

Philosophy Comes Out of Lives

An Interview with Marilyn Frye

Marilyn Frye is a noted philosopher and feminist theorist whose works include *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* and *Willful Virgin: Essays in Feminism* as well as various other essays and articles. Frye recently retired from teaching philosophy at Michigan State University. On February 26, 2013, the *Stance* staff met with Marilyn Frye to talk about her work, her life, and the status of women in the field of philosophy.

Stance (Ashli Godfrey): So what made you decide to become a philosopher?

Marilyn Frye: My first thought is that I was “born this way.” In a way, that seems right, because it just came to me so easily. But there is a story here. When I was an undergraduate, I was at Stanford. Freshmen were not allowed to take the introductory philosophy course at Stanford at that time. That gave the course a certain status because you were considered too young and immature to take it as a freshman. The women I was hanging out with in my dorm knew something about what philosophy was, had some idea. I didn’t—I’d never heard of it. They had this course high on their list of things you had to do in order to be a serious person, an intellectual, a sophisticated person, and so I just kind of followed them. So I got into philosophy in the first place by peer pressure. Kind of an unusual way to go, I think.

It was a huge lecture class, probably three hundred or more students. I loved the course. I got really fascinated with things like Berkeley’s idea that things don’t exist except when they’re being perceived. And then I think a thing that maybe got me, really hooked me, was how hard philosophy is. I think it was the first time in my educational experience that I had encountered anything that I really worked on and didn’t get an A or a 4.0. I got a B+. I was like, what? This doesn’t happen. I don’t do my best and get a B+. It was a new thing in my life, and I loved it. I thought: “Okay, this is worth doing.”

Philosophy has always been, I think, the hardest thing I do. It’s just incredibly hard work. I’m very often writing about things I don’t understand at all, and I’m just working to understand something, working to figure something out. In that way for me philosophy is a lot like various kinds of art and what artists do. You take on exactly what is problematic for you, you’re at the outer edge of what you can figure out,



and that's what you take on. You self-set the problems and the challenges. I don't write about stuff I already think I know. It's not interesting at all. I write about stuff I don't get. I think that's one reason it's endlessly interesting to me. I'll hear somebody give a paper on something I know almost nothing about in philosophy, and I will just dive in there. That's why I'm a philosopher. I hope the rest of you will have that much fun and work that hard.

Stance (AG): Marriage equality seems to have become the focal point for much lesbian and gay political activism in the last decade or so. What are your thoughts on this, especially considering your views regarding heterosexual marriage?

MF: You have correctly anticipated that I am not a fan of the institution of marriage. It's got a terrible history in patriarchy, and I know people manage to live with it in ways that are okay, but it's designed to live in ways that are not okay, it seems to me. I don't get the mindset, the habit of thought, thinking the state should be an agency whose actions make a

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relationship legitimate or real. People doing commitment ceremonies—that makes sense to me. Usually that's a matter of people doing some rituals that accomplish things in their social milieu. Birthday parties do that, you know? That's nothing I have anything against.

As for the involvement of the state in legitimating relationships and the setting up of domestic lives, I don't see going to bat to get the state into my life that way, and it's sort of curious to me that so many lesbians and gay men want to do that. I can sort of figure it out, but it's not the way I look at things.

But then, the other thing is that, and this goes along with gays in the military, the gay movement (and they don't usually call it lesbian and gay because lesbians just get swept up under the male name of "gay") in its large public presence right now has only this focus. Many gay men and lesbians are doing a lot else that's not in the large public picture of what gays want these days. We want (supposedly) marriage and we want to be in the military. Great. Two of the greatest patriarchal institutions of all time [and] they're clamoring to get in. Not my politics at all, not how I look at things.

Now, I do recognize that in the present status quo, there are a lot of very concrete benefits to be gotten by getting these official statuses as married or in the military, such as pay and the possibility of various kinds of civil rights that should be there for everybody, [but] which are in fact limited to people in these statuses. So, it's not like I'd be out there

lobbying in any eager way against gay marriage. I'm not against people getting the full range of civil rights and so on. It's just that that whole politics of "I want into all this wonderful stuff you've got" just doesn't seem right to me.

But I have one small hope for that whole situation. There are some people out there who are very convinced that if same-sex pairs are allowed to marry, it will, in fact, undermine and eventually destroy the institution of heterosexual marriage. I hope maybe they're right. Maybe "gay marriage" is more destructive than I ever would have thought. Sometimes the people who hate and fear you are right about something. It's good to think about it. In that case, maybe all this stuff I don't think is good politics will, in fact, end up right where I want to go.

Stance (AG): What do you consider to be the biggest roadblock for the acceptance of lesbianism?

MF: That question really puzzles me. Acceptance by whom? I mean, I already accept it. It's like accepting that the sun rises. What is this "accept" business? So, I'm not sure what you mean.

I'm not going to be liked by everyone. In the big picture, in the culture at large, I really don't need more than tolerance. I don't need acceptance by most people. I don't need to be embraced. Just put up with me, and I'll put up with you. There are a lot of people around that I don't think are people I would want for neighbors because of their politics and their views, their lives. But tolerance, I feel, is required. That is, until they're actually dangerous to me.

Stance (AG): Feminist philosophers are often critical of gender construction and the "gender regime." This creates interesting intersections with current movements of gender-identifying persons, such as the trans community and the "femme movement." Is this a place of conflict, and if so, can you expand on how current feminisms can structure a response?

MF: I'm really sympathetic with both the poles you've sketched out there. I think that, as a feminist, you can see there are all kinds of things going on in the world that support the understanding that being a woman is something entirely defined as being the "other" of man, and as not having any positive content. And you also are very aware that there's this hierarchy of women and men. When you wake up as a feminist, you perceive all this, and you want to think, "No, this whole mode of doing things, of dividing people into these two, one against the other, needs to just be abolished. There shouldn't be any such thing."



One of the early writers about this was a French feminist named Monique Wittig. She argued that lesbians aren't women in just this vein—that lesbians don't exist as the other of man. They exist—we exist—as something ourselves. And then she thought that if feminism were successful there wouldn't be any more women, because that category would just dissolve. There are other people who have thought along similar lines, along an analogy of slave and master. Woman, man. Slave, master. You don't just want to get better treatment for slaves—you want to abolish the whole thing, right? Let's just get rid of the whole operation, and then there will be no women (no slaves), and that's good.

But then there's another sort of moment in the feminist experience of life where being a woman is not, in fact, only being something relative to man. It is something you've lived, and you've adopted and taken on as something to be defended against oppression. You feel like you don't have to buy that woman is just the other of man. In fact, it may even seem like this whole idea that woman is just the other of man is nothing but a sort of self-serving male fantasy. He'd like it to be like that, but in fact women are something. We are something on our own. Woman as a positive category. We construct what woman is, thank you, by being it and by relations to each other and by chosen relationships, not imposed ones, with men. In that case, it seems entirely wrong to be thinking, "Well, let's just abolish gender—there won't be any women anymore." That's gynocide. And that's not at all where you want to go. What you want to do is make it more and more possible for more and more women to give the content to what it is to be a woman in many varied ways and in many varied situations. So these seem to me both pictures of what being a woman is that are both very available to you as a feminist.

Frankly, I'm prepared to just live with both of them and tolerate the ambiguity. There are these two lenses, and neither of them should be privileged as the only way to look at it. So I go with both, recognizing that they don't make sense in terms of each other, but they each make a lot of sense of my life. So, there it is. I think the ability to just hang in there with ambiguity is important for getting on with life. And important in politics so you don't keep generating these "all or nothing" ways of looking at things.

Stance (Esther Wolfe): I was wrestling with the ambiguity of it, and I think by posing the question I kind of wanted to be like, "Marilyn Frye, fix this for me!" And I really love that your answer embraced the liminality of those spaces and that you can live in that space.

MF: They both help make sense of what's happening, so don't pitch either of them out. I think you can see in what I've written these two ways of looking at things emerging at different times. The second is articulated most fully in the one paper, "The Necessity of Differences."

The other is not so fully articulated anywhere, but it's very present in the back of my mind in a lot of moments in *The Politics of Reality*. So don't abandon either of those overall pictures, even though they don't fit together with each other. Good, I'm very happy to have been helpful to somebody interested in that question.

Stance (AG): How would you describe a “wild woman?” Would you consider this phrase to mean the rejection of patriarchal norms?

MF: It's a trope. It's a figure of speech. It suggests an image of women in patriarchy being tamed and domesticated, and that you could escape this, the scene of your domestication, if you want. I think that's a very useful image in a lot of ways. In particular, I think of the institution of marriage and related institutions. There's a very wide phenomenon that when somebody gets old, their younger female relatives, usually a daughter, sometimes a niece, is the primary helper, caretaker, or supporter. That's a kind of domestication that's deeply entrenched in someone who devotes a huge amount of her life without any reward. That kind of service to somebody in the family or anything like it is a kind of domestication.

With any trope like that, there's really nothing you can bank on forever because in another frame of reference you realize that all humans are domesticated animals. That's called socialization, and you don't survive as a human being if you don't do that. So everybody's domesticated. But that's in one frame. In another frame, looking at some of these institutions, it seems like a useful image to think of women as domesticated even though we could be wild. Another thing about the image of women as tamed or domesticated, is that it seems to carry the suggestion of a “before” when women weren't yet tamed or domesticated. When we talk about domestication, we're talking about going from wild to domestic.

Even if in the history of our species there was in fact a time when the way humans lived was not male domination, to think too much in terms of trying to figure a future that's like the past may not be the way to go. I would not want to get bogged down by following this trope too far, but it's cool for a while. Certainly, for some individual women, it has been the image of themselves in their present situation as domesticated and tamed. It's just about right for them, and it encourages them to escape the zoo and go out and be wild. It can be very supportive for interpreting, in a useful way, certain kinds of conditions that women live in fairly commonly in our culture.

Stance (AG): Is it possible for men to deconstruct their own masculinity in a manner similar to “whitely” people? If so, what might this process involve, and what might be the result?



MF: I'm going to fuss about the word "deconstruct." Deconstruction, in its most philosophical meaning as given to us by Derrida, is a particular kind of linguistic analysis. I'm talking here about a real reconstruction of a person and a subjectivity. Deconstruction sounds to me like writing an essay.

As a person who is white and very prone to whiteness, I can certainly say that it is possible to reduce my whiteness quotient a whole lot. I can become aware of it in ways that cause me to feel displeasure and discomfort. I don't want that. I don't want to be like that. I recognize it and I begin to get sensitive to it. So yeah, you can change. You can change pretty deep habits.

How men should do it, and whether it is concretely or really going to be possible for this man, that man, or many men, I don't know. That's not my problem. That's their problem. Take it on or not. My experience trying to take it on regarding whiteness is that we can make some headway.

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You also have to pick your friends. There are a lot of people that get very dissatisfied with you when you stop being the correct way, the way they want you to be. You get called a traitor or a lover of the sort of person they hate. You don't get called that stuff if you've got the right friends.

If you go out in various, more challenging environments, you catch a lot of grief from people for it. That teaches you a lot, by the way. One of the things about various kinds of activism, and you see this in the

work of Andrea Dworkin, is you go into the belly of the beast and start criticizing, rejecting, and resisting. You find out how much they hate you. "Oh, I didn't get that." You do find out something about racism and racists. If you are a white person, and you get less whitely. I think men who get less masculine, tone that down, shift away from it, and so on will often find out how much men hate women. So it's up to you. Do it or not.

Stance (AG): What would your response to the category skeptic be in terms of your view that social categories are necessary in order to be intelligible to others?

MF: The category skeptic says that social categories are imaginary or fictional or unreal. I'm saying: they're real. When we socially make

things, they're as real as houses, cars, and the other stuff we socially make. So, there is a distinction between real and fictional. The category *goth* is real. I think possibly the category *schizophrenics* is not. I think there might not be a real thing there, though there is an effort to make there be one. But the category *Starfleet crew members*, that's fictional. There are fictional social categories, and then there are real ones. *Men*, *women*, those are real ones. *Athletes*, that's a real one. So I just think there is an idea that something which is socially made by us into our social relations can be made to go away. Just like somebody's imaginary friend. It's like you get talked out of it, and then it's not there anymore.

I think social categories are real. In fact, you can get hurt by them. They don't go away by wishing. It's as hard to get rid of as an old car: When does it finally rust out into dust? How hard do you have to work to get rid of that social construct? Well, similarly to get rid of *women*, to get rid of *addicts*. To have these not be categories? No. That's no easier than ridding the univers of materially real things.

Starting with Simone de Beauvoir, but in some other phases of feminist thought, theory, and philosophy, people have made the distinction between sex and gender very much with the idea in mind that sex is an unchanging given and gender is something that can change. I see where people thought that and, in fact, I think it was useful as a stage, and we should return to it for certain purposes sometimes. Along with that, though, came the image that we can just undo gender. It's merely social. It's not material. I see how it can seem like that, but it doesn't just go away. It is as real as the desk, the chair, and the car. It is going to be just as resistant to annihilation.

Stance (AG): The field of philosophy has a persistent reputation for being especially hostile and unwelcoming toward women. As a woman philosopher, can you comment on your own experience?

MF: Very soon after I decided I was a philosophy major, I was explicitly told by a philosophy professor, in so many words, that philosophy is not a women's field and that women don't do well in philosophy. I think he meant to be helpful, that I shouldn't get into something that was not going to pay off for me.

So from then on, I was in a defensive posture. I've got to show them. I'm going to do this even though he thinks I can't—they think I can't. I took him to be expressing a general view, to be manifesting a general climate. I didn't take him to be speaking solely as just one individual person with a certain opinion. I later talked about our experiences with another woman who had been in that department at that time (as an instructor). She said in that time and place, she felt that if you were a woman and a philosopher, you were just a living, breathing contradiction. That



expressed it very nicely, I think—the way it was for me for many years. I got started in this before the woman's movement really got cranked up. I was relatively unaware of and unaffected by it until I was already a beginning professor. I really had to be in a stance of fighting to do this thing, fighting to prove I *could* do this thing. It tempts you also to some bad things, like thinking as you do succeed in doing it, "How exceptional I am. I'm a woman, but I'm exceptional, and I can do this." That's a very bad place to go, and so it can cultivate some vices as well as strengths and makes the whole thing harder, much harder.

Now I think it's more that hostility to women has gone underground. In this country and in this time, it would be very unlikely that this professor would tell this new female major, "This isn't a woman's field; you shouldn't try to do this," in so many words. But it's there. So, I think it may be even harder to cope. It was right up front for me. I knew exactly what I was up against. And I think it may be more confusing now, more surprising or shocking when a moment goes by when it suddenly is overt, and then it goes secret right away. You think, "Did he really say that?" or "Did I really pick that up?" Then you doubt yourself because you really can't quite believe that's actually there.

I think it may be even more problematic in many places. My general take on the question "Well, have things changed or not?" is it's a completely different world, and nothing has changed. There are many more women in philosophy. We are much more present and recognized. The Eastern Division just had a wonderful woman philosopher as its president. Linda Alcoff is a feminist philosopher, a really good philosopher, and she gets a lot of recognition. That wouldn't have happened thirty years ago. There were one or two women philosophers around when I was coming up, but just a tiny few, so things really have changed, they really have. Now, at least you know if somebody says something or does something sexist to you, you can call it. You can say, "That's sexist." I used to say that, and they said, "What's that?" Now they argue with me; they know what I'm saying.

Stance (AG): What advice do you have for an undergraduate who wishes to pursue a career in philosophy and do you have any advice specifically for undergraduate women?

MF: Well, I guess if it's you, and you love it, don't get talked out of it. Just go for it. Historically, both men and women philosophers, artists, musicians, and so on, have often had to make their living at some day job or another. Maybe you don't get to be a philosophy professor. I think in most of the things you might want to do, things that are intellectually interesting, creative, and exciting, you will have your moments when somebody thinks a woman can't do it, and they are afraid she can. It's so threatening that a woman can do what they can do, and they have to get really mean. You'll run into bad stuff. But, if it's you, do it. Actually, that's

not that different than my advice to men, except the women are going to have to be stronger to do it, and that's not fair.

Otherwise, do it feminist. Bring your life into it. Turn out philosophy that comes out of women's lives. Philosophy comes out of lives. It does not come out of cognition alone. Some people are going to head off into "What is it?" and "How does it work?" Other people are going to head off into "What does it mean?" That's me. Other people are going to go off into, "But is this good, is this right?" The people who are interested in meaning tend to divide up into those for whom issues about translating thought into language are most compelling, while others will be more in the other direction, translating printed word into action. Different things within these areas are what engage people, and that comes out of their life. It's stuff in their life that makes that compelling.

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Women's lives and men's lives are different in many ways. If you try to do philosophy like you were living a man's life, it will take the vitality out of it. A lot of us tried to do that for a long time. It's painful, and it's not nearly as productive and fruitful as working with whatever is really coming out of your own situation and your own life. It will be coded. It's not like they could read back and tell you what your personality is out of what your interest is. It's not going to just be the topic; it's also going to be the way of working it and what other stuff you bring in. Philosophers need to take everything they know into their philosophy, including all that you are, in order to make it really fun. ❖

