

The Number One Question About Feminism: The Third Wave and the Next Half-Century

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A while ago I came across an interest-catching title, and article, in *Feminist Studies*.¹ The article caught my attention because it was one of the relatively few feminist articles about feminism itself, about its *raison d'être*, about its *future*. So I have borrowed the authors' excellent title to use as the first half of my own. The second half of my title gives you my context – a looking ahead, a *thinking* ahead, creatively and efficiently, about feminism. I'm sure Amy Richards and Jennifer Baumgardner, the authors of the short article mentioned, would approve of this context since it's one they share. And I sincerely hope to engage their interest and attention, as they have mine.

They begin their article by pointing out that the number one question about feminism (not 'in' feminism, with which I would agree) regards feminism's *raison d'être*, its purpose, its reason for being. And they conclude with the following significant statement: "We spend so much time talking about what feminism is, or was, and not enough about *what it could be*."² (italics mine) Their answer to this dilemma is to promote a return to political activism in women's studies. "Returning to political activism—answering the question, what can I do?—is key to understanding feminism for this generation."³ Let me take this statement as my starting point.

What impressed me about this article was the authors' creative twist of envisioning the future. And I would like to pick up on that twist and 'run with it.' I would like to ask you, Jennifer and Amy, and anyone else who is interested, to consider another key to feminism's future, a key that isn't a step 'back into the past,' however effective activism has been, but a creative leap into the future. 'What can I do?' What can *you and I* do together, communally, to better understand and implement

¹ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, "The Number One Question About Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 29 (Summer 2003), 448-52.

² Baumgardner and Richards, 452.

³ Baumgardner and Richards, 452.

feminism's future? That, indeed, is the number one question of the next several decades, centuries even! Most immediately, though, it's the number one question for the next generation, for our daughters and nieces and sisters and friends around the globe.

1 Feminism's High Aim

So, what *is* feminism's ongoing *raison d'être*? What can you and I do to begin to better understand (and thereby implement) feminism's purpose(s), aim(s), goal(s)? As a valid starting point, we can examine, very generally, the feminist literature to see how many feminists have this futuristic bent in mind. How many authors are thinking about the future of feminism, about where we are going and how we're getting there? Roughly what percentage of articles found in feminist journals are devoted to this concern? Has this topic been of interest in the past decade or decades of feminist writing? What do current debates and dialogues reveal about the 'ongoing aim' of feminism?

My own concern for feminism, and my pressing curiosity about these questions, led me to spend many recent months sifting through feminist journals at my local university library. It isn't a huge library or university but it is certainly more than adequate, and it does have a recently established (1996) Women's Studies Program, and thus a decent holding of feminist literature. There, to date, I have found sixteen feminist journals, as well as at least another dozen in specific disciplines (sociology, psychology, economics, political science, etc.) that include a regular feminist content. It was particularly enlightening to spend time 'in the stacks,' going through the past ten years of a given feminist journal, or even the past thirty years where library holdings allowed.⁴

As a result of my library exercise I found only a scattering of articles that explicitly raise the question of feminism's future. The vast majority of authors are concerned more about the 'present state' of feminism in any number of geographic locations around the globe. Most articles are limited to analyses of the present and past workings of feminism, and are steeped in a sort of 'stock-taking.' This 'present-state-of-feminism' type analysis seems to represent the current mind-set of the academy. As Baumgardner and Richards so aptly point out, reflections about feminism need to begin to look forward, to fantasize beyond the present 'status quo' and look to future possibilities of feminism and what it could be.

Instead of that forward looking bent, I found in my journal survey that stray questions about feminism's future tend to be absorbed in other current concerns (like interdisciplinary study, for example) and aren't

⁴ *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, for example, had back issues dating from 1976 to the present day.

really *envisioning concrete solutions* to possible future directions.⁵ There are, for instance, questions and criticisms from ‘anti-feminist’ feminists that threaten the feminist movement itself. As well, there is discussion and concern about how lack of funding for Women’s Studies departments in many universities will affect their futures.⁶ There are postmodernist claims that feminism is dead or dying; some say feminism is at its end since its demands are apparently now being met.⁷ There are questions about the future of the interdisciplinary nature of women’s studies and feminism, and there is complaint of resistance within many traditional disciplines to the idea and value of such restructuring. Again, tensions are noted between feminists operating from within traditional disciplines (such as music, literature, history, economics, and so on) and feminists within ‘women’s studies only’ departments.⁸ Finally, there is a lamenting by some feminists of the loss of activist drive, the message of Baumgardner and Richards in my opening above.⁹ The complaint here is an academic institutionalization of feminism that has settled into a dull, less vital, less practically effective, exchange of ‘discourse.’¹⁰

What these findings point to is a single clear fact: in this third wave of feminism there is confusion about the needs, aims and goals of feminism. Instead of the clear-cut need for political action that was the harbinger of the women’s rights movement over a hundred years ago, changes through the last century have lead feminism to new and larger questions and challenges about its own method, its way of going forward. Hovering on the horizon, or should I say, *in* the horizons of many feminists, is a lurking uncertainty, doubt, confusion about ‘what we are at.’¹¹

⁵ An exception worth noting is Elizabeth Grosz, “Histories of a Feminist Future,” *Signs* 25, Special Issue: “Feminisms at a Millennium” (Summer 2000), 1017-21. The entire issue is very relevant to this essay.

⁶ See Judith Stacey, “Is Academic Feminism an Oxymoron?” *Signs* 25, Special Issue: “Feminisms at a Millennium” (Summer 2000), 1189-94; Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich, “Feminist Attacks on Feminism” *Feminist Studies* 24 (Spring 1998), 159-76.

⁷ For a good overview and critique of this viewpoint see, Elaine J. Hall and Marnie Salupo Rodriguez, “The Myth of Post-feminism” *Gender and Society* 17 (December 2003), 878-902.

⁸ On the question of inter and multidisciplinary study, *Feminist Studies* 27 (Summer 2001) Forum: “Doing Feminism in Interdisciplinary Contexts.” Also scattered articles in *FS* 29 (Summer 2003) and *FS* 24 (Summer 1998).

⁹ Along with articles such as Baumgardner’s and Richards’ there is a noteworthy number of articles following or promoting activism at a ‘grass roots’ level in many places around the world, especially Africa, Asia (notably Japan), South America, India, the Middle East, and so on.

¹⁰ Njoki N. Wane, “Black Canadian Feminist Thought: Tensions and Possibilities” *Canadian Woman Studies* 23 (Winter 2004), 145-53. “It is clear [from the participants in Wane’s study groups] that there is an assumption that feminism in general is an academic discourse and that it is alienating. Many [participants] saw feminism as disconnected from the people in the community. Yet many participants also felt that feminism as a discourse is changing” *Ibid*, 148.

¹¹ Baumgardner and Richards, 451, underline this point: “Women’s studies is at a crucial moment: it is highly successful, yet clearly anxious about its *raison d’être*.”

The question arises, then: is there one single purpose of the early women's movement that continues to be the drive behind our present feminist enterprise, taking us into the future? Broadly speaking, the ultimate aim of feminism was, has been, and continues to be the desire to effect change in women's living. Not just any change, but change for the *better*. To achieve such change means effecting change in the whole fabric of society: from economics to local and global politics, to business practises, family relations, education, religion; in short, to every conceivable corner of the social infrastructure that supports our daily living. Any society desirous of such change, from India to Indiana, Hakido to Halifax, must succumb to this proviso. Very broadly speaking then, we can say that the aim of feminism, feminism's *raison d'être*, is *progress*.

Is this claim true? If it is true that feminism's *raison d'être* is *progress*, for women and for society as a whole, then why has feminism changed so much in the past century and a half from its glowing activist days of the Women's Rights movement? As is attested to by the designation of first, second and third 'waves' in feminism, the feminist movement itself has undergone development from its early stages to our present stage.¹² Notice in the second wave of feminism a distinct change. Where the first wave was a concentrated practical effort toward political change (especially toward attaining 'the vote'), the second wave, though continuing the activist position, introduced the necessity of a new dimension in feminism: *reflection* on women, by women, to be expressed and communicated through books and newly established journals, and through the establishment of academic departments devoted to women's studies.¹³ Between the first and second waves of feminism, women began to recognize the reality that 'getting the vote' hadn't been enough, had not in actuality been effective in changing women's status in most societies around the world. Women needed *their own forum*. They needed to have a structured institution (the academy) that allowed them to reflect on ideas about women and women's issues, to analyze the current state of affairs and identify needed change, to retrieve and correct, or 'reconstruct,' histories that had been biased, that had left women out or had portrayed them inaccurately. The drive in this second wave era of feminism thus was toward establishing a worldwide

¹² For three perspectives on third wave feminism, see *Canadian Woman Studies* 20/21 (Winter/Spring 2001): Natasha Pinteres, "Riding the Feminist Waves: In With the Third?," 15-21; Rebecca Ellis, "Second Thoughts about a Third Wave," 24-26; Anita Harris, "Riding My Won Tidal Wave: Young Women's Feminist Work," 27-31.

¹³ See Susan Margery and Susan Sheridan, "Local, Global, Regional: Women's Studies in Australia," *Feminist Studies* 28 (Spring 2002), 129-52. See pages 131-37 for an overview of the development through the 1970s of women's studies programs in Australian universities and of the challenges they are now facing. Becky Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 28 (Summer 2002), 337-60 provides a very good multiracial perspective on the same question.

academic forum that would organize the reflections of women *on* women, and on their status around the world.

Notice that once this global forum for feminist reflection is established, as is the case at our crossroads position now, *discourse* replaces political action as the primary ‘product’ of feminist output. The questions hovering in feminist horizons now revolve around this shift, this change in the feminist enterprise itself.¹⁴ It is a shift in *method*, in its way of going about achieving its goal: *progress*. Still, why has discourse become so prominent? What has happened to political action? Is this new shift to discourse ‘really necessary’? Is it ‘really effective’? Is it as effective as the ‘old style’ political action?

2 A Key

In an attempt to answer the above questions, let me begin by asking you to ponder four basic points about the feminist enterprise:

1) Is there a common ‘base’ to all feminisms? Yes, the realization and identification of women’s lower status in many, most, societies around the world is the base of both past and present women’s rights and feminist initiatives. A look at the feminist theories of different feminist groups will confirm that virtually all feminisms take as their starting point the verification of women’s experiences of oppression(s).

2) Are there particular differences in this common base? Yes, different groups, races, cultures, ages, nationalities, religious beliefs, personal experiences, etc., of women around the world usher in differing sets of concerns and concrete circumstances, resulting in different particular feminisms.

3) Nevertheless, is there a common goal within all feminisms? Yes, *progress* for each particular group of women and for all women around the world.

4) Are there particular differences within this common goal? Yes, different ideas of what makes for progress yield differing theories, different methods, and different particular feminisms.

¹⁴ Robyn Wiegman, “Women’s Studies: Interdisciplinary Imperatives, Again” *Feminist Studies* 27 (Summer 2001), at 515 and 518, n. 3, remarks that “academic feminism today has come to be figured as both cause and locus for various kinds of failure by, toward, or in the name of women. Central to this failure, even in texts that share little in the way of theoretical perspective, is a concern for academic institutionalization: ... [including] ... the way that academic discourses have themselves become central, displacing community-based knowledges and models of institutional intervention based on social activist agendas.” In a following footnote, Wiegman clarifies: “I hope it is clear that these various critiques of institutionalization are contradictory, that scholars who ascribe to one may be wholly unconcerned with another, *that there is no uniformity in the analysis of how and why institutionalization has gone wrong*” (italics mine). I am hoping that my contribution to this question of the academic institutionalization of feminism will perhaps bring some unity to the picture.

Now let's try to make sense of some larger implications of these 'general truths' about feminism. The common base of women's worldwide oppression puts feminism on a global footing.¹⁵ It makes feminism '*universal*' in the sense of all-inclusive: all women, all times, everywhere. It also means that feminism must take in the *concrete*: it must take into account particular differences of individual women and differences between differing groups of women with their respective concerns and conditioning circumstances.¹⁶

Here, then, is a key to the present problems, doubts, and questions in feminism about the seemingly radical shift to the priority of 'discourse.' Feminism's goal of progress for women is, by its very nature, both practical *and* theoretical. On the practical side, feminism's concern is for women's lives in their concrete functioning; for human living in all its concrete conditions, economic, ecological, cultural, religious, educational, political, and so on; and for effective practical change to those conditions. But in any situation, in any society, before practical change can occur, there is invariably the need for reflection. Preceding practical action, there is a *need to understand* the full situation: *What has gone on in the past? What is the present state of women's living? What needs to change in the future? How does it need to change?* In other words, this general activity of *understanding* is a prior condition for practical change.

This key relationship between reflection and action explains why second and third wave feminism saw a shift into the academy and toward the priority of discourse. Discourse has become prominent because, implicitly, feminism has moved toward recognition of the crucial role of reflection on past and present ideas about women and their living. It is a relationship that needs to be not just implicit, but explicitly identified in feminism. Indeed, it is already playing a crucial part in feminism's way forward. The confusion about the present state of feminism, the complaints about ineffective discourse, the longing for an earlier glory of political activism, all reveal the fact of a deep need to grasp this key instrumental relationship of the organized role of reflection on our need to take action.

¹⁵ Angela Miles, "Local Activisms, Global Feminisms, and the Struggle Against Globalization" *Canadian Woman Studies* 20 (Fall 2000), 6-10, sees feminism as being a necessity at an organized global level, as well as locally, if women are to achieve the progress they desire in their lives and in society.

¹⁶ It is noted that Barbara Smith's widely inclusive definition of feminism, dating from the 1970s, still stands: "Feminism is the political theory and practise to free *all* women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women, as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this is not feminism, but mere female aggrandizement." See Thompson, 340.

3 A Way Forward

I've talked about a key to feminism's future: the need to make explicit the priority of reflection on women's living as a condition for issuing in practical change. Hence there has been a growing 'academic feminism' over a once ripe political activism. In taking on a primarily reflective role with its consequent discourse, academic feminism is playing a theoretical role. But is present academic feminism really theoretic? Is it really being effective in unifying the various particular feminisms around the world?

Theory, in its fullness, seeks to unify, to bring synthesis to an underlying range of particular elements. In feminism, these 'particular elements' consist in the global array of particular feminisms that reflect women's lives around the world, each group with its own concrete conditions, concerns and methods. At present, academic feminism is still operating on this particular level. While it is doing well at handling these concrete aspects of feminism, it isn't adequately embracing the all-inclusive, universal aspect of feminism. The recent spate of 'anti-feminist' sentiment and the mourning of the loss of activism both reveal in themselves underlying discontent around these larger relevant aspects of academic feminism.

The fact that academic feminism is stuck operating on the level of particularities can be seen from an examination of its journals, which was my own starting point for this article. As I have already stated, feminism's concern has always been and continues to be for the 'concretely universal' conditions of *all* women, embracing their full human living. This openness of concern demands that academic feminism to be equally open in their range of interests, questions, disciplines, and findings. As is clear from even a glance at the tables of contents of feminist journals, the spread of feminist attention *is* enormous. But as is also apparent from the journals at present, this range of questing is heavily focused on the particular: particular women's issues, particular feminist methods, and particular feminist actions, occurring in particular regions, locales, and cultures. What is missing is a unifying scheme that would adequately 'hold together' the mass of particular feminisms in all their details.

How, then, to lift academic feminism up to a 'more universal' level of operation? What is crucial to academic feminism is *reflection itself*. For women in any situation, in any society, in all particular feminisms, there is invariably the need for reflection. Preceding practical action, there is a need to reflect on and understand the full situation: *What has gone on in the past? What is the present state of women's living? What needs to change? What might go on, positively, in the future?* Indeed, I have claimed that this reflection is the key role in the shift to academic feminism in the first place. For academic feminism to become genuinely theoretic, to succeed in unifying all particular feminisms, it must make a

move to *explicitly* recognize its own universally valid role as a Reflective Agent in the feminist enterprise.

What is needed, then, is a workable, efficient way, or *method*, that would in itself bring unity to this business of reflecting on women, society, and progress. The project here, then, is to seek another way of ‘doing academic feminism.’ It has to be a way that functionally and effectively encompasses the wide-ranging scope and overlapping interests of all particular feminisms.

4 Function In Feminist Method

What might be the base of such a method? Or, again, what is common to all particular feminisms and feminist methods? Reflection! What is common to all feminisms is our *basic human activity* of *making sense* of women’s lives – this is the *core* of what feminists are at. It is the unifying principle of feminism, the constant that underlies each theory, each stream, each branch of feminist thought and effort. Instead of ordering academic feminism on the basis of each different feminist theory, or on the basis of ‘the disciplines,’ why could we not organize our feminist enterprise on the basis of this unifying activity of reflecting, of *making sense*?¹⁷

Consider how this basic activity *already* functions within feminism.¹⁸ First of all, in a first broad division of labour, there are those who are *making sense of the past*, while there are others who are *making sense of the future*. Think of feminists who are ‘making sense of the past.’ Their efforts are towards understanding, from a feminist

¹⁷ See Bernard Lonergan’s primary work on this topic, *Method in Theology*. Also see his original article on the topic: “Functional Specialties in Theology” *Gregorianum* 50 (1969), 485-505. Lonergan’s field of application was theology but, as is clear from Rahner’s critique of Lonergan’s article, the method Lonergan proposes is readily applicable and indeed vitally important to all fields. See Karl Rahner, “Kritische Bemerkungen zu B.J.F.Lonergan’s Aufsatz: ‘Functional Specialties in Theology,’ ” *Gregorianum* 51 (1970), 537-40. “Die theologische Methodologie Lonergan’s scheint mir so generisch zu sein, dass sie eigentlich auf jede Wissenschaft passt” [“Lonergan’s theological methodology seems to me so general that it is suitable for any field of inquiry”], 537.

¹⁸ One useful reference here is Michelle A. Gonzalez, “Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Contemporary Feminist Theology,” *Theological Studies* 65 (September 2004), 565-95. I have chosen this work because it is up to date and brings out nicely concrete details of one current feminist method. Consider what Gonzalez describes and see how it fits into the proposed method here. On pp. 583-84, for instance, Gonzalez identifies a tripartite method in feminist theology: (1) a hermeneutic of suspicion; (2) a hermeneutic of retrieval; (3) reconstruction. She goes on to discuss three crucial tasks of feminist theology related to its three-part method. Note that the first two tasks, and the first two parts of the feminist theological method, fall into our division of ‘past-oriented functional tasks,’ while her third task, and the third part of feminist theological method, falls into our division of ‘future oriented functional tasks.’ But to what *particular* functional tasks might her tasks correspond? You might enjoy coming back to this question as an interesting ‘exercise’ after reading this article.

perspective, what went on in the past. If you think about the activities they are presently engaged in, you can begin to ferret out, from the full range of disciplines, three major practical tasks. You have some scholars who are retrieving and *making sense of* women's histories; you have another set of scholars interpreting or critiquing, in other words, *making sense of*, others' past analyses and interpretations of women; and you have yet another collection of scholars who *make sense of* the past by searching out and retrieving *significant*, yet previously overlooked, data.

At present, of course, most feminist scholars are doing all three of these tasks. The shift suggested here would be a shift to *specialist task*, to the specialist activity of making sense of women's lives within the functional confines of one of these three domains. In other words, this is a task-oriented workable, efficient *method* of going about the business of 'making sense' of women, society, and progress. It is a blunt and effective division of labour, much the same as what has been going on in industry over the past few hundred years: *Divide Up the Work By Task*. Notice that this suggestion isn't mere idealism: as noted above, currently functioning within the feminist enterprise, you have already three functional tasks to which we can give the names: *History, Interpretation, Research*.

As an aside here, one of the problems feminists are encountering in our third wave crossroads is the question of how to become truly (and not just nominally) interdisciplinary. With most scholars (not just feminists but all of academia) immersed in a single specialized field or discipline, tackling researches, interpretations, histories each on their own, it is difficult indeed to imagine how any one person can have the time and/or energy to enter into another serious discipline. But if the emphasis in scholarship were to shift from specialty topics and disciplines to *functional tasks* then there is opened up 'room for a view.' Each person, concentrating now on *how-best-to-do-their-task* (or in other words, on their *method*), can begin to mesh their goings-on and their findings with the goings-on and the findings of others doing that task.

Try to imagine, for instance, feminist conferences that bring together, say, *Researchers* from all fields and disciplines. What might take place? These Functional Specialists would surely want to discuss and compare notes on how they are going about their task of 'doing research.' Thus, while concentrating on their own particular fields of interest (e.g., women and economics, education, prehistory...),¹⁹ they also will gradually develop a feel for and an appreciation of the full Field of Disciplines and not just their own small niche. But once this Field is opened up, the functional specialist is led to enlarge her View correspondingly. She is called to begin to appreciate the Field of Human

¹⁹ On women in prehistoric times, see the excellent book, Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth and Society in Early Times* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994). Barber has a very good chapter on 'doing research' in this field.

History, within the boundaries of her *function*. By virtue of this kind of *functional* meshing, can you begin to see how a multicultural, fully functional ‘interdisciplinary context’ is opened up?²⁰

But we will return to our broad division of labour and consider now present activities of ‘making sense of the future.’ You have some groups of feminists who are engaged in *making sense of* existing doctrines, and in creating new directives, or doctrines, toward an improved equality and authenticity in our human living. You have scholars trying to *make sense of* the large, intricately connected web of concerns, questions, and needs that condition feminism’s goal of progress. And you have those scholars who are endeavouring to order and *make sense of* the ongoing findings in their field, so as to communicate them to global villages and local communities of women looking for progress in their concrete daily lives. Giving names or titles to these three tasks you have, respectively, tasks of *Doctrines*, *Systematics*, and *Communications*.

A canny reader may have already leaped ahead to realize that between those working to make sense of the *past*, and those working to make sense of the *future*, there exists a gulf. The constant in both of these past- and future-oriented ‘streams’ of feminism is a quest for *progress*: the key questions of each stream respectively are 1) what has made for progress in the past?, and 2) what will make for progress in the future? Ideas about the future, to be most effective, can take ‘the best’ from what has come out of the past. But as feminism has grown over the decades there have emerged increasing numbers of *differing views or positions* on what has made for progress in the past. So, constituting a fourth past-oriented task, there is a desperate need for some few scholars to take up an explicit task of sorting out and bringing to light, *making sense of*, these many differing positions on progress. Let’s give to this task the name of *Dialectic*.

Again, crucial to feminism’s future there are discourses, even disputes or disagreements, about *how feminism can best go forward* – my own essay and the article from which I borrowed my title are ones which fall into this domain. It is essentially a question of method. Thinking about the proposed shift to *function* that I have suggested here for feminism, this domain of ‘making sense of feminism’s way forward’ becomes, then, a *foundation* for the whole of this newly functional feminist method. There opens up a need for Foundational specialists who take on the ‘high’ task of ‘making sense’ of both their own as well as the other seven tasks of feminism and how best the *whole cycle* can carry feminism into the future, toward progress. As already alluded to, this task has the name of *Foundations*.

²⁰ Another exercise here is to try to envision a restructured library system based on this kind of functional division. How would cataloguing systems change? In terms of the move to interdisciplinary work, wouldn’t it be helpful to be able to go to a section or floor of ‘History’ in a library and have the entire Field of disciplines to browse through?

Now, let me give you an image that may help you forward in grasping the functional ‘workings’ of this method. Think, then, of an old-fashioned water wheel, or water mill, the kind built over a stream, powered by the water to drive machinery such as grinding stones in a grain mill. In this image, the stream, the water, is the flow of human life, human history, including the flow of women’s lives around the world, of local rural and urban life, the flow of feminism that seeks a better way. The wheel is the eight-runged ‘academic’ cycle of functional tasks: research, interpretation, history, dialectic, foundations, doctrines, systematics, and communications. It picks up the deep riches from the flow of history, cycling them round, grasping their contributions to human history, to progress, and ‘sending out its diamond jets’²¹ of global relevance to our human future.

In this image, can you begin to see how the tasks are *functional*, how they work together to cycle progress around? And can you see that they hold the potential to unify feminism? In each particular village, town or city, and for every particular feminist method, this *method of task functioning* is what remains constant. The function of Research, for instance, is to seek out, pick up and pass on to Interpretation the deep riches from the flow of women’s living; the function of Interpretation is to sort out the riches provided by Research so as to pass them along, their significant meanings, to History. The function of History is to piece together, from Interpretation’s gleanings, true stories of ‘what made for progress’ and pass them on to Dialectic. Dialectic churns out from the fray of History the ‘diamonds’ of progress²² and passes on its results to Foundations, seekers of light for ever-better ways forward. This grist for the mill of progress is handed onto Doctrines, whence are grinded out truths for best ways forward. Doctrines hands on its truths to Systematics, who seek to spin a global interdisciplinary web of understanding, which is handed on to Communications. The function of Communications is to give back to, and lift, the flow of human living. Communications tries for a View, one gleaned from the whole cycle of this radically evolutionary perspective of feminism that will provide light to local living: the right-ways for the right-groups²³ around the globe, an up-lifting of local feminisms in their ever-fresh futures.

²¹ George Elliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, edited with an introduction and notes by A. S. Byatt (London: Penguin Classics, 1985), chapter one, pp. 54-5, describes Dorlcote Mill in the town of St. Ogg’s: “the unresting wheel sending out its diamond jets of water.”

²² Here ‘diamonds’ refers to the searching out, not only of what made for progress in history, but also of the *inner grounds* of human progress. It’s a matter of grasping, understanding, making sense of, the ground of human progress itself: our ‘inner light,’ guiding our human way.

²³ The word ‘right’ is an adjective used very purposefully in the canons of the Noble Eightfold Path in the Zen Buddhist tradition. It is linked explicitly with attaining ‘the goal of enlightenment,’ a purpose not unrelated to our own.

5 Conclusion

There is, then, an authentic need within feminism, embracing all academic feminist groups, to find a way or *method* that will unify the many particular feminist reflections on women and their living. Moreover, since the goal of feminism, its *raison d'être*, is progress, academic feminism ultimately is a vehicle fostering reflection on and understanding of what *progress* is itself. A unified academic feminism can contribute to actual progress for women by striving to make sense of the *grounds* of human progress.

This new functional mode of feminism with its emphasis on discourse is, then, intended to serve an even larger purpose. In its concern with the concretely universal condition of women, and the societies in which women live, feminism is pushing, more than any other discipline at any other time in history, the question of authentic human living. At every turn, in each local situation, in every village, town, and city around the world, feminists must ask before they act, "What has made for progress in the past? What will make for progress in the future?" In a unified feminism, the multiple answers that feminists make to such questions will gradually shed light on the larger question of authentic human living. What is it to achieve equality for all? What constitutes an authentic human living for all citizens, women, men, and children, around the world? By bringing unity to our many diverse answers, there is hope of future understanding. The radical implication here is that feminism is placed in an extremely unique position. Feminism is giving birth to a potentially new stage in history in which the explicit grounds of our 'human progress' will be gradually understood.

A functional feminism will thus not only strive to *achieve* progress, but more essentially, strive to *understand* the very nature of human progress itself. As long as this 'intellectual ground' of progress is lacking, any attempts at achieving particular material progress will be fragmented, incoherent, piecemeal.²⁴ Is it possible, then, to have an institutionalized feminism, in the positive sense of unifying, efficient, functional that also is a *praxis*, a task-oriented vehicle in world society with the explicit function of discerning the grounds of *progress* for women, for our human living?

²⁴ The present gap between the theoretical and the practical, and the need for feminism to work on both levels to create efficient change, is a topic one will find mentioned in much of feminist literature. Nearly forty years ago, Mary Daly, in *The Church and the Second Sex* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968), 136, refers to the issue under the context of women entering the church. Mention of it occurs more recently in Wane's article on Black feminism: "Since Black feminist theory is still carried out predominantly in piecemeal fashion, a more unified Black feminist voice needs to be formed, both on a theoretical and practical level" Ibid, 147. See note 10 above. One can lift Wane's comment, in the broader context of this essay, to include all of feminism.

The functional notion of this cycling method provides a ‘yes’ to that question. It is akin to the workings of the industrial mill itself, to the inspiration of the industrial revolution itself: it is far more efficient to *divide up the work*.²⁵ Each to her own task, where the tasks and the whole lightsome cycle are finally a *praxis*: feminism’s theoretical workings glean from and offer to local feminist groups in towns and cities and countries around the globe, a lift to our understanding of our past and the possibilities of our future. Indeed, there lurks in this functional method the possibility of nurturing into mutual respect the workings of practise and theory, no small feat in these strange, mixed up times. But if feminism’s *raison d’être* is progress for all women everywhere, isn’t this cycling scheme a decent leap forward? “We spend so much time talking about what feminism is, or was, and not enough about *what it could be*”²⁶ (italics mine). Could it be, could we together ever so slowly and painfully make it, a genuine unifying wheel for women’s progress?

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²⁵ Stephanie Riger, “Challenges of Success: Stages of Growth in Feminist Organizations” *Feminist Studies* 20 (Summer 1994), 275-300, is a consultant for all types of feminist organizations, from women’s arts centres to shelters for rape victims, battered women. She analyzes internal organizational problems that occur as such organizations develop. Riger has found that *growth*, *conflict*, and *task specialization* are key issues confronting all organizations as they develop. One might consider the whole *feminist enterprise itself* as ‘an organization’ that fits this scheme of developmental growth. Then, as with any other feminist organization, there inevitably arises, from its own patterns of growth, the need to find a way to handle conflicts (think of *Dialectic*), and the need to divide up the work based on a more flexible *method of task-specialization*.

²⁶ Baumgardner and Richards, 452.