make matters worse. As Farganis states in expounding the views of Erikson:

Women becoming equal to men, in the sense of their becoming like men, allow men to impose their notions, misguided and incorrect though these may be, of what is humanly desirable and humanly possible on women. This imposition enslaves women, continues to entrap men, and precludes any genuine dialectic of an ideal of being human. (1986, p. 117)

Nor will it be enough to rid human society of its capitalistic structures, as Marxist feminism calls upon us to do. The patriarchal system as such, with all its social and cultural institutions, has to be eliminated. Radical feminists may be far from unanimous as to how that might be achieved, but there is impressive uniformity in the strength of their conviction and the passion of their commitment.

Psychoanalytic feminism grounds women's oppression in the depths of the female psyche. In this form of feminism, arising as it does out of Freudian theory, sexuality is at centre stage. Freud, of course, is seen by many as an inescapable foe of all feminism. His talk of penis envy and his alleged biological determinism have drawn incisive critiques on the part of writers such as Betty Friedan (1974), Kate Millett (1970) and, with more qualification, Shulamith Firestone (1970). However, there are a number of feminists who identify in Freud—in Freud himself, that is, in contradistinction to many of his latter-day followers—insights that prove liberating rather than domesticating. This, to be sure, necessitates a break with the biological determinism so routinely ascribed to Freudian
theory. It also occasioned a spirited challenge to the Freudian notion that men's sense of justice and morality is more highly developed than women's. With that break made and that challenge mounted, a number of feminists have found it useful to remain within a Freudian framework. Some of them work towards a non-patriarchal understanding of the Oedipus complex, while others prefer to concentrate on the pre-Oedipal stage in which the relationship between mother and infant is at its peak. The influence of Jacques Lacan has led a number of these psychoanalytically oriented feminists into a post-structuralist reading of feminism.

In Tong's listing of feminisms, socialist feminism is deliberately placed after psychoanalytic feminism rather than after Marxist feminism. She believes that socialist feminism represents 'the confluence of Marxist, radical and, more arguably, psychoanalytic streams of feminist thought' (1995, p. 173). Socialist feminists find that Marxism, taken alone, is inadequate for the analysis of women's oppression. Hartmann claims (1981, pp. 10-11) that 'Marxist categories, like capital itself, are sex-blind'. Radical feminism, on the other hand, while it offers a more comprehensive gender analysis, presents such a univocal picture of patriarchy that it blurs important distinctions that need to be made. As a number of writers have pointed out, purdah, suttee, foot binding and clitoridectomy may all come to be dismissed as abominations perpetrated by a patriarchy as Other. The Other being a threat to Self, woman must be subordinated. This has led males in the course of time to construct a series of myths about woman so as to control her better. As de Beauvoir sees it, such myths express an ideal image of woman that offers men all that they as men lack. To fulfil this purpose, the image of woman can be a reminder of life or of death. She can be angel or devil. Woman can be a reminder of life or of death. She can be angel or devil. These myths beget the social roles to which women are assigned and which play a pivotal role in holding them subject. Breaking such fetters is no easy task for women but, de Beauvoir believes, joining the workforce, entering the ranks of the intellectuals, and taking part in the socialist transformation of society are all steps in the right direction.

Existentialist feminism locates its source in the pre-eminent figure of Simone de Beauvoir and her major text, The Second Sex (1953). Her partner was Jean-Paul Sartre, who, along with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, spearheaded the advance of existential phenomenology. This was in the wake of Heidegger's Being and Time (1962), which, in developing its radical ontology, invoked a number of traditional existentialist themes. Numerous commentators have regarded Sartre's Being and Nothingness (1956) as, in large measure, a commentary on Being and Time.

Unlike the ancient Greeks and the medieval Christians who found comfort and security in the notion of a stable, orderly cosmos operating according to immutable laws, existentialists find the world contingent, indifferent, even absurd. In this view of things, as conscious and self-conscious human beings, we are thrown back upon our freedom and called to respond to our human situation.

In expounding his version of existentialism, Sartre makes a cardinal distinction between en-soi (the 'in itself') and pour-soi (the 'for itself'). These are modes of being. The pour-soi is conscious being; the en-soi is being-as-object. Flowing out of this distinction is Sartre's further distinction between 'Self' and 'Other'. By Other he means another personal being, even though the Other is itself a pour-soi, we dissociate ourselves from it as from an en-soi. This is a mutual dissociation: we each constitute the Other as an object and perceive it as a threat.

Simone de Beauvoir takes this Sartrean distinction between Self and Other (perhaps it was hers in the first place?) and uses it to illuminate the relationship between man and woman. She construes man as Self and woman as Other. The Other being a threat to Self, woman must be seen as a threat to man and he needs to make her subordinate. Hence the oppression of women that we find throughout history. Relegated to the status of Otherness, women find themselves in a condition of subjection and dependency. This has led males in the course of time to construct a series of myths about woman so as to control her better. As de Beauvoir sees it, such myths express an ideal image of woman that offers men all that they as men lack. To fulfill this purpose, the image must be chameleon-like: it must be able and ready to change at will. Woman can be a reminder of life or of death. She can be angel or devil. These myths beget the social roles to which women are assigned and which play a pivotal role in holding them subject. Breaking such fetters is no easy task for women but, de Beauvoir believes, joining the workforce, entering the ranks of the intellectuals, and taking part in the socialist transformation of society are all steps in the right direction.

Postmodern feminism is Tong's final category. The feminist thinkers she has in view are Hélène Cixous (1937- ), Luce Irigaray (1932- ) and Julia Kristeva (1941- ). Until recently, Tong observes, what she is calling postmodern feminism has been referred to as 'French feminism'. This, along with a linking of postmodern feminists to Derrida and Lacan, is indication enough that Tong sees no need to distinguish between poststructuralism (an eminently French phenomenon stemming from the equally French phenomenon of structuralism) and postmodernism (a phenomenon much broader both geographically and in terms of the issues it raises and addresses). While Tong is by no means alone in doing this, it will be suggested in Chapter 9 that the distinction between
postmodernism and post-structuralism remains a useful distinction to make. In the light of that distinction, it can be argued that the three feminists referred to are post-structuralist rather than postmodernist. Certainly, Kristeva, for one, has expressly declined to be described as postmodernist.

Whatever of the nomenclature, Tong links postmodern feminism very closely to deconstruction, characterising this as a process that is universally and radically critical, anti-essentialist, and fiercely committed to breaking down traditional antinomies such as reason/emotion, beautiful/ugly, self/other, and the conventional boundaries between established disciplines. Deconstruction makes a major theme of 'the positive side of Otherness—of being excluded, shunned, “frozen out”, disadvantaged, unprivileged, rejected, unwanted, abandoned, dislocated, marginalized' (Tong 1995, p. 219).

While mention of deconstruction summons up for us the personage of Jacques Derrida (1930– ), postmodern feminists have drawn as well on the thought of another Jacques—Jacques Lacan (1901–81). Lacan's structuralism will be discussed in Chapter 9 but here we may focus on his use of Freudian theory.

The relationship between infants and their parents has a pre-Oedipal phase and an Oedipal phase. Pre-Oedipally (or in what Lacan terms the ‘Imaginary’) infants are at the start so much at one with the mother that they do not know where their body ends and the mother's body begins. Then, in a 'mirror' phase, they move to an awareness of their self. While this weakens their earlier, undiscriminating unity with the mother, they remain firmly attached to her. The Oedipal phase follows. During this stage the child must internalise the Symbolic Order, that is, the linguistic rules of society that need to be inscribed in the unconscious. Here the father comes very much into the picture. The child separates to some extent from the mother and gains a kind of rebirth—a birth into the symbolic world of language. Language provides a medium for a continued link to the mother but it is, of course, not the same. Because of their anatomy, girls cannot make this shift as well as boys do. Fear of symbolic castration is the prime motive but that can hardly move girls to the same extent. They fail to emerge fully from the Imaginary and remain trapped within it. For this reason, girls are seen to be left at the very margins of the Symbolic Order. Since they cannot fully internalise that order ('the law of the fathers'), it will be imposed upon them via the masculine language with which they are endowed. Cixous, for one, refuses to share this pessimism. Women can break free of this circumscribing order, which expresses itself above all in the binary oppositions we inherit—activity/passivity, sun/moon, culture/nature, day/night, speaking/writing, high/low, and so on (Cixous and Clement 1986, pp. 63–5). Exploration of the body, finding strength in 'oral drive', 'anal drive', 'vocal drive', 'gestation drive', a 'desire to live self from within', and a 'desire for the swollen body, for language, for blood', will enable women to escape the dichotomies of the conceptual order in which they find themselves (Cixous 1981, p. 261).

Lacan views women's entrapment in the Imaginary in a quite negative light, but Irigaray declines to follow suit. She wants to find possibilities for women within the Imaginary. All that women hear about womanhood and female sexuality has come from a male point of view. Irigaray looks for a non-phallic feminine, a feminine feminine, one not articulated by men, and for a way to selfhood and language that is not mediated by men. 'Thus', writes Clough (1994, p. 50), 'Irigaray gives voice to the preoedipal daughter, a voice already full of confusion, anger, and desperation'.

In a move that parallels the modernist attack on 'identity logic' launched by thinkers such as Adorno, Irigaray unleashes a fierce onslaught on 'Sameness'. She finds Sameness to be endemic within a history of ideas stretching back to the ancient Greek philosophers. It is Sameness that leads people to understand woman in the light of what they hold about man—for instance, to interpret woman, in Freudian mode, as a little man deprived of a penis. To combat Sameness, it is important, first of all, to address the nature of language. However, for all the sexism everyday language displays, it is not Irigaray's aim to render it gender-neutral. Her tactic, instead, is to insist on the use of the first person and the active voice, which at once puts her practice at variance with the language of science. In this way, science, philosophy and psychoanalysis are forced to assume responsibility for what they say. They can no longer indulge in the false security provided by the anonymous third person and the passive voice that distances subject from object.

To combat Sameness, it is also important not to describe female sexuality in terms provided by male sexuality. The female sex organs are not just the absence of the male organ but are in themselves a most meaningful multiplicity. Nor will the understanding begotten by a direct addressing of that multiplicity be limited to sexuality. It will reach out to all forms of human expression. It can even transform social structures.
Finally, to combat Sameness, Irigaray provocatively suggests that women mime the very miming to which they have been subjected. 'If women exist only in men's eyes, as images, women should take those images and reflect them back to men in magnified proportions' (Tong 1995, p. 228). By its very exaggeration, such mimesis will strip phallocentric discourse of its power to oppress.

Kristeva, for her part, is not comfortable talking about women in general or woman in the abstract. To talk of woman as such or the feminine as such is to embrace an essentialism that Kristeva rejects wholeheartedly. Politically, one may talk in such terms but philosophically she finds it untenable. People may say, 'We are women', as they struggle for freedom to use contraception and abortion, the availability of day-care centres, or equal opportunities in the workplace. Yet, at a deeper level, 'We are women' is an unwelcome phrase for Kristeva. She does not even want to hear women saying, 'We are', for she believes a woman cannot 'be' but must always be 'becoming'. If this sounds a matter of words, we need to be mindful of Kristeva's focus on language. For her, the pre-Oedipal is the 'semiotic' rather than Lacan's 'imaginary'. She contrasts the semiotic with the symbolic stage that follows, conceptualising the two stages as engaged in continual interplay, a back-and-forth movement between disorder and order.

The symbolic stage, as we have seen, occurs as a post-Oedipal development. It is this post-Oedipal development that induces disgust, the characterisation of something as 'abject' (Kristeva 1982). Identifying the oppression of Jews, ethnic minorities, homosexuals and so on, along with the oppression of women, as the outcome of this very process, Kristeva calls for the marginalised discourses of such groups to be unleashed upon language to transform it. Social revolution, for her, is always poetic revolution (Kristeva 1984).

**Feminist 'Epistemology'**

Tong's categories have led us on a long journey. While this has been a speedy journey and we are left rather breathless, our fleeting glimpses of feminist landscapes along the way bring home to us the richness and diversity of feminist thought. We may well feel moved to retrace our steps and study these vistas at our leisure.

For the moment, however, we need to consider something that caught our attention at the start. Notwithstanding our gratitude to Tong's categories, we recall the reservations many feminists evince about any categorisation of feminist thought—or, for that matter, about the categorisation of any thought whatsoever. Tong herself warns that her categories can prove limiting and distorting. What she has in mind in saying this is that some of the theorists she presents are difficult to fit under one label and may need to be dealt with under several. This notwithstanding, she believes her categories serve a useful analytic purpose. In her own case, they have helped her to locate herself on the spectrum of feminist thought and serve to reveal inconsistencies, or points of growth, or both, in her own understanding of feminism (Tong 1995, p. 8).

Others are much more sceptical about the development of typologies. As we have already seen, Stanley and Wise consider it a quintessentially male thing to do. This is not their only concern. In the typologies they study, they find the types presented in very clear-cut terms with each so definitely separated from the others that there is no overlapping. Moreover, the various positions come to be laid out one after the other, stretching from the 'most correct' to the 'least correct'. Stanley and Wise, quite rightly, take issue with these forms of typologising. Tong, however, would have to be acquitted of both charges. On the one hand, she explicitly recognises overlaps, acknowledging 'just how artificial are the boundaries between the various feminist perspectives'. On the other hand, she expresses respect and gratitude for all the perspectives, emphasising that each 'has made a rich and lasting contribution to feminist thought' (1995, pp. 7–8).

What, then, about the further charge that making clear-cut classifications of this kind is a very masculine thing to do? That this form of categorising is carried out overwhelmingly by males goes without saying. It reaches its peak in empirical science as we know it, itself a very male affair, and it embodies the desire to have control of things and to know what is likely to happen. It issues in the kind of binary opposites we have found feminists, especially postmodernist feminists, decrying so vigorously—as antinomies such as thought/language, nature/culture, reason/emotion, theory/practice, white/black, and especially men/women. Not that all males do such categorising or create these hierarchical oppositions without question. As we have already seen in Chapter 6 and will see again in Chapter 9, there are male thinkers aplenty who have argued, for quite some time and in quite radical fashion, against categorisation of this kind. Theodor Adorno, for one, never failed to assail the view of the 'concept' that lies at the root of all such categorisation.

Feminists arguing against this categorising and these oppositions do so from a special standpoint, however. Where, for others engaging in this debate, the male/female antinomy is one binary opposite among many, for feminists it tends to be the binary opposite, serving as a synecdoche...
for all the others. Thus, in a paper delivered at the University of Leicester in 1978 and cited by Stanley and Wise (1983, p. 29), Dale Spender asserts that 'few, it appears, have questioned our polarisation of reason/emotion, objectivity/subjectivity, reality/phantasy, hard data/soft data and examined them for links with our polarisation of male/female'. The emphasis in this citation is ours, not Spender's. It is added because it is the linking of the issue to the feminist question and feminist critique that distinguishes the questioning of binary oppositions by feminists from the questioning that has taken place in modernist and postmodernist thought more generally.

Necassing to be viewed in much the same light is Chester's claim that radical feminism offers 'a much more optimistic and humane vision of change than the male-defined notion of the building towards a revolution at some point in the distant future, once all the preparations have been made' (1979, p. 15). Chester believes that one of the most important attitudes she has learned from radical feminism has been to 'bring revolutionary change within the realm of the possible'. The notion of building towards a future revolution is indeed found in male thinkers and may well be seen as male-defined. Once again, however, it has to be said that not all males have thought in this fashion. Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, considered in the last chapter, is a praxis requiring the oppressed to reflect and act now and he denies that it 'could be divided into a prior stage of reflection and a subsequent stage of action' (1972a, p. 99). Freire is forever underlining that revolution is possible. In his 'problem-posing' pedagogy, as we have noted, the oppressed come to understand their situation, not as 'a dense, enveloping reality or a tormenting blind alley' (Freire 1972a, p. 81), but as 'letters or . . . insurmountable barriers' (1972a, p. 72), but as a challenge that can and must be met.

It may therefore be important to qualify claims like Chester's about specifically feminist insights. Perhaps there is place for a caveat like that entered by Seigfried when writing of the feminine traits she finds within pragmatism. Seigfried is careful to note that these can and must be met. Chester's awareness of the need to see change as possible and to take action now is different from Freire's awareness of this need. Hers has been taught to her, as she states, by radical feminism. It stems from a specifically feminist standpoint, set against a feminist backdrop, and for that reason is to be seen as a critique distinct from that of Freire.

A specifically feminist standpoint? That is surely more correct than any talk of the specifically feminist standpoint. Assiter concurs with Jane Flax in arguing that, because there cannot be just one way in which patriarchy permeates thinking, there cannot be just one women's standpoint. Where Assiter locates feminist unity is not in a single standpoint, for 'it is certainly the case that there is a multiplicity of standpoints, values, outlooks amongst feminists', but in 'collective commitment to the undermining of oppressive gender-based power relations'. This commitment constitutes a 'shared set of values that makes feminists feminist' (Assiter 1996, p. 88).

Here Assiter is casting doubt on 'the idea of a specifically women's epistemological standpoint' (1996, p. 88). She does not hold that women 'know' in a different way from men so that a group of women would, together, inevitably have a specifically women's form of knowledge. Rather than suggesting that an epistemological stance follows from the identity of the group holding it', writes Assiter (1996, p. 89), 'my own position allows for a multiplicity of individuals to come together, in an epistemic community, so long as the members of that community share certain values in common'. In adopting this position, Assiter is setting herself against what has been a very strong current in feminist thought. Alcoff and Potter write of 'feminist epistemology' and of how feminist theorists 'have used the term variously “to refer to women’s “ways of knowing”, “women’s experience”, or simply “women’s knowledge”' (1993, p. 1). The use of the word 'epistemology' in this context is problematic. Alcoff and Potter recognise that the usage is 'alien to professional philosophers and to epistemology “proper”' (1993, p. 1). If talk of
women having their own epistemology is taken to mean that the fundamental act of knowing is different for women, this has enormous, and unwelcome, consequences. How does one know what one knows? What is the relationship between the knower and the known? What status is to be ascribed to knowledge? In other words, what truth claims can be made on its behalf? These are epistemological questions and, if one must answer them in a radically different way when referring to women, women emerge as alien beings indeed and one wonders how there could ever be dialogue of any kind between them and males.

‘Feminine epistemology’ can, however, be understood in another sense—one that suggests, not that women know in a way fundamentally different from that of men, but that they theorise the act of knowing in a way different from that of men. In ‘doing’ epistemology, they express concerns, raise issues and gain insights that are not generally expressed, raised or gained by male epistemologists. Few would want to quarrel with that.

Still, many feminists would not be content with that version of ‘feminine epistemology’. They insist that women’s knowing is, in important respects, different from that of men. Some might accept that they are talking about women’s psychology, or their philosophical anthropology perhaps, rather than women’s epistemology. Their sociology, even! Fonow and Cook, after all, take epistemology to mean ‘the study of assumptions about how to know the social and apprehend its meaning’ (1991, p. 1). Yet it would be impoverishing to let semantics impede our engagement with this important stream of feminist thought.

Gilligan (1982) has been very influential in suggesting that women speak ‘in a different voice’. She believes women and men have different ways of perceiving the world and relating to it. Their concept of the self is different. In particular, their mode of addressing moral issues is different. For this reason, she takes issue with Kohlberg’s stages of moral development and proceeds to rewrite them so that they take account of the way in which women approach the task of moral reasoning. In all of this, men are seen to set a premium on autonomy, generality, abstract impartiality. Women, on the other hand, prize caring, nurturing, bonding and the formation of interpersonal community. Harding too (1983) is found suggesting (in a way quite similar to that of Gilligan) that the rational is gendered, that is, that it varies according to sex (Farganis 1986, p. 181).

Characteristics of the kind postulated by Gilligan and Harding have been used to set women’s forms of research over against male forms of research. Some have gone as far as identifying quantitative research as male and qualitative research as female. In introducing their symposium of writings on ‘feminist scholarship as lived research’, Fonow and Cook (1991, p. 8) reject this point of view. They agree ‘that carefully designed research grounded in feminist theory and ethics is more useful to understanding women’s experiences than an allegiance to any one particular method as more “feminist” than another’. ‘A well crafted quantitative study’, they add, ‘may be more useful to policy makers and cause less harm to women than a poorly crafted qualitative one’.

What Fonow and Cook do see as a ‘major feature of feminist epistemology’ is attention to the affective components of the research act. They refer to ‘women’s greater familiarity with the world of emotions and their meaning’ and the notion that “women care” at both a practical and an interpersonal level’. Then, drawing on the outcomes of Gilligan’s research, they point to the emphasis on caring that emerges in different ways in the essays they have edited. What all this suggests to Fonow and Cook is ‘an attempt among feminist scholars to restore the emotional dimension to the current concepts of rationality’. While recognising similar endeavours within the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, Fonow and Cook see this attention to emotions as part of the critical reflexivity that ‘characterizes feminist approaches to knowledge’ (1991, pp. 9–11).

In this linking of emotion and knowledge, Fonow and Cook look to Alison Jaggar. Jaggar identifies ‘a continuous feedback loop between our emotional constitution and our theorizing such that each continually modifies the other and is in principle inseparable from it’. To recognise this is to embrace an ‘alternative epistemological model’, one that ‘shows how our emotional responses to the world change as we conceptualize it differently, and how our changing emotional responses then stimulate us to new insights’. In this model an important role is ascribed to what Jaggar calls ‘outlaw’ emotions. These are conventionally unacceptable emotional responses, as when people of colour respond to a racist joke with anger rather than amusement, or when women experience discomfort and even fear, instead of flattery, in the face of male sexual banter. Outlaw emotions can inspire new investigations. Jaggar feels, and may lead to different perceptions of the world (1989, pp. 144–8).

As a feminist, Jaggar has particular interest in the outlaw emotions of women. This is not because she accepts ‘the stereotypes of cool men and emotional women’. There is in her essay no parallel to Fonow and Cook’s talk of women’s greater familiarity with emotions and their meaning. To the contrary, as she sees it, ‘there is no reason to suppose that the thoughts and actions of women are any more influenced by emotion than the thoughts and actions of men’. The stereotypes continue to flourish, however, and they lead to the myth of ‘the dispassionate
investigator’. This is a very powerful myth. It is classist, racist and especially masculinist.

It functions, obviously, to bolster the epistemic authority of the currently dominant groups, composed largely of white men, and to discredit the observations and claims of the currently subordinate groups, including, of course, the observations and claims of many people of color and women. The more forcefully and vehemently the latter groups express their observations and claims, the more emotional they appear and so the more easily they are discredited. (Jaggar 1989, p. 142)

It is above all to counter this myth and its consequences that Jaggar proposes her ‘alternative epistemological model’ with the key role it assigns to emotions in general and outlaw emotions in particular. As she points out, ‘some, though certainly not all, of these outlaw emotions are potentially or actually feminist emotions’. How do emotions become feminist emotions? Jaggar’s answer is unequivocal. ‘Emotions become feminist when they incorporate feminist perceptions and values’ (Jaggar 1989, p. 144). In this way, Jaggar comes close to what we have already found. Asster asserting, that is, that a group’s ‘epistemological stance’ does not stem from the identity of the group members (the sheer fact, in this case, that they happen to be women) but arises from their sharing certain values in common (in this case, their collective commitment to undermining oppressive gender-based power relations). As Stanley and Wise point out (1990, p. 27), a feminist standpoint is ‘a practical achievement, not an abstract “stance”’. It demands, Harding tells us (1987, p. 185), an ‘intellectual and political struggle’. Farganis agrees (1986, p. 196): ‘Feminism is a movement to change the way one looks at the world and feminist theory is part of that struggle’.

Feminine Thought or Feminist Values?

There would appear, then, to be two rather disparate strands within feminist theory, both invoking the concept of ‘feminist epistemology’ and its associated themes, and both of compelling interest from the viewpoint of research methodology. The two are by no means mutually exclusive and in the end, paradoxically, they come together.

In the one case, feminist researchers bring a feminist standpoint to their research. Because of their commitment to feminist values and the feminist cause, and given the feminist purposes they bring with them, they do research in a different way from others, especially men. Whether this means that there are distinctive feminist methodologies, that is, methodologies unique to feminist researchers, is the subject of much discussion. For many, it is more a question of feminist perspectives entering into existing methodologies. The debate may be chiefly a matter of semantics. A methodology that embodies a feminist orientation is essentially very different from a methodology that does not, even if the methods it selects and shapes look to be the same. Just as a critical ethnography is vastly different from an ethnography informed by anthropological theory or symbolic interactionism even though all rely on participant observation, so a feminist ethnography will be different again.

In the other case, the claim to distinctive patterns of research rests upon a prior claim to a different pattern of knowing. Women are said to have different ways of knowing and will therefore do research in different ways to men. Some would want to say that what this postulates is feminine forms of research rather than feminist forms of research. Mies (1991, p. 60) invokes this distinction when she asks, ‘Women’s research or feminist research?’ and demands involvement in the women’s movement for research to qualify as the latter. Furthermore, a similar debate to the one just mentioned can be detected here too. Are there distinctive feminine methodologies, that is, methodologies unique to female researchers? Or does a feminine style come to inform existing methodologies? However one responds to them, these questions imply that there is a feminine style in research which reflects feminine traits and makes a significant difference to the research that is carried out. On this basis, claims are made that, because the researcher is a woman, the approach taken is likely to be, say, qualitative rather than quantitative . . . constructivist rather than objectivist . . . experiential rather than cerebral . . . interactive rather than non-involved . . . caring rather than dispassionate . . . a seeking of shared understanding rather than an attempt to prove a point . . . action-oriented rather than theoretical . . . collaborative and participatory rather than otherwise . . . And so on.

Some difficulties with this point of view have been considered already. Women form a far from homogeneous grouping, and selecting certain features as categorically feminine and shaping women’s research in definite ways will always prove contentious. It is also difficult (impossible, perhaps?) to pinpoint feminine characteristics that are not shared by a significant number of men. Even when it is a question of undoubtedly feminist and not merely feminine insights, many of these, as we have seen, appear to be attainable by routes other than feminism. We may point to the Spenders and Chesters of this world but the Adornos and Freires of this world persist in putting their hand up too. Alcoff and Potter might set out to put together a symposium on ‘feminist
epistemologies' but in the end they find themselves having to answer the question, 'Why, then, retain the adjective “feminist”?' (1993, p. 4).

For all that, as we have also seen, feminist commitment and feminist orientation are able to transfigure the insights in question and make them well and truly distinctive. It is not so easy to say the same of orientations that are attributed, not to feminist perspective and participation in the feminist struggle, but to feminine style. When all that can be said of their genesis is that in these cases they come from women, are we talking about feminist insights, or even specifically feminine insights? Or are we talking merely about insights found among men and women alike?

True enough, we may be talking about features—ways of thinking, feeling, behaving—that are found among women much more than among men. They may divide quite strongly along sex lines. Not only are they far more characteristic of women than men but they may be said to come together in a complexus that constitutes feminine style and is unique to women. From this perspective, there are numerous feminists for whom features characteristic of women and therefore constituting the feminine are central to their feminism, and they roundly celebrate the 'difference'.

At this point it becomes important to ask about the origin of such feminine traits. Are they innate and inherent? Are they social products? Or is there some kind of middle position here?

Whether, or to what extent and in what way, innate or inherent features of femininity exist remains very much a matter of dispute. 'It may well be', writes Sondra Farganis (1986, p. 1), 'that there are no traits particular to a single sex'. On the other hand, as 'sceptical feminist' Janet Radcliffe Richards sees it (1982, p. 155), 'there is no reason to presume that there cannot be any inherent feminine and masculine characteristics' and 'it is overwhelmingly likely that there are some'. In her view, the actual attributes of men and women spring from a combination of specifically sexual characteristics with others that may be equally distributed between the sexes. It is hardly surprising if this process issues in some non-sexual traits that are more commonly found in one sex than the other.

Despite the apparent difference of opinion, neither of these writers considers the existence of specifically feminine traits to be central to her concerns. For Farganis, the existence or otherwise of such traits is not what is 'at issue' in her work (1986, p. 1). Instead, she is concerned with how women are perceived and, in this more limiting sense, how gendered characteristics are understood. While Richards may be more inclined to accept the existence of inherent, or innate, feminine characteristics, she too does not consider them 'at issue in the great debate about women and femininity'. The question of 'how many there are, what they are, or what effect they have' is not at the centre of that debate as she understands it. Women may have inherent or innate attributes but these are not the ones that are a matter of concern. Instead, 'the fuss about femininity' is 'about what it is thought that the sexes ought be like, and about what measures need to be taken to achieve whatever that is'. Accordingly, she believes, most feminists have no worries about inherent tendencies to differences between the sexes. They are, however, justifiably indignant about what these differences are often alleged to be and are deeply concerned about the discrimination that these perceived differences supposedly legitimate. 'The feminist concern about femininity is not about such inherent characteristics. It is rather the fact that men and women are under different social pressures, encouraged to do different kinds of work, behave differently, and develop different characteristics, which is important' (Richards 1982, p. 155–7).

Once again, then, we find ourselves with the feminist agenda rather than with allegedly inherent features of femininity. The pivotal problem that emerges has to do with inherited and prevailing perceptions of what it means to be a woman and how women ought to live and act. Not that these perceptions can be kept apart from the feminine characteristics we have been discussing. Earlier in this book, when dealing with social constructionism, we considered the notion of reification. It is a process whereby something that is not a ‘thing’ is posited as a ‘thing’. By just such a process of objectification, socially derived expectations of women become putatively ‘inherent’ features of femininity.

Thus, what are said to be characteristically feminine traits and behaviour turn out to be historical and cultural constructions. Unless we postulate some sort of essential feminine nature and are willing to wear the charge of being essentialist and ahistorical, we need to see it in this light. This is not to deny a role to biology. Nature has a hand in it, to be sure. Female anatomy and physiology play their part. Yet the feminine qualities and actions we encounter in social life do not equate to the mere functioning of genes and hormones. Lying between the basic ground plans for our life that our genes lay down and the precise ground plans into the activity' (Geertz 1973, p. 50).

Chartres is made of stone and glass. But it is not just stone and glass; it is a cathedral, and not only a cathedral, but a particular cathedral built at a particular time by certain members of a particular society. To understand what it means, to perceive it for what it is, you need to know rather more than the generic properties of stone and glass and rather more than what is
common to all cathedrals. You need to understand also—and, in my opinion, most critically—the specific concepts of the relations between God, man, and architecture that, having governed its creation, it consequently embodies. It is no different with men: they, too, every last one of them, are cultural artifacts. (Geertz 1973, pp. 50–1)

Geertz’s use of the generic masculine stands out in the clearest relief in the context of the present chapter. ‘It is no different with men.’ While this was originally written well over 30 years ago and we may be tempted to feel indulgent about the author’s language in this respect, we may also feel the temptation to shout back, ‘It is no different with women!’ And this, as it happens, is the precise point we are concerned with at the moment. Women, along with men—yes, ‘every last one of them’—are cultural artifacts. Simone de Beauvoir tells us (1953, p. 273), ‘One is not born, but rather becomes a woman’. Farganis agrees. Proposing that ‘theories of the feminine cannot be divorced from the social conditions of their formulation’, Farganis draws on and expands the thought of English sociologist Viola Klein.

The feminine, according to Klein, is a constellation of cultural roles, attitudes and abilities related to, but not necessarily growing out of, the biological traits held to constitute being a woman, that is, grounded in chromosomes, anatomy and hormones. ‘Feminine’ includes cultural influences in a way that ‘male’ does not . . . In allowing for the importance of human intervention, action, and transcendence in becoming a person, one counteracts the determinism of simple biological or cultural explanations. The biological within a cultural context rooted in time is at the core of the social and the sociological, and it moves beyond the simplistic as well as specious dichotomization of nature/nurture, biology/culture, genes/environment. (Farganis 1986, p. 4)

There are those who would privilege the nature–biology–genes side of the divide to which Farganis refers us. The movement in this direction reached its zenith in the sociobiology that waxed strong in the 1970s and sought, as in the writings of E.O. Wilson, to explain animal behaviour, including human behaviour, through genes and gene selection. One of the sociobiological strategies is to draw parallels between humans and other species—especially our ape cousins, most of whose genetic material matches our own. Here sociobiologists pay a great deal of attention to sex roles, sexual displays and sexual practices, so that their work is certainly of interest to people involved with feminism. Sociobiology has had a bad press in feminist quarters, not least because it suggests a determinism that would leave women at the mercy of their genetic inheritance and biological functions. Still, there are feminist writers who do not hesitate to appeal to instinctual female drives, for example, to motherhood in particular or to nurturant in more general terms.

There are others who would privilege the nurture–culture–environment side of the divide mentioned by Farganis. Cultural, or social, anthropology certainly emphasises the role of the symbol system that serves to direct what we as humans do. On the basis of citations we have already considered, Geertz emerges as an anthropologist who offers that emphasis without losing sight of the biological basis. He calls for ‘analyses of physical evolution, of the functioning of the nervous system, of psychological process, of cultural patterning, and so on—and, most especially, in terms of the interplay among them’ (1973, p. 53). His talk of ‘interplay’ resonates with Farganis’s appeal for a ‘dialectical method’ in the analysis of feminist issues. For the most part, feminists are certainly on the side of the culturalists rather than the sociobiologists. Nevertheless, Farganis echoes the finding of Smith that there is an essentialism to be found not only in sociobiology but in certain strands of feminist theory as well. ‘A dialectical method’, Farganis believes (1986, p. 118), ‘often absent from feminist theory and never found in sociobiology, would be the corrective to or antithesis of each of these paradigms and would counter a universalism that is historically untenable’.

There is a point to be carefully noted here and it holds regardless of whether we want to downplay the role of culture (as in sociobiology) or maximise the role of culture (as in certain versions of anthropology). If, in any way and to any extent, we consider the inherited and prevailing understandings of womanhood to be a social construction, we need to be suspicious of them. These understandings have been forged in and out of the give-and-take of society. They are a cultural product. Since that society is a patriarchal society and that culture a masculinist culture, one can only conclude that the picture of femininity we have inherited has been developed by males to serve male purposes. In consequence, the first task of feminists may well be that of opening themselves in phenomenological fashion to the immediate experience of being a woman, thereby calling into question the meanings inevitably imposed upon them in hegemonic fashion by their culture.

It is in this very spirit that Adrienne Rich (1990) directs women to the literature they have inherited, as we noted when discussing hermeneutics. In pointing up the kind of oppression that women suffer under patriarchy, Rich writes of ‘the visible effects on women’s lives of seeing, hearing our wordless or negated experience affirmed and pursued further in language’ (1990, p. 483). Language has trapped women as well as liberated them. The very act of naming has been until now the
prerogative of males. Rich does not call for a boycott of this masculinist literature. What she calls for instead is 're-vision'—a radical feminist critique of literature that will use literature as a clue to how women have been living and a pointer to how women can begin to see things differently, name things authentically for themselves, and so bring themselves to a new way of being and living. 'We need', says Rich, in a statement that we have already considered but which bears repetition, 'to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold on us' (1990, p. 484).

Rich's call should not be limited to literature. All human life and every human situation can be seen as text. As they address that life and those situations, women need to lay aside the cultural understandings imposed upon them, inevitably sexist as those understandings are, and interpret life and situation anew—yes, reading them as they have never been read before.

Research as re-vision, then? That may not be a bad way to describe feminist research in a nutshell. When feminists come to research, they bring with them an abiding sense of oppression in a man-made world. For some, this may be little more than an awareness that the playing field they are on is far from level and they need to even things up. For others, the injustice is more profound and severe. They perceive the need for very radical change in culture and society—for a revolution, no less. Feminist research is always a struggle, then, at least to reduce, if not to eliminate, the injustices and unfreedom that women experience, however this injustice and unfreedom are perceived and whatever intensity and extent are ascribed to them.

This striving for equity and liberation marks feminist research indelibly. To all outward appearances, feminist researchers may share methodologies and methods with researchers of other stripes; yet feminist vision, feminist values and feminist spirit transform these common methodologies and methods and set them apart. Far more than ways of gathering and analysing 'data', methodologies and methods become channels and instruments of women's historical mission to free themselves from bondage, from the limiting of human possibility through culturally imposed stereotypes, lifestyles, roles and relationships.

Like Rich's reading of literature, feminist research addresses the world to 'know it differently than we have ever known it'—yes, and to fashion it anew.