

FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY COLLECTION

Charlotte Witt  
*Editor*

# Feminist Metaphysics

*Explorations in the Ontology of Sex,  
Gender and the Self*



 Springer

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## Editor

Elizabeth Potter

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Oakland, CA, USA

Over the past 40 years, philosophy has become a vital arena for feminists. Recent feminist work has challenged canonical claims about the role of women and has developed new methods of analysis and critique, and in doing so has reinvigorated central areas of philosophy. *The Feminist Philosophy Collection* presents new work representative of feminist contributions to the six most significant areas of philosophy: Feminist Ethics and Political and Social Philosophy; Feminist Philosophy of Religion; Feminist Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art; Feminist Metaphysics; Feminist History of Philosophy; and Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science. Feminist work in some fields, notably ethics and social theory, has been going on for four decades, while feminist philosophy of art and aesthetics, as well as feminist metaphysics, are still young. Thus, some volumes will contain essays that build upon established feminist work as they explore new territory, while others break exciting new ground.

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Editor

# Feminist Metaphysics

Explorations in the Ontology of Sex,  
Gender and the Self

 Springer

*Editor*

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*Cover illustration:* Nancy Spero, "Black and the Red III", 1994 (detail). Handprinted and printed collage on paper. 22 panels, 50×245 cm each. Installation view, Malmö Konsthall, Sweden. Private collection. Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York. Photo by David Reynolds. The work of Nancy Spero (b.1926), artist, activist and feminist, has focused on diverse historical, mythical and contemporary cultural representations of women since the 1970's.

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I am very grateful to the contributors to this volume for making the project so fun and rewarding. Although I was convinced that the time had come for a collected volume of essays in feminist metaphysics, I did not really know what to expect. It was truly exciting to see the range and quality of work being done in feminist metaphysics, and to see the many points of contact with analytic metaphysics, continental philosophy, and with earlier feminist philosophy. I am also grateful to the Center for the Humanities at the University of New Hampshire and the College of Liberal Arts for their support of the final stages of this project. Thanks also to Elizabeth Potter and Ingrid van Laarhoven for their wise words of editorial advice. Finally, I would like to thank Brenda Emands, who did a wonderful job copy editing the manuscript with great care and interest.



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**Jules Holroyd** has recently taken up a position as Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Cardiff, UK, having undertaken a Junior Research Fellowship at Churchill College, Cambridge. In her research, she has focused on the notions of autonomy, political liberty, free will and moral responsibility. She is in particular interested in the concern, often expressed by feminists, to examine the kinds of social relationships that may be relevant to, or constitutive of, these notions. She is also working on the relationship between punitive justice and social justice, connecting up debates about political obligation with those concerning the justification of punishment.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Charlotte Witt

When Simone de Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* in 1949 she could hardly have imagined the influence her thinking would have on feminist philosophy. Among other things she could hardly have imagined that there would exist something called “feminist philosophy” with at least as many dimensions as there are volumes in *The Feminist Philosophy Collection*.<sup>1</sup> By asking the question “What is a woman?” Beauvoir inaugurated a new subject matter for philosophical reflection. Of course, other philosophers had occasionally provided definitions of women, differentiated them from men, and even—very, very occasionally—argued that women and men are equal (in some respects, at least). But Beauvoir posed the question, “What is a woman?” in the same way that Socrates asked about the virtues. For Socrates, inquiry into the definition of a virtue like piety or justice is anchored in and illuminated by the identities, situations and interests of the characters undertaking the inquiry. And Socrates was critical of definitions that reflected mere cultural consensus or popular belief. Similarly, Beauvoir’s extensive exploration of cultural definitions of what a woman is revolves around her self-identification as a woman, and her situation in a male-dominated society and a sexist intellectual culture. Hence, her response to the question “What is a woman?” is necessarily critical of received opinion, conventional thinking, and her intellectual milieu. Beauvoir’s question, with its self-referential, contextual and critical presuppositions, has guided later feminists to think about topics like sex and gender, our understandings of our selves, and, finally, the relationship among ideology, reality and truth. In the sense that I will be using it in this

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<sup>1</sup>The Feminist Philosophy Collection under the general editorship of Elizabeth Potter, includes volumes on feminist work in ethics and social and political philosophy, aesthetics and philosophy of art, epistemology and the philosophy of science, philosophy of religion, the history of philosophy and metaphysics. At the time of this writing *Feminist Ethics and Social and Political Philosophy: Theorizing the Non-Ideal* edited by Lisa Tessman has appeared in print.

Introduction, Beauvoir's writing is an early and influential example of feminist metaphysics.<sup>2</sup>

Beauvoir provides a second context for the essays in this volume because her work is foundational for feminist thinking in both the continental and analytic philosophical traditions. Given the landmark character of this volume I thought it was important that the essays collected here represent some of the best recent work on feminist metaphysics by both analytic and continental philosophers. Both analytic and continental feminist theorists, perhaps influenced by the anti-metaphysical character of their respective philosophical traditions in the latter half of the twentieth century, have tended to focus on core questions of social justice and ethics rather than metaphysical questions. Feminist work in value theory, political theory and ethics, however, implicitly raises metaphysical questions: about the ontology of sex and gender, the character of the subject and persons, and the ontology of the social realm and ideology. For example, feminist work in political theory to develop a relational theory of autonomy connects to questions about free will; feminist work on identity politics raises questions about nominalism and realism about sex and gender. One of the great virtues of the essays in this volume is the way in which they connect feminist metaphysical thinking both to feminist ethics and theorizing about social justice and to mainstream philosophical metaphysics in both the analytic and continental traditions.

But what is feminist metaphysics? Given that metaphysics is traditionally thought of as not grounded in the social situation and identity of the theorizer, how could there be any specifically feminist project or projects in metaphysics? There are at least two ways that one might want to respond to this question. One response is to define feminist metaphysics in terms of its subject matter, and, in particular, the relevance and utility of that subject matter to feminist theory and politics. Here we might think about feminist work on social categories like gender (or sex) where what is most distinctively feminist about the work is to be found in its choice of subject matter, rather than in a unique or peculiarly feminist methodology. The debate between gender realists and gender nominalists exemplifies this way of characterizing feminist metaphysics, since the debate is framed using terms and argument strategies that are familiar from mainstream discussions of nominalism and realism. What makes this work *feminist* metaphysics is the immediate relevance or utility of its subject for feminist theory rather than its uniquely feminist methodology or perspective. The utility and relevance could be of several kinds. It could be that just raising a particular metaphysical question has value for feminist theory or it could be that a particular view is (partially) motivated or (partially) justified by its relevance to feminist theory. Let's call this the subject matter conception of feminist metaphysics.

Alternatively, one might define feminist metaphysics as a perspective on metaphysics, or, perhaps, a method or approach to metaphysics. In this case what makes

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<sup>2</sup>For a useful discussion of topics in feminist metaphysics that also traces crucial issues and questions to Beauvoir, see Sally Haslanger's "Feminist Metaphysics" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

the metaphysics *feminist* is not simply the relevance or utility of its particular subject matter or topic to feminist theory, but the general orientation of the project. Here we might think about feminist work on the inter-relationship among power, ideology and reality, for example.<sup>3</sup> What makes this work *feminist* metaphysics is its insistence on new approaches to metaphysical questions, like the employment of new metaphors, language or methods that better express or reflect feminist interests and projects. Let's call this the methodological conception of feminist metaphysics.

Of course, many projects blend the subject matter and methodological conceptions of feminist metaphysics. For example, *The Second Sex* satisfies the first definition of feminist metaphysics by exploring the category of "woman" in a way that has been very fruitful for feminist theory and politics. Beauvoir's discussion draws heavily on traditional sources like Hegel and Descartes in its philosophical perspective. But Beauvoir also articulated the unique perspective of her writing by underlining that she was writing as a woman, from a certain standpoint. Indeed, the fact that her gendered location was marked and obvious, while that of men was invisible, is a major theme of her book. And this fact is also integral to her understanding of what it is to be a woman. It might be useful, therefore, to think of these two conceptions of feminist metaphysics as lying on a continuum with some work in feminist metaphysics clearly at one end or the other, but other work falling along the spectrum, and satisfying both definitions to some extent. Indeed, as readers of this volume will appreciate, the essays in this collection fall in various places along the feminist metaphysics spectrum.

Several of the chapters in *Part I: The Ontology of Sex and Gender* clearly fall under the subject matter definition of feminist metaphysics. For example, in "What is Gender Essentialism?" I use an Aristotelian notion of essence as a principle of unity and organization of an individual as a model for the way in which an individual's gender organizes and unifies her (or his) social agency. I propose this neo-Aristotelian approach to gender essentialism as an alternative to conceiving of essentialism as a view about kinds or categories, which is the standard way of understanding gender essentialism in feminist theory. Applying a traditional Aristotelian notion of essence to the category of gender is an example of feminist metaphysics defined in relation to its subject matter, as are the following three chapters in the volume.

Drawing on the Lockean tradition, Natalie Stoljar argues for a nominalist interpretation of gender in her chapter "Different Women. Gender and the Realism-Nominalism Debate". Stoljar's chapter does a wonderful job of summing up the realism/nominalism debate by considering the force and range of five different arguments for nominalism about gender. Rather than argue in favor of nominalism in general, Stoljar limits her argument to the special case of gender nominalism; thereby making her conclusion of interest to both committed nominalists, and to those who might be realists about some categories.

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<sup>3</sup>One notable early work in this genre is Marilyn Frye's *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*, which was published in 1983, and which raised important questions about the connections between politics, power and reality.

Both Ásta Sveinsdóttir and Mari Mikkola address the issue of how to understand sex and gender, and the relationship between the two. Their chapters provide two very different views. In “The Metaphysics of Sex and Gender” Sveinsdóttir provides a model (called the “conferralist framework”) for explaining both sex and gender. Following and elaborating upon Judith Butler’s account of sex and gender, Sveinsdóttir develops a sophisticated analysis of the social constructionist view of categories like sex and gender. According to Sveinsdóttir both gender and sex are conferred properties; conferred properties are dependent upon human thoughts, attitudes or practices (although there are some biological constraints on what sex assignment is possible). Still, on Sveinsdóttir’s view both being of a certain sex and being of a certain gender are mind dependent properties since they are both conferred properties.

In “Ontological Commitments: Sex and Gender” Mari Mikkola focuses on a conflict between our everyday conceptions of sex and gender and the conventionalist, abolitionist views of sex and gender developed by some feminist theorists. Feminists who hold conventionalist theories about gender (like Sveinsdóttir’s) often also advocate for the abolition of gender categories on the grounds that they inherently encode sexist and patriarchal conventions. As an alternative, Mikkola develops a model for understanding the relationship between sex and gender that she calls “the trait/norm covariance model.” Mikkola’s model distinguishes between descriptive traits, like wearing make-up or having ovaries, which are mind-independent properties, and norms like masculinity and femininity, which are mind dependent and express normative judgments about the descriptive traits. Mikkola argues that this model is of use to feminist theorizing because it accords with common sense views about sex, gender and the relationship between them whereas the conventionalist, abolitionist view contravenes common sense and potentially alienates women from feminist politics.

Finally, in “Metaphors of Being a  $\phi$ ”, Marilyn Frye develops a neo-Wittgensteinian understanding of the category WOMEN that draws on the metaphor of family resemblances. Frye explores several ways of thinking about categories, and ways of expressing categorical membership. Underscoring the importance of metaphor in philosophical writing, Frye suggests several ways of understanding the notion of family resemblances. Drawing on the biological undertones of the notion of family resemblances, Frye uses the philosopher of biology John Dupre’s understanding of biological species (as densities in observable correlations of properties) to explain her idea of “artificial natural kinds” as applied to gender. Frye suggests that we can think of social categories (like gender) as “socially produced species” where we understand an artificial natural kind in a manner analogous to Dupre’s natural kind i.e., as a pattern in the behavior and appearance of human beings that supports predictions and expectations. Frye’s chapter is an example of feminist metaphysics both in its subject matter, and in its methodology since she is engaged in developing new metaphors to express social categories, and to facilitate the expression of a feminist metaphysical perspective.

The chapters in *Part II: Persons and Subjectivity* address several topics concerning persons and the character of subjectivity. In her chapter “The Metaphysics of

Relational Autonomy” Jules Holroyd raises the question of the connection between feminist relational accounts of autonomy and traditional compatibilist and incompatibilist positions on free will and determinism. This chapter demonstrates the influence that feminist scholarship can have on traditional metaphysical debates. But it also enriches feminist work on relational autonomy by suggesting its implications for, and connections with, the topic of free will and determinism. In its focus on the issue of the connection between feminist inspired accounts of relational autonomy and traditional questions of free will and determinism Holroyd’s work exemplifies the subject matter conception of feminist metaphysics.

In “Beauvoir and the Allure of Self-Objectification” Nancy Bauer discusses the nuanced account of objectification found in Beauvoir in relation to contemporary practices of sexual objectification. According to Bauer, one of Beauvoir’s central insights is the extent to which women participate in their own objectification, and for this reason, the attainment of subjectivity is always an unstable process rather than a fixed accomplishment. Bauer underlines the importance of Beauvoir’s phenomenology of sex and gender for an adequate understanding of our gendered lives. Since sexual objectification is a central topic in feminist theory, Bauer’s chapter clearly exemplifies the subject matter conception of feminist metaphysics. But, since the chapter also suggests the significance of phenomenology as an approach to the issue of sexual objectification, it also satisfies the methodology definition of feminist metaphysics.

Sara Heinämaa’s contribution, “A Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Types, Styles and Persons” also falls between the poles of the feminist metaphysics spectrum. In her chapter Heinämaa develops a phenomenological account of gendered types and gendered subjectivities using, but also extending, Husserl’s methodology. So, Heinämaa is recommending a typological understanding of gender difference and a phenomenological approach to gendered subjectivity, which is to say that both her subject matter and her perspective exemplify feminist metaphysics.

In *Part III: Power, Ideology and Reality* several chapters address (from different directions) a difficulty that has been implicit in my proposed definition of feminist metaphysics. The difficulty is that once we acknowledge or allow that considerations of theoretical relevance or political utility influence our choice and framing of metaphysical questions or the methods we use to discuss them, then it seems as if there is an intractable problem facing the feminist project. It is a problem that arises once the contextual features of feminist metaphysics are highlighted in relation to the feminist project of ideology critique. If feminist metaphysics, either in the questions it poses or in its perspective, is shaped by, and responsive to, the requirements of feminist theory or politics, then there seems to be no reason for anyone who does not share that perspective to be persuaded by the results or for the results to provide a secure basis for ideology critique. Notice that this is a problem for both conceptions of feminist metaphysics. For it makes no difference whether feminist ideology inspires one’s choice of topic of metaphysical inquiry, or how one goes about the investigation; in either case it is a real question how or why someone not motivated by feminist concerns might be convinced of the importance of feminist topics or feminist methodology, or of the truth of the resulting theories or claims.

In her chapter “The Politics and the Metaphysics of Experience” Marianne Janack explores this dilemma by contrasting what she calls the “Romantic” and the “Kuhnian” model of experience. According to the Romantic model, experience gives us “authentic, reliable first hand knowledge”; in contrast, the Kuhnian model emphasizes that all experience is theory-dependent. Janack notes that the Kuhnian model, according to which experience is theory-dependent, is the prevalent view of experience among feminist theorists of all kinds. But this model of experience as occurring in a closed loop with theory does not seem to allow for the kinds of appeal to authoritative experience we find in feminist theory, and, more importantly, it seems to preclude our ability to persuade others to accept the presumably superior political worldview of feminism. In response to this dilemma, Janack proposes an agentic model of experience, which is neither wholly in the head nor wholly determined by an individual’s conceptual framework. Instead, Janack’s theory conceives of experience as derived from practical agency in which agents are not transcendental subjects but rather absorbed in meaningful engagement with the world and its furniture.

In “Ideology, Generics and Common Ground” Sally Haslanger explores the relationship between ideology and social structures in relation to the meaning of generic statements like: “Women are submissive (nurturing, cooperative)” or “Blacks are violent (criminal, dangerous)”. Haslanger argues that these statements (like some other generics) seem to presuppose that there is something about the group itself (or intrinsic to its members) that makes it true. Part of the role of ideology critique is to uncover the presuppositions that form part of the common ground of communication. There are many strategies for ideology critique to follow, however, including the creation of new narratives that can become part of the common ground that conditions our communication with one another.

Finally, in “Experience and Knowledge: The Case of Sexual Abuse Memories” Linda Alcoff develops a complex account of the relationship among memory, experience, political and historical context, and truth. The example of sexual abuse memories is conceptually rich and provocative because of the social, political and historical context within which it developed. In her reflections on Ian Hacking’s discussion of memory and abuse, Alcoff endorses certain elements of Hacking’s Foucauldian framework while at the same time insisting on the importance of questions of truth. Alcoff’s useful discussion of the context of the case of sexual abuse memories illustrates the difficulties and complexities facing feminist critique, which seeks to balance attention to ideology and power relations, on the one hand, and attention to truth, on the other.

In the end I think that the subject matter conception of feminist metaphysics and the methodological conception converge in one important respect. Both perspectives raise issues concerning the relationship among metaphysical questions, how and why we ask them, ideological perspectives, how and why we occupy them, and truth. These are important questions and issues for feminist metaphysicians to address, but they are also important questions for all metaphysicians to consider. In making these topics philosophically salient and visible, feminist metaphysicians are contributing new kinds of questions to a very old and venerable tradition.

It has been a pleasure assembling the chapters collected in this volume. It was an additional pleasure to feel confident that the time for justifying the existence of something called “feminist metaphysics” has passed, and that my introduction could simply focus on different ways of conceiving of the field. The best introduction to the field is not here, however, but in the essays themselves.

**Acknowledgements** I would like to thank Sarah Conly and Mark Okrent for their helpful comments and suggestions.

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**Part I**  
**The Ontology of Sex and Gender**



## Chapter 2

# What Is Gender Essentialism?

Charlotte Witt

**Abstract** In this chapter I distinguish among different theories of gender essentialism and sketch out a taxonomy of gender essentialisms. I focus primarily on the difference between essentialism about a kind and essentialism about an individual. I propose that there is an interesting and useful form of gender essentialism that pertains to social individuals. And I argue that this form of gender essentialism, which I call *uniessentialism*, is not vulnerable to standard, feminist criticisms of gender essentialism.

But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations. (Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, VI)

The only dependable test for gender is the truth of a person's life, the lives we live each day. (Jennifer Finney Boylan, *The XY Games*, The New York Times, 8/03/08)

The feminist debate between gender essentialists and anti-essentialists is a deep and enduring one that ranges over broad topics in metaphysics and epistemology, including realism vs. nominalism, nature vs. nurture, individualistic vs. relational conceptions of the self, and individualistic conceptions of the knowing self (and of knowledge) vs. historical and social conceptions of the knowing self (and of knowledge). It seems to me, however, that it is often unclear what notion of essentialism undergirds these debates. One purpose of this chapter is to sketch out a taxonomy of essentialisms in order to clarify what might be at stake in the debate between gender essentialists and anti-essentialists. My second purpose here is to outline a concept of essentialism that I think both survives the standard feminist criticisms of gender essentialism and has potential value for feminist theory. The concept I have in mind (which I call *uniessentialism*) has its roots in Aristotle's metaphysics, but it is fully compatible with a historical and social understanding of gendered individuals.

Uniessentialism is a theory about the unity of individuals, and it holds that individuals are unified and exist as individuals (as opposed to being a heap of parts) by virtue of their essences. For example, a house exists as an individual (as opposed to

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a jumble of house parts) because its parts are organized in a way that realizes the functional essence of a house. The very same house parts stacked at Lowe's lack the uniessence of a house; they are, collectively, a heap and not an individual. Organisms are individuals because their parts realize a functional essence that unifies them into an individual over and above the parts. Analogously, we can think of an individual's gender as providing a normative principle that unifies all that individual's social roles at a time or over time. A social role is itself a set of norms that attach to a social position; for example, an individual who is a mother (social position) ought to care for her children (norm or social role). Unlike the case of the artifact or the biological organism, in the case of social individuals (us) what is organized by gender is our practical agency and the norms that govern it. In *The Metaphysics of Gender* I argue that our gender provides a principle of normative unity for our lives as social individuals, and our gender is, therefore, uniessential to us. Here I am primarily concerned to distinguish uniessentialism from other concepts of essentialism, and to show that it is not vulnerable to standard feminist arguments against gender essentialism.

The idea that gender is uniessential to social individuals is useful for feminism for several reasons. First, and foremost, it articulates the central role that gender plays in our social lives, day by day. So, even though it is true that gender norms vary historically and culturally, it is also true (both historically and cross-culturally) that an individual's gender is, at minimum, a central organizing feature of his or her practical agency. Gender uniessentialism expresses the centrality of our gender in our daily lives and social agency without positing an unchanging, ahistorical, universal essence of womanhood (and manliness) hovering over our heads and tying our hands. In order to begin to make a case for this idea, however, it is necessary to differentiate uniessentialism about gender from other theories of gender essentialism. That is my project here.

I begin by distinguishing between kind and individual essentialism. Essentialism about a kind holds that there is a property or properties definitive of membership in that kind. Essentialism about an individual holds that there is a property or properties that make that individual the individual it is. Here I focus on individual essentialism applied to gender. A further distinction is required, however, to sort out different versions of individual essentialism, namely, to distinguish Aristotle's unification essentialism from Kripke's identity essentialism.

Following my preliminary taxonomy of essentialisms, I focus on uniessentialism. I explain how and why I use uniessentialism to express gender essentialism. I then revisit identity essentialism, and consider the way some philosophers use it to discuss gender (and race) essentialism. The purpose of this section is to clarify the differences between uniessentialism and identity essentialism in relation to the topic of gender essentialism.

Finally, it is useful to round out my taxonomy of essentialisms by considering Locke's distinction between nominal and real essences. Feminist debate concerning essentialism frequently turns on disagreement between gender realists and gender nominalists, and the concepts framing this debate originate with Locke. Some feminists have argued for adopting a theory of nominal essences about gender (Fuss 5;

de Lauretis 3). Others are gender realists (Haslanger; Zack, “*Inclusive*”; Alcoff). As it turns out, however, the realism/nominalism debate among feminists is tangential to my focus here as it concerns the basis for membership in gender kinds.

## A Brief Taxonomy of Essentialisms

Traditionally the notion of essence has had two different applications. First, we can think about essences in relation to kinds, and we can ask whether or not a collection of individuals constitutes a kind that is defined by a common and unique property (or properties). An essence in this sense is a property that determines kind membership.<sup>1</sup> In addition, some theories add the requirement that essential properties have causal or explanatory power.<sup>2</sup> Kinds defined by properties that meet the second requirement are sometimes called “natural kinds” because standard examples of natural kinds include biological species and material substances like water.<sup>3</sup> For convenience, let us call essentialism about kinds and the criteria for kind membership, *kind essentialism*.

Many feminists deny that women (and men) are kinds whose members share a defining property, and they reject gender essentialism understood as a claim about kind membership.<sup>4</sup> In other words, they reject gender realism. Since women (and men) form social kinds or groups, not natural kinds, their membership cannot be defined by a shared property. This argument assumes that only membership in natural kinds (like biological species) could be defined by a common property because only natural kinds are stable and homogenous. In contrast, the features that characterize women (and men) vary over time and across different cultures and, as a result, there are no features that are common to all women (or to all men). Finally, as Elizabeth Spelman argues in *Inessential Woman*, there is also variation within a single culture due to the intersection of gender with other social identities, like race or class. So, even within one culture, there is no possibility of a shared feature or features common to all women or to all men that could determine kind membership.<sup>5</sup> Those who would advocate gender essentialism (understood as kind essentialism)

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<sup>1</sup>I differentiate here among collections—e.g., the objects in my garage—that are arbitrary groupings of things; kinds—e.g., red things—that are groupings based on a property that defines its members; and natural kinds—e.g. biological species—that are kinds based on a non-arbitrary, explanatory or causal property. These are not uncontroversial distinctions but as I am not developing a theory of kind essentialism, they are not central to my purpose, and I won’t say more about them.

<sup>2</sup>Nominal essences, which I discuss at the end of this chapter, do not have causal or explanatory power.

<sup>3</sup>John Dupre is critical of the view that biological species are natural kinds in *The Disorder of Things: Metaphysical Foundations of the Disunity of Science*.

<sup>4</sup>For a discussion of the main arguments against gender essentialism see my “Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Theory.”

<sup>5</sup>The second feature of essential properties, their causal or explanatory role, is not central to feminist criticisms of gender essentialism. Since anti-essentialist feminists tend to argue against the

mistake what is social and variable for what is natural and fixed. I call this the core argument against gender essentialism (“Anti-Essentialism” 324). Further, given the variability of women, kind essentialism will necessarily marginalize and exclude some women by defining kind membership using properties that they do not have. I call this the exclusion argument against gender essentialism (“Anti-Essentialism” 327). I return to these criticisms below, after introducing a second notion of essence.

A second notion of essence is that of a property or characteristic that makes an individual the individual that it is. An essence in this sense is a special kind of property of an individual; the property is necessary, or it tells us what the individual is fundamentally.<sup>6</sup> Let us call this type of essentialism, *individual essentialism*. The question of what makes an individual the individual it is can be understood in at least two ways, and the two interpretations yield slightly different theories of individual essentialism.

The first way, which yields a view I call *unification essentialism* (or *uniessentialism*), originates with Aristotle. For Aristotle the question “what is it?” asked of an individual substance expands into a question about the unity and organization of material parts into a new individual. He asks: Why do these materials constitute a house? And the answer is that they realize the functional property that defines being a house, which is to shelter humans and animals. Being a shelter for humans and animals is what makes these materials a house rather than a heap of stuff or a sum of parts. The house’s functional property explains why a new, unified individual exists at all.

The second interpretation, which yields a view I call *identity essentialism*, is associated with Kripke. For Kripke the question—What makes an individual be the individual it is?—concerns the identity of the individual. What makes this lectern the very individual it is (as opposed to some other lectern)? One answer is that it must be made from the very materials from which it, in fact, originated. If it had originated from a different piece of wood, then it would not be this very lectern. Its origins are a necessary property of the lectern (“Identity”). Notice that its material origins are not an essential property of the house on the Aristotelian (or unification) understanding of essential property. Hence there is reason to think that these are two different theories of individual essentialism in the sense that they respond to different questions about individuals. Aristotle explains why a new individual exists at all over and above the sum of its material constituents or parts. In contrast, Kripke begins with an existing individual and asks about which of that individual’s properties are necessary to be that very individual.<sup>7</sup>

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claim that there is any property common to all women, this condition will receive most of my attention in what follows.

<sup>6</sup>For a discussion of the difference between a modal conception of essentialism, in which the notion of a necessary property is basic, and a conception of essence that answers the question “what is it?” see Fine.

<sup>7</sup>Although individual essentialism is less prominent in feminist discussions than kind essentialism, there is reason to think that many feminists would reject it as well (Alcoff; Butler). One objection might be that it runs counter to the correct view of the self as a subject that chooses,

Let me now return to the core argument and the exclusion argument against gender essentialism. My response to them here will be brief<sup>8</sup>: Neither the core argument nor the exclusion argument establish their conclusions. Let's begin with the core argument. The fact that an individual, institution or kind has a social origin or social definition does not in and of itself rule out essentialism about that individual, institution or kind. Think of Aristotle's house or Kripke's lectern: the fact that they are artifacts does not rule out *ipso facto* that they might have essential properties. The core argument does not—in itself—establish anti-essentialism about gender.

The exclusion argument targets kind essentialism about gender because it holds that the properties proposed to define membership in gender kinds necessarily exclude some women and some men. My response is twofold. First, individual and kind essentialism are, in principle, independent of one another, and so the conclusion of the exclusion argument, even if true, does not apply to individual essentialism, which is my focus. Second, the exclusion argument needs to be supplemented by some other theoretical notion, like that of intersectionality, in order to tell against kind essentialism about gender. Without a theory that shows exclusion to be the inevitable result of attempts to define membership in gender kinds, the exclusion argument works in a cautionary fashion to warn against hasty generalization or over-generalization. If that is right, then the exclusion argument—by itself—does not establish anti-essentialism (or anti-realism) about gender kinds.<sup>9</sup>

As Natalie Stoljar points out, individual and kind essentialism are often not clearly distinguished by feminists who argue against gender essentialism (261). And, as we have just seen, most feminist criticisms of gender essentialism are directed against kind essentialism (or gender realism). My interest in individual essentialism has several sources. First, because individual gender essentialism is relatively unexplored territory, it is still possible to say something interesting and useful about it. But another, more significant, reason for my focus is that individual essentialism seems to express the centrality of gender in our lived experiences. Kind essentialism expresses the powerful political idea that I share something in common with all other women, and provides a basis for political solidarity. But individual essentialism expresses the equally compelling idea that my gender is constitutive of my being the social individual that I am. In my experience most women and

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negotiates, rejects, or performs identities like gender. On this view, nothing *makes* the individual man or woman the individual that he or she is, because the identities and self-understandings that make up our social selves are chosen, negotiated, performed, rejected and so on. Those who would advocate gender essentialism according to the second notion, therefore, are mistaking subjects or selves for objects or things—with serious consequences for the possibility of women's agency (including their political activity), women's autonomy, and women's freedom (Alcoff; Butler). I call this the ontological argument against individual essentialism about gender because mistaking self-determining subjects or agents for causally determined objects is an ontological error. I argue in *The Metaphysics of Gender* that this objection fails.

<sup>8</sup>For a more detailed consideration of these arguments against gender essentialism, see my "Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Theory."

<sup>9</sup>For an argument along similar lines see Mari Mikkola's "Elizabeth Spelman, Gender Realism and Women."

most men think it is simply obvious that their gender is inextricably interwoven in their social existences and identities. This intuition deserves exploration by feminists even though it is not clear what it means or perhaps *because* it is not clear what it means. Finally, it is individual essentialism, rather than kind essentialism, that intersects with questions of agency, and the issue of agency is central to feminist theory.

I use an Aristotelian model to express uniessentialism; the essence is the cause of being of the individual (“Substance”). More precisely, its essence causes these materials or parts to constitute a new individual substance rather than a mere pile of stuff or collection of parts. The numerous social positions that we occupy are systematically unified by our gender; hence, our gender is uniessential to us as social beings. The unity of social agents is not a relationship among material parts; it is a relationship of normative unity among our various social position occupancies. There is much more to say about the concept of normative unity, and I discuss it in some detail in *The Metaphysics of Gender*. Here, I limit my focus to describing my model for uniessentialism and explaining how it applies to gender.

I think that individual and kind essentialism are conceptually independent of one another. On many accounts of “Aristotelian essentialism”, however, the species form (e.g., for humans the property of rationality) is both common to all members of the species *and* essential to the existence of each individual (Spelman; Stoljar, “Essence”; Alcoff). This is not my interpretation of Aristotle’s theory of form and essence, but it is a common and traditional understanding of his view. So, in at least one important example, the two essentialisms are intertwined. If kind and individual essentialism were always related in this way, then there would only be one view to discuss in which the essence is both a universal species form and the cause of being of individuals. But if, as I argue below, individual essentialism and kind essentialism are conceptually independent of one another, and respond to different philosophical issues, then I will not need to defend kind essentialism about gender in order to make my case for individual essentialism.<sup>10</sup>

Individual essentialism, as I have just explained, comes in at least two varieties. Unification essentialism asks why a new, unified individual exists over and above a sum of parts or materials. Identity essentialism asks about which properties an individual must have in order to be that very individual, the same individual. Kind essentialism, in contrast, is a view about what property or properties an individual must have in order to be a member of a given kind. What is the relationship between individual and kind essentialism? I will argue that the two essentialisms are—in principle—independent of one another. They are independent of one another because they address distinct philosophical questions. This is true of both varieties of individual essentialism. Let us focus first on the difference between unification essentialism and kind essentialism.

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<sup>10</sup>I distinguish the two essentialisms in order to define my project not out of a belief that kind essentialism about gender is mistaken.

To see that unification and kind essentialism are—in principle—conceptually independent of one another let us consider the example of a biological organism. We can ask two very different questions about it. First, what makes the organism an individual? An organism, like an animal or a cell, is a composite of many individual parts, and yet it is also an individual itself, not just a collection or sum of individuals. What is it that orders or organizes the individual parts so that they compose a unified individual? It seems that an adequate answer to this question must be a relational property that orders all of the individual parts into a functional unity, and that functional unity is an individual organism. The relational property is the uniessence of the organism; it is by virtue of realizing a particular function that the parts of an organism are unified into an individual. Its function is uniessential to the organism.

A different question is whether or not animals (i.e., individual organisms) should be grouped into species understood as natural kinds and, if they should, what the basis is for these groupings. This is to raise the issue of kind essentialism with respect to animals. But the question of kind essentialism assumes that individual animals (i.e., organisms) exist, and therefore it is raising a different question from the one addressed by unification essentialism. Maybe animals should be grouped into natural kinds? But maybe they should be understood to form populations rather than natural kinds? Maybe species are individuals and their members (i.e., organisms) are parts of the individual? Questions like these are conceptually independent of the question of why an organism is an individual.<sup>11</sup>

I have used the example of biological organisms to illustrate the different questions raised by unification and kind essentialism and to show that they are conceptually independent of one another—at least in principle. We can draw a parallel distinction with regard to gender essentialism. The property or properties (if there are any) that are shared by all men or by all women and form the basis of gender kinds need not be uniessential to individual men or individual women. For example, it could be the case that the basis for grouping women as a class or kind is that they are recognized to have a certain reproductive function, and yet it not be the case that any individual woman is a unified individual because of her gender. Aristotle differentiated between men and women (the male and the female) because of their different reproductive functions, but he did not think that either men or women were individuals because of their reproductive functions. Rather, he thought that both men and women were constituted as individuals by virtue of the presence of human soul (conceived of functionally) in their bodies. The human soul (conceived of functionally) is uniessential to both individual men and individual women; but men (as a kind) are defined in terms of the male reproductive function, and women (as a kind) are defined in terms of the female reproductive function. Because unification and

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<sup>11</sup>For a good discussion of the ontological status of species, see Marc Ereshefsky's article "Species" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

kind essentialism address different questions it is possible to develop an argument for unification gender essentialism that does not include an argument for kind gender essentialism.<sup>12</sup>

## Uniessentialism and Gender

I am interested in the question of whether our gender (being a man, being a woman) is essential to us as social individuals.<sup>13</sup> In order to explore this issue I use an Aristotelian model to express gender essentialism. For Aristotle the essence is the cause of being of the individual whose essence it is. Both artifacts and biological organisms have material parts that are organized into an individual that is not identical to the sum of its material parts. In both cases we can ask why the material parts constitute a new individual rather than a heap or a collection of parts. Hence, both artifacts and biological organisms have essences in that they both have a principle that explains their existence as individuals. Artifacts and biological individuals are also similar because the principle that explains their existence as individuals is a functional essence. A functional essence is an essential property that explains what the individual is for, what its purpose is and that organizes the parts towards that end. Of course, the origin of the purpose differs in the case of artifacts and natural beings. For artifacts the purpose has an external origin in the intentions and purposes of human beings, whereas the purposes of biological individuals are intrinsic to the organism.

It is important to be clear that the question of why a sum of parts makes up a new individual is not a causal question. To use Aristotle's idiolect, it is important to distinguish between the cause of being (ontological question) and the cause of becoming (causal question). One could ask, for example, about how a house is constructed out of building materials where that would be a question about the process of pouring concrete, building a frame, etc. This is a causal question where the answer specifies the causal factors that produce an individual artifact (or an individual organism). The ontological question is not about the process of generation; rather it focuses upon the existence of an individual, which is not simply the sum of its parts. What explains the existence of an individual? What accounts for the fact that it is an individual?

Here is the Aristotelian model exemplified by an artifact, a house. A sum of material parts that realizes the functional property or properties of a house is a house, and its house functional property is essential to the house. The functional properties of a house unify the building materials (or parts) into a new individual, a house. It is

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<sup>12</sup>It is also possible to show that identity essentialism is different from kind essentialism, but I will not pursue that issue here.

<sup>13</sup>For simplicity I refer in what follows to women and men, but I think that the framework I develop could accommodate a third gender if that gender plays an analogous role in the social agency of some individuals as being a man or being a woman does to others. Transgendered individuals, for example, could have their social role occupancies organized by their being transgendered; being transgendered could be the principle of normative unity that unites their social roles and positions.

because these bricks and boards (or these windows and doors) realize the function of providing shelter to humans and animals that an individual house exists. If the very same parts were scattered across a junkyard (or neatly arranged at Lowe's), then they would not realize the house function (providing shelter, etc.) and a house would not exist. Its house functional properties are uniessential to the individual house. The essence explains why a collection of parts are unified into a new individual.

Uniessentialism is not kind essentialism. The two theories address different questions or problems, and the issues or problems are, in principle, independent of one another. Uniessentialism explains why an individual exists rather than a heap. For instance, the house functional properties explain why certain materials are an individual house rather than a mere jumble (or some other artifact). Absent the house functional properties, we would not have an individual; we would have a collection of building materials. In parallel fashion we can ask about why an individual organism exists, e.g., a human being, rather than a collection of body parts (heart, lung, brain). The question of whether, and on what basis, artifacts like houses and natural beings, like organisms, are kinds is—in principle—a conceptually independent question. It may turn out, for example, that biological species are not natural kinds, and that kind essentialism does not hold of biological species, but that finding is—in principle—conceptually independent of the truth of uniessentialism applied to organisms.<sup>14</sup>

Uniessentialism is also not identity essentialism. Although the functional essence of the house explains why an individual exists (over and above its parts), it does not thereby secure its particular identity. As far as its function goes, it is just like the house next door. In contrast, identity essentialism asks what makes this individual the very individual it is. In order to be this very individual, a house must be made from the materials actually used to construct it. A human being must originate from the very sperm and egg from which she actually did originate; a lectern must be made from the very wood from which it was, in fact, made. Identity essentialism is also—in principle—independent from kind essentialism because it need not broach the question of artifactual or biological kinds in its investigation of individual identity.

Notice that the uniessential properties of the house are functional properties that are realized in and by its material parts. Functional properties are relational rather than intrinsic properties. A window serves its function in relation to the house as a whole and its other components. Also, the functional properties of artifacts are always enmeshed in a broad social context of use. A house has the function of providing shelter, true, but that function is embedded in various social practices (e.g., architecture), social structures (e.g., patriarchal households) and other conditions. And finally, functional properties have a normative dimension because the function specifies what that object *ought* to do, and not simply what it does. A house with

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<sup>14</sup>In *The Disorder of Things* John Dupre argues that biological species are not natural kinds. And Eliot Sober in "Evolution, Population Thinking and Essentialism" argues that population thinking has replaced the notion of species in contemporary biology.

a leaky roof is a house, even if it is nonfunctional in relation to its essential task of providing shelter. Because functional properties are normative, it is possible for an individual to have a function that it cannot or does not perform. A house that was flooded by Hurricane Katrina is a house even though it does not (and perhaps cannot) perform its function.

Turning to the application of Aristotle's model to gender: A social individual (or agent) occupies many social positions simultaneously (and many more diachronically), but its gender unifies the sum of social position occupancies into a new social individual. Its gender (being a man, being a woman) is unessential to the social individual. It is worthwhile pausing here to provide a preliminary clarification of two important features of my application of unification essentialism to gender: (1) the claim that gender is essential to social individuals and (2) the unifying role of gender.

My application of the Aristotelian model to gender uses the notion of a social individual, and it is reasonable to wonder exactly what a social individual is. In *The Metaphysics of Gender* I distinguish social individuals from both human organisms and persons. Persons are the individuals who are the loci of rights and responsibilities, who have autonomy, the first person perspective or whatever other feature defines ethical subjects (Baker, "Bodies"; Friedman). By human organisms I mean individuals who are members of the human species, who realize the human genotype or satisfy whatever other criteria are proposed to define membership in the human species. Not every member of the human species is a person (e.g., a baby), and, conversely, there could be persons who are not members of the human species (Baker, "Persons"). Social individuals are those individuals who occupy social positions—indeed, multiple social positions—both synchronically and diachronically. Social individuals differ from human organisms because their actions are bound by social normativity, which is different from biological normativity in two respects. First, social norms are not species-based: they are flexible and variable and differ from culture to culture. Second, the normativity of social normativity requires the recognition by others that an individual is obligated to obey or fulfill the norm. Social individuals differ from persons in that they are necessarily embodied and necessarily exist in a web of social relations.

Let us now consider the second point in need of clarification. In the case of an artifact, the functional essence unifies the material parts into an individual. It is because the building materials are unified and organized so as to realize the property of being a shelter for humans that an individual house exists. But what does the gender functional essence unify in order to constitute a social individual? And what notion of unity is relevant? At any given moment, a social individual occupies multiple roles—professor, parent, etc.—and the question is what unites those social position occupancies so that a social individual exists? How are they unified and organized? A bundle of social position occupancies is not an individual, just as a heap of house parts is not an individual house. Just as the function of providing shelter unifies that heap of boards, nails, etc. into a house, gender is a pervasive and fundamental social position that unifies and determines all our other social positions both synchronically and diachronically. It unifies them not physically, but by providing a principle of normative unity. It is as a woman that I am a parent or a professor

(or whatever the full range of my social roles might be at the moment or over time). Of course, there is much more to be said about normative unity and whether there is a single principle of normative unity or many principles, and I discuss these issues in *The Metaphysics of Gender*.

In this essay, however, I am simply interested in describing unification essentialism applied to gender and distinguishing it from other ways of expressing gender essentialism. I will not give any reason or argument to believe that gender essentialism is true or even plausible. Rather, my goal is to introduce the Aristotelian model as a way of thinking about—or expressing—the unifying role that gender plays in our social lives. In order to continue with the description of unification essentialism and its application to gender, it is useful to contrast it with identity essentialism, and to consider the application of identity essentialism to gender and to race.

## Identity Essentialism and Gender

Identity essentialism is intimately connected with modality; an individual's essential properties are its necessary properties. Moreover, Kripke's views on individual essences are articulated within the semantic framework of a theory of reference for proper names. According to Kripke, proper names do not have meanings or senses, but rather refer directly to individuals. (Both the details of this theory, and its application to kind terms (tiger) and substance terms (water) are beyond the scope of this discussion.) Kripke frames the question of the essences of individuals as follows:

Here is a lectern. A question which has often been raised in philosophy is: What are its essential properties? What properties, aside from trivial ones like self-identity, are such that this object has to have them if it exists at all, are such that if an object did not have it, it would not be this object? (86)

In this text Kripke raises the question of the essential features of individuals, what I call individual essentialism.<sup>15</sup> It is important to see that Kripke is not asking us to imagine what changes an artifact like the lectern could undergo and still persist. Rather than thinking temporally about change, we are to think modally, about possibility and necessity. The properties an object *must* have if it exists at all are the properties that if the object did not have them, it would not be that very object. Kripke classifies the necessary properties of individuals into three sorts: properties of origin (a material object must come from the very hunk of matter it did come from), sortal properties (being a lectern is a necessary property of a lectern), and properties of substance (a material object must be made from the kind of matter it is in fact made from). In another text, Kripke discusses the example of the Queen of England, saying that the necessary property of origin is the very sperm and egg from which, in fact, the Queen originated (Kripke). In biological individuals, the necessity of origins is identified with the original genetic materials, the sperm and egg.

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<sup>15</sup>In "Naming and Necessity" Kripke also discusses the essential features of kinds (like tiger) and stuffs (like water).

As we have just seen, unification essentialism is not formulated using modal notions (possibility, necessity).<sup>16</sup> Further, unlike Kripke's theory, it does not depend upon any particular semantics for those notions or for names and natural kind terms. Unification essentialism is not constructed out of the same theoretical ingredients as Kripke's theory (Witt, "Substance"; Charles). The basic difference, however, concerns what issue the theories address. Unification essentialism asks why a hunk of matter or an assemblage of material parts constitutes an individual. Why does an individual exist at all, over and above a collection of parts? In contrast, Kripke asks of an individual which of its properties it must have in order to be that very individual. What properties must an individual have to be this very individual, the same individual? Although both questions are about individuals and not kinds, they are not the very same questions. For convenience I refer to Kripke's essentialism as identity essentialism because it uses our intuitions concerning the identity of individuals to determine what their essential properties are.

Some philosophers use Kripke's identity essentialism to explore essentialism about race or gender (Appiah; Stoljar, 286; Zack, "Race"). Appiah, for example, explicitly couches his reflections on race, sex and gender in relation to Kripke's theory. Appiah begins by distinguishing between questions of metaphysical or biological identity and questions of ethical identity. Our metaphysical or biological identity is what Kripke was talking about in holding that human beings necessarily come from the very same sperm and egg we actually came from (the necessity of origin applied to biological beings). In this metaphysical/biological context, if I originated from genetic material with XX chromosomes, then, given the necessity of origin, I would not be me unless I was genetically female.<sup>17</sup> We can contrast the biological determinations of female and male with the social roles of being a woman or being a man. It is possible for a biological female to live as a man or a biological male to live as a woman. In relation to this distinction, Appiah introduces the notion of the ethical self. "As many think of them sex—female and male, the biological statuses—and gender—masculine and feminine, the social roles—provide the sharpest model for a distinction between the metaphysical notion of identity that goes with Kripkean theorizing and the notion of identity—the ethical notion—that I am seeking to explore" (77). The ethical self is an individual with projects and a self-conception. In the ethical context, when we ask the question "But would it still be me?", the answer reflects our self-conception as social agents rather than an external metaphysical/scientific truth like the necessity of origin or the biological

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<sup>16</sup>A separate issue is whether or not Aristotle's uniessentialism supports modal claims. It seems to me that it does support contrary-to-fact statements of potentiality or possibility like "If the wooden parts did not have the function of a house, then they would not constitute a house". But the central focus of Aristotle's theory of essence is their explanatory role in the organization and unity of substances and not the relationship between essences and modality. For a contemporary discussion of the difference between Aristotelian essentialism and contemporary modal essentialism see Fine.

<sup>17</sup>Appiah acknowledges that this is an oversimplification of the biological facts. Human sexual identity is determined using several criteria, which do not always line up with one another. For a discussion, see Fausto-Sterling.

determination of sex. Appiah thinks that a change in his gender would usher into existence a new ethical self, whereas a change in his race would not.

I have described Appiah's views in some detail, not so much to take issue with them, but rather to explain that I do not develop individual essentialism about gender along the lines that he pursues. As Appiah sees it, the question of gender essentialism is a question about an individual's ethical or pragmatic self-conception. My approach differs from Appiah's because I do not think that the question of gender essentialism is fundamentally a question about an individual's self-conception. Rather, I believe that our self-conceptions are formed in relation to the social positions that we occupy, and my focus is on the way that our social position occupancies are unified and organized. There is an important, ontological question about the unity of the social individual that is prior to, and independent of, how we understand ourselves. Uniessentialism is a theory that explains how a collection of parts is unified so that a new individual exists, but Appiah's identity approach takes the individual (whether the metaphysical/biological human organism or the ethical self) as a given, and then asks about what conditions must be met to be that very individual.

Finally, let us finish this taxonomy of essentialisms by considering nominal essences. Some feminists argue that Locke's theory of nominal essences provides an account of the meaning of gender terms that is preferable to the Aristotelian approach.<sup>18</sup> For that reason Locke is an important figure in the feminist debates over gender essentialism, and I end my taxonomy of essentialisms with a consideration of his theory in relation to the distinction between individual and kind essentialism.

## Nominal and Real Essences

For Locke, the topic of essence arises in his account of language and, in particular, in his account of how we classify individuals into kinds or species. A nominal essence is an abstract idea that corresponds to the meaning of a general word, like "tiger:" or "water". Linguistic meanings are conventional for Locke and consist of the collection of ideas associated with a word: water is liquid, clear, refreshing, etc. Nominal essences are the general ideas that correspond to the terms that we use for classification. A real essence, in contrast, is the material composition—or minute parts—of an object that causes us to perceive it as we do. Real essences are, in principle, unknowable by us since they are the causes of—but not part of—our perceptual experiences that are recorded in the nominal essence. We know they are there, but, according to Locke, we don't know what they are. We might think of the atomic structure of water as H<sub>2</sub>O as corresponding to Locke's real essence, keeping in mind that he did not think that the material structure was knowable.

Pretty clearly, Locke's theory of nominal essences pertains to kinds and not individuals. The theory is his response to the traditional interpretation of Aristotle's

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<sup>18</sup>In addition to Fuss and deLauretis, mentioned earlier, both Alcoff and Battersby find the nominalist theory of gender essences to be preferable to an Aristotelian approach.

doctrine of species forms that are both essential to individuals and the basis for their kind membership. For Locke, in contrast, the nominal essence is an abstract general idea, which we use to classify individuals. There are, of course, many possible ways to classify individuals, and our minds are actively engaged in forming the abstract general ideas that we use to categorize individuals. Locke's theory of nominal essences is a theory of kind essentialism that does not posit any form or feature of the individual that is both essential to it and the basis for its kind membership. Hence, Locke provides the theoretical framework for those feminists who are gender nominalists.

Natalie Stoljar suggests that there is not a sharp distinction between nominal and real essence for social terms like "woman": "For social concepts, the real essence is constituted by the social features of the world given in the definition of the term" ("Essence" 278). For social terms, in effect, there are only nominal essences. Stoljar is critical of the utility of a nominal essence of "woman" for feminist purposes because a nominal essence introduces a social universal "woman" which ignores the real differences among women of different social classes, races, etc.<sup>19</sup>

The upshot of this very brief discussion of Locke's nominal essences is that they pertain to kind essentialism and not individual essentialism. Following Stoljar's suggestion, we can bracket the issue of real essences (in the Lockean sense) for social kinds. Those feminists who advocate for nominal essentialism about gender are proposing an anti-realist theory of kind essentialism. Since my primary interest here is in individual essentialism, Locke's theory of nominal essences and its value for feminism is tangential to my central focus.

By distinguishing between kind and individual essentialism, I hope to have opened up a new approach to the issue of gender essentialism. The new approach is important in two respects. First, it shifts our attention from the questions of kind membership with its attendant difficulties of inclusion and exclusion to the unifying role that gender plays in our individual lived experiences. This shift in focus from kind to individual simply opens up a new articulation of what might be meant by gender essentialism, however, and considerations in favor of its truth must wait until another occasion.

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# Chapter 3

## Different Women. Gender and the Realism-Nominalism Debate

Natalie Stoljar

**Abstract** Individuals who are women are members of a group, “women,” yet they are also very different from each other. Is there one womanness or many? Realists say that there is one womanness whereas nominalists say that there are many. Although nominalism is the more popular position among feminists, and realism is usually dismissed, Mari Mikkola has recently proposed that gender realism should be treated as a serious metaphysical option. In this chapter I evaluate the arguments for nominalism. I identify five separate arguments and conclude that, although not all of the arguments are successful on their own, the combined effect of the ones that are successful is to make a strong case for gender nominalism. Feminists are right therefore to reject realism and adopt nominalism. At the end of the chapter, I briefly address the question “Why does this debate matter?” If the debate between gender realists and gender nominalists is no more than metaphysical or theoretical bookkeeping, why should feminists care about adopting one side or the other?

### Introduction

It has become commonplace to call oneself a nominalist with respect to race, to indicate that there is no such thing as race, or that, if there is, it is made up by us. For instance, K. Anthony Appiah adopts the “dynamic nominalism” of Ian Hacking to argue for race nominalism.<sup>1</sup> Strangely, it is less commonplace to hear the term used with respect to gender. Elizabeth Spelman, however, is a prominent gender nominalist. In her 1988 book she claimed that “much of Western feminist theory” is committed to gender realism, a Platonic conception of universal womanness, the position that particular women are “instantiations of [a] single, non-physical, and unchanging Form” (2). Spelman’s book critiqued this implausible position. Since 1988 the pendulum has perhaps swung the other way. Mari Mikkola claims that

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<sup>1</sup>For an extended discussion of race nominalism, see Sundstrom.

“gender realism is considered to be something that feminist philosophers should not endorse or even consider as a viable option” (78).<sup>2</sup> She has elaborated a detailed response to Spelman’s critique of realism which acknowledges the variation among individuals who are women yet claims that Spelman’s case for nominalism is unsuccessful. Mikkola proposes that Spelman’s arguments leave open the possibility of gender realism, albeit a more nuanced gender realism than one relying on Platonic Forms.

In this chapter I explain and defend a version of gender nominalism that I call *resemblance nominalism*. The word “nominalism” can be used to deny the existence of the social category in question, that is, to deny the existence of race, or gender. I am using “nominalism” in a sense that need not deny the existence of gender categories. “Nominalism” is the rejection of a universal—the rejection of a metaphysical position that posits a universal *womanness* to explain how the class “woman” is unified. The main goal of the chapter is to identify and explicate five arguments for gender nominalism in this sense. Not all of the arguments are successful, as I explain. However, the combined effect of the ones that are successful is to make a strong case for gender nominalism and against its contrary, gender realism.

Let us make a preliminary distinction between different kinds of groups. First, there are genuine classes—the groups of individuals that D.M. Armstrong calls “types” whose members are similar to each other (*Universals* 1–13). These individuals share a property that is attributed to them based on qualitative resemblances; so, for example, the individuals in the class of electrons share the property of “being an electron,” and the individuals in the class of pea green things share the property of “being pea green.” Secondly, there are gerrymandered or heterogeneous classes, for instance, the class consisting of a tortoiseshell cat, a fountain pen, and a teapot. This class of objects may have a property in common, but it is “miscellaneously disjunctive” and is not based on qualitative resemblances among the objects in the class (Lewis 59). Properties of the former sort are candidates for universals, whereas properties of the latter sort are not.

Proponents of universals think that the resemblances among members of a type are explained by the presence of a universal that all members of the type share. So, for example, to say that electrons all have the property of “being an electron” corresponds to the metaphysical claim that each individual electron instantiates the same, numerically identical, universal of being an electron. Nominalists also admit the existence of types but offer different criteria to explain them. One version of nominalism is *resemblance nominalism*: “it is not that scarlet things resemble one another because they are scarlet, but what makes them scarlet is that they resemble one another” (Rodríguez-Pereyra). Resemblance on this view is “fundamental and

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<sup>2</sup>Sally Haslanger says that “nominalism” and “skepticism” are “by far the preferred positions” in feminist theory (“Feminism in metaphysics” 117). She defines nominalism as “maintaining that the basis of being a type is non-objective, i.e., dependent on us” (“Feminism in metaphysics” 117). This definition of “nominalism” has a different emphasis from the one that I will be adopting here (see below).

primitive” (Rodriguez-Pereyra). Because nominalists say that there are no universals, they have a simple argument for gender nominalism at their disposal: there are no universals, and hence there are no gender universals. For the purposes of this discussion, I will not be siding with nominalism; rather I will be assuming for the sake of argument that there *are* universals.<sup>3</sup> Neither will I be siding with philosophers who claim that, if universals exist, they correspond to “perfectly natural” properties only—properties that are qualitatively similar to each other *and* “carve [nature] at the joints” (Lewis 60). These philosophers also have a simple argument for gender nominalism at their disposal: since “being a woman” is not a perfectly natural property, it does not correspond to a universal.

For the sake of the argument here, I adopt the position that there are many categories that are good candidates to be universals: for example, the class of human beings, of scarlet things, of pieces of gold. It is important to notice that, among the classes, there are differences of degree. The class of electrons is highly unified; the class of colored things is moderately heterogeneous; gerrymandered classes are not unified at all. Is the class of women highly unified, is it closer to a gerrymandered class, or is it somewhere in the middle? My answer is that it is somewhere in the middle: it is heterogeneous enough to raise doubts about whether “being a woman” is a universal. But it is not an extremely gerrymandered class in which there are no substantive similarities among the members. As I explain in section “The Argument from Complexity”, *resemblance* is important for the class “woman,” but *sameness* is not.

The first five sections of this chapter identify and examine five different arguments for gender nominalism: the arguments from *social construction*, *diversity*, *nonseparability*, *particularity* and *complexity*. The last section on complexity also describes the resemblance nominalist position. My task in this chapter is different from that of Mikkola. She follows a modest strategy, namely to open up a position in logical space for gender realism; for her it is enough to show that the various arguments offered by Spelman do not either “rule out” realism or entail nominalism (e.g., Mikkola 87). I acknowledge that both realism and nominalism are possible positions in logical space, but I claim that, on balance, the arguments favor nominalism over realism. At the end of the chapter, I briefly address the question “Why does this debate matter?” The question is an instance of a broader question, namely: why does metaphysics—or the position one takes in metaphysics—matter for feminist politics? If the debate between gender realists and gender nominalists is no more than metaphysical or theoretical bookkeeping, why should feminists care about adopting one side or the other?

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<sup>3</sup>The realism-nominalism debate should be distinguished from a closely related debate in feminist theory over *essentialism* and *anti-essentialism*. Essentialism in feminist theory is often taken to be the Platonic idea mentioned above, namely that members of the class woman have a common *nature* that both binds them into a class and is essential to their individual identity. The main focus of this chapter is on the question of how to unify the class “woman,” not on the question of the essential properties of the individuals within the class. For further explanation, see Stoljar, “Essence, Identity” and Stoljar, “The Politics of Identity.”

## The Argument from Social Construction

In this section I explore an argument for gender nominalism that many theorists writing on gender *take* to be successful. Gender and race were once thought of as “natural” categories of reality. Now it is standard to think that gender and race are social, that we in some sense “make them up” rather than find them already-formed in the world (Hacking). The move from natural to made-up categories is thought to correspond to the move to nominalism. Spelman writes:

If we can say with de Beauvoir that societies create women out of females (making gender out of sex) and that different societies do this differently, indeed in part define their differences by how they do this, we can say in an important sense that there is a variety of genders. . . gender is constructed and defined in conjunction with elements of identity such as race, class, ethnicity and nationality. . . (174–5)

I will suggest that the *argument from social construction* relies on an equivocation in the notion of “realism.” “Realism” about a property has often been the claim that the property exists in the physical, or natural, world. Color realism, for example, is the claim that there is some physical property that constitutes what it is to be scarlet, or ochre, or pea green. The class of pea green things, therefore, is the class of things that have this physical property. One version of color realism is that the property is an intrinsic property of the things that are colored; it is not, for example, a dispositional (though real) property of bringing about color experiences in human observers. The intrinsic property of being pea green (or of being some other color) may be understood as a *universal*, the numerically identical property of pea greenness that all pea green things share. Realism in a second sense, namely that color is a universal, has been thought to accompany realism in the first sense that color is a physical, intrinsic property.

There is a notion of gender realism that is parallel to realism in the first sense: *being a woman is a natural, or biological, intrinsic property of an individual*. As a result of this view, women were taken to be females who have (in virtue of being female) certain natural aptitudes, such as those for nurturing or intuitive reasoning, and normative corollaries about women’s different or inferior social status were thought to be legitimate. This was both a metaphysical and a normative mistake—the result of projecting “natural,” intrinsic properties that do not exist onto the world—and theorists have proposed two alternatives to correct such mistakes. Writers on race have often adopted the first option, “eliminativism,” the position that there is no such thing as race (cf. Mallon, “Race”). Feminist writers, however, have adopted the second option, the position that “woman” is not natural or biological but rather socially constructed. Gender is characterized as a function of the social roles, ascriptions and attitudes that typically go along with being female. This alternative leaves open the possibility that the category “woman” could be redefined, in particular to remove any problematic normative implications. Indeed, many feminist writers reject the category of the natural altogether; it is thought that *any* attribution

of a “fixed” or natural category to the world implies the mistaken attribution of an oppressive social regime.<sup>4</sup>

The argument from social construction claims that when we deny gender realism in the first sense, we also deny it in the second sense. That is to say, when we reject intrinsic natures and adopt social constructionism, we also reject universals. Spelman, for instance, treats the position that “there is a variety of genders” (nominalism) as indistinguishable from the position that “societies create women out of females.” For Spelman, the move from an analysis of woman as an intrinsic nature to one using social features that are extrinsic and relational is taken to imply that “there can only be particular and culturally specific senses of womanness (such as black womanness, middle-class womanness, lesbian womanness, etc.)” (Mikkola 89). In response, Mikkola argues that “social constructionism per se does not provide a good reason to reject gender realism” (88). Mikkola outlines examples of extrinsic and relational properties that—she claims—are candidates to be universals. Consider her discussion of “being a wife”:

The feature of being a wife is extrinsic as it depends on numerous external factors; in order for  $x$  to have this feature  $x$  must be a woman, the institution of marriage (broadly construed) must exist and  $x$  must be married to some other individual (or individuals). The feature is also socially constructed: it is a product of certain social practices that differ enormously from one society to the next. . . [I]f social construction has the consequence that only particular and culturally specific senses of womanness exist, then it must also count against realism about wives, such that there can only be particular and culturally specific senses of being a wife. Individual wives (as a result) would not share some single feature by virtue of their marital status. It seems to me, however, that this latter claim about social construction and being a wife does not hold. Although there may be culturally specific senses of being a wife (such as being a wife within a woman-marriage and being a wife within a monogamous heterosexual Christian marriage) this does not seem to provide a good reason to reject the view that all wives have the feature of being a wife in common. And since social construction does not provide a good reason to reject realism about wives, I see no reason to think that it provides a good reason to reject realism about gender. (89)

The history of philosophy shows us that indeed social constructionism does not rule out gender realism (in the second sense). Locke’s “nominal essence” corresponds to a universal that is made up by us. Locke noticed that the natural world does not contain precise boundaries, e.g., there are no precise boundaries marking off one species from another. However, for Locke our classifications of things in the natural world have precise boundaries: “The measure and boundary of each Sort, or *Species*. . . is what we call its *Essence*, which is nothing but that *abstract Idea to which the name is annexed*: So that everything contained in that *Idea* is essential to that Sort” (Locke III, 6, #2). Similarly, W.V.O. Quine describes the position of conceptualism in the philosophy of mathematics as appealing to “mind-made universals” (14). Hence, Mikkola is right that social constructionism does not entail gender nominalism. However, neither Spelman nor Mikkola adequately distinguish

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<sup>4</sup>Sally Haslanger criticizes this general position in her “Feminism in Metaphysics.”

the argument from social construction from what I will call *the argument from diversity*. Spelman writes “different societies [create women out of females] differently, indeed in part define their differences by how they do this.” This diversity, not social constructionism itself, makes the case for nominalism.

## The Argument from Diversity

Mikkola’s example of the relation “being a wife” is introduced as an example of a social feature of the world that is also a universal. Her position is that all wives have the same “feature of being a wife” in common; being a wife is *exactly* the same relation for everyone standing in it. On the face of it, however, the class is quite heterogeneous. Mikkola herself observes:

[M]any African tribes have traditionally engaged in the practice of polygyny (having multiple wives) in two ways: males can take multiple (female) wives or females can take multiple (female) wives. This latter practice, woman-marriage . . . was documented in around forty pre-colonial African societies and has endured in some societies. It seems fair to claim that this practice of woman-marriage differs hugely from a traditional Christian practice of monogamous-marriage between a (male) husband and a (female) wife. The feature of being a wife in these two practices, as a result, seems also to differ greatly. Compare being a wife in a traditional monogamous marriage and a woman-marriage with a third marriage system, such as polyandry (having multiple husbands), and the notion of being a wife becomes more diverse still. (89)

Assuming therefore that there is considerable variation in the features of the world that constitute what it is to be wife, how is this fact to be explained? Consider the following parallel. Proponents of objective moral values claim that there is a single true morality, a single moral code or set of moral rules applicable to all. Moral relativists respond that there is no single true morality, but rather a number of different moral codes that are relative to different concerns, outlooks or cultures:

The argument from relativity has as its premise the well known variation in moral codes from one society to another and from one period to another, and also the differences in moral beliefs between different groups and classes within a complex community. Such variation is itself merely a truth of descriptive morality, . . . [but] the actual variations in the moral codes are more readily explained by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life than by the hypothesis that they express perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values. (Mackie, *Ethics* 36–7)

It is not that variation *implies* the rejection of realism. It is, of course, logically possible that a single moral code is manifested in a great variety of very different ways. The point is that the observed variation is *better explained* by the hypothesis that there are many different moral codes, or “ways of life,” than by the proposal that our moral perception is systematically and persistently flawed.

*Prima facie*, nominalism is a compelling explanation of the heterogeneity of the class “being a wife.” Mikkola disagrees, perhaps because she takes “being a wife” to *mean* “being married to some other individual according to the culturally specific institutions of marriage (broadly conceived)” and thereby to correspond to a single

feature of social reality. As I explain below, however, it should not be assumed that a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of a term—a definition—corresponds to a single set of features of reality. Moreover, even if Mikkola's definition does correspond to a single feature in the world, it does not capture the social reality of being a wife. In Western societies, a common law (i.e., unmarried) wife is a wife; in other societies, close female relatives such as sisters or cousins fall into the class "wife." The social reality of being a wife is not reducible to a single relation "being married" that all wives share. If I am right, Mikkola's use of the example "being a wife" can be turned on its head. For Mikkola, being a woman is like being a wife, and this shows that being a woman is potentially a universal. For the nominalist, being a woman is indeed like being a wife, but this shows that being a woman is *not* a universal.

Mikkola pursues a second strategy to argue that realism can be maintained, even in the face of diversity. She suggests that there is a plausible gender realist account in the literature, that of Sally Haslanger: "Haslanger's position is gender realist and she maintains that women have a feature in common that makes them women: they are all socially positioned as subordinate or oppressed where this social positioning is sex-marked" (Mikkola 87). To explore Mikkola's suggestion, I will look in more detail at Haslanger's account to see if it is plausible to describe it as gender realist. I first consider the consequences, if any, of the fact that Haslanger is offering a definition of "woman"; next, I consider the methodology implicit in Haslanger's argument and ask whether this methodology implies realism; finally, I consider whether Haslanger's account is subject to the diversity argument.

### *The role of definitions*

Haslanger offers a definition of woman, as follows:

S is a woman if S is systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.) and S is "marked" as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction. ("Gender and Race" 39)

It might be thought that in offering a definition, Haslanger is introducing a nominal essence, or a social universal, and hence implicitly a realist conception of woman. For Locke, the paradigm case of a nominal essence is that of *substances* such as biological species and chemical stuffs. A nominal essence imposes precise classifications on a vague natural world. It supplies a set of necessary and sufficient conditions that an individual must satisfy to fall under a substance term such as "gold" or "horse" (Mackie, *Problems from Locke* 85). Articulating a nominal essence is thus providing a definition of a term.

There is no reason in principle why this insight cannot be generalized to social kinds. The categories of social reality may be vague and messy and may not admit of precise boundaries. So, introducing a definition may help to classify social reality. But the presence of a definition does not by itself imply that the relations in the

definition correspond to social relations in the world.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, a parallel point has been made in discussions of disjunctive definitions. (Haslanger's definition may be characterized as a disjunctive one as follows: *S* is a woman if *S* suffers economic subordination, or political subordination, or legal subordination, etc.) Suppose *A* has *F* but lacks *G* and *B* has *G* but lacks *F*. Suppose further that we introduce a predicate *X* which is defined as having either *G* or *F*. Now, both *A* and *B* have *X*, but we cannot conclude from these premises that there is therefore some objective property, being *X*, that *A* and *B* have in common (Armstrong, *A Theory of Universals* 20). Of course, as proponents of disjunctive properties have pointed out, we also should not conclude from these premises that *A* and *B* have nothing in common, because there are cases in which disjunctive predicates track single properties or relations that the objects satisfying the predicate have in common (Clapp, Antony). In this context, Louise Antony observes that "There is no reason to think that, in general, analytic relations among designations are reliable indicators of objective relations among the things designated" (10). So we must put aside the potential argument that because Haslanger has introduced a definition of "woman" she has thereby identified an "essence"—a single property or relation—that all women share.

### *Haslanger's methodology*

Haslanger distinguishes three ways of undertaking conceptual analysis. First, one may undertake a *conceptual* inquiry asking "What is our concept of woman, race, etc?" On this approach, "one looks to a priori methods such as introspection for an answer. Taking into account intuitions about cases and principles, one hopes eventually to reach a reflective equilibrium" ("What Are We Talking About?" 12). Secondly, one may undertake a *descriptive* inquiry. We ask "what kinds (if any) our . . . vocabulary tracks. The task is to develop potentially more accurate concepts through careful consideration of the phenomena, usually relying on empirical or quasi-empirical methods" ("What Are We Talking About?" 12). On this alternative, the inquirer is not limited to articulating concepts that pick out natural or biological kinds. Haslanger notes that "a descriptive inquiry into race and gender need not presuppose that race and gender are biological kinds; instead it might ask whether our uses of race and gender vocabularies are tracking social kinds, and if so which ones" ("Gender and Race" 33). Thirdly, one might undertake an *ameliorative* inquiry, asking: "What is the point of having the concept in question . . . What concept (if any) would do the work best?" ("What Are We Talking About?" 12). Haslanger calls the

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<sup>5</sup>Locke seems to disagree with this. He describes *mixed modes*, which include geometrical figures as well as social concepts like adultery or suicide, and for which real and nominal essences *coincide*: ". . . a Figure including a Space between three Lines is the real as well as the nominal *Essence* of a Triangle; it being not only the abstract *Idea* to which the general Name is annexed, but the very *Essentia*, or Being, of the thing it self" (III, 3, #18). I am suggesting that Locke has overlooked a possibility, namely that our definitions of social terms may not always correspond to social reality itself. See Haslanger's distinction between *manifest* and *operative* concepts, described below.

concepts elucidated by these three kinds of inquiry the *manifest*, the *operative* and the *target* concepts (“What Are We Talking About?” 19–20).<sup>6</sup>

It is clear that Haslanger’s account of gender (as well as her account of race) is primarily an ameliorative inquiry articulating a target concept. That is to say, her goal is to articulate a concept that is useful for our “legitimate” purposes; in particular, the target concept of woman is “an effective tool in the fight against injustice” (“Gender and Race” 36; “What Are We Talking About?” 20). Is her approach gender realist? A simple response is to say “no” because her methodology is *instrumentalist* not realist. Suppose a theoretical term is introduced into a scientific theory. On one option, we understand the term to refer to a real property or relation, that is, to make an ontological commitment to an entity referred to by the term. On another option, we introduce the term because it is useful and predictive, and makes sense of the evidence. The introduction of the term serves our “legitimate purposes,” and implies no ontological commitment. Haslanger’s account of the target concept and its role in the constructionist project is akin to the latter instrumentalist option not the former realist one. On the instrumentalist option, whether or not “woman” picks out a social kind is, in a sense, *beside the point*. As Ron Mallon puts it, Haslanger’s project “‘brackets’ the metaphysical question” (“Human Categories” 159; fn 11).

However, one may still ask the question of whether the target concept of woman that Haslanger articulates coincides with either the manifest concept or the operative concept. In her discussion of whether Haslanger’s account is revisionary, Jennifer Saul points out that Haslanger’s definition of “woman” is counterintuitive, and therefore it is unlikely to correspond to our manifest concept (e.g., 128). Let me focus then on the operative concept. It is only if the target concept coincides with the operative concept that it tracks the social kind or class “woman.” And it is only if it tracks the social kind “woman” that Haslanger’s account potentially corresponds to the universal, womanness.

Does the analysis provided by Haslanger coincide with our operative concept? Saul answers that “to learn about the operative concept, what we really need to do is find some females who are not subordinated on the basis of real or perceived sex characteristics and check to see whether people apply the term ‘woman’ to them. But this is far from straightforward” (129). Strictly speaking, Saul is correct that a detailed empirical investigation—into the uses of both the term “woman” and the term “subordination”—would be required to answer the question conclusively. It is nevertheless *probable* that Haslanger’s target concept is *not* the operative concept. Imagine a fictional scenario: a matriarchal society in which characteristics that are attributed to females (e.g., aptitude for nurturing, capacity for intuitive thinking, etc.) are systematically privileged and characteristics that are attributed to males are systematically subordinated. It is probable that people who are competent in using the term “woman” would describe this society as one in which *the women* were in charge, not the men; they would treat these privileged females as falling into the class “woman.” If my empirical prediction about how people would use the term is

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<sup>6</sup>See Jennifer Saul’s careful explanation of Haslanger’s position.

correct, Haslanger's target concept is under-inclusive with respect to our operative concept. In picking out only subordinated females, it leaves out females who are not subordinated but who, it is probable, would be included in the social kind to which the operative concept refers. Similarly, it is probable that Haslanger's target concept is over-inclusive with respect to the operative concept, because there are people who would fall into the target class who are *not* likely to be described as women in ordinary usage, e.g., "effeminate" males. (The latter satisfy Haslanger's definition because they are "marked for subordination on the basis of real or imagined bodily features that are assumed to be evidence of female biology.") Hence, on the balance of probabilities, we can say that Haslanger's target concept does not coincide with our operative concept. Her position then is not gender realist because the concept she introduces does not correspond to the social kind "woman".

### ***Diversity and Haslanger's Account***

Suppose—as seems likely—there *is* a class of people whose members are subordinated in the way outlined by Haslanger. We argued above that the class picked out by the operative concept "woman" does not overlap exactly with this one. However, suppose we follow Haslanger and start to use "woman" to refer to this class. This may seem to imply gender realism because, by hypothesis, all members of the class apparently have a relation in common, that of being subordinated in the way Haslanger describes. "Being subordinated," however, is at least as disjunctive and heterogeneous as is "being a wife." Subordination will be relative to culturally specific economic institutions, or legal institutions, or social institutions, etc. So even assuming Haslanger's account for the sake of argument, the argument from diversity establishes, at least, that womanness is multiply realized. If there is a single thing that is womanness, it is and has been realized in a vast array of different ways across culture and across history. Although the multiple realizability does not in principle rule out realism, we must ask which of the following alternatives is a better explanation of the heterogeneous nature of the class: are there many different relations of subordination, and hence many different kinds of womanness, or is there a single relation that is perceived by us in different ways?

### **The Argument from Nonseparability**

The argument from diversity says that the class "woman" is a heterogeneous class, and that nominalism is a better explanation than realism of this heterogeneity. The argument focuses therefore on the class "woman" not on the nature of the individuals within the class. The next two sections shift the focus to the role of gender in individual identity. How is womanness manifested in individuals who are members of the class "woman" and what consequences does this have for the realism-nominalism debate? I discuss two arguments, which I call *the argument from nonseparability* and *the argument from particularity*. Both arguments

characterize gender as a *particular* feature of individual women; gender identity is affected by the circumstances of oppression in which particular women find themselves, for instance their race and class. I address the argument from nonseparability in this section, and show that it is not a successful argument for nominalism, although certain useful epistemological insights can be drawn from it. I examine the argument from particularity in the next section.

Spelman thinks that gender realism implies that “a person’s identity [is] made up of neatly distinguishable ‘parts’ [that are] separable from every other part” and that the individuals who are women share the same separable part. Thus, for realism, “my difference from other women is only along the other dimensions of my identity,” and not a difference in my womanness itself (136). She counters the realist position using the following thought experiment. Suppose that Angela is a black woman and Elizabeth is a white woman. Now try to imagine Angela as white and Elizabeth as black. Spelman says that we inevitably imagine a difference in their womanness: “Does our being called ‘women’ mean the same thing to us and for us? Are there any situations in which my being white and her being black does not affect what it means to us and for us to be women?” (135). Moreover, “if it were possible to isolate a woman’s ‘womanness’ from her racial identity, then we should have no trouble imagining that I had been Black . . . [but] [t]o rehearse this imaginary situation is to expose its utter bizarreness” (135).<sup>7</sup>

The *argument from nonseparability* can be reconstructed in the form of *modus tollens*. Suppose that gender realism is true. It follows that the universal, womanness, has a separate existence from the individuals that instantiate it and that we should be able to “abstract away” from other aspects of individual identity and consider womanness in isolation. But we cannot abstract away in this sense because we cannot imagine gender identity in isolation from, for example, racial identity. Therefore gender properties are not separate entities. Gender realism is false (and nominalism is true).

Let us consider the first inference in the argument: namely, that gender realism implies that gender properties have a separate existence. Recall that for Spelman, Western feminism is committed to a Platonic conception of womanness, the position that particular women are “instantiations of a single, non-physical, and unchanging Form” (2). It is certainly true on this conception that universals are separate entities from the particulars that instantiate them and from other universals. However, on contemporary accounts, there are no “bare particulars” and equally no uninstantiated universals (e.g., Armstrong, *A Theory of Universals*); universals exist only as parts of individuals. So more plausible versions of gender realism do not imply that gender properties are separate entities that we ought to be able to consider in isolation. Thus, if the argument presupposes gender realism in the Platonic sense, it does not establish nominalism, because it is open to a gender realist to adopt another version of realism in which gender universals are not in a metaphysically separate realm but rather are always instantiated in particulars.

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<sup>7</sup>These comments are discussed by Mikkola (85).

What then is the conclusion to be drawn from Spelman's thought experiment? Mikkola suggests that our inability to imagine Angela as white or Elizabeth as black indicates a failure of the imagination—an epistemological failure—rather than a failure having metaphysical consequences.<sup>8</sup> Just because we *imagine* or *experience* white womanness as different from black womanness does not conclusively show that gender *is* different. True, but Spelman's thought experiment is helpful to differentiate our intuitions about the concept "woman" from intuitions about standard types such as those of pea green things or scarlet things. Suppose we have a set of pea green chairs and scarlet tables. We have no trouble imagining the chairs as scarlet and the tables as pea green. During this exercise of the imagination, we do not imagine a difference in the pea greenness or the scarletness. This provides some reason to think that the classes of identity properties "race" and "gender" are different from these standard cases. It seems that at least an epistemological consequence can be drawn from Spelman's thought experiment: namely, that we cannot understand or fully grasp the nature of identity properties without knowing about their place in the constellation of identity properties overall.

The conclusion of our examination of the argument from nonseparability is therefore twofold. First, nominalism does not follow from the position that womanness is not metaphysically separable from the individuals who are women. Realists who think that universals are always instantiated in particulars do not think that universals are metaphysically separate entities. Secondly, gender cannot be "abstracted away" from other identity properties. There is a modest epistemological conclusion to be drawn from this fact, namely that knowledge about gender (and identity properties in general) is acquired in a different way from knowledge about properties, such as the colors, that are also candidates to be universals. A more radical metaphysical conclusion, which forms the basis of the argument from particularity, is discussed in the next section.

## The Argument from Particularity

The argument from particularity relies on the metaphysical claim that identity properties such as gender or race are *particular*: their *natures* differ according to the unique constellation of identity properties instantiated by each individual. Much as communitarians say in response to liberals that human nature is in part constituted by an individual's particular social and historical location, this argument claims that gender is constituted by a particular combination of historically- and culturally-situated relations of oppression. The "premise of particularity," as I shall call it, has become an orthodoxy in feminist theory. In commenting on Spelman, for example, Trina Grillo writes: "as the intersectionality critique has taught us, [the experiences

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<sup>8</sup>Mikkola says that "our imaginative limitations when thinking about womanness do not entail anything about gender realism as a metaphysical position. Imaginative limitations simply suggest that there may be some epistemic problems in thinking about gender and its interconnections with race and class" (86).

of a white woman and a black woman] are different and not just additively . . . Race and class can never be just ‘subtracted’ because they are in ways inextricable from gender” (18).

It is worth noting that the argument from particularity, if it is successful, implies that gender realism is false, and therefore it is stronger than the argument from diversity. Diversity is logically consistent with gender realism. The premise of particularity however is *not* consistent with gender realism because it claims that the natures of the individuals in the class “woman” are different and hence cannot instantiate the same universal. Consider a metaphysical counterpart to the idea of particularity—that of abstract particulars or *tropes*. Tropes are *particular*—non-repeatable—properties that “have a local habitation” and “exist as individuals at unique place-times” (Campbell 3). To introduce the idea of tropes, Keith Campbell considers six green peas in a pod: “Colour occurs here both as type (what all the peas have, a certain shade of green) and as token (the particular case of colour that each different pea has, peculiar to itself)” (3). If our metaphysics is that of abstract particulars, “the case of colour that belongs to this pea is the color of this pea and no other . . . it cannot be instantiated in different situations simultaneously” (3). As Lewis explains, “being alike by sharing a universal is having something in common in an absolutely literal sense . . . [If we adopt a metaphysics of tropes], on the other hand, . . . there is no recurrence, no sharing of a multiply located, non-spatiotemporal part” (64).

So, it is clear that the premise of particularity, as I have construed it here, is incompatible with realism. Is the premise plausible? Mikkola’s answer is “no” because the reasons adduced in its support are, in her view, flawed. As we saw, she claims that, to the extent that the premise is derived from Spelman’s thought experiment, it expresses an epistemological rather than a metaphysical position. Moreover, she points out that the premise of particularity is often derived from descriptive facts about women’s different *experiences*. Mikkola argues that gender realism need not characterize gender as “an identity of individuals that designates something about individuals’ psychology or sense of self” but rather, as in the view of Haslanger, may rely on a notion of woman as a position in a social hierarchy (86–7). Hence, gender realism is immune to the argument from particularity.

I do not believe, however, that appealing to the idea that gender is a social position rather than a set of experiences evades the particularity thesis. Suppose that gender *is* a subordinated position in a social hierarchy. For any individual woman, this social position is likely to be constituted by multiple and intersecting relations of subordination coming together in a particular way. Indeed, this fact about women’s *actual* subordination—not merely their experienced or imagined subordination—is implicit in Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw’s notion of “structural intersectionality.” Crenshaw describes the subordination of minority women in a battered women’s shelter in Los Angeles:

Shelters serving these women cannot afford to address only the violence inflicted by the batterer; they must also confront the other multi-layered and routinized forms of domination that often converge in these women’s lives . . . Many women of color, for example, are burdened by poverty, child care responsibilities, and the lack of job skills. These burdens,

largely the consequence of gender and class oppression, are then compounded by racially discriminatory employment and housing practices. . . (1,242)

Crenshaw is here characterizing these women as being in a particular kind of socially subordinated position, one in which multiple structures of oppression coincide. The observation that different women experience oppression differently is of course *good evidence* that the subordination they are suffering is different from the subordination of women subject to different intersecting structures of oppression. But the particularity thesis is not merely an epistemological one about how women imagine their gender identity or experience their oppression; hence, gender realism that is based on Haslanger's notion of gender as a position in a social hierarchy is not immune to the particularity argument.

Suppose therefore that we have good reasons for thinking that gender is particular in the sense described. As I have explained, particularity is incompatible with the existence of gender universals. How then should we understand the way in which particular women are bound together into a class? How do we adjudicate between a metaphysics of tropes and another version of nominalism in which womanness does not correspond to a class of tropes yet particular women are unified in a "resemblance structure" (Armstrong, *Universals* 5, 15, 39–58)? My argument in the remainder of the chapter will be that we should adopt resemblance nominalism, rather than a metaphysics of tropes, for three reasons. First, considerations of parsimony argue against adopting tropes; it is not clear that any explanatory advantage is gained by positing tropes, yet positing tropes introduces a new class of properties. Secondly, recall that standard tropes—such as pea green tropes—while not numerically identical are nevertheless exact duplicates. We have seen as a result of the argument from diversity that womanness is realized differently in different members of the class. It seems, therefore, that the different properties "woman" instantiates at different locations in space-time are not simply differences in their locations in space-time, but rather qualitative differences as well. Finally, as I go on to argue in the next section, womanness is a complex of parts that cluster together in a particular way in particular women. The cluster is not the same in each woman instantiating it. Although it is possible for tropes (and universals) to be complex as well, the individuals instantiating the universal or the trope must instantiate *all and only the features* in the cluster; this is not the case for "woman."

## The Argument from Complexity

The core idea in the argument from complexity is that *womanness is something complex, not something simple, and the ingredients in the complex structure of womanness are not always the same ingredients from one woman to another*. The same ingredients make up the components in our *concept* of woman but are not always all instantiated in the individuals to whom the concept applies. If I am right, womanness cannot be a trope or a universal because on either of these positions the class of things instantiating the trope or the universal must instantiate *all and only* the parts in the complex. On the theory that I claim applies to gender concepts, this is not

required. Rather, womanness in particular women is a cluster of overlapping sets of properties or parts.

An important strategy in explicating our operative concepts is to first identify paradigms of the particulars to which the concept applies. Haslanger comments that “scientific essentialists and naturalizers, more generally, start by identifying paradigm cases—these may function to fix the referent of the term—and then draw on empirical (or quasi-empirical) research to explicate the relevant kind to which the paradigms belong . . . The question is whether these states form a natural kind, and if so, what kind?” (“What Are We Talking About?” 12). The same strategy can be applied for social kinds. Consider then some paradigms of individuals in the class “woman”: (i) a person who has an XX chromosome and female sex characteristics, additional bodily features such as a characteristic female gait, and responsibility for child-rearing and other family-oriented tasks; (ii) a transgender person who attributes womanness to herself and dresses “as a woman,” has female secondary sex characteristics and many of the elements of female phenomenology though she lacks an XX chromosome and does not have responsibility for child-rearing or other domestic tasks; (iii) a person whose biological sex is “indeterminate” (hermaphrodite) who has been brought up “as a girl” and as a result satisfies typical female roles, has many of the aspects of female phenomenology and bodily features, and dresses and lives as a female though she lacks female sex characteristics.

I propose that these paradigms are members of the class “woman” in virtue of a complex and intersecting set of properties such as, first, having the biology of a human female and other bodily characteristics such as gait or voice quality; secondly, having certain phenomenological features or “lived experiences” both *bodily*—such as those of pregnancy, child-birth, or breast-feeding—and *social*—such as fear of walking on the streets at night; thirdly, taking on social roles such as wearing typical female dress, or undertaking “private” responsibilities like child-rearing rather than “public” responsibilities in the wider community; and fourthly, calling oneself a woman and being called a woman as a result of the physical and other features that I have identified. The presence of different parts in the complex “woman” explains how womanness is *particular* in the sense described in the last section: for example, lived experience, social roles and self-attributions will vary according to culture, class and race.

An examination of the paradigms suggests that there is no single feature or set of features that all paradigms of womanness share. (It is striking for example that only paradigm (i) has female sex characteristics.) Rather, they have “family resemblances” to each other in Wittgenstein’s sense (s. 66)<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein observes that different games have different features: in chess, much depends on skill; in cards, there are elements of skill and luck; in children’s games, there are elements of luck and amusement, but perhaps not of skill; and so forth. We call all these practices

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<sup>9</sup>Several authors have mentioned the possibility of analyzing gender in this way, e.g., Green and Curry; Nicholson; Stoljar, “Essence, Identity.” See also the discussion of natural kinds as clusters in Mallon, “Human Categories.”

“games” because of the similarities among them. The class “woman” is like the class “game.” The concept “woman” is therefore what I have termed a “cluster concept” (Stoljar, “Essence, Identity”): that is, there is a cluster of different features in our concept of woman and in order for an individual to satisfy the concept, it is sufficient (and necessary) to satisfy *enough* of, rather than all and only, the features in the cluster. The type “woman” is a type in virtue of the resemblance structure that obtains among individual members of the type. Women constitute a type on the basis of the (natural and social) similarities among the members of the type.<sup>10</sup>

Mikkola’s implicit response to this proposal is as follows: a proponent of a cluster concept is in effect saying that the concept “woman” is unanalyzable, and that, because it is unanalyzable, “woman” cannot correspond to a universal. But, Mikkola argues, “woman” could refer to a universal *and* be unanalyzable: “Women may simply have an extremely complex and, thus, unanalyzable feature of womanness in common that makes them women” (92). In other words, the fact that “woman” is unanalyzable is an epistemological difficulty, not a metaphysical one. Mikkola quotes the following passages from Armstrong to support her position:

Suppose that a certain universal is complex [being composed of parts] . . . Suppose, further, that human beings notice that certain particulars fall under this universal and that they correlate a predicate with it. Suppose, however, that this complex universal is apprehended in a totalistic or *gestaltist* way so that users of the predicate are unable to resolve this universal in any way. For them, the universal is unanalysable . . . [I]n the case specified the universal is complex but it is not apprehended as complex . . . [We have] a “simple idea” of a complex universal. (*A Theory of Universals* 53–4; qtd in Mikkola 91)

This response however does not refute the argument from complexity. First, adopting a cluster concept is not inconsistent with adopting necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of the concept “woman.” Suppose we say that it is a necessary and sufficient condition for an individual to satisfy the concept “woman” that she have *enough* of the features in the cluster associated with the concept. The cluster concept view accepts that “woman” is analyzable in this (perhaps weak) sense though the analysis does not imply that there is a *single feature or set of features* that it is necessary and sufficient for an object to have in order to satisfy the concept. (As I argued in “The Argument from Diversity” the presence of an analysis—a definition—does not imply that the definition corresponds to a single set of features in the world.) Secondly, “woman” is not a simple idea of a complex universal in Armstrong’s sense. An investigation of paradigms of womanness, I argued, shows us that womanness in particular individuals is not apprehended in a “totalistic or gestaltist” way; it is not apprehended in “an all or nothing way as a simple idea” (Armstrong, *A Theory of Universals* 54). Thus we are not here making the mistake

<sup>10</sup>As Armstrong notes, even if “game” does not refer to a universal, Wittgenstein’s argument does not show that there are no universals. Suppose that chess has properties *FGH*, bridge has properties *GHI*, soccer has properties *HIJ*, etc. They do not share a single property yet all the properties they instantiate could themselves be universals (“Universals” 86). Since for the purposes of this chapter, I am assuming that there are universals, resemblances among women need not be primitive, but could in principle result from shared features that are universals.

that Armstrong points out, that is, assuming that a concept that is apprehended as simple (and which for that reason we do not know how to analyze) cannot *in fact* be complex and composed of parts. On the contrary, “woman” is apprehended as a complex idea. And, it is not the case that we do not know how to analyze the idea; in fact much of the discussion in the chapter has been taken up with examples of possible analyses: those of Haslanger, and the analysis of woman using clusters that I have outlined in this section. We have a clear sense therefore of the potential parts that are candidates in an analysis of “woman.” The argument from complexity does not claim that the complexity of womanness per se defeats realism. Both tropes and universals can be complex. Rather, an examination of paradigms of womanness shows that the parts in the complex are present in different combinations in different women, and hence different women do not always have the same set of features in common.

## Conclusion

I have now built the case for gender nominalism. We saw that the argument from social constructionism, though it is seductive, is not successful. The argument from nonseparability likewise is not successful against the strongest versions of gender realism. The case rests therefore on the arguments from diversity, particularity and complexity. The argument from diversity establishes *at least* that the class of women is a significantly heterogeneous class. It does not refute realism though nominalism is a better explanation of this heterogeneity than realism. Moreover, a realist must explain how a social universal can be realized by a multiplicity of institutions in a multiplicity of ways without collapsing into a multiplicity of relations. The argument from particularity refutes realism if the premise of particularity is accepted. There is a strong case for the premise of particularity, and therefore a strong case for resemblance nominalism, if we rule out the competing metaphysics of tropes. The argument from complexity helps to undermine the metaphysics of tropes. It also establishes the case for resemblance nominalism through an examination of the nature of womanness in paradigm women.

The discussion canvassed three ways of thinking about the metaphysics of the class “woman” that correspond respectively to three ways of explaining how the type is unified. The first is gender realism, the position that woman is a social universal with “multiple realizations”; the second is as an abstract particular or trope; and the third is as a class of particulars that resemble each other. Should we care about which metaphysics is correct? Or is the choice of a universal, a trope or a resemblance structure just a matter of theoretical bookkeeping with no consequences for feminist politics? In other words: what is gained (if anything) from this metaphysical discussion for feminist politics and what is lost? I offer some brief concluding remarks to address these issues.

Gender realism has been thought to have an explanatory disadvantage because of its imposition of precise boundaries that—it is thought—privileges a single conception of what it is to be a woman, thereby excluding others. An important concern

is that realism brings “white solipsism”, the privileging of the experience and perspective of white middle class women over non-white, along with it. On the other side, nominalism has been thought to have the consequence that gender is illusory or fictitious and thus there is no “reality”—social or otherwise—that gender tracks. If gender is illusory, how can there be political action on behalf of women, or a constructive response to *women’s* experience of subordination?

These problems can be addressed by the nuanced versions of realism and nominalism that have been described here. Mikkola is right that Haslanger’s account, in which “woman” is analyzed as a position in a social hierarchy, does not attract the objection of white solipsism. Haslanger’s position does not have these “politically adverse consequences”; it does not imply the exclusion of the experience or perspective of any particular group (Mikkola 85). And the resemblance nominalist approach that I have endorsed does not have the consequence that the category “woman” is a fiction. Recall that types can be explicated as either corresponding to a universal or by some version of nominalism. Suppose we adopt a nominalist account of natural kinds, and hence say that there are no universals corresponding to the classes of electrons or pea green things. It does not follow that these classes are fictions or illusions. It does not follow that there are no electrons, or pea green things, in the way that there are no witches. What follows is that these groups of things constitute genuine classes either because they are “resembling particulars” (resemblance nominalism) or because we apply the predicate or the concept “electron” or “pea green” to all and only members of the class (predicate nominalism or concept nominalism), or in some other way, including that they are resemblance classes of tropes (Rodriguez-Pereyra). On my account, the class “woman” is a type because of the similarities or “partial identities” among members of the class (Armstrong, *A Theory of Universals* 15). The class is moderately heterogeneous and moderately unified.

Nevertheless, vestiges of the two concerns mentioned remain even for these “improved” versions of realism and nominalism. The concern on the nominalism side is that emphasizing the heterogeneity of the class “woman” undermines altogether the possibility of unification, and hence the category “woman” collapses. Does the heterogeneity of the class show that it is a gerrymandered class and not a type? Is it like the class consisting of a tortoiseshell cat, a fountain pen and a teapot? My response is that the class “woman” is not gerrymandered, despite its heterogeneity, because it carves *social* reality in a way that is significant in explaining our causal interactions with the world. Gerrymandered classes do not have this feature; they do not play a role in causal explanations of the world. Hence, to reiterate, my characterization of the class “woman” as a moderately heterogeneous class of particulars that resemble each other does not have the consequence that the category “woman” is illusory or that there are no women.

The concerns on the realism side cannot be as easily dispelled, however. The concerns for realism may be described as those of the *rhetoric of realism* and the *impoverishment of the liberatory promise of social constructionism*. Realism is at a rhetorical disadvantage in contemporary feminist theory because *any* attempt to impose precise boundaries is characterized as an attempt to privilege one group to

the exclusion of others. If, as I have tried to show in this essay, there is an explanatory advantage in preferring nominalism to realism, this rhetorical disadvantage of realism adds to the reasons to prefer nominalism. Moreover, the version of realism discussed may in a sense lead to an impoverishment of the “liberatory promise” of social constructionism. Consider the consequences of adopting Haslanger’s position. Haslanger treats “woman” as—in short—the position of being subordinated in a social hierarchy. If political action on behalf of this subordinated social class is successful, no women will exist, and this will be a good thing. So, on Haslanger’s position, we should be aiming for the eradication of women. This outcome is unexpected and perhaps not even desirable from the point of view of identity politics; the promise of social constructionism lies in large part in seeing identity categories as *not* fixed natural categories that place constraints on liberatory goals, but rather as malleable categories that we can revise in light of liberatory goals. In other words, being a woman is something that should be able to be valued by those who identify with it. On Haslanger’s account, being a woman is only something of disvalue. This seems a genuine issue that proponents of realism will need to address.

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# Chapter 4

## The Metaphysics of Sex and Gender

Ásta Kristjana Sveinsdóttir

**Abstract** In this chapter I offer an interpretation of Judith Butler's metaphysics of sex and gender and situate it in the ontological landscape alongside what has long been the received view of sex and gender in the English speaking world, which owes its inspiration to the works of Simone de Beauvoir. I then offer a critique of Butler's view, as interpreted, and subsequently an original account of sex and gender, according to which both are constructed—or *conferred*, as I would put it—albeit in different ways and subject to different constraints.

### Introduction

It has become commonplace in certain academic circles and in popular discourse to insist that the categories we live by, and which shape our lives, are socially constructed. However clichéd it may have become to say that such categories as gender or race are socially constructed, it is often quite hard to know what that claim amounts to and what conclusions can be drawn from it. This is so much the worse because often this claim is seen to support some radical political agenda: although we live by these, often oppressive, categories, we don't have to. Our social life could be organized in ways that are not oppressive.

Judith Butler is perhaps one of the few theorists with a recognizable metaphysical story to support her radical political agenda (*Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*).<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I will examine her account of gender and sex and attempt to situate it within the ontological landscape. In particular, I am interested in distinguishing Butler from Beauvoirean feminist metaphysics and from radical linguistic constructivism. I think Butler offers very important insights into the construction

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<sup>1</sup> Whether or not Butler herself considers herself to be doing metaphysics is not the issue. Theorists can have a metaphysics even if they don't consider themselves to be doing metaphysics. Thanks to Helen Longino for this point.

and perpetuation of sex and gender, but that her account has serious problems. I conclude by offering an account of sex and gender according to which both are socially constructed, albeit in different ways and subject to different constraints. In doing so I offer a general framework for making sense of the claim that a particular category is socially constructed, a framework I term a “conferralist” framework.

## Judith Butler’s Account of Sex and Gender: An Interpretation

My interpretation of Butler’s views centers around four ideas:

Firstly, Butler offers a reorientation in the way we are to think of the relationship between gender and sex. Sex is now to be thought of as materialized through the regulatory schemes of gender, as opposed to gender being the social significance of sex, as the post-Beauvoirean feminist theory has had it. I appeal to the idea that assertions of sex are normative to try to capture that reorientation. Secondly, I appeal to an analogy with a game to illuminate how the regulatory schemes of gender work to determine meaningfulness. Thirdly, I appeal to Hegel’s expressivist theory of the development of the subject and of objectification to cast more light on how sex becomes materialized on Butler’s story. Lastly, I appeal to an analogy with Kant’s transcendental idealism to help to situate Butler’s story in the ontological landscape between the Beauvoirean position and the radical linguistic constructivist one.

## *The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir*

It is with Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*<sup>2</sup> that a distinction between sex and gender begins to be made in feminist theory.<sup>3</sup> *Sex* is taken to be a biological category, and *gender* the cultural interpretation of sex. For Beauvoir and her followers, drawing the sex/gender distinction had liberatory purposes, for the aim was to argue against the view that, to put it rather generally, social reality was determined by natural reality. Division of labor between men and women, and the inequality following from that division, had been thought to have a natural justification in biology: women’s biological features explained and justified women’s place and function within the social sphere.<sup>4</sup> Beauvoir’s point was precisely that this cannot be done, for the question of the justification for the organization of social reality is a substantive normative question which requires a substantive answer. It is the question of how we *ought* to organize social reality, which types of organization are justifiable, which not. The biological facts are just facts, brute facts, and no matter what those facts are they do not entail an answer to the normative question. Beauvoir thought that there might even be biological inequality between the sexes (males

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<sup>2</sup>In the French *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Paris: *Librairie Gallimard*, 1949).

<sup>3</sup>She did not coin terms for the categories of sex and gender, but by insisting that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman, she can be read as implicitly drawing such a distinction.

<sup>4</sup>I take the social sphere here to have political, economic, legal, cultural, and religious dimensions.

are larger, women menstruate etc.), but from that nothing should follow about gender inequality. If anything, social organization should make up for biological inequality.

What is Butler's complaint about the Beauvoirean account? First, she points out that feminist scholars have argued that the notion of *nature* and the relation between *nature* and *culture*, which is presupposed by the Beauvoirean account, is quite problematic. It assumes that nature is something passive, acted upon (and controlled) by culture, and does not take into account that, as Butler puts it, "[the concept of] nature has a history, and not merely a social one, but, also, that sex is positioned ambiguously in relation to that concept and its history" (*Bodies* 5).

How are we to understand the complaint that the Beauvoirean account misses that the concept of nature has a history? I think that we have to assume that her complaint is that it is not only what is social that is constructed, but that what is natural isn't so untainted as the Beauvoirean assumed. But why should that follow from the fact that the concept of nature has a history?

To say that the concept of nature has a history seems to me to mean any or all of the following:

1. that over time what has counted as natural has changed, i.e., the extension of the concept *natural* has undergone change;
2. that over time the content of the concept has changed, i.e., the constitutive criteria for being natural have changed<sup>5</sup>;
3. that over time people's beliefs about what is natural has changed, i.e., people's association with the concept natural has changed.

How would a commitment to any of the above invite one to say that sexual distinctions were constructed? One line of thought might be to say that if the criterion for being male or female has undergone change, then it follows that what it is to be male or to be female has changed. And if so, how can the male/female distinction help but be constructed? For the assumption is that if the distinction between the sexes is a natural distinction, then it is not changeable.<sup>6</sup> But such an argument won't do, because the Beauvoirean has an easy response. She will say that the criterion for being male or female is merely an *epistemic* criterion, a way of telling, not a *meta-physical* criterion constitutive of what it is to be male or female. Our conceptions of, or beliefs about, the natural world are, of course, imperfect, and the many proposed criteria for being male or female belong to those. Butler's opponent may think there is a real,<sup>7</sup> natural, distinction between male and female, but that our criteria have not yet captured that distinction—have not yet managed to divide nature at its joint. Or she may think that nature has too many joints related to sexual differences and that it

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<sup>5</sup>This might raise a worry about on what grounds we consider this the same concept, but let us leave that aside for now.

<sup>6</sup>Modulo evolutionary changes, taking place over a long time.

<sup>7</sup>That is independent of our thought and practices.

is up to us to find criteria to latch on to those joints that are of interest to us.<sup>8</sup> Either way she goes, it is clear that Butler does not succeed in pointing out a weakness of the Beauvoirean position simply by noting that the concept of nature has a history. Something more is needed. Is something more in the offing? Perhaps. A quote from *Gender Trouble* gives us a glimpse of what that might be:

It would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category. Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established as “prediscursive,” prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts. . . . How, then, does gender need to be reformulated to encompass the power relations that produce the effect of a prediscursive sex and so conceal that very operation of discursive production? (7)

We are not yet in a position to evaluate the crucial claim that sex itself is a gendered category, pretending, so to speak, to be one uncontaminated by gender or other value. And we won't be in a position to evaluate this claim until we have gotten to know more about Butler's motivations for her view and the reorientation she is suggesting.

So let us consider one possible motivation. One way to distinguish between constructivism (Butlerian or a more radical kind) and a Beauvoirean view is to say that they disagree about where questions of value arise. The constructivist thinks that questions of value go all the way down, that there isn't a base layer, a layer of fact, at which no questions of value arise. Beauvoir can be seen to be committed to such a base layer of biological, natural facts. What do I mean by “questions of value”? I don't mean just questions about right and wrong, or what individuals or communities should do, but mean value more broadly, including cognitive value. A main motivation for a constructivist account is the deep-seated belief that questions of value arise in more places than we are aware of. The constructivist is thus often involved in a debunking effort: to show that certain claims to objectivity are unfounded and social organization based on such claims thus unjustified.

The above suggestions are all rather general. What we need to know here is if Butler is indeed motivated by the belief that questions of value go all the way down, how does that belief get translated into her theoretical proposal? How and where does she locate value, to which the Beauvoirean has been blind? My suggestion is that Butler's claim is that certain assertions, which the Beauvoirean holds to be assertions of fact, are, at least to some degree, normative. Which assertions? Definitely assertions to the effect that someone is of a certain sex; perhaps more assertions. Would Butler want to say that all assertions are to some degree normative? Probably not, but perhaps that a certain class of assertions—let me call

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<sup>8</sup>One might think that this is a weak kind of constructivism, but the key point is that the proponent of this view is committed to there actually being some joints of nature. Butler seems not committed to that. Nor does she seem to deny that, perhaps because she thinks that making claims about how the world is independent of us is not justified.

them “kind assertions”—are all to some degree normative. What is a *kind assertion*? It is an assertion to the effect that S is of kind K, e.g., that Jodie Foster is a woman, that Jamie Lee Curtis is female.

The claim that questions of value go all the way down might make one think that Butler’s position is a radical linguistic constructivist one: everything is constructed, everything is language, or everything is text. This is not Butler’s position. In fact, she is eager to distance herself from such a view. Let us examine her arguments against such a position.

### ***Butler Distinguished from a Radical Linguistic Constructivist***

The problem Butler points to is a dilemma for the radical linguistic constructivist who attempts to make sense of the Beauvoirean truism that gender is the social significance of sex: either the radical linguistic constructivist shows the limits of her own position, or her view is reduced to linguistic monism (*Bodies* 5). The radical linguistic constructivist is committed to the view that everything is language, text, or discourse. Let us examine the two horns of this dilemma. On both horns, gender is constructed. The problem is what to do about sex.

If the radical linguistic constructivist says that sex itself is unconstructed, then she has conceded that not everything is constructed. Is she then, after all, committed to a view according to which there are things in the world that are not constructed, something like a base layer of natural facts? But if so, then it is hard to see how she differs from the Beauvoirean (except, of course, that her claims appear more inflammatory).

On the other hand, if the radical linguistic constructivist says that sex is itself a linguistic construction, then she is in no better position than the radical linguistic constructivist who rejects the sex/gender distinction altogether. For both the view is reduced to linguistic monism. That is the unhappy view that everything there is a linguistic construction. For a feminist, the challenge for linguistic monism is particularly acute: How to make sense of material violence against women, make sense of rape, of economic hardship?<sup>9</sup> Such violence surely is not a linguistic construction, and the very suggestion that it might be is offensive. For if it were a linguistic construction, would it not follow that by changing our language or our discourses we could stop such violence? The very suggestion seems, on the face of it, even contrary to feminist aims. For what would have been the point of the consciousness-raising and the overcoming of our false consciousness, in the beginning of the century for the proletariat, in the seventies for Western women? Did we create social problems by beginning to be able to describe aspects of the world in a different way? Certainly not. Isn’t there an important sense in which there was already something harmful happening, and the availability of the description made us able to recognize it? This is an additional problem for the linguistic constructivist caught by the other

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<sup>9</sup>See also “Contingent Foundations” 17.

horn. However, whereas that horn exposed an internal problem to the position, this one (merely) poses an external problem. It is of course a stronger criticism to be able not only to point out that a view doesn't do what one thinks it should aim to do, but also show that the view cannot do what its proponents intend it to do.

In light of the difficulties that a feminist radical linguistic constructivist faces, it is not surprising that many feminists have thought that feminism needs to assume that sex is unconstructed just like the Beauvoireans do. Butler thinks that it is misguided to think that a feminist theory cannot proceed without presuming the materiality of women's bodies, or in her phrase "the materiality of sex" ("Contingent Foundations" 17). The radical linguistic constructivist position is, to be sure, problematic, as it seems unable to make sense of the material violence women suffer. Butler thinks, however, that the options are not exhausted by *presuming* materiality or *negating* it ("Contingent Foundations" 17). What is needed is a rethinking of the sex/gender distinction, but perhaps more importantly, a complete shift in orientation—something of a Kantian "Copernican Revolution".

### *The Elements of Butler's View*

For Butler, then, the question is no longer: "How is gender constituted as and through a certain interpretation of sex? (a question that leaves matter untheorized), BUT: through what regulatory norms is sex itself materialized?" (*Bodies* 10).

If sexual categories are not joints of nature, what are they then, and why did we ever think they were joints of nature? Butler's suggestion is that sexual categories are *regulatory ideals* (*Bodies* 1). This term is borrowed from Foucault, but has its roots in Kant. What is a regulatory ideal? It is a prescriptive norm projected or posited by subjects, as opposed to, say, read off of nature, so to speak. An ideally rational agent is such a norm, for instance: it is an ideal because no actual person is an ideally rational agent, and it is regulatory because there is a demand on all of us that we strive to be such (although we never will be). Butler's suggestion is that the categories of male and female are such ideals, although I believe she thinks that the demand on us that we strive for one of those ideals<sup>10</sup> is not grounded in the same way as the demand that we strive for rational agency. For part of her aim is a debunking one: to show that this demand on us is a demand to the effect that we help perpetuate the current power structure and that the force of that demand does not come from its being a justified demand, but merely from its being a demand backed with power (*Bodies* 35).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>This is not to say that we can choose which ideal we strive for.

<sup>11</sup>See also *Gender Trouble* 6–7: "The radical splitting of the gendered subject poses yet another set of problems. Can we refer to a 'given' sex or a 'given' gender without first inquiring into how sex and/or gender is given, through what means? And what is 'sex' anyway? Is it natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal, and how is a feminist critic to assess the scientific discourses which purport to establish such 'fact' for us? Does sex have a history? Does each sex have a different history, or histories? Is there a history of how the duality of sex was established, a genealogy that

Coupled with the claim that the category of sex is a regulatory ideal comes a story of what is involved in asserting that someone is of a certain sex. In the case of the Beauvoireans, saying that S is female amounts to asserting a fact, describing what (a part of) the world is like. Not so for Butler. Perhaps we can hold on to the idea that something is being *asserted* on her view, but only if we allow for a certain ambiguity in the word “assertion”, for a descriptive and a prescriptive sense of that word. To assert in the prescriptive sense that S is female is to perform a certain speech act, which is expressive of the commitment—one’s own or that of the community—that S be female and be regarded as female (“Contingent Foundations” 17).<sup>12</sup>

An analogy may be helpful here. Consider a game called the “gender game”. The game involves a host of complicated rules for behavior within the game. There are only two types of role a player can play—either one enters the game as a girl or as a boy—and with time one advances to different stages of that role (the man or the woman stage), giving one different duties and responsibilities and different possible moves.

Now, there has been no mention of sex yet. What would be the role of sex in my hypothetical gender game? If my analogy is to work, then there has to be place for sex within the gender game. I suggest that in the gender game the categories of sex are projected regulatory ideals, ideals that best fit the perpetuation of the game. In fact they are gendered ideals, i.e., shaped by gender rules that regulate what bodies and body parts have meaning within the game. How exactly? I would like to attempt to link it to Butler’s idea that “‘to matter’ means at once ‘to materialize’ and ‘to mean’” (*Bodies* 32). I take this to mean that in this context the bodies that matter in the gender game are those that are materialized in accordance with the rules of the game; they are the intelligible bodies. It is then the matrix of intelligibility—in other words the rules of the gender game—that governs the materialization of the bodies that come to matter to the game. Let us take Butler’s own example:

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might expose the binary options as a variable construction? Are the ostensibly natural facts of sex discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of the political and social interests [false taxonomies?]? If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.”

<sup>12</sup>Cf. *Gender Trouble* 17: “. . . the question here will be: To what extent do regulatory practices of gender formation and division constitute identity, the internal coherence of the subject, indeed, the self-identical status of the person? To what extent is ‘identity’ a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience? And how do the regulatory practices that govern gender also govern culturally intelligible notions of identity? In other words, the ‘coherence’ and ‘continuity’ of ‘the person’ are not logical or analytical features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility. Inasmuch as ‘identity’ is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of ‘the person’ is called into question by the cultural emergence of those ‘incoherent’ or ‘discontinuous’ gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined.”

Consider the medical interpellation which (the recent emergence of the sonogram notwithstanding) shifts an infant from an “it” to a “she” or a “he,” and in that naming, the girl is “girded,” brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender. But that “girling” of the girl does not end there; on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reinforce or contest this naturalized effect. The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm. (*Bodies* 7)

Before the baby is girded it is not yet part of the gender game; it does not fit into the scheme of things, is not part of the symbolic domain—it does not yet *matter*. What there is before the naming is unintelligible (in the game) and it is only through being articulated as a girl that the girl comes into being as a participant in the game.<sup>13</sup>

What might the mechanism, by which sex gets materialized, be? Here Butler’s Foucauldian story has decidedly Hegelian elements. Let me describe the Hegelian expressivist account of the development of the subject, and of objectification. I will then suggest that these two models are the mechanism by which sex gets materialized, gendered, and rendered intelligible, on Butler’s story.

The Hegelian expressivist idea is roughly as follows: A subject forms a conception or model of itself and its relation to the world, followed by the acting out or actualization of this conception. To “act out” a conception is, roughly speaking, to behave as if that conception were true and strive to make it apply, make it true, “perform” that identity. How so? With a conception are associated norms for behavior and to act out a particular conception is to take those norms as binding on oneself and to strive to act in accordance with them.

The other side of the coin is the story of objectification, which goes as follows: The self or subject forms a conception of the object and attempts to actualize that conception. This the self does by acting as if the object conforms to the conception the self has of it. This is thus third-party identification, followed by an attempt to make that identification apply. The objectification succeeds if the object does not, or is not able to, resist the conception offered of it by the subject. In perhaps the most interesting case the object is itself a subject, a self. In that case, it may react to the objectification in either of two ways: (i) take on the conception imposed on it and attempt to actualize that conception; (ii) fight the objectification and the conception imposed and attempt to (re)claim control over its self-conception.

Let me draw these elements together a bit more and address how they work together in a social setting. Let’s think about these *conceptions* a subject may adopt

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<sup>13</sup>Cf. *Gender Trouble* 8: “Bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender; the question then emerges: To what extent does the body come into being in and through the mark(s) of gender? How do we reconceive the body no longer as a passive medium or instrument awaiting the enlivening capacity of a distinctly immaterial will?”

as a conception of itself. In a particular social or cultural context there are several such conceptions that may be available to a subject to adopt as its own, but, importantly, the subject's choice is constrained by the available conceptions. We can think of them as conceptions of what it is to be a member of some social kind and the associated norms of behavior for members of that kind. Only conceptions that appear to fit us "well enough" are available for our adoption, and often certain socially salient conceptions are thrust upon us and we must negotiate other people's acting as if that is our conception. For instance, the conception of what it is to be a woman is not only available to me but thrust upon me every day, and I embrace it more or less and act out that conception every day: I act as if it is true, and the more I act as if it is true, the more accurately it fits me. This is so, even if I negotiate what comes with adopting that conception to some extent. Some of the norms of behavior associated with being a woman I embrace fully and take as binding on me; others I try to resist. Sometimes this resistance is without any repercussions, sometimes it results in social sanctions of some kind.

Both sides of the Hegelian coin work together to form the subjects within the gender game and to perpetuate the gender game itself. The first experience a player in the gender game has of the game is of being handed a conception that he or she is to act out. She or he is, in a sense, treated as an object. Then, the better the player acts out the conception offered, the better she or he does in the game. The objectification has likewise worked to the same degree, since she or he has taken over the conception offered and started to act out that conception.

How does the discussion of the two Hegelian models help us understand the process of materialization of sex within the gender game? Let us think about what bodies and body parts come to have meaning within the game. They are the bodies and body parts that do not resist the conception imposed on them. The available conceptions are all ones that fit the perpetuation of the gender game itself. What sex is, is whatever conforms to the gendered ideals. The subjects' conceptions of themselves as embodied beings, and the conceptions of their own bodies and the significance of each body part, even what counts as a body part, are all shaped by the gender rules, the matrix of gender. And it is even part of the gender game that sex be thought of as not contaminated by the gendering, but as a natural category. Such naturalization of sex is a necessary part of the perpetuation of the gender game itself.<sup>14</sup> How so? Treating sex distinctions as natural makes them seem inevitable as well as the source of gender distinctions and hierarchies in a way that legitimates them and thereby the gender game itself. Naturalizing sex is thus an important part of the ideology that helps perpetuate the gender game.

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<sup>14</sup>Cf. *Gender Trouble* 33: "To expose the contingent acts that create the appearance of a naturalistic necessity, a move which has been part of cultural critique at least since Marx, is a task that now takes on the added burden of showing how the very notion of the subject, intelligible only through its appearance as gendered, admits of possibilities that have been forcibly foreclosed by the various reifications of gender that have constituted its contingent ontologies."

## *Butler's Proposal: Life Is a Gender Game*

I take it that Butler's proposal is that a game like the gender game is what we live in.<sup>15</sup> I now want to explore the significance of that claim for the question of what kind of metaphysics Butler is offering.

For one thing, Butler has suggested a reorientation: our assertions do not fit the world, but the world fits our assertions. It is the Kantian suggestion that we shape our world more than we have hitherto realized. But the Kantian inheritance does not end with that. For the structure of the domain of the gender game and its relation to what is outside the game can be explained by analogy to Kant's transcendental idealism.

The analogy works as follows: the realm of the gender game is like Kant's phenomenal realm. It is the realm of spatio-temporality (materiality) and intelligibility. There is another realm, but what resides there can only be thought,<sup>16</sup> but the thought about those objects is not contentful. For Kant the phenomenal realm is the realm of objects as they are for us, as they are subject to the conditions of possible experience. The noumenal realm on the other hand is the realm of objects as they are independent of those conditions. The Butlerian symbolic domain is the domain of signifiability and intelligibility (*Bodies* 138). The objects we experience there are objects as they are subject to the conditions of the gender game, the gender matrix. We can think of objects as they are independent of those conditions, but in certain cases such thoughts will not be very contentful, because gender influences the way such objects appear to us so completely. The suggestion is that sex is such an object, and that we cannot think about sex or sexualized objects contentfully or experience them independent of the conditions of gender. But does this mean that we are stuck with the current gendering of sex? Not at all. I think Butler might say that although we may not be able to think or experience sex independently of the conditions of gender, the actual conditions of gender need not be the conditions that sex is subject to. But then what is needed for change is, in the first instance, a critical examination of our actual gender norms.

The Kantian analogy breaks down when one points to objects that can be thought about or experienced contentfully without being subject to the conditions of the gender game. But that's alright. Butler can allow that the gender game not be the only game in town, and that in fact the gender game interact with other games,

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<sup>15</sup>Cf. *Gender Trouble* 16: "It would be wrong to think that the discussion of 'identity' ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that 'persons' only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility."

<sup>16</sup>Cf. *Bodies* 8: "Paradoxically, the inquiry into the kinds of erasures and exclusions by which the construction of the subject operates is no longer constructivism, but neither is it essentialism. For there is an 'outside' to what is constructed by discourse, but this is not an absolute 'outside,' an ontological thereness that exceeds or counters the boundaries of discourse; as a constitutive 'outside,' it is that which can only be thought—when it can—in relation to that discourse, at and as its most tenuous borders."

some of which can be just as oppressive as the gender game.<sup>17</sup> However, I think the Kantian analogy helps us to situate Butler's position in the ontological landscape in between Beauvoir and the radical linguistic constructivist. Let us recall what the relationship is between sex and gender on Butler's story. Instead of sex being a natural category, and gender the social significance of sex, sex is really a gendered category posited by us and claimed to be a natural one so that it can better help perpetuate the gender game. Gender categories, on the other hand, are roles or ideals constitutive of the gender game itself. How does Butler's ontological picture then compare to the Beauvoiran one? Contrary to the Beauvoiran she thinks that all sex is constructed or materialized through the matrix of gender. After her shift in orientation, Butler's point that the concept of nature has a history appears stronger, since she is able to resist the Beauvoiran move that the criteria we are talking about are purely epistemic ones. Butler will insist that the criteria for sex distinctions are indeed constitutive criteria of what it is to be male or female. However, the significance of being male or female is tied up with what meaning it has within the gender game.

Although sex is constructed on Butler's view, her position does not collapse into linguistic monism with the radical linguistic constructivist. For she is not interested in the claim that there isn't anything before the materialization in accordance with the matrix of gender. The point is rather that what meaning and significance sex and sexualized body parts have, they have such meaning and significance in virtue of being given to us as gendered, for it is the gender matrix that is the matrix of intelligibility for sexed objects.

## *Critique*

My interpretation of Butler's constructivism has centered around four ideas. Let me tie them more tightly together. First, I suggested that Butler is not merely advocating a rethinking of the sex/gender distinction, but a complete shift in orientation. This is a Kantian "Copernican Revolution" of sorts: the picture is not that our thought and practices conform to how the world is, but that, at least sometimes, the world conforms to our thought and practices. I appealed to a rethinking of what is going on when it is asserted that someone is of a certain sex, and suggested that instead of thinking of that assertion as a mere assertion of fact—of how the world is—that we think of it as, at least to some degree, normative. The suggestion, then, is that assertions that someone is of a certain sex, and that some body parts and acts are sexualized, are such normative assertions and that our thought and practices partake in making them true. I then appealed to the analogy with a gender game to attempt to explain how bodies and body parts acquire meaning within our thought and practices. Such acquisition of meaning holds hands with the materialization of the body and body parts within the game. The actual mechanism of materialization I then

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<sup>17</sup>For example the race game, the class game, the ethnic game.

tried to explain by reference to Hegel's expressivist model of the development of the subject and his model of objectification. Finally, I attempted to explain the relationship between the conditions of intelligibility within the gender game, and that which is outside the game by reference to Kant's distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal realms. That analogy is also supposed to help us see how Butler's ontology differs from the Beauvoirean one and that of the radical linguistic constructivist.

If Butler is right, and it is not only that the category of sex is gendered, but that the naturalization of it is a necessary part of the perpetuation of the gender hierarchy, then it is not only that she can resist the Beauvoirean position, but she poses a positive challenge to the Beauvoirean feminist: Is the construction of the category of female as a coherent and stable subject an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations (*Gender Trouble* 5)? And is not such a reification precisely contrary to feminist aims? To what extent does the category of female achieve stability and coherence only in the context of the gendered matrix?

I'm inclined to think that the critique Butler offers of the Beauvoirean position is right on target and the claim that sex gets materialized in accordance with the matrix of gender is both illuminating and accurate. The worry I have is what happens to the biologically given on this picture: out of what does sex get materialized? How come some people are better able to pass as male or female than other people? Doesn't that have something to do with certain biological features that are simply given and no amount of interpretation can have disappear? Isn't it the case that only people with certain functioning body parts can bear offspring with people with certain other functioning body parts? Butler's account does not seem to be able to explain that. In fact her account seems open to the charge that in principle any body part could be a sexed body part and that there is no biological (as opposed to social) reason why some body parts have sexual significance and not others. I think we are in need of an account of the construction of sex that takes seriously the gendered societal influences on that process, but that also gives the constraints of nature its due. I now want to suggest such an account.

## Conferralism About Sex and Gender

Given the worries raised about Butler's account, I want to suggest another way to account for the sex/gender distinction. On this account, both sex and gender are constructed—or as I would put it, *conferred*—but in different ways, and subject to different constraints. Let me start by explaining the key notion, that of a *conferred* property.

Recall the disagreement between Socrates and Euthyphro over whether an action was pious because it was loved by the gods or whether the gods loved the action because it was pious (Plato 10a). That disagreement concerns whether the gods' love confers the property of being pious on the action or whether being pious is a property the action has independently of the gods and their affections such that upon detecting the property the gods come to love the action. Euthyphro initially holds a

conferralism about the property of being pious; he thinks the gods' love confers the property of being pious on the action.

This disagreement between Euthyphro and Socrates is a disagreement about the metaphysical status of the property of being pious: What kind of property is it? How independent is the property from the attitudes and practices of the gods? How *real* is it?

In my view, the debate over the social construction of gender, sex, and other categories exactly mirrors the debate between Euthyphro and Socrates: What kind of property is the property of being a woman or being female? How independent are these properties from human thoughts, attitudes, and practices? How natural or real are they? The Euthyphronic position is that they are not naturally given or real, but rather dependent in some way on human thoughts, attitudes, and practices. But *how*?

The idea of a conferred property can help us clarify different views on the status of gender and sex. Once I have clarified what a conferralism about a property is, I hope the reader will agree with me that any theorist who thinks gender (or sex) is socially constructed, when that is meant as a metaphysical thesis, is a conferralist about the property of being a woman (or female). The difference among the various social constructionist accounts will then amount to differences in the details of the conferralism they are committed to.

I hope the intuitive distinction between a conferred property and a non-conferred property is clear. I will make precise what giving a conferral account of a property amounts to shortly but let us first linger with the range of conferred properties. Lots of properties are obviously conferred. Consider, for example, the property of being hip or cool. Isn't it natural to think that being hip or cool is conferred on people by members of some in-group? It doesn't seem plausible to say that someone is hip or cool irrespective of the attitudes of the members of that in-group.

Some properties are plausibly conferred, but bear a close relationship to some non-conferred properties. Consider, for instance, some baseball properties, such as a pitch's being a ball or a strike. There is a physical property, presumably non-conferred, of having traveled some trajectory T from the fingers of the pitcher to the glove of the catcher. But whether a pitch is a strike or a ball is not a matter of what that trajectory T is—it is a matter of what the umpire *judges* that trajectory to be. The umpire is attempting to *track* what the physical property T is, but it is his judgment as to what T is that makes something a ball or a strike. The properties of being a ball or a strike are thus *conferred* by his judgement.

When one offers a conferral account of a property there are five components that need to be specified<sup>18</sup>:

*Property*: what property is conferred, e.g. being pious, being hip, being a strike

*Who*: who the subjects are, e.g., the Greek gods or the baseball umpire

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<sup>18</sup> Here I draw on my "Essentiality Conferred". In that work I did not include *Tracking* as an integral aspect of the account, but now think it helpful.

*What:* what attitude, state, or action of the subjects matter, e.g., the gods' love or the umpire's judgement

*When:* under what conditions the conferral takes place, e.g., normal, ideal, or some specified conditions. This can be a one-time conferral or, which is perhaps more common, an iterative phenomenon stretching over a long period of time

*Tracking:* what the subjects are attempting to track (consciously or not), if anything.

## *Conferralism About Gender*

It is now easy to see how various constructivist accounts of gender can be brought under the hat of conferralism. Most would probably agree that gender is conferred by subjects or groups of subjects (even "society"), but they will disagree on what about the subjects does the conferring, under what conditions the conferral takes place, and what, if anything, the conferral is supposed to track: is it attempting to track sex assignment, role in biological reproduction, sexual roles, or merely role in the organization of society, irrespective of assumed sex?

Take the Beauvoirian view.<sup>19</sup> On a plausible interpretation of this view sex is a non-conferred biological property, but gender is conferred by society on people taken to be of a certain sex. With the conferral of gender come duties, privileges, and burdens. Gender assignment, on this view, is supposed to track sex assignment, which is assumed to be biologically given, but gender properties are social properties.

Plausibly there has been a persistent assumption in the background<sup>20</sup> that in tracking one of these things, i.e., sex assignment, role in biological reproduction, sexual role, role in societal organization, etc., we manage to track the other phenomena as well. We can then understand various kinds of subsequent feminist and queer theoretical work and activism as challenging that assumption: these categories are not coextensive and tracking one of these properties need not help us track the others.

My suggestions as to how gender is conferred makes gender out to be highly context-dependent. Not only is it deeply context-dependent when it comes to historical periods and geographic locations, but the same geographical location and time period can allow for radically different contexts, so that a person may count as a woman (or man or what have you) in some contexts and not others. This is because different properties are being tracked in different contexts: in some contexts it is perceived role in biological reproduction,<sup>21</sup> in others it is role in societal organization

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<sup>19</sup> Again, this may not be Beauvoir's own view, but rather that of feminists influenced by her for whom sex is a biological category and gender the social interpretation of sex.

<sup>20</sup> My aim is not to settle that question here.

<sup>21</sup> Sally Haslanger prioritizes this for the purposes of her analysis. Cf. e.g., "Gender and Race".

of various kinds, sexual engagement, presentation of the body, in the preparation of food at family gatherings,<sup>22</sup> etc.

There may be contexts that are such that to count as a woman (or of some other gender) in them, one need not only be perceived to have some central property being tracked in that context, such as perceived role in biological reproduction, but also not be seen to trouble the assumption that one have the other properties traditionally associated with that gender (societal role, gender-appropriate presentation, sexual orientation, and the like) as well.<sup>23</sup> Thus, there are contexts where there may be people who do not count as being of any of the available genders. Such contexts can vary in the attitudes towards those who are perceived not to fit the available genders. In certain contexts people who don't fit may be hailed as special, even sacred, creatures; in other contexts they can suffer abuse that threatens their lives and limbs. New contexts are coming into being every day as assumptions are questioned. Thankfully, although many of these assumptions and expectations are very hard to change, they are not set in stone. Here is thus the general schema:

*Property*: being of gender G, e.g., a woman, man, trans

*Who*: the subjects S in the particular context C

*What*: the perception of the subjects S that the person have the grounding property P

*When*: in context C

*Tracking*: the grounding property P

Unlike in the baseball case, the conferral is not a one-time act, but rather involves a standing attitude, namely the perception by the subjects in the context that the person have the relevant grounding property. This perception can be in error and the person may in fact not have the property in question.

In certain contexts, being transgender will count as a separate gender; in others, it will simply raise trouble for the gendering structure of that context and disrupt

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<sup>22</sup>It is easy to think of anecdotes that fit the various context descriptions. My friend, Agustín Rayo, told me a nice story of going with his mother, Julieta Fierro, a famous astronomer and public figure, to a genderly rigid gathering of extended family in Mexico. Apparently the expectations were such that the women would get together early in the morning on Sundays to start cooking the meal, and the men would gather and drink beer and chat. Later the men would be seated at the table and the women would wait on them while they ate. Only after the men were done eating would the women eat the leftovers. While Agustín's mother was a bad fit in each company, she ended up sitting and eating with the men. There was never a repeat of that family experiment. The way I analyze this example is that it is not that Julieta Fierro counted as a woman or a man in that context. This was precisely the kind of context where there was no gender available to her. She was treated as an other. While she ended up conversing and eating with the men, the fact that she ceased to partake in such family gatherings suggests that there was not a comfortable "third gender" category available in the context.

<sup>23</sup>This is why in some contexts lesbians don't quite count as women, and that in some contexts butch lesbians are more challenging than femmes as they very obviously trouble the assumption that all of the gender-stereotypical properties inhere in the same person.

the expectations of the coextension of the associated gender properties. In certain contexts, being perceived as being of a certain sex may be an essential grounding property; in other contexts, it may be highly irrelevant.

Thus there are several things that may happen in a particular context: a person can resist the conferral of the property (the gender assignment), but how successful such resistance can be will vary. Certain contexts may be particularly “silencing” in this regard, such that attempts to trouble one’s gender assignment receive no uptake and remain futile. This is analogous to what can happen in linguistic contexts where it can be impossible to say certain things. Try one may, but the context may prevent one from being heard and understood as saying what one intends to say.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, one may try to trouble people’s perception of oneself in a particular context, but there may be no other gender assignment available. Some contexts are even such that there is no possibility of simply not fitting into one of the available genders. Just as in some linguistic contexts it may be impossible to say what one wants to say, so there can be some action contexts where it is impossible to perform the actions one wants to perform, because the performance of the action depends on one’s being taken to perform it (or less strictly, taken to have certain properties).

On this account of gender there is thus no one context-independent property of being of a certain gender, e.g., a woman. Instead what we have is a family of context-dependent conferred properties some of which share some grounding properties. Let me now turn to the account of sex.

### *Conferralism About Sex*

The conferralist paradigm can help us makes sense of the value-ladenness of a property or category, without rejecting that there is anything prior to the conferral. It can thus help us makes sense of the appearance that a certain property is biologically given, even if it is not. Sex, I believe, is such a property. Being of a certain sex is a conferred property. In fact, it is first and foremost a social (in fact legal) property.

Do I have an argument for that? Here is a first stab: If a property chiefly figures in explanations of social facts, and not natural facts, that suggests that the property is a social property, and not a natural property. Consider, e.g., the natural facts about what kind of human bodies can create offspring together. It is not your sex assignment that allows you to bear or seed children. In fact, there are people whose sex assignment is in no way in dispute who cannot bear or seed children. What allows one to bear or seed children are rather some other properties that the sex assignment is intended to track. Since being of a certain sex is not an explanatory property when it comes to bearing or seeding of offspring, but it is explanatory when it comes to the distribution of various social resources, privileges and burdens, doesn’t that suggest that sex is a social property and not a natural one?

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<sup>24</sup>Consider, e.g., being an actor on stage and attempting to warn a theater audience that there is a fire in the theater by shouting “fire!”, where the audience continues to laugh. See Ishani Maitra’s “Silencing Speech” and “Silence and Responsibility”.

Here is thus my methodological suggestion: one should consider in what kinds of explanations the property occurs. If it functions in explanations of various social facts and it isn't playing the explanatory role of various physical or natural facts, but rather some "nearby" property is doing so, that should give us reason to think that the property in question is a social property, and hence conferred.

The second step in offering a conferral account of a property such as being of a certain sex is to tell a plausible story of how the mechanisms of conferral actually work. This is where social metaphysics has to rely on the empirical to offer a plausible story of the nature of the social phenomenon in question. In my story of the mechanism of conferral I turn to the work of Anne Fausto-Sterling and, again, Butler.

In her work (*Sexing the Body*, "The Five Sexes") the biologist Fausto-Sterling has discussed how unfounded the assumption is that biologically people can be divided neatly into two sexes, female and male, with the associated chromosomes, functioning genitalia, and hormonal levels. She estimates that about 1.7% of the general population does not fall neatly into one of these two categories. There is a variety of ways in which one can be intersex: one can have any one of a number of combinations of functioning and non-functioning male and female genitalia; one can have different chromosomes (X, XXY or XYY); or different hormonal levels. Interestingly, a deviation from the statistical norm when it comes to one of these factors (functioning genitalia, chromosomes, hormonal levels) does not line up neatly with deviation from the norm when it comes to one of the other factors. The three ways of dividing people up into sexes not only do not carve nature at some joint where you have female on one side and male on the other; these three methods of carving serve up different slices of nature.

But "carving" is not only to be used metaphorically in this context. Even before voluntary sex change operations, newborns with ambiguous sex characteristics have been subject to the scalpel (*Sexing the Body*).

For this reason I want to give an account of the property of being of a certain sex as a conferred property where the aim is to track certain *physical* properties, but where the resulting property is a *social* property, in fact a legal one<sup>25</sup>:

*Property*: being female, male

*Who*: Legal authorities, drawing on the expert opinion of doctors, other medical personnel, and parents

*What*: The recording of a sex in official documents, on the basis of the testimony of parents, doctors, and others. The judgment of the doctors (and others) as to what sex role might be most fitting, given the biological characteristics

*When*: at birth (in the case of newborns); after surgery and hormonal treatment (in the case of older individuals)

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<sup>25</sup>In giving this account of the conferral of sex, I want to leave it open that the sex categories may change in the future. In fact, perhaps the intersex movement has precisely started to trouble the idea that the legal category of sex is the most helpful societal category tracking sex-stereotypical properties.

*Tracking*: the aim is to track as many sex-stereotypical characteristics as possible, and doctors perform surgery in cases where that might help bring the physical characteristics more in line with the stereotype of male and female.

Unlike in the case of gender, the conferring of sex is a one-time act by relevant authorities, and not subjects in some social contexts. Such subjects can in fact be in error as to what a person's sex assignment is, but a person's perceived sex assignment plays no role in determining that assignment, although it may play a role in determining the person's gender assignment in some context. In this way, some of the Beauvoiran insight is preserved. For there are some contexts where at least one of the things being tracked is sex assignment. In such a context, being of a certain gender is conferred by the perception that the person has a certain sex assignment.

In giving this account of how sex gets conferred, I draw on Butler's work, as interpreted above, as well as Fausto-Sterling's work. The Butlerian elements should be clear: Sex assignment is guided by the aim to have the individual in question exhibit as many sex-stereotypical properties as possible, with the aid of medical treatment, if necessary. It isn't quite that the gender matrix dictates the materialization of sex, as Butler would have it, but that sex-stereotypes, shaped by societal expectations about gender roles and possible ways of being within a society, guides sex assignment. On this account, it isn't the case, as on Butler's, that there are no natural constraints on the materialization of sex, as determined by the gender matrix, for people have various physical properties. But the determination of which physical properties are important for sex assignment, and in particular the assignment of people into one of two sexes, is shaped by societal values and interests.

## Conclusion

Most of the elements of Butler's account are compatible with the conferralism of gender and sex offered here. The only element rejected is the echo of Kant's transcendental idealism in the sense that I want to allow there to be properties that are biologically given and that put constraints on what sex assignment is possible. I don't reject the question as to what there is prior to the conferral of sex, as Butler should, if my interpretation of her is correct. In that way, I am able to benefit from her insight into how the gender matrix shapes sex and sexed bodies, yet leave room for constraints on that shaping on the part of nature.

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# Chapter 5

## Ontological Commitments, Sex and Gender

Mari Mikkola

**Abstract** This chapter develops an alternative for (what feminists call) “the sex/gender distinction”. I do so in order to avoid certain problematic implications the distinction underpins. First, the sex/gender distinction paradigmatically holds that some *social* conditions determine one’s gender (whether one is a woman or a man), and that some *biological* conditions determine one’s sex (whether one is female or male). Further, sex and gender come apart. Taking gender as socially constructed, this implies that women exist *mind-dependently*, or due to productive human social activities; thus, it should be possible to do away with them just by altering the social conditions on which gender depends. In addition, some feminists take gender to depend on *oppressive* social conditions. Changing our social environments, then, would not only unwittingly eradicate women; doing away with women should be feminism’s political goal. I argue that both implications are unacceptable. In response, I argue for a view that is more congenial to ordinary thinking and that doesn’t have the goal of eradicating women.

### Introduction

This chapter develops a model, which I will call “the trait/norm covariance model”, as an alternative for understanding the phenomena feminists usually discuss under the rubric of the sex/gender distinction. This well-known distinction gives rise to certain problems that motivate the formulation of my alternative model. Specifically, I have in mind here problems arising from the conventionalist and abolitionist implications that the distinction underpins. First, consider the conventionalist implications: paradigmatically, some social conditions must be met in order for one to count as a woman or a man because gender is (as the slogan goes) socially constructed. One need not satisfy any biological or anatomical conditions; they are relevant only for counting as female or male. On this understanding “woman” and

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“man” are used as gender terms, “female” and “male” as sex terms.<sup>1</sup> The implication is that women and men exist *mind-dependently* or due to productive human social activities: that there are women and men ontologically depends on some social institutions and agents, their beliefs, practices and/or conventions in that women and men could not exist unless the relevant institutions, practices and conventions (with conscious agents upholding them) existed. Women and men are akin to wives, husbands and US senators that also depend on us for their existence.<sup>2</sup> This being so, it should be possible to do away with women and men while leaving the individuals we call “women” and “men” otherwise intact—we simply alter those social conditions on which gender depends so that individuals no longer *count* as women and men. Consider a parallel to US senators: their existence depends on certain socio-political conventions so that were a political revolution to alter those conventions by abolishing the US Senate, US senators would literally vanish overnight. Those individuals who previously counted as US senators would no longer do so despite being otherwise physically intact (presuming the revolution were a bloodless one). Just as one need not execute US senators in order to eradicate them, the thought is, eradicating women and men does not require physically altering those individuals we think of as women and men. Second, consider the abolitionist implication: in addition to holding a conventionalist view, some feminists take gender to depend ontologically on *oppressive* social conditions. As a result, changing our social environments would not only unwittingly eradicate women and men: doing away with gender should be feminism’s political goal.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Note that although this is the *traditional* view, some feminists reject the distinction between biological sex and social gender; for instance, some take both sex and gender as social notions (for example, Butler). Further, although some feminists accept the distinction between gender and sex traits, they deny that social factors play no role in discerning the latter. For instance, which traits are taken to determine one’s sex is (in some ways) a value judgement. Take the case of the athlete Maria Patiño, who has female genitalia, has always considered herself to be female and was considered so by others, but who was discovered to have XY chromosomes and barred from competing in women’s sports (Fausto-Sterling 1–3). Patiño’s genitalia were at odds with her chromosomes and the latter were taken to determine her sex. Patiño successfully fought to be recognised as a female athlete arguing that her chromosomes alone were not sufficient to *not* make her female. This case suggests that there is no immediately obvious biological way to settle what sex amounts to. Doing so involves evaluative judgements that are influenced by social factors. (For more on feminist conceptions of sex, see Mikkola, “Feminist Perspectives”.)

<sup>2</sup>Some quick caveats are in order. In a trivial sense many features of reality depend for their existence on social agents. If all social agents suddenly zapped out of existence that would obviously abolish (for instance) wives and US senators on the account that they are social agents. It would also abolish all social institutions, since social agents are needed to uphold those institutions. Further, had there never been any social agents, artefacts would not have existed; all manufactured goods depend in this causal sense for their existence on social agents. But I am not interested in causal mind-dependency here. Although pieces of paper depend on us for their existence in that paper is always manufactured by human agents, that some pieces of paper count as money depends on us in a different sense: if social agents suddenly zapped out of existence, money would cease to exist although the pieces of paper that count as money would not.

<sup>3</sup>Although all abolitionist conceptions are conventional, not all conventional ones are abolitionist. That is, although one may hold that the existence of women and men ontologically depends on

As I see it, both implications are problematic and ones that many ordinary social agents are unwilling to accept. Ordinarily, women are thought to be human females, men human males. As a result, their *existence* is not thought to depend on productive human social conventions, practices and institutions so that we could abolish women and men leaving intact females and males simply by altering our social landscapes. Conventionalist implications, then, are unintuitive. Further, ordinary social agents often find the abolitionist implication that “after the revolution” women and men will no longer exist objectionable. Many of my students, along with other feminist philosophers, do not see *being* a woman or a man as problematic per se. Rather, the problem is how we are *viewed and treated* as women and men. For ordinary thinking, then, the idea that feminists should aim to do away with women and men harbors undesirable ontological commitments.

These problems are generated by a clash between the paradigmatic feminist and everyday conceptions of sex and gender. Ordinary thinking does not separate sex and gender in the way many feminists do, thus neither seeing the existence of women and men as mind-dependent nor holding that gender is something to be eradicated. We can avoid this clash in one of two ways: either feminists work hard to modify everyday conceptions of sex and gender so that they are in line with the conventionalist and abolitionist views, or feminists modify their conceptions of sex and gender so that they are closer to everyday thinking. Here I will endorse the latter option and propose a way to conceptualize the phenomena usually discussed under the sex/gender distinction to avoid the unintuitive and undesirable ontological commitments. I will do so by developing what I will call “the trait/norm covariance model” to replace the usual sex/gender distinction. My alternative model will involve redrawing the boundaries of the sets of gender and sex traits and dividing these traits into new sets: *descriptive traits* (traits of which there is “a fact of the matter”) and *evaluative norms* (norms that express judgments about descriptive traits). For instance, the paradigmatic gender trait of wearing make-up and the paradigmatic sex trait of having ovaries will both count as descriptive traits (one either has ovaries/regularly wears make-up or not). But, my model also acknowledges the influence of social norms: certain evaluations (like being judged to act, be or appear “feminine”) can be seen to covary with particular descriptive traits, which accounts for why some traits are supposedly appropriate for women and others for men.<sup>4</sup>

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some social conventions, one need not hold that these conventions are oppressive. Further, although all conventional accounts of gender are (in some sense) social constructivist, not all social constructivist accounts have the conventional implications mentioned. This is because there are different ways to understand social construction, and how social factors influence and shape our gendered social realities. (For more on different conceptions of social construction, see Haslanger, “Ontology and Social Construction”.)

<sup>4</sup>I am alone in providing radical rethinkings of sex and gender; for example, see Stoljar and Alcoff. Although both Stoljar and Alcoff offer interesting conceptions of gender and sex that are much more plausible than the paradigm conceptions, they, nonetheless, retain some commitment to the sex/gender distinction. My view is that it is better to give up the distinction entirely.

By way of illustration, I will consider Sally Haslanger's fascinating and innovative recent account of gender ("Gender and Race"; "Future Genders"; "Social Construction"), which has the conventionalist and abolitionist implications. Next, I will examine what precisely is problematic about these implications in order to motivate my alternative model. I will then outline my trait/norm covariance model, ending with a discussion of how it avoids the problematic ontological commitments considered.

## Haslanger on Gender: An Example

Haslanger's account of gender has conventionalist and abolitionist implications: it takes the existence of women and men to be *mind-dependent* in the sense of depending on human social practices and conventions, and it takes these conventions and practices to be *oppressive*—for her, since gender is a product of oppressive social forces feminists should aim to *eradicate* it. These implications are underpinned by a distinction between sex and gender that many feminists have historically endorsed. Paradigmatically: "sex" denotes human females and males depending on some biological features (like chromosomes, sex organs, hormones or other physical features to do with reproduction) whereas "gender" denotes women and men depending on some social factors (like social role, position, behaviour or identity). As is well known, the motivation for drawing the sex/gender distinction was to counter biological determinism that took some (supposedly) biological facts to explain behavioural and psychological differences between women and men. Instead, feminists argued that these differences have social causes. They distinguished biological and social/psychological differences and began using the term "gender" to denote the latter. For instance, Gayle Rubin (who was one of the first feminists to articulate this distinction) used the phrase "sex/gender system" in order to describe "a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention" (165). For Rubin, although sex differences are fixed, gender differences are the oppressive results of social interventions that dictate how women and men should behave: women are oppressed *as women* and "by having to *be* women" (204). For her, gender is the social interpretation of sex and an oppressive one at that. However, women's oppression is mutable by political and social reform that abolishes gender. As Rubin saw it, feminism should aim to create a "genderless (though not sexless) society, in which one's sexual anatomy is irrelevant to who one is, what one does, and with whom one makes love" (204).

For Haslanger, gender is *constitutively constructed*: in defining it we must make reference to social factors ("Ontology and Social Construction" 98), and, in particular, we must make reference to unequal social positions ("Gender and Race" 37–43). In so doing, Haslanger aims to debunk the ordinary view that gender classification is a matter of anatomy. Commonly, being female is thought to be sufficient for womanhood; Haslanger, on the other hand, takes the conditions for satisfying "woman" to be social rather than biological. Her project involves showing that although the use of the term "woman" is thought to track a group of "individuals defined by a set

of physical . . . conditions [it] is better understood as capturing a group that occupies a certain . . . social position” (“Social Construction” 318). And the social positions that our gendered classification scheme tracks and that make gender ascriptions apt crucially involve reference to subordination and privilege. For Haslanger, societies in general tend to “privilege individuals with male bodies” (“Gender and Race” 38) so that the social positions they subsequently occupy are better than the social positions of those with female bodies. And this generates sexist injustices. For her:

*S is a woman* if [by definition] S is systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is “marked” as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female’s biological role in reproduction.

*S is a man* if [by definition] S is systematically privileged along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is “marked” as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a male’s biological role in reproduction (“Future Genders” 6–7).

These are constitutive of being a woman or a man: what makes calling S a woman apt is not that S is female, but that S is oppressed on sex-marked grounds; what makes calling S a man apt is not that S is male, but that S is privileged on sex-marked grounds.

Haslanger acknowledges that debunking projects like hers sometimes require a “radical change in our thinking” (“Social Construction” 319). After all, her proposal is counterintuitive: privileged females like, arguably, the Queen of England would not count as women on this view. But Haslanger’s project does not aim to capture what ordinary language users intuitively have in mind and her aim is not to illuminate our commonsense understandings of gender terms. Haslanger’s analysis is, in her terms, ameliorative: it aims to elucidate which gender concepts best help feminists achieve their legitimate purposes thereby elucidating those concepts feminists *should* be using (“Gender and Race” 33).<sup>5</sup> That is, endorsing her classification scheme is a pragmatic political choice. And (Haslanger holds) feminists should choose her account of gender since it will be helpful in feminist fights against sexist injustices enabling feminists to identify and explain persistent inequalities between women and men in terms of their social positions. Insofar as Haslanger takes being a woman to be a social matter crucially tied to oppression, she holds that “it is part of the project of feminism to bring about a day when there are no more women

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<sup>5</sup>In Haslanger’s “Gender and Race” this analysis was termed *analytic*; Haslanger has subsequently modified her terminology. Further, the analysis I have outlined is (what some call) Haslanger’s “revisionary analysis” (see Saul, “Gender and Race”). Haslanger has also suggested a non-revisionary analysis of gender, which roughly holds that even though her analysis is counterintuitive this does not show that it is not an analysis of *our* gender concepts: we might simply be deeply confused about what we are talking about so that even though we don’t take ourselves to apply “woman” on the basis of social subordination, we might still in practice be doing so (“What are we Talking about”; “What Good are Our Intuitions”). I have argued elsewhere (“Gender Concepts and Intuitions”) that the prospects of Haslanger’s non-revisionary account being true are not good (Saul in “Gender and Race” also argues for this). This being the case, I won’t consider the non-revisionary account here.

(though, of course, we should not aim to do away with females!)” (“Gender and Race” 46). Since what it is to be a woman is by definition tied to sexist oppression, gender justice would eradicate women by abolishing those social structures that are responsible for sex-marked oppression. Women and men could not exist, unless sexist oppression existed; that women and men exist is mind-dependent being the result of oppressive human social activities. And feminism’s goal should be to dismantle those social structures responsible for gender and, by extension, women and men.

## **Problems with the Conventionalist and Abolitionist Implications**

Earlier I claimed that ordinary thinking finds the conventionalist and abolitionist implications of accounts like Haslanger’s problematic. I also claimed that these problems are underpinned by a clash between different conceptions of sex and gender. Let’s examine the worries in more detail.

### ***The Conventionalist View Is Unintuitive***

For Haslanger (among others) gender depends on something social and not on anything biological. This *prima facie* makes being a woman ontologically on a par with being a US senator, a wife or a landlord. And, it seems, just as one can cease to be a wife by changing one’s social relations (by getting a divorce), one should be able to cease to be a woman by changing those social relations constitutive of womanhood. But a closer examination suggests that being a woman is not ontologically on a par with (say) being a wife. To tease this out, consider the following claims:

- (1) For a week last summer, James was a woman.
- (2) For a week last summer, James was a US senator.

These statements take “woman” and “US senator” as social notions. The first takes womanhood to be about easily perceptible gender markers like clothing and appearance (James lived “as a woman” for a week last summer). The second takes James to have been treated in ways that enabled him to count as a US senator for a week (for instance, James was elected to the US Senate, but due to a political scandal lost his position very quickly). Now, consider:

- (3) After seeing John’s body, I realised that John is a woman.
- (4) After seeing John’s body, I realised that John is a US senator.

These claims are not about social factors. We can understand claim (3) and it makes sense to us, although we are clearly using “woman” as a biological term. However, when we substitute “woman” for “US senator” in (4), the statement no longer makes sense to us. After all, just by looking at one’s body, it’s not possible to know that one is a US senator. That is, when used as a social term, “woman” is on

a par with “US senator”. But we can also use “woman” as a biological term, which makes “woman” and “US senator” come apart. The upshot of this is that “woman” is not a purely social term<sup>6</sup>; for ordinary thinking, then, being a woman is not on a par ontologically with what it is to be a member of some other social kind. And this suggests that it is not obviously true that women and men’s existence is mind-dependent in that one can cease to be a woman (or a man) just by altering one’s social environment. Because ordinary thinking does not see being a woman as a purely social matter, conventionalist implications (like the implication that we can eradicate women and men via change in our social environments) are hard to accept. The paradigmatic feminist distinction between sex and gender clashes with everyday thinking. Due to this, ordinary thinking doubts the possibility of eradicating gender via social change, because it ties sex and gender together.

A defender of the conventionalist view might hold that claim (3) doesn’t really make sense either, but we are fooled into believing that it does precisely because ordinary thinking ties sex and gender together when it shouldn’t. So, if we thought about womanhood in the right way, we would see that (3) is also senseless. That would leave claim (1) where “woman” is a social notion making it akin to “US senator”. My worries about unintuitive ontological commitments are dispelled *prima facie* making it possible for one to cease to be a woman just by altering one’s social environment. But this raises some further questions that the defender of the conventionalist view must answer: Precisely what kind of social change would abolish women and men? Which beliefs, social conventions, linguistic practices and relations would have to be altered for one to no longer count as a woman or a man? And which social institutions, relations and structures would have to be dismantled so that women and men were to cease to exist wholesale? These questions cannot be answered in any intuitively obvious introspective manner. In fact, answering them is the stuff of feminist philosophy and a huge point of contention. Admittedly, this contention may be generated by gender being such an incredibly complex phenomenon that discerning the kind of social change that would eradicate it is extremely difficult; we may simply be ignorant of the kind of change needed, but it is possible to eradicate gender via social change. This may be so. But it may also be that feminists cannot agree on what social changes would do away with women and men because doing so just by altering one’s social environment is not possible. Bluntly put, perhaps it is just plain wrong to think that women and men’s *existence* ontologically depends on some social factors. I am not concluding that it is; I am merely making a strategic point. The issue of, on which social conditions the existence of women and men depends, is so intractable as to be unhelpful. If gender really is such a complex issue that it is hugely difficult (if not impossible) to articulate and agree on what sort of social change would eradicate it, the most useful move would seem to be to give up the quest. Pragmatically, feminists should not try to uncover which social factors are responsible for the existence of women and men, but, instead, should settle for

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<sup>6</sup>I’m not alone in thinking so. For example, Jennifer Saul argues convincingly that the term “woman” has a contextually varying extension: we use the term on the basis of (various) sex traits and (various) gender traits (“Woman” as a Contextually Varying Term”; see also Stoljar).

the much less contentious view that human actions significantly *shape* the way we are as women and men. No feminist (to the best of my knowledge) denies this claim. The concerns I have raised here are not decisive and do not rule out conventionalism about gender altogether. But, as I see it, the less contentious view I have floated here is the one that feminists ought to endorse precisely because of its less contentious commitments.<sup>7</sup>

### *The Abolitionist Implication Is Undesirable*

On views like Haslanger's, gender is also a product of oppressive social conditions and, thus, something feminists should seek to abolish. But this abolitionist view may not be conducive to feminist interests since for ordinary thinking it harbours undesirable ontological commitments. To tease this out, contrast such abolitionist strategies with a different (what I will call) "re-evaluative" strategy. They both have the same starting point: feminism is about ending oppression that women as women face. But their ways of achieving this goal differ, which alters the strategies' outcomes. Abolitionist accounts take womanhood to be *by definition* tied to oppression so that it is not possible to be a woman and not be (in some sense) oppressed. Re-evaluative accounts do not take being a woman to be per se oppressive. Instead, they recognise that our social circumstances create environments where women are viewed and treated in ways that disadvantage them, perhaps by associating some traits with women and using this association to justify disadvantageous treatment. Nonetheless, by altering how women are viewed and treated it is possible to be a woman and yet not be oppressed. So, on the former view, gender justice would dismantle unjust social hierarchies thus doing away with women and men; on the latter, it would dismantle such hierarchies while retaining women and men (roughly) in a re-evaluated sense.

The strategy to follow comes down to a pragmatic political choice. But if ordinary social agents think that eradicating gender is undesirable, it may be strategically wrongheaded to endorse an account of gender that has abolitionist implications. Some anecdotal evidence supports this: my feminism students tell me time and again that they think the abolitionist strategy is aiming to eradicate something that need not be eradicated—the "feminist revolution" need not do away with gender

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<sup>7</sup>Note that the question, how to eradicate women and men, is different from how to eradicate sexism. Although eradicating sexism is a complicated matter and it is not immediately obvious what social changes are needed to do so, it seems at least *prima facie* conceivable that feminists could agree on and articulate what kind of social change would do away with sexism and yet not be able to agree on and articulate definitively what kind of social change would do away with women and men. To illustrate, think about race: articulating what kind of social change would abolish racism is a complicated matter, but we can think of ways to undercut racist oppression without necessarily aiming to do away with racial kinds. For instance, having policies that make it impermissible to discriminate individuals on racial grounds need not threaten the existence of raced individuals. In a similar vein, it is *prima facie* conceivable that we can have policies that undercut sexist oppression, but do not threaten the existence of women and men.

and doing so would result in (at least some) good being unnecessarily lost. Many insist that the ways in which people are treated as woman and men is the problem feminists should focus on—*being* a woman or a man is not primarily the problem. And many claim to find their gender a source of positive value. After all, it is certainly true that, although one may be discriminated against due to one's gender, it can still be something one values positively; in a similar sense, one can take pride in one's racial group membership despite being socially disadvantaged by it. The everyday conception of gender clashes with feminist conceptions like Haslanger's. As a result, ordinary thinking doubts the viability of eradicating gender because it sees gender as being at least partly a positive social identity rather than being a wholly negative one.

Projects like Haslanger's do, of course, start by aiming to alter the ways in which we are viewed and treated as women and men. So, in a sense, the abolitionist and re-evaluative routes go hand-in-hand to begin with. But the abolitionist strategy runs into difficulties if many social agents are unwilling to follow it through. Haslanger is asking for a significant shift in people's self-conceptions and acknowledges that she is asking social agents to understand themselves in ways that are not ordinarily part of their gendered self-understandings ("Gender and Race" 48). In so doing, she is "call[ing] upon us to reject what seemed to be positive social identities" and to refuse to be gendered women and men ("Gender and Race" 48). I agree with Haslanger that a change in our self-understandings is called for; but I wonder if the change that she is calling for is the right kind of change given that ordinary thinking does not see the viability of eradicating gender. Again, my point is strategic: accounts that have abolitionist implications are likely to be extremely demanding. It will take a lot of convincing to make ordinary social agents view their gender as not being even in part a positive social identity and to make them refuse to be gendered women and men, if social agents do not believe to begin with that this is necessary. And, one might wonder, whether scarce feminist resources should be directed at something other than trying to convince social agents to revise their self-understandings in this manner.

Fortunately my students always do express a desire to see an end to gendered oppression. And clearly this is what Haslanger also wants, which may suggest that really the parties to the debate are just talking past each other. Everyone wants the same thing: gender justice. Haslanger's rhetoric just differs from how we ordinarily talk about women and men. Usually, acknowledging this does not dispel my students' worries; they still find it puzzling that Haslanger doesn't use gender terms as people ordinarily do and wonder why she is confusing matters with her conception of gender. Of course, Haslanger's rhetoric has a specific, valuable purpose: to motivate a certain kind of social and political response that undermines sexist oppression. But, given the kinds of worries I have mentioned here, strategically I think that this kind of response can be better motivated by understanding the phenomena feminists discuss under the rubric of sex and gender in a way that does not imply women and men no longer exist "after the revolution". The worry is that accounts with abolitionist implications probably would not motivate positive social change, if this change requires that social agents must give up something they do not want to give up.

## The Trait/Norm Covariance Model

This section develops my trait/norm covariance model as an alternative to the sex/gender distinction. To begin with, it is important to note that, contrary to traditional feminist views, I do not take the term “woman” to be a purely social gender term. Ordinary speakers have, to use Ron Mallon’s terminology, indicative features in mind when they call someone a “woman”:

there is a distinction between those properties that are *indicative* of category membership (such as easily perceptible racial [or gender] markers), and those that are *central*. A property is indicative of category membership if having the property increases the likelihood that one is a member of a category. In the United States wearing a dress is indicative of being a woman . . . [But w]earing a dress is neither necessary nor sufficient for being a woman. (652–3)

Indicative features of womanhood include one’s appearance (clothing, hairstyles, make-up); behavioural patterns; social roles; and anatomical and bodily features (body type, shape, size, amount of body hair and how one “carries” one’s body). These features are conceivably involved in everyday gender ascriptions.<sup>8</sup> Paradigmatically, feminists hold that the indicative features mentioned are not exclusively gender traits in that they include features which are taken to be paradigmatic sex traits (to do with being female or male). But, ordinary language users often deploy “woman” on the basis of anatomical sex features such as body type; “woman” is not a purely gender term for them, but (bluntly put) a mixture of sex and gender. So, ordinarily “woman” denotes individuals who are taken to possess features indicative of womanhood. This does not (and certainly should not) limit the application of “woman” to women-born-female; the term also applies to trans women, individuals “assigned male at birth whose gender presentation may be construed as ‘unambiguously’ female” (Bettcher 46), who call themselves “women”.

My contention is that feminists should use the term “woman” as ordinarily as possible. And the trait/norm covariance model that I will outline next will be sensitive to these reflections about ordinary language use. The model I am proposing deals roughly with the same phenomena that the sex/gender distinction does. It just understands that phenomena in a different way that is, I submit, more fruitful in being more congenial to everyday thinking. On my view, we redraw the boundaries of the sets of gender traits and sex traits giving up the labels “sex” and “gender” to denote those traits. Instead, the traits are divided into sets of *descriptive traits* and *evaluative norms*. The former (in a sense) describe “the way the world is” and include physical and anatomical traits (e.g., chromosomes, ovaries, testes, genitalia, body shape and size), one’s appearance (e.g., one’s clothing, make-up, haircut, amount of body hair), roles (e.g., whether one undertakes caretaking roles, engages in childrearing tasks) and self-conceptions (calling oneself a woman or a

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<sup>8</sup>Whether these features make gender ascriptions *apt* is something I won’t take issue with. I am simply pointing out some common grounds on which speakers deploy gender terms.

man). These are features of which there are “facts of the matter”—it isn’t in any sense mysterious or down to value judgements whether one has ovaries, undertakes childrearing tasks, or calls oneself a woman. (This does not mean that values were not involved in singling out descriptive features, like anatomical traits, or that descriptive features are not socially malleable; but more on this shortly.) Evaluative norms are to do with stereotypical judgements: whether one is judged to be, to appear to be and/or to act in “feminine”, “masculine” or “neutral” ways. Evaluative norms attributed reflect value judgements and cultural norms. So, on my and the paradigmatic feminist schemas:

Paradigmatic feminist model		Trait/norm covariance model	
Sex	Gender	Descriptive traits	Evaluative norms
Having ovaries	Wearing make-up Being “feminine”	Having ovaries Wearing make-up	Being “feminine”

What does it mean to say that evaluative norms covary with descriptive traits? Just that we take certain traits to be of certain kind. So, the trait/norm covariance relation is constituted by particular descriptive traits being viewed in a particular manner *by us*. I take “femininity” to mean “associated with women”, “masculinity” to mean “associated with men” and “neutrality” to mean “associated with neither or both”. That is, depending on how we view particular descriptive traits, they either covary with femininity, masculinity or neutrality. And certain trait/norm pairings are currently linked to women, others to men and still others to neither or both. They can be so linked in a global or (more often than not) in a local manner. For instance, being short-sighted is globally neutral: as far as I know, the trait is nowhere associated exclusively with either women or men thereby globally covarying with neutrality. Then again, possession of testes appears to be globally masculine, possession of ovaries globally feminine. Quite often, though, the trait/norm pairings are local differing from one context to the next and depending on social and cultural factors. So, although all cultures have traits that covary with femininity and others that covary with masculinity, the configurations of these trait/norm pairings can differ depending on their location. To illustrate, take long hair. In many UK communities it is no longer strongly associated with women and often covaries with neutrality. However, in UK Asian-Indian communities that do not consider it appropriate for those picked out by “woman” to have short hair, having long hair covaries more strongly with femininity. But, of course, other social and cultural axes affect this covariance relation even within a culture: in many UK Indian Sikh contexts, neither men nor women are expected to cut their hair, which suggests that (in these social contexts) having long hair covaries with neutrality. However, in these contexts, other practices to do with hair covary with femininity and masculinity, like the practice of Sikh men wearing turbans. The trait/norm pairings are interrelated: with those picked out by “man”, the pairing “having long hair/neutrality” is interrelated with “wearing a turban/masculinity”; but for those picked out by “woman” the former

pairing is not interrelated with the latter pairing. (For more on Asian social conventions to do with hair, see Hildebeitel and Miller.) The trait/norm covariance relations can also change over time. Wearing trousers is a good example: until quite recently in many Western Anglo-European contexts, masculinity covaried with it. But, relatively quickly, in many contexts it has become neutral. It is now socially acceptable for someone ordinarily picked out by “woman” to wear trousers. The same social value is no longer attached to this trait. Of course, this all further demonstrates that the ways in which the trait/norm covariance relations pan out are not always straightforward. Since the relations depend on beliefs and conventions that change over time and place, they will usually be manifestations of some local and context-specific beliefs and conventions. There are many complications not least because of differences in contexts and in what norms social agents project on descriptive traits. Nevertheless, it seems fair to say that sometimes seeing how the relations pan out is not complicated and that sometimes social agents do not differ significantly in their ascriptions of norms.

I have said that certain descriptive traits covary with certain evaluative norms, but what explains this covariance relation? I take the existence of this relation to be a thoroughly mind-dependent matter. If you like, wearing make-up and engaging in child-care (to name two descriptive traits) are not inherently or mind-independently feminine—that femininity covaries with them is something that depends for its existence on social factors and obtains because of *us*. The classification scheme of feminine, masculine and neutral evaluative norms is a strong pragmatic construction; that is, social factors wholly determine our use of the scheme and the scheme fails to represent accurately any “facts of the matter” (Haslanger, “Ontology and Social Construction” 100). So, the classification scheme does not pick out any mind-independent facts about descriptive traits. That some traits are viewed as feminine, masculine or neutral is a consequence of “human-made” fashions, styles, cultural beliefs, social conventions and linguistic practices, which determine what features are judged to be of what kind. The classification scheme of feminine/masculine/neutral is a mere social construction. Furthermore, this scheme tends to be hierarchal in grading traits; this is evident from the devaluing of many activities and features with which femininity covaries (like the devaluing of caretaking work).

On my model the claim “Jane is feminine because Jane wears make-up” does not capture any mind-independent fact about the world. Yet, my model also takes wearing make-up to be a descriptive trait of which there is “a fact of the matter”. So, it appears that saying Jane wears make-up does capture something mind-independent about the world. It is worth clarifying the notion of mind-independence here to avoid an air of inconsistency. Consider driving. In the United Kingdom, people drive on the left-hand side of the road; in the United States, they drive on the right. Which convention is the correct or true one? We cannot say because the context-specific conventions that govern driving are mind-dependent: they depend for their existence on productive human social practices and require that certain human-made background conditions are in place. Such conventions are, of course, mutable. The UK government could just decide to alter conventions governing driving. Obviously

doing so in practice would be hugely difficult and certainly no easy feat. But the point is that ultimately conventions come down to *us*—there is no mind-independent fact about which side of the road is the correct side for driving. However, that people drive on the left in the United Kingdom is mind-independent in another sense. When I state “People in the United Kingdom drive on the left” I am stating something that is true mind-independently: the truth of the statement is not (if you like) up for grabs. I cannot just decide that the statement is false and drive on the right. (Or, I could, but probably with quite tragic results.) So, *given* certain background conditions, it is a mind-independent fact that in the United Kingdom people drive on the left irrespective of the fact that the convention to drive on the left is mind-dependent.

The descriptive trait of wearing make-up is akin to the convention of driving on the left: it is mind-dependent in that it is a trait that depends for its existence on particular human-made social conditions (it requires that certain human-made background conditions are in place). The trait is also socially mutable: wearing make-up might, for example, go out of fashion thus prompting people to abandon the practice. Nonetheless, that Jane wears make-up is (in another sense) mind-independent. The truth or falsity of the statement “Jane wears make-up” is not up for grabs: either she does or she doesn’t. This is akin to the claim “People in the United Kingdom drive on the left”: however mind-dependent—due to productive human activities—the respective conventions (to drive on the left and to wear make-up) are, whether the statements “Jane wears make-up” and “People in the United Kingdom drive on the left” are true or false is not open to debate *given* our current conventions. By contrast, the claim “The convention to drive on the left is better than the convention to drive on the right” is utterly mind-dependent. Whether this statement is thought to be true or false depends on one’s view or opinion, in addition to the convention to drive on the left being a product of human social practices.<sup>9</sup>

Now, although it is a mind-independent feature of reality that Jane wears make-up, that Jane acts in a feminine way because she wears make-up is mind-dependent. It does not capture any mind-independent facts about the world, like some supposed fact that the practice of wearing make-up is inherently feminine. That femininity covaries with wearing make-up is mind-dependent obtaining due to productive human activities—because of us. This further illustrates that the trait/norm covariance relation is not a *causal* relation in the sense that the former causes the latter.

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<sup>9</sup>One might wonder whether all descriptive traits are mind-dependent or whether only (broadly speaking) the socially constructed ones are. I think that there is a way to understand all descriptive traits as being mind-dependent (being products of human social practices). However, this requires understanding social construction quite broadly and it requires that we acknowledge the existence of not only *object*-construction but also of *idea*-construction (for more on this distinction, see Haslanger, “Social Construction”). That is, social forces and human practices bring certain objects into existence, like \$1 bills; but they also bring certain ideas or notions into existence, like the idea of money in general. So, even though we are either born with ovaries or not, the idea or notion of ovaries is a product of human social practices, broadly speaking. After all, the history of scientific research of human anatomy is deeply intertwined with many social practices that have guided (and still guide) such research.

Childcare activities or the practice of wearing make-up do not *cause* femininity to covary with them; rather, our beliefs and judgements cause this. To illustrate, think about morality. Standardly moral philosophers agree that the act of giving to charity covaries with moral goodness. But does the act cause moral goodness? This depends on one's metaethical commitments. For some moral realists, the answer might be yes: the act of giving to charity instantiates a realist (non-natural) moral property of *goodness*. So, the act of giving to charity literally causes moral goodness to pop up in the world because one's actions instantiate the property of *goodness*. For moral constructivists, however, the answer might be no: the act of giving to charity covaries with moral goodness because we project moral goodness onto the act of giving to charity. Roughly, we have constructed a moral world in which giving to charity is considered good. So, the relation between giving to charity and moral goodness is not a causal one in that the former causes the latter. That giving to charity is considered to be morally good is down to us. The same appears to be true of what I have said about descriptive traits and evaluative norms: we have constructed a gendered world in which childcare and wearing make-up are considered to be feminine. That is, we—human social agents—are responsible for these covariance relations. And this being fortunately the case, we can also alter them so that childcare, for instance, no longer covaries with femininity.

## Ontological Commitments and the Trait/Norm Covariance Model

My contention is that the unintuitive and undesirable ontological commitments discussed earlier should be avoided and that the model I have just outlined can help to do so. For a start, by endorsing my model the existence of women and men need not be taken as conventional although the ways in which the trait/norm covariance relations pan out are—something that is ontologically less contentious than the conventionalist implications considered. That there are certain conventional trait/norm pairings linked with women and men does not commit one to the view that social forces bring women and men into existence; so, feminists need not take the *existence* of women and men as a mind-dependent matter. I want to stress that my claim is not that being linked to particular trait/norm pairings is definitive of women and men. I am simply providing a way (a) to conceptualise the fact that often such pairings are linked to women and men, and (b) to conceptualise this in a way that takes into account the crucial role productive human social activities play in shaping the *ways in which we are* as women and men. As a result, my model holds that social change can significantly affect those individuals we call “women” and “men” without implying that this does away with them. It understands the locus of social change to be the descriptive trait/evaluative norm covariance relation, which leaves the existence of women and men ontologically intact. On my account, we start by looking at those individuals designated as women and men and by seeing which trait/norm pairings are linked with them. In so doing, we can see whether

there is anything morally or politically problematic about the trait/norm pairings associated with women and men—after all, not all pairings are problematic (like the neutral ones). Finally, we should work to undermine the trait/norm covariance relations that are insidious. The aim is for our judgements to change radically over time as a result of which those future individuals picked out as women and those picked out as men won't have the same configurations of the trait/norm covariance relations that women and men currently do. But, in so doing, women and men won't be eradicated; we will have just altered how the covariance relations pan out. This is because on my conception, no particular features must be had for one "to be" a woman or a man. As a result, a change in the trait/norm pairings associated with women and men does not entail that we have done away with women and men thereby avoiding the unintuitive conventionalist implications.

My model also bears on the issue of what happens "after the revolution" and avoids the undesirable commitments that the abolitionist implications have. For me, gender justice does not eradicate women and men; it eradicates problematic trait/norm pairings associated with women and men. This enables feminists to conceptualise positive social change that retains women and men while dismantling unjust social hierarchies. Feminists would be engaging in the kind of re-evaluative project I outlined earlier. For example: Many traits and activities associated with women are devalued being seen as inferior as and less valuable than traits associated with men. And it seems that many difficulties women face are due to such trait/norm pairings being associated with them. Childcare and domestic work are good examples demonstrated by (among other things) divorce settlements that fail to compensate for this type of work (for more, see Saul, "Feminism" Chapter 1; Williams). In these cases, femininity covaries with child-caring tasks devaluing them. But this situation not only disadvantages women in making it hard for them to combine work and family life commitments; it also disadvantages men. In the United Kingdom it is difficult for men to take up parental leave partly due to employers' unwillingness to grant men leave. The Department for Trade and Industry revealed that in 2007 "a quarter of men working in the private sector who asked to work flexibly had their requests refused, compared with only one in 10 women. Almost a fifth of men in public sector jobs have had requests turned down" (Ward). Even with the best will in the world, parents find it hard to combine equally work and family lives. Perhaps if childcare were not so closely paired with femininity, and instead were associated with both women and men thus becoming a neutral activity, both parents would find it easier to combine work and family lives as employers might be willing to grant them more flexible working conditions—something that would benefit everyone. That is, for as long as childcare solely covaries with femininity, the covariance relation is likely to be insidious. So, driving a wedge between this and other insidious trait/norm pairings may have hugely beneficial practical consequences: driving a wedge between the pairing of child-care and femininity would hopefully make it easier for men to obtain parental leave and for women to have a healthier work-life balance (one that does not disadvantage their career prospects). Under my model, women and men could both engage in

child-caring tasks “after the revolution” without this being seen as either feminine or masculine; it would be seen as a neutral human activity.<sup>10</sup>

On my model, just as on Haslanger’s and on other feminist philosophers’ models, gender justice requires an active change in our lives. Among other things, it will involve acting in ways that undermine existing trait/norm pairings (like men taking on caring roles) and refusing to act in stereotypical ways in one’s own life; it requires challenging stereotypes in one’s interactions with others; and it requires bringing up one’s children in ways that undermine the current trait/norm pairings. It also often requires changes in our public policies. For instance, in Sweden, the government has attempted (in my terms) to drive a wedge between childcare and femininity via parental leave legislation. Each couple has the right to take a total of 480 days leave to be divided between them. Of these 480 days, each parent *must* take at least 60 days. The thinking is that by preventing fathers from opting out entirely, gender equality in the family is fostered (Sundelin). Despite being something that we cannot easily achieve, through such public policies and changes in our personal lives, I would hope, over time we can alter the current problematic trait/norm pairings.

## Concluding Remarks

Feminists should conceptualise the phenomena traditionally discussed under the sex/gender distinction in terms of my trait/norm covariance model. This formulation avoids unintuitively taking the existence of women and men as a mind-dependent matter. It further avoids the implication that gender justice would or must do away with women and men: bluntly put, severing links between descriptive traits and evaluative norms can provide a way to dismantle social hierarchies without doing away with women and men. How exactly this severing is to be done and precisely which social policy changes (among other things) are needed are not questions for a philosopher; they are questions that those working in social sciences and public policy can answer better. Nonetheless, my model conceptualises the phenomena at issue in a way that fits ordinary thinking better and this, I contend, is crucially important for feminist philosophical accounts that aim to have an impact on everyday thinking.

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<sup>10</sup>Another way in which one might try to sever the links between the trait/norm pairings and women/men would be to try to undermine the associations between trait/norm pairings and women/men. So, it would leave the childcare/femininity pairing intact but would aim to dissociate this pairing from women. But, insofar as “femininity” on my account means “associated with women”, I cannot see how this strategy would work. It would still leave in place an implicit normative suggestion that childcare really should fall within women’s purvey. As a result, leaving the trait/norm pairings intact would be the wrong strategy. The insidious pairings themselves must go.

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## Chapter 6

# Metaphors of Being a $\Phi$

Marilyn Frye

**Abstract** The category WOMEN is a central analytic category of feminism, but has been very troubled in feminist theory and philosophy. In the background of the troubles with the category WOMEN is the metaphoric image of a social category as a *set* and its exemplars as set members. But the category WOMEN cannot be defined as sets are defined, so that is an inappropriate metaphor. A number of feminists and race theorists turn to Wittgenstein, who offers alternative metaphors. This chapter explores the powers and resonances of his metaphors—in the case of “family resemblance,” using the work of cognitive psychologists Rosch and Mervis on categories that have prototype structure.

One feature of the metaphor of family resemblance is that it invokes our experience of groups of people who are biologically related. This is dissonant with feminist and race theories that have rejected the idea of any biological ground of sex/gender or race categories, but it suggests looking again, or looking differently, at the crisscrossing and overlapping features of members of living kinds. Appealing to Dupré’s notion of living kinds as correlational densities (a specific sort of “crisscrossing and overlapping features”), and referencing Hacking’s remarks about the connection of categories to praxis, it is suggested that it may be fruitful to think of social categories as simulating living kinds.

The category WOMEN is, of course, a necessary analytic category of feminism, but it has been seen as very problematic in ways that are by now very familiar to feminist theorists and philosophers. It has been challenged in the terms of the problem of definition: How can I fix the reference of this term? Can it be defined without committing to the notion that there is something that all women have in common, some metaphysical or biological essence, that makes an individual a woman? It has been challenged in the terms of the problem of identity: Can one conceive “being a

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woman” without repressing the differences among women and the non-unity of the individual woman, and/or without re-inscribing the oppressive institutions through which gender has been constructed? Many have given negative answers to these questions. It is my view that the power of these questions to perplex and to produce skeptical and pessimistic theory and politics derives in part from a certain sort of picture of *being something* (a picture of *what it is to be a  $\Phi$* ), a picture of the particular *vis à vis* the universal, of category membership, of the coherence of a kind or category. The metaphor in the background is that of a set, figured as a container: the individual is “in” the category, like peas are in the can; the criteria of membership in a category are the walls of the container that sharply separate what is inside (the  $\Phi$ s) and everything else (the undifferentiated universe of the not- $\Phi$ ). In this picture, if one is in a category one is exactly like everything else that is in it, in some specific respect; and one is thereby constrained and limited by that “definition” of what one is, as though that likeness foreclosed all difference among the members and all differentiation among the things that are not members. And in the frame provided by the “set/container” metaphor, if there is supposedly a category  $\Psi$  of which one is a member (e.g., a gender or a race category), but there are no necessary and sufficient conditions that work as the outline of the container, no conditions that sort individuals into members of  $\Psi$  and non-members, then there is really no such thing as “being  $\Psi$ ” or “being a  $\Psi$ .” And this is indeed the conclusion that some theorists reach, in the cases of gender categories and race/ethnic categories: there is no such thing as being a woman, being a man, being white, being Black, being chicano/a.

It is widely agreed among feminist theorists/philosophers that there is no set of conditions that are necessary and sufficient for  $x$  to be a *woman*.<sup>1</sup> Some, assuming precisely that the meaning of a noun is the rule defining the set of things to which it refers, conclude that the word “woman” is indefinable, meaningless. And with this, some conclude that there really is no such thing as a woman (or a man), that gender categories are illusory, not real, that the impression that one “is” a woman (or a man) is an illusion. Such “gender skepticism” easily expands to a global skepticism about social categories, since few if any are bounded by necessary and sufficient conditions. (Those that are so bounded appear to be in the domains of specific institutional legal or quasi-legal institutions, such as “mayor” or “full professor.”)

The observation that there are no necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in social categories and no *set* for the word “woman” to denote should not be taken to demonstrate that social categories, in this case, gender categories, are unreal and the words for them meaningless; it should be taken to demonstrate that social categories are not sets, are not containers that individuals are “in.” It should be taken as showing that however social categories work in perception, cognition, behavior,

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<sup>1</sup>Naomi Zack argues for necessary and sufficient conditions that specify a disjunctive set of conditions, one of which is an attribute of the person, one a condition on how one is designated, and one a condition of being an object of the sexual interest of heterosexual men. I find the conditions hard to interpret, but it appears to me that there are individuals who satisfy at least one of the conditions but are not women.

social processes, and operations of power (both appropriate and oppressive), *they do it without having boundaries fixed by necessary and sufficient conditions, and consequently without having any fixed sameness as their principle of coherence.* We need a different imagination, free of the magnetic field of the set/container metaphor.

For anyone who has a fresh memory of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, it is almost irresistible to turn to it at this juncture, and a number of feminists and race theorists have done so (Heyes, Nelson, Medina, and Frye (2005) on Medina). One of the great things about Wittgenstein is that he understood that we can be captured by a metaphor, a picture, that constrains our imagination. He also understood that one cannot be liberated from the power of a metaphor, an image, a picture, without being provided with *other* metaphors, images, pictures. Indeed, Wittgenstein does offer one thing that is absolutely needed for escaping the grip of the set/container metaphor, namely, alternative metaphors.

Wittgenstein himself needed to be freed from a certain picture of language. It was a picture according to which the only words that are really *words* are names, and names designate things, and the relations of names depict the relations among the things named. In this picture, the relationship of naming, or designation, is mediated by our ideas of the objects and their names. That is, I hear or see a name; it provokes the idea in my mind of the thing named. In the *Investigations* Wittgenstein is working himself out of that picture, coming to see that there are many phenomena that are language, that there are many different ways different kinds of words are woven into our activities and projects—many things we “do” with words other than name objects and represent their relations to each other. We use them to count, to call for help, to give orders, to tell jokes, to play Jeopardy. There is no unitary essence of language, and no correct and precise definition of the word “language” in terms of a list of common and distinctive properties. He likens language to a collection of assorted games, language games. Then he has his interlocutor say:

You take the easy way out! You talk about all sorts of language-games, but have nowhere said what the essence of a language-game is, and hence of language, is: [you have nowhere said] what is common to all these activities and what makes them into language or parts of language.

He goes on in his own voice:

And this is true.—Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all,—but that they are *related* to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all “language.” (§ 65)

Wittgenstein then suggests that we consider “the proceedings we call ‘games’.” He immediately lists off examples: board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on, and goes on to mention tic-tac-toe, solitaire, chess, tennis and ring-around-the-rosy. He points out that there is *nothing common* to all of these proceedings, and that if we “*look and see whether there is anything common to all*” what we will see is “similarities, relationships, and whole series of them at that”

(§ 66). The examples he gives of common features that are shared by some but not all of the examples of classes of games include *amusement*, *competition between players*, *winning and losing*, *different roles of skill and luck*.

What do these passages tell us about the category GAMES, and about what games are? Certainly, there that is no feature or set of features which all games have in common and that they do not share with other categories of activities or procedures. So, what holds such a category together? What is the principle of coherence? What makes games, and what makes them distinct from, say, hobbies, pastimes, dances, sports, war, courtroom trials, or making business contracts? This is where we need another metaphor. Wittgenstein offers two, and both are interesting. One is the metaphor of a spun thread or cord, whose coherence is due not to a single element running through the whole, but to friction between overlapping short fibers twisted together.

The thread metaphor is very effective in one way: it provides a vivid, clear and concrete image of something that is coherent, has integrity, something that hangs together, not by virtue of some attribute shared by all and only its elements, but by virtue of many local forces, operating locally in overlapping spheres of influence. And it is not attributes of each fiber that “makes” it part of the whole, but overlapping contacts; no single fiber touches all the others, in fact, each fiber touches very few other fibers; what makes the fibers elements of a thread is not traits or attributes specific to each of these fibers and not shared by other fibers that are not part of the thread. The fibers that are part of the thread need have no particular attributes that set them apart from other fibers. Imagine that coherence of a social category, like women, or Blacks, or Democrats, is a matter of overlapping local and frictional meetings among us that make a strand that is far stronger and with wider reach than any of us is alone.

It comes clearer that there might be a politics to how we imagine social categories. This is a sort of anarchist’s vision of unity, solidarity, or coherence, as opposed to a totalitarian vision of it. This image offers the possibility of coherence, of unity, without bondage.

But the image of a thread is two-dimensional and linear and as such seems not quite adequate to modeling the structure of something like the category GAMES, with all of its sub-categories varying from ball games to board games to games of tag and tic-tac-toe. Salutory as its influence on our imaginations surely is—and we should continue to hold it in mind—it is not complex enough. It is considerably more adequate as a picture of the complexity of the category NUMBERS—cardinal numbers, real numbers, rational numbers—which is the example in relation to which Wittgenstein first introduced this metaphor of the thread. This can remind us that categories need not all have the same kind of structure, the same principle of coherence, or the same kind of principle of coherence.

Wittgenstein’s other, and more famous, metaphor, of “family resemblance,” is more promising, in that it suggests multidimensional relations. Having brought our attention to the many kinds of games, he says that we see there “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail” (§ 66). He goes on:

I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances”; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. I shall say: “games” form a family. (§ 67)

So, what can we make of “criss-crossing and overlapping similarities?” Cognitive psychologists Eleanor Rosch and Carolyn B. Mervis, explicitly referencing Wittgenstein, developed the notion of family resemblance in a way that gives nice empirical specificity to “criss-crossing and overlapping similarities.”<sup>2</sup>

They start with the fact that many categories, especially work-a-day non-specialist categories of concrete things, have what is called a “prototype structure.” This means that there are items in the category that are “best examples” and others that are less good, or not good examples of the category. For example, for the non-specialist North American robins are very good examples of birds, but penguins are not, though that same non-specialist does affirm that penguins *are* birds. (Already one can see that these categories are not sets: members of a set are not better or less good examples of its membership.) One effect of the prototype structure of a category is this: it has been shown empirically that subjects were more likely to believe that a disease would spread from robins to ducks on an island, than that it would spread from ducks to robins. Another is: people make asymmetrical similarity judgments, judging ducks to be more like robins than they judge robins to be like ducks. For categories such as FURNITURE, VEHICLE, and WEAPON, some members of the category are highly prototypical, others are less prototypical. In the case of the category FURNITURE, chairs are “best examples” and mirrors are not. In the case of FRUIT, oranges are “best examples” and olives are not good examples.

What Rosch and Mervis used the notion of family resemblance for was to elaborate an operational notion of *degree of prototypicality* in terms of degrees of family resemblance. They initially defined family resemblance as overlap of attributes (so it looked like the “thread” metaphor), and then thickened it by working up a notion of degree of family resemblance that was *not* just two items having fewer or more attributes in common.

This research involved asking people to list attributes that are typical or characteristic, for example of chairs, of sofas, of tables, and so on for a long list of exemplars of the category FURNITURE, likewise for exemplars of other categories such as FRUIT, and VEHICLE. Then, to take the example FURNITURE, she pooled *all* of the attributes on all the informants’ lists for all of the items of furniture. The pool of these attributes is such that there is variation in how widely each attribute occurs across the lists for CHAIR, SOFA, TABLE, LAMP, OTTOMAN, MIRROR and so on. Some attributes in the pooled list are attributed to almost all of these; some are attributed to only a few, and so on. Looking at the individual items (chairs, sofas, tables, lamps, etc.) you can see that some of them have many of the most widely shared attributes, and some have few of the most widely shared attributes,

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<sup>2</sup>This material is fairly old. I am using it to work the imagination, not citing it as the last word in science. I suppose, though, that the empirical data involved are as good as ever.

and of course, some are somewhere between these extremes. Those that have the most of the most widely shared attributes have, she says, a high degree of family resemblance with the other items in the category; those with the least of the most widely shared attributes have a low degree of family resemblance to the items in the category. And, empirically, it turns out that items with the highest degree of family resemblance, thus measured, are by other measures the most highly prototypical items in the category, the “best examples.” It also turns out that comparing members of a category with members of other neighboring categories, the most prototypical members of the first category have very low degrees of family resemblance with members of the neighboring category, while some of the non-prototypical members have higher degrees of family resemblance with members of neighboring categories.

I like this elaboration of the notion of family resemblance for making family resemblance *not* simply a matter of strung-out pair-wise similarities such as: Uncle Jack and Cousin Ethyl have similar noses, Cousin Ethyl and Grandpa have similar eyebrows, Grandpa and brother Charles have similar gaits . . . etc. In Rosch and Mervis’ picture it is a matter of relations of items to the whole field of members of the category by way of their mapping into an array of most-widely-shared to least-widely-shared attributes of things in the category. (They actually make the weighting of attributes’ extent-of-commonness even more complex than I have made it.) They have taken “family resemblance” from something imaginable as a spun thread, to something I imagine as a ball of felt—one that is more densely packed toward the center, on an only-fairly-regular gradient. And this is another metaphorical image that can do us good in the process of being dispossessed of the set/container metaphor. There is no single fiber running three-dimensionally through it; the individual fibers need be like one another only in very generic traits that they in fact share with many other things in the world; its density is not uniform; it has a fuzzy surface that can drop and gain fibers without much effect on the whole, and it is very cohesive indeed.

An important aspect of Rosch and Mervis’ articulation of family resemblance is its capturing the non-homogeneity of the cognitive categories. It suggests that if we are members of a social category, we may differ from one another in our possession of various of the more-widely-shared and less-widely-shared attributes—attributes simply thought by ordinary folks to be “typical and characteristic” of members of the category (and different groups of informants may provide different attribute lists to that pool). Category membership, thus imagined, does not impose reductive sameness, homogeneity, and is not repressive of differences among category members.

Returning to the *Philosophical Investigations*, there is more to gleaned.

In the passages around the introduction of the phrase “family resemblance,” Wittgenstein says that all of the things we use the same word for are “related to one another in many different ways,” that you will see “similarities, relationships and a whole series of them at that.” He speaks of “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing; sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.” This leaves it open for us to think that the “relationships”

he's thinking of are all relationships of "similarity," and to think of similarity in terms of things sharing attributes. The spun thread image again permits thinking of the relationships as having attributes in common. But there has to be something more here than overlapping attributes, even "complicated networks of them" such as the quantitatively varied arrays of them that Rosch discovered. For everything is similar to and different from everything in indefinitely many ways. It is not useful to be told that there is "nothing common" to all the proceedings we call "games." Certainly games and household chores and defenses of accused persons in court have many similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing—indeed there are complicated networks of them. But those other things are not games. "Similarity" only has traction if something is at work to select some similarities as *salient*. Salience is slipped in to Rosch's work when she asks research subjects to list "typical and characteristic" attributes of things.

What the use of the notion of "family" here signals to me is that Wittgenstein was attuned to the "similarities" in question forming not just a network, that is, not just anything with a "network"-ish sort of structure, but a much more particular kind of density. The image of family resemblance gestures toward and invokes visual memory of multiple people who are closely genetically related, a family—two or three generations of parents and their siblings and their offspring, all but the direct mother-father pairs related, as we oddly say, "by blood," and even those pairs related at only one degree of separation through their offspring. We imagine, maybe we know, that the web of resemblances across the group is in some way and degree "biologically" grounded or conditioned—that there is some material biological, relatively diffuse, causality contributing to it, and giving it its quite distinctive gestalt. This is not just any "network." The resonance of the image "family resemblance" connects Wittgenstein's picture of categories with the distinctive densities of attributes and relations that are characteristic of living kinds. It is a very familiar kind of density—the kind we routinely encounter in living kinds: cats, dogs, daffodils, tomatoes, maples, frogs. The suggestion lurks here that the webs that constitute the categories we call "social"—both those like GAMES, TOMBSTONES and WEEDS, and those like ARTISTS, HERETICS, WOMEN, SCIENTISTS, LESBIANS and SPARTAN FANS—are the same sorts of webs as those that constitute the categories we call "natural," like DOG, BIRD, ROSE BUSH, MOSQUITO, MAPLE, CAMEL—species and subspecies, genera and so on.

I have suggested that the anti-essentialism and category-skepticism that has so strongly characterized anti-racist and feminist and some of queer thought in the last several decades has operated in the sphere of influence of the image of categories as sets; that only if categories are thought of as sets/containers does the impossibility of a certain kind of definition and delineation of category membership lead to the suspicion that race and gender categories are "unreal," and/or un-useable in theory and politics; and only if categories are thought of as sets or containers can it seem a necessary truth that categorial identity represses difference. Following a Wittgensteinian path out of the shadow of that metaphor (a path quite favored by many feminists, theorists of racial and ethnic identity, and queer theorists) has brought me back to thinking about "living kinds" and "social kinds" together in the

same sentence. In the context of feminism, race theory, and queer theory, this is a little shocking.

It was in part an impulse sharply to separate the natural from the social, to escape or reject the biological naturalization of races and genders, that fed into the anti-essentialism that led to the skepticism. I am not going to suggest that the category WOMEN has, after all, a “ground” in biologically determined “similarities.” What I am going to do, merely, is go back and pay more attention to the principles of coherence of living kinds, to see more clearly *what it is* that Wittgenstein has so slyly gestured toward with his family resemblance metaphor. Theorists have for the most part used the family resemblance metaphor negatively, to say what categories are NOT (not bounded by a rule, not unified by a common essence, and so on). I will take up ideas that come from reading it positively, to help articulate at least one of the things that social categories might be.

It has been a consistent commitment of almost all schools of feminist thought that genders are not natural kinds, are not kinds like species are kinds. What is being rejected, as a picture of genders, is the-picture-we-have-of-species. So it will be fruitful to take a look at species.<sup>3</sup>

According to a familiar and vernacular notion of a species, an exemplar of a species is *of that species* in virtue of deeply “internal” physical structures installed at the moment of its individuation as a discrete organic individual, structures whose features determine causally the features, tendencies, capacities, and behaviors by which the individual is identifiable as being of that species. We think of “genes” as determining everything from the overall shape of the plant or animal, to its mechanisms of nutrition, to its being social or a-social, to the color of its eyes, if it has any, and to many people it is at least somewhat plausible to talk of things like a gene for homosexuality or a gene for prostate cancer, or genetic determination of something called intelligence. In this picture, it is because of their genes that organic individuals are what they are and do what they do. But there is another picture of species, articulated by John Dupré (1981, 1986), that is devoid of the essentialism and determinism of this standard picture, and Dupré’s picture offers another metaphor that is useful for imagining what social categories are.

Dupré suggests that the world is lumpy, not homogeneous. He invites us to imagine a multidimensional quality space, like a three-dimensional graph of Cartesian coordinates multiplied to as many coordinates as there are qualitative dimensions by which we describe and recognize living things. To get this picture, you can begin by thinking of a three dimensional object located in a three-dimensional space by locating the point corresponding to its height, width and depth in that space, or locating the object in a four-dimensional space by graphing its height, width, depth and weight. Analogously, one can imagine locating each individual living thing in a multidimensional quality space by graphing all of its values in the multiple dimensions that we mark in language or by our repertoires of recognition. Dupré says that when every living thing has been mapped into that space, the space will not be

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<sup>3</sup>The following discussion of species is taken from my essay, “Categories in Distress.”

occupied homogeneously with equal spaces in all dimensions between individuals, but will be characterized throughout by densities and discontinuities. Some of the discontinuities will be sharp; most will be graded, and among the latter there are variations in how sharply the density drops off and how uniform the gradation is. As I understand Dupré, he is saying that the fact that there are those densities and discontinuities *is* the fact that there are living kinds. In Dupré's picture, the densities can be understood as webs of correlations which empirically support inferences from the presence of one feature to the presence of another. Such inferences are empirical and contingent. That one can make them with a reasonable record of their being observationally confirmed is simply a corollary of the clustering of individuals in "hills" or "densities" in quality space, not sanctified by the deterministic efficacy of interior microstructural features, i.e., essences.

The feminist distinction of sex and gender, which was a salutary development in its time, was made to quarantine a realm of essentialist determinism and keep it distinct from a realm of contingency that was open to political analysis, critique and intervention. But we do not have to construe our biological identities as a matter of essentialist determinism. Other images are possible. An image of a correlational density in a multidimensional quality space, for instance. If we were to think of ourselves, in a biological register, as concrete individuals located in correlational densities in a multidimensional quality space, we might be able to make generalizations over the kinds we are exemplars of—generalizations that are contingent and revisable, observationally supported, neither transtemporal nor atemporal, generalizations that permit the existence of individual variation and exceptional individuals.

To sum up: on Dupré's picture, the observable world of living things is not homogeneous. There are strong patterns of correlations in it. There is a high correlation between having feathers and having wings. There is a very strong one-way correlation between having fur and being quadruped. Dupré suggests that living kinds are densities of observable correlations. In some cases the correlations support fairly strong predictions about things like mobility, what a critter will and will not eat, mating displays, styles and schedule of nest-building, general irascibility, timidity, presence or absence of intra-species dominance hierarchies, and so on. That's all. No essences. Just correlations. But a certain distinctive sort of clustering, certain distinctive structures of density, of correlations.

This picture of correlational densities in multidimensional quality spaces suggests one way to imagine social categories, including gender categories as "family resemblance" categories, *viz.*: the summed effect of all the cultural training and constant maintaining and policing that goes into making women and men of us is that it creates and maintains patterns of behavior, gesture, posture, vocalization, aptitude, taste, interest, desire and so on that *imitate* the distinctive shape, density, and structure of those correlational densities that are the living kinds. The image emerges of genders, and many other social categories, as *artificial natural kinds*, or more specifically *artificial living kinds*. That image suggests that the processes of ongoing construction and maintenance of social categories are processes that produce social kinds as simulations of the living kinds observable to us as "natural." It suggests

thinking of human beings as replicating within the domain of our sociality the *kind of variety* we encounter in the world of living things that is our home as an animal species—replicating species-type-structure within our species.

If we think of social categories as socially produced “species,” as correlational densities of that particular sort, we will be able to imagine social-categorical coherence not as a matter of similarity or exact likeness among the individual exemplars of the category, but as a matter of complicated webs of relations—a particular kind of density of correlations. Possibly it is the particular kind of density Rosch was tracking as she sought an operational specification of the distinctive density of prototypicality of prototype categories.

Feminist theorists have suggested a number of versions of the claim that being a woman is being in a particular social location, rather than similarities of attributes. I have been sympathetic with that view, but have thought that the notion of being in a social location required more expansion and explanation than it was getting. Here, I want to suggest that social symbolic placements might be understood as embeddedness in correlational densities, in patterns in the appearance and behavior of human beings that empirically support good-enough prediction and expectation.

In his paper, “A Tradition of Natural Kinds,” Ian Hacking says:

[S]imilarity is a passive notion, one that observers can attend to. They note resemblances . . . Bits of copper may “resemble” each other in being malleable and ductile, but that is an evasive, Latinate and spectator-oriented way of saying something about their dispositional properties . . . I emphasize instead that what we can do with, and what can be done to us by, things of a kind, is precisely why natural kinds originated and persist in our interest . . . (113)

When we recognize things to use, modify or guard against, we say they are of certain kinds . . . Kinds are important to the agents and artisans who want to use things to do things. Were not our world amenable to classification into kinds that we cognize, we should not have been able to develop any crafts. . . . We dwell in a universe of kinds. (114)

Following Hacking, I suggest that we are all members of social categories because all of us have a standing substantial practical interest in what other people can do with, for or to us, and what we can do with, to and for other people, a practical and urgent interest in strong-enough generalization, expectation and prediction. That is to say, we need to be intelligible to others, and we need others to be intelligible to us. With respect to other people as much as to non-human things we are, as Hacking noted, artisans, craftspersons, *homo faber*. We constructively interact, materially *and* socially, with the elements of our environments. The metaphor of simulated or artificial species suggests that although social categories change and membership in them is neither ontologically fixed nor clearly bounded, they are not arbitrary, unstable, accidental clusters with no principles of coherence, putting up no principled constraints on what can and cannot *be a  $\Phi$* , or on *what is* and *what is not a  $\Phi$* .

We are kinds of people, and if kinds of people can usefully be figured as artificial natural kinds it may help us grasp the ways we are constrained in what we are and what we can be, enduringly or temporarily, even though we are not bound by essences or any rigid material causality or irresistible socio-symbolic violence.

As, in our theorizing, we come into the influence of these models of our being-the-kinds-we-are (held in suspension with other metaphors like that of the spun thread and a felt ball), and are freed of the gravitational force of the picture of our kinds as sets/containers, we may be able to do more fruitful thinking about the modes and methods of social and political action and agency that would effect the systemic changes dreamt of by radical social and political movements and theorists. Meanwhile, we can articulate our accounts and analyses of the current state of things deploying our work-a-day social categories with some confidence, albeit with conscientious caution to avoid sexist, racist and/or ethnocentric or other egregious overgeneralizations and reductive simplifications.

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## **Part II**

# **Persons and Subjectivity**



## Chapter 7

# The Metaphysics of Relational Autonomy

Jules Holroyd

**Abstract** I here focus on two debates about the conditions for self-governance. In one, the *metaphysical debate*, theorists are concerned with the potential threat that causal determinism poses to self-governance. In another, the *relational debate*, theorists are concerned with the potential threat that certain social conditions—especially those that are oppressive to certain social groups—pose to self-governance.

MacKenzie and Stoljar have suggested (2000) that the concerns of these two debates do not intersect. In this chapter, I draw out the connections between the two debates, arguing that certain views in the relational debate are in tension with certain commitments in the metaphysical debate. I look at a relational condition for autonomous agency from Paul Benson (1994), extrapolate from the cases discussed by Langton (1993) in the literature on speech acts some relational conditions for autonomous action, and examine the formulation of relational conditions for autonomous choice (Stoljar 2000). I argue that each of these views sits in tension with positions in the metaphysical debate (hard determinism, libertarianism, and (more broadly) incompatibilism, respectively). Thus the concerns of the two debates do intersect. Moreover, if these tensions cannot be resolved, then the relational debate brings to bear important considerations in assessing the plausibility of the views in the metaphysical debate.

## Introduction

I here focus on two debates about the conditions for self-governance. In one, the *metaphysical debate*, theorists are concerned with the potential threat that causal determinism poses to self-governance. In another, the *relational debate*, theorists are concerned with the potential threat that certain social conditions—especially those that are oppressive to certain social groups—pose to self-governance.

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MacKenzie and Stoljar have suggested (13) that the concerns of these two debates do not intersect. Is this right? Can an examination of the social relations that might be necessary for autonomy go on without picking up any commitments in the metaphysical debate? Can the metaphysical debate continue without attending to the views propounded in the relational debate? I argue not. My aim here is to draw out the connections between the two debates, arguing that certain views in the relational debate are in tension with certain commitments in the metaphysical debate. I look at a relational condition for autonomous agency from Paul Benson (1994), extrapolate from the cases discussed by Langton (1993) in the literature on speech acts some relational conditions for autonomous action, and examine the formulation of relational conditions for autonomous choice (Stoljar 2000). I argue that each of these views sits in tension with positions in the metaphysical debate (hard determinism, libertarianism, and (more broadly) incompatibilism, respectively). Thus the concerns of the two debates *do* intersect. Moreover, if these tensions cannot be resolved, then the relational debate brings to bear important considerations in assessing the plausibility of the views in the metaphysical debate.

## Two Debates

The literature on the metaphysical grounding for free will is vast. One of the key questions that authors in this literature deal with is “how must the world be, if agents are to have free will?” The relevant aspect of the world that the authors hone in on is the nature of causal relations: how must these relations be, if agents are to have free will? Specifically, must the causal relations that obtain between events be indeterministic? Or can deterministic causal relations be compatible with free will? I will refer to the body of literature that discusses these problems as the metaphysical debate. I will refer to the kind of self-governance with which these theorists are concerned as autonomy<sub>m</sub>.

There is also a burgeoning body of literature, much of it by feminist philosophers, in which authors have explored whether the conditions for autonomy are “relational”. The central question dealt with in this literature is “how must the social world be, if agents are to have autonomy?” Specifically, must the agent stand in certain social relations in order to be autonomous? Must social conditions provide a certain range of options to, or secure certain social standing for the agent, if she is to be autonomous? I will refer to the literature that is concerned with these problems as the relational debate, and to the kind of self-governance with which these theorists are concerned as autonomy<sub>r</sub>.

Both of these bodies of literature concern the matter of *self-governance*. One threat to self-governance might be a deterministic world: a world in which deterministic chains of events stretch out, foreclosing alternative courses of action; these might primarily govern choice and action, and the agent who is their source. Another threat to self-governance might be a certain kind of social determination; social forces may subsume the role of the agent in determining her choices and actions.

Might these debates, both concerned with the conditions for self-governance, inform each other? This claim from Natalie Stoljar and Catriona MacKenzie suggests not:

The debates [about autonomy] within the contemporary literature arise in response to two distinct sets of issues, which we refer to as the metaphysical problem and the socialisation problem. The metaphysical problem focuses on the implications of determinism for autonomy . . . . The socialisation problem focuses on the implications of socialisation for autonomy. Since our primary aim is to highlight issues within the mainstream literature on autonomy that intersect with feminist concerns and to explain the impetus toward the development of relational approaches to autonomy, our discussion focuses mainly on the socialisation problem. (13)

What is here referred to as “the socialisation problem” is what I have set out as the relational debate, although the debate is broader than that implied by the label “socialisation problem”.<sup>1</sup> The implication is that feminist concerns have a stake in the relational debate, but that, first, such concerns do not intersect with the metaphysical debate, and second, that the socialisation debate and the metaphysical debate themselves do not intersect.

I want to challenge this thought, and, in bringing the two debates together, highlight the stake that those who are interested in developing relational conceptions of autonomy have in the metaphysical debate. In doing so, I will set out in a little more detail the concerns and views in each debate. I will argue that in looking at the two debates side by side it becomes clear that the kind of concerns that motivate the adoption of relational conceptions stand in tension with a certain cluster of views in the metaphysical debate. A stronger point is also in the offing: if we think that relational conceptions of autonomy are plausible, or even correct, and the tensions I highlight turn out to be irresolvable, then the relational views may have significant import for the metaphysical debate.

## The Relational Debate

A relational conception of autonomy is one which has “amongst its defining conditions requirements concerning the interpersonal or social environment of the agent” (Christman 147). That is, such a conception posits as a necessary condition for autonomy that the agent stand in certain social relationships or certain social conditions. A range of views can be understood as relational and it will not be possible to address them each here. Rather, I will focus on three prominent relational views.

A distinctive feature of relational conceptions of autonomy is that they are concerned to take into account the social aspects of autonomy, where these aspects

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<sup>1</sup>The term “the socialisation problem” implies that the potential threat to an agent’s autonomy is simply the kind of socialisation to which she is subject (in particular, gender socialisation). But the views that appear in the relational debate, as I have briefly outlined it, extend to considering various ways in which the structure of social relations might hinder or foster autonomy (socialisation may of course be relevant insofar as these structures are engendered and perpetuated by processes of socialisation).

include the social conditions that might impact upon or constitute an agent's capacity to be autonomous, or the social relations that might impact upon (hindering or enabling) the exercise of autonomous agency. As such, these conceptions make reference, in specifying the conditions for autonomy, to the social conditions or relations of the agent.

Now, autonomy has different aspects: the conditions for autonomous agency, action and choice should not be expected to be the same (for example, the conditions for autonomous action will presumably make reference to the agent's governance of her bodily movements in a way that the conditions for autonomous choice will not (or at least not in the same way)). I will look at relational condition for each aspect of autonomy. The first relational view I set out is concerned with the social aspects of autonomous *agency*—the deliberative competences of the agent. The second is concerned with the social aspects of autonomous *action*—namely, the agent's ability to execute her decisions as she intends. The third condition is for *autonomous choice*—proper self-governance in deliberation and choice.

I do not here undertake to endorse or evaluate the arguments for these relational conditions. Rather, I will argue that for each of these aspects of autonomy, there are issues of direct relevance to the metaphysical debate. To see this, I will spell out a little more of the detail of these views, before setting out the views in the metaphysical debate with which those of the relational debate intersect.

### ***Three Relational Views***

#### **Relational Conditions for Autonomous Agency**

Paul Benson (1994, 2005a) examines the way that an agent's view of herself as an authoritative, accountable agent can be deeply affected by the esteem in which others hold her. He argues that in the absence of a sense of herself as answerable a person may experience alienation from her agency and become quite disassociated from her actions such that she feels unable to properly grasp, or give, reasons for which she acts; self-governance is undermined. Benson thus maintains that in order for an agent to be autonomous (that is, to have autonomy<sub>r</sub>) an agent must meet the following relational condition:

(RA1) A necessary condition for autonomy<sub>r</sub> is that the agent authorises herself as an accountable agent ("Free Agency", "Taking Ownership").

An agent is autonomous when she has—and can exercise—the capacities for self-governance. Benson brings to light the social aspects of autonomous agency by way of example. He gives us the case of Ingrid, who is "gaslighted" by her husband:

Gaslighted<sup>2</sup> [America, the end of the nineteenth century]: Ingrid is diagnosed with hysteria by her well meaning but mistaken husband, who is also a doctor. Ingrid does not dispute

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<sup>2</sup>Gaslight: "to manipulate (a person) by psychological means into questioning his or her own sanity" (<http://www.oed.com/>). Benson's example is a (significant) reworking of the plot in the 1944 film *Gaslight*.

or resist her husband's diagnosis, believing his judgement 'on the basis of reasons that are accepted by a scientific establishment which is socially validated and which she trusts'. As a result, Ingrid 'ends up isolated, and feeling rather crazy'. Ingrid no longer trusts her competences as an agent, in particular, her competence to grasp normative standards or respond to reasons—'she has ceased to trust herself to govern her conduct competently' ("Free Agency" 656–7)

The key social aspect, according to Benson, is that Ingrid no longer sees herself "as being competent to answer for [her] conduct in light of normative demands that, from [her] point of view others might appropriately apply to [her] actions" (660). Whilst Ingrid may meet whatever other necessary conditions are required for autonomy (reflective endorsement of the motives on which she acts, endorsement of the processes by which she formed her motives, and so on), she is nonetheless non-autonomous. This is accounted for, he claimed, by her failure to see herself as a competent agent, who can be held answerable for her action. She fails to see herself as a competent agent when it comes to grasping the norms that her actions will be judged by, and hence when it comes to answering for her action in light of such norms. In short, the views of others—the esteem in which they hold her—impact upon her sense of herself as an accountable agent. In his later work ("Taking Ownership"), Benson emphasises that agents in so regarding themselves *authorise* their wills, and thus take ownership of their reasons for action; once again, failing to be regarded as competent or as worthy can undermine the agents' attitude of self-authorisation.

Benson thus draws attention to how social relations might impact upon an agent's sense of accountability and to how lacking this sense an agent may feel alienated or disengaged from her action. The central relevance Benson gives in his conception of autonomy<sub>r</sub>, to the relationships of accountability and the agent's sense and authorisation of herself as an accountable agent is of importance for present purposes. I will argue that such a relational account is in tension with a set of views in the metaphysical debate. If this is right, then the issues in the metaphysical debate and the relational debate do intersect.

### Relational Conditions for Autonomous Action

The second view of concern here is one that is motivated by the thought that sometimes our actions are in part constituted by the obtaining of certain relational conditions.<sup>3</sup> An agent is autonomous in action when she can successfully execute the action that she (primarily) intends. The claim, then, is that certain social relations must obtain if the action that the agent intends is to be successfully executed. Thus the following relational condition can be specified:

(RA2) a necessary condition for autonomous action (for some actions) is that relations of "reciprocity" obtain (Andrea Westlund, "Autonomy in Oppressive Contexts", unpublished paper)

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<sup>3</sup>The kinds of actions under discussion are discussed by Langton as speech acts. Andrea Westlund discusses these actions as a matter of self-governance.

In her defence of the claim that pornography could be a speech act that silences, Langton presents a case in which an agent fails to successfully execute the act of refusal. The case is presented as follows:

Consider the utterance 'no'. We all know how to do things with this word. We use it, typically, to disagree, to refuse, or to prohibit. In sexual contexts a woman sometimes uses it to refuse sex, to prohibit further sexual advances. However, in sexual contexts something odd happens. Sometimes a woman tries to use the 'no' locution to refuse sex, and it does not work. . . . Sometimes 'no' when spoken by a woman, does not count as the act of refusal. The hearer fails to recognise the utterance as a refusal . . . In saying 'no' she may well intend to refuse. By saying 'no' she intends to prevent sex, but she is far from doing what she intends. She performs the appropriate locutionary act [i.e., she utters some words]. She means what she says. She intends to refuse. She tries to refuse. But what she says misfires. . . Refusal—in that context—has become unspeakable for her. (320)

Andrea Westlund instructively suggests that we understand this case in terms of autonomy<sub>r</sub>—the agent's autonomy of action is thwarted, as she is unable to execute the action she intends to. Her action might be understood at various levels of description: the uttering of some words, saying something, communicating something, stopping his sexual advances. The relevant level of description, for present purposes, is the description of the agent's *communicative intention*. She fails to communicate what she intends (although she succeeds in uttering some words, saying something). Her refusal "misfires" and is not communicated.

Westlund suggests that, if we accept Langton's claims about how social norms—here, the norms of sexuality—might prevent women from performing certain actions, we here have a case that brings to light the social aspects of autonomous action.<sup>4</sup> Indeed the "uptake" or reciprocity of the audience that is required for the performance of the refusal is constitutive of the action in such a way that we can make the following claim: for the performance of certain communicative actions certain social relations are necessary as constitutive parts of the performance of those actions. The social relations at issue are those in which the intentions of the agent (in this case, the woman) are transparent to the "audience" (here, the man), and the agent is accorded the status to perform the action she intends (she is not treated as insincere, say). If these two conditions are met in the relationship, then there will be uptake; the woman will succeed in her illocution of refusal.

Thinking of Langton's case in terms of autonomy<sub>r</sub>, then, is instructive in bringing to light the social aspects of autonomous action. Certain social relations are required for the performance of some communicative actions. The relevant point for present purposes is that such a condition is underpinned by the following thought:

(MA) an agent can be self-governing when control over her action does not reside completely with herself.

I will argue that a relational account that is motivated by such a thought is in tension with a different set of views in the metaphysical debate. Once again, then,

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<sup>4</sup>What I here refer to as social norms, Langton talks of in terms of *the conditions for the speech acts of women*, which she argues, pornographers might be understood to set.

it appears that the two debates intersect. Moreover, if the thought that motivates the relational theorist is a plausible one, then unless the tension can be resolved, there is *prima facie* reason to reject the metaphysical position.

### Relational Conditions for Autonomous Choice

Finally, let us consider a relational view of autonomous choice. Natalie Stoljar has argued that for a choice to be autonomous, an agent must choose in accordance with a certain value. The value she specifies might be understood as “the true and the good”, set in contrast to the “false and oppressive”—when agents choose in accordance with such norms, claims Stoljar, the choice is non-autonomous (107, 108). Such a view takes into account social conditions in two ways: first, that social conditions may be non-conducive to equipping agents with a sense of the true and the non-oppressive comes to the fore. Second, some social conditions or relations cannot be autonomously chosen, namely, those that are false and oppressive. Thus the following condition will be under consideration:

(RA3) a necessary condition for autonomous choice is that the agent does not choose in accordance with the false and oppressive (Stoljar, “Autonomy and the Feminist Intuition”).

A positive version of this condition can be stated as:

(RA3\*) a necessary condition for autonomous choice is that the agent chooses in accordance with the true and the non-oppressive or good.

In arguing for a condition of this form, Stoljar starts with the intuition that certain women are non-autonomous in their choice to take contraceptive risks. Having shown that each meets any procedural necessary conditions that demand reflective deliberation or certain structures of the will, Stoljar argues that the best explanation for this “feminist intuition”<sup>5</sup> is simply that the agents are acting in accordance with false and oppressive norms: norms concerning the value of women depending upon certain aspects of their sexuality and fertility, for example. Thus she holds that “to vindicate the feminist intuition that the subjects [who acted in accordance with ‘false and oppressive norms’] are not autonomous . . . feminists need to develop a strong substantive theory of autonomy” (109), where by this is meant an account which incorporates a demand that the agent choose in accordance with some value. As Benson puts it:

substantive accounts of autonomy . . . [are] those in which the contents of the preferences or values that agents can form or act upon autonomously are subject to direct, normative constraints . . . there must be some things that autonomous agents cannot prefer or value without sacrificing some autonomy, where this restriction depends immediately on the substance of such preferences or values. (“Feminist Intuitions” 133)

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<sup>5</sup>Benson objects to Stoljar’s claim to this intuition as “the feminist intuition”, arguing that different intuitions might well be held by feminist theorists (such as himself). See Benson, “Feminist Intuitions”.

I hope to have said enough to have shed some light on the claims set out above as (RA1), (RA2) and (RA3), and their plausibility. I have not argued for this, nor is it my intention to defend them here. Rather, the aim is to show the intersection of the two debates. With this in mind, I now turn to the metaphysical debate. I will argue that each condition addresses issues that are of direct relevance to particular views in the metaphysical debate.

## The Metaphysical Debate

This debate, as outlined earlier, concerns the metaphysical conditions for self-governance: namely, whether a causally deterministic world is compatible with an *agent* governing herself, rather than being a mere vessel for causal forces. There are, broadly, two lines of argument that lead some theorists (*incompatibilists*) to doubt this. The first concerns what a causally deterministic world would mean for an agent's *governance* of her choices and actions. The second concerns what the *ultimate source* of an agent's action is in a causally deterministic world.

### *Ability to Do Otherwise*

Suppose that one holds that an action is not freely self-governed unless an agent has the ability to do otherwise than perform that action. There is some intuitive force to this: if Clara is shoved and cannot control her movements, unable to do otherwise than barge into Clarke, then she does not barge freely; if Bernadette is locked in a room and has no option other than to remain there, she does not remain there freely; if Annette is addicted to drug C such that she is physically and psychologically compelled to take drug C—she cannot choose or do otherwise—then she is not free when she acts to take the drug. If the relevant freedom-undermining factor in these cases is the absence of the ability to do otherwise, then an argument can be constructed for the incompatibility of autonomy and causal determinism. Such an argument, in brief, goes as follows:

#### Argument 1

1. if causal determinism is true, then every event is determined by some prior event.
2. if every event is determined by some prior event, then no event—including the events of an agent performing an action—could be other than it in fact is.
3. an agent is free when she has the ability to perform an action (bring about an event) other than the one she in fact did.
4. if causal determinism is true, then no agent could perform an action (bring about an event) other than the one she in fact did.

C1: if causal determinism is true, then no agents are free. (Van Inwagen, “Incompatibility”)

The central thought here is:

(I1) self-government requires the ability to govern over two or more courses of action.

Now, one of the reasons for which the ability to do otherwise is important to self-governance concerns what follows, in terms of accountability for action, from the fact that an agent is self-governing. Gary Watson claims that the demand for alternate possibilities stems from the thought that if we are to hold self-governing agents to account, then it must be fair to do so (“Two Faces”). Holding an agent to account means not only *attributing* the action to an agent, but also demanding of her that she *answer* for the action and its (foreseen) consequences. It is only fair to demand that an agent be accountable for her action, Watson claims, insofar as the agent has had the chance to avoid performing the action. In Watson’s view, then, holding others accountable is incompatible with the truth of the thesis of determinism. It should be clear that this is of relevance to the relational view (RA1) that I set out above. I turn to this shortly.

### *Causally Deterministic Histories*

Some theorists reject premise 3 of this argument (and hence (I1)), claiming that an agent can be free in the absence of the ability to do otherwise. If Annette wants to crave the drug and wants to take the drug, gleefully sourcing it, then it matters not that she cannot do otherwise than take it; if Bernadette wants to stay in the room, happily stationed there, then it matters not that she could not leave. To paraphrase Harry Frankfurt: if one can do what one wants, and has the will that one wants, then what more is there to freedom than this? (See “Freedom of the Will” 19) The presence of alternate options is, on this view, insignificant (see Frankfurt, “Alternate Possibilities”).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Watson suggests that whilst holding others *accountable* requires that they had the ability to do otherwise, we can nonetheless *attribute* actions to agents in a causally deterministic world. This has moral and evaluative significance, he claims, when the actions attributed are expressive of the agent’s character (see “Two Faces”).

However, some incompatibilists hold that there *is* more to self-governance than the ability to attribute actions to agents. Rather, if an agent is to be self-governing, her choice and action must not have their ultimate source in events beyond the agent’s control. It is this, rather than (or for some in addition to) the demand for alternate possibilities, that is necessary for self-governance. The agent must be the *originator* of her action. If what is relevant to freedom is that the agent is the ultimate source of her action—*she* brought it about, and no other—then a second argument

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<sup>6</sup>Frankfurt’s counter example to the “principle of alternate possibilities” has been much discussed. For objections, see, e.g., Wideker, “Libertarianism and Frankfurt’s Attack”. For a defence, see Fischer, “Frankfurt-style Compatibilism”.

can be constructed for the incompatibility of autonomy<sub>m</sub> and causal determinism. Such an argument, in brief, goes as follows:

### **Argument 2**

1. if causal determinism is true, then all events have their ultimate source in earlier events in a causal chain stretching infinitely back in time.
2. an agent is free when she is the ultimate originator of her choice and action (the event of her performing some action).
3. if causal determinism is true, then all events (including those of agents acting) have their ultimate source in earlier events in a deterministic causal chains that is beyond her control.
4. if causal determinism is true, then no agent is the ultimate originator of her choices or actions.

C2: if causal determinism is true, no agent is free in choosing or acting.

The key thought driving this argument is that:

(I2) self-government requires that the agent's action not be ultimately dependent upon factors outside of her control.

Put in its positive form, this amounts to the claim that:

(I3) self-government requires that the agent's action is 'up to her' in a way that is precluded by causal determinism and lack of ultimate control.

It should already be clear that these claims are of relevance to the second relational view (RA2) and (MA) that I outlined above. I turn to this shortly.

### ***Positions in the Metaphysical Debate***

Some accept the conclusions of either *Argument 1* or *Argument 2*, thus accepting that free agency, or self-governance, is incompatible with a causally deterministic world. These incompatibilists have two positions available to them: one could hold that determinism is true, and that therefore there are no autonomous agents. This view is *hard determinism*. Or, one could hold that there are autonomous agents, and thus determinism is false. This view is held by *libertarians*. (Actually, there is an alternative position available: *agnostic incompatibilism*—reserving judgment as to the nature of causal relations in the world, and the existence of free agents, whilst maintaining an incompatibilist stance.)

Those theorists who fail to be impressed by *Argument 1* and *Argument 2* are compatibilists. These theorists deny that the truth of the thesis of causal determinism entails the absence of autonomous agency and maintain that self-governing agents could exist in a world with deterministic laws (some compatibilists remain metaphysically agnostic, maintaining that the truth or falsity of determinism is irrelevant to the conditions for free agents (see Mele, *Autonomous Agents*)). Other compatibilists insist that determinism itself is necessary for self-governance (indeterminism entailing a randomness that is antithetical to control) (Wolf, "Asymmetrical

Freedom”). The compatibilist task is then to spell out the conditions necessary or sufficient for free agency irrespective of the presence of a deterministic causal history.<sup>7</sup>

My aim here is not to offer a critical view on the existing arguments for compatibilism or incompatibilism. Rather, my hope is to show, first, that some of the thoughts that motivate relational conditions speak to some of the considerations in the metaphysical debate. Second, I suggest that the relational theorists can contribute to the metaphysical debate, insofar as the plausibility of relational conceptions may rule out the plausibility of some views in the metaphysical debate.

## The Metaphysics of Relational Autonomy

I have noted the comment from MacKenzie and Stoljar, which implies that the two debates do not intersect and can continue alongside, but without attending to, each other. Indeed, many theorists offering relational conditions for self-governance do not mention anything of the metaphysical debate. Marilyn Friedman is an exception in explicitly stating that she envisages her conception to sit in a compatibilist framework. I want to suggest that this is where relational conceptions seem most comfortably to sit. I will draw out the kinds of tensions that hold between the relational conditions that I have set out and some of the views in the metaphysical debate.

### *Agency: Relational Autonomy Vs. Hard Determinism*

According to Benson’s relational view, we have the claim:

(RA1) A necessary condition for autonomy<sub>r</sub> is that the agent authorises herself as an accountable agent (“Free Agency”, “Taking Ownership”).

On a relational view that holds (RA1), such as Benson’s, an important causal role is given both to the beliefs of others and the agent’s own beliefs about her status as an accountable agent. The demand, as stated by Benson, is that “the agent feel that he is in a position to respond to normative expectations arising within one domain or social context” (“Free Agency” 663).

Recall Watson’s claim that it is not fair to hold agents accountable if they are unable to do otherwise. A hard determinist who accepts the truth of determinism, that autonomy<sub>m</sub> and determinism are incompatible, will thus hold that no agents have autonomy<sub>m</sub>. Now, we also have the claim that for an agent to be accountable, she must have autonomy<sub>m</sub>. But no agents have autonomy<sub>m</sub>, so no agent, according to the hard determinist, is accountable. Thus we have the following two claims:

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<sup>7</sup>For a range of compatibilist views, see Fischer and Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control*; Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason*; and Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will” and the range of modifications he has since made to this view.

- (A) some agents have autonomy<sub>r</sub>, which requires that these agents believe themselves to be accountable.
- (B) according to the hard determinist, no agent is accountable, because no agent has autonomy<sub>m</sub>.

There is a tension, then, that means it will be difficult to be a hard determinist claiming that no agents have autonomy<sub>m</sub>, whilst holding that there are agents who have autonomy<sub>r</sub>. This is because such a hard determinist will have to be committed to two claims: first, that autonomy<sub>r</sub> requires that agents believe something false (namely, that they are accountable). Secondly, that in achieving autonomy<sub>r</sub>, false beliefs play an important causal role: namely, the beliefs of the agent, and of others, about her accountability. The tension, then, is that a hard determinist can only accept Benson's conception of relational autonomy if she is to accept that false beliefs play a widespread and important role in sustaining our everyday ("shallow" to the hard determinist) agency.<sup>8</sup>

The commitment that this tension leads to, then, makes hard determinism and a relational theory that posits (RA1) difficult to reconcile. Hard determinism could only be accepted whilst accepting a significant role for false beliefs in sustaining our everyday agency. In particular, this means that hard determinism of the stripe that Derk Pereboom advocates cannot be maintained ("Determinism").

In considering the threat that a belief in the truth of the hard deterministic thesis might pose for continuing effective deliberation, Pereboom suggests that "hard determinism seems to leave us with the following choice: either deliberate and have a belief you know to be false whenever you do, or cease to deliberate" (32). The latter option (ceasing to deliberate) is one in which the agent accepts the truth of hard determinism and fails to sustain a false belief in one's efficacy as a deliberator. The suggestion is that this would lead an agent to a position in which she simply could not continue with the deliberation required for agency. This is a position not dissimilar to that of Ingrid, who, ceasing to believe that she is a competent, answerable agent, ceases to function as an effective agent. Pereboom is highlighting just the tension I have set out in holding (A) and (B), and comments that it is "disturbing to maintain that one must be theoretically irrational whenever one deliberates" (32).

However, Pereboom goes on to suggest that this thought is a mistaken one—accepting the truth of hard determinism does not mean that one must cease to deliberate, so long as one continues to believe that one's deliberations and choices are causally efficacious. He maintains that if "one's actions are determined by deliberation and choice ... as long as one does not know beforehand what the result of deliberation will be, there will be no interference with the deliberative process" (32).

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<sup>8</sup>It is worth noting that such a view has been defended: Saul Smilansky argues for "illusionism", the view that false beliefs play a key role in maintaining our belief in our status as self-governance and responsible agents. See his "Free Will: From Nature to Illusion". See Lenman, "On the Alleged Shallowness", for concerns with Smilansky's illusionism.

Here, then, we see the crucial point of intersection: if Benson's view is right, then Pereboom cannot maintain this thought. If the threat to deliberation comes not from the belief that one's choice is determined simpliciter, but rather from what follows from this—namely, the belief that one's choice is determined and so one is not accountable or answerable for it—then there *will* be interference with the deliberative process. Certainly, deliberation is still required; determinism does not pre-empt the agent's decision, as Pereboom insists. But Benson's example shows how an agent's failure to believe that she is accountable (a consequence of believing the truth of hard determinism) can lead to her suffer the kind of "estrangement from her conduct" that Pereboom wants to deny ("Free Agency" 657). If Benson is right, then we must reject Pereboom's claims, and the hard determinist must make the "disturbing" demand that autonomy<sub>r</sub> requires false beliefs.

## Action: Relational Autonomy Vs. Libertarianism

The other stripe of incompatibilist is the libertarian. The libertarian maintains that autonomy<sub>m</sub> and causal determinism are incompatible, but that nonetheless there *are* free agents. I here argue that some libertarians who are impressed by *Argument 2* will find their commitments in tension with the relational condition (RA2).

The key thought underpinning *Argument 2*, we saw, was:

(I2) self-government requires that the agent's action not be ultimately dependent upon factors outside of her control.

When we considered *Argument 2* we saw that (I2) underpinned the incompatibilist's discomfort with deterministic causal histories. In a deterministic world, the ultimate origin of the agent's action are events outside of her control. Her action is dependent upon these prior events over which she had no control, or role in bringing about.

Recall that according to (RA2) and the motivating thought (MA), an agent can be self-governing when control over her action does not reside completely with herself. Indeed, in the cases we saw from Langton, autonomy<sub>r</sub> is not merely compatible with, but *requires* that the action is dependent upon the reciprocity of another agent (the "audience", whose uptake is partly constitutive of the action). Thus we have the following two claims:

(C) autonomy<sub>m</sub> requires that the agent's action is "up to her".

(D) autonomy<sub>r</sub>, on occasion, requires that the agent's action is not "up to her".

We have what appears to be a tension: the necessary conditions for autonomy<sub>m</sub> and autonomy<sub>r</sub> appear to be inconsistent. Whether this is the case will depend upon

precisely how the libertarian spells out the demand couched here in the terminology of “up to her”.<sup>9</sup> Here are two ways of understanding this claim:

(C') autonomy<sub>m</sub> requires that there is no other sufficient cause of (i.e., no other event or agent able to causally explain) the agent's action.

On this reading, the libertarian demands the absence of deterministic causal histories, because the presence of such would be sufficient for bringing about the agent's action. This reading is consistent with (D): (RA2) posits for autonomy<sub>r</sub>, some necessary conditions—but not other sufficient conditions. There is an alternative way to understand (C), however, as suggested by Chisholm:

We should say that at least one of the events that are involved in the act is caused, not by any other events, but by something else instead. And this something else can only be the agent—the man [sic]. If there is an event that is caused, not by other events, but by the man, then there are some events involved in the act that are not caused by other events. But if the event in question is caused by the man then it *is* caused and we are not committed to saying that there is something involved in the act that is not caused at all. (30)

The thought here is this: to avoid the problems of Arguments 1 and 2, above, the libertarian must deny that prior events causally determine an agent's action. But the libertarian does not want to be committed to the claim that agent's action is not caused at all. So a form of *agent-causation* is posited. It is the agent that causes the action. On this view the libertarian holds:

(C'') autonomy<sub>m</sub> requires that there is no other sufficient cause for the agent's action and that the agent is a sufficient cause for her action.

This kind of commitment is incompatible with that of (RA2), according to which the successful execution of the agent's intention requires the cooperation of other agents. The agent is not a sufficient cause of her action when she acts with autonomy<sub>r</sub>. A relational theorist who holds (RA2), then, cannot reconcile this commitment with that of libertarians who advocate agent-causation views that are committed to (C''). Again, looking at the two debates side by side brings to the fore the points of intersection between the two debates.

## Choice: Relational Autonomy Vs. Incompatibilism

Stoljar's substantive condition for autonomous choice was specified as:

(RA3) a necessary condition for autonomous choice is that the agent choose in accordance with the value of the true and the good (Stoljar, “Autonomy and the Feminist Intuition”).

Now, whilst Stoljar calls for this kind of condition in order to make sense of the potential threat that oppressive socialisation poses to women's autonomy, she does not spell out in detail what such an account requires. There are quite different

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<sup>9</sup>For use of this phrase see Strawson, *Freedom and Belief*, and “The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility”; and Kane, “Two Kinds of Incompatibilism”.

demands that might be made. Perhaps the call is for the agent to *believe* that her choice is in accordance with the true and the good. But this cannot be all that is required, because the agents that Stoljar scrutinises do not believe their choices to be guided by oppressive norms; indeed, she claims that “because of the internalisation of the norm, they do not have the capacity to perceive it as false” (“Autonomy and the Feminist Intuition” 109). In addition to believing that her choice is in accordance with the relevant value, then, surely the agent must be right about this: her choice must in fact be in accordance with the value. And if the substantive theorist is to demand something like “proper appreciation” of the value in question (as Thomas Hill Jr. does<sup>10</sup>), then surely she will require that an agent’s choice is made *because* of her (true) beliefs about the object of choice according with the value.

To be clear, no such commitments are explicitly made by a relational theorist—such an account has not been developed in full, and I am merely considering ways in which such a view may plausibly be filled in. The point I am aiming for is this: if a substantive account fills out “proper appreciation” in a certain way, some commitments will be picked up in the metaphysical debate.

Susan Wolf writes that to be undetermined by some value “would mean that the agent had the ability to act against everything that he believes in and cares about . . . one might think [an agent] would have to be quite insane if he even had the ability to perform [such an action]” (“Asymmetrical Freedom” 153). Thus Wolf argues that, insofar as one is to have a proper appreciation of the true and the good, an agent must be determined by values, or reasons. One reading of the “in accordance with” relation in (RA3) demands that the agent “*is determined by*” the value. This is a plausible understanding of the substantive relational theorist’s commitment, insofar as she requires that the agent truly believe her choice accords with the value, and so choose *because* of this belief. Her choice must be *determined* by her beliefs about this value:

(RA3’) a necessary condition for autonomous choice is that the agent’s choice is determined by the value of the true and the good.

If the relational condition for autonomous choice is spelt out in such a way, then it is clear that commitments are incorporated. Being so determined is *required* for autonomy<sub>r</sub>. Compare the demand of the relational theorist with that of the incompatibilist:

- (E) autonomy<sub>r</sub> requires that the agent’s choice is determined by (her beliefs about) value *v*.
- (F) autonomy<sub>m</sub> requires that the agent’s choice is not determined by prior events.

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<sup>10</sup>See his “Servility and Self-Respect”. Hill argues for a substantive constraint on autonomous choice, claiming that this can make sense of the problematic choices of the deferential wife (and other servile individuals).

Thus if a relational theorist takes up Stoljar's claim that only a substantive condition can make sense of how social relations can thwart women's autonomy, then insofar as a formulation such as (RA3') is incorporated, she will hold commitments that are inconsistent with those of incompatibilism.

## Conclusions

Where does this leave the metaphysics of relational autonomy? I have argued that some incompatibilist views—Pereboom's hard determinism, and agent-causal libertarianism—are in tension with the commitments of relational views that hold (RA1) or (RA2), respectively.<sup>11</sup> A relational theorist who adopts (RA3'), moreover, will have commitments inconsistent with any stripe of incompatibilism. I have not argued for or defended any of the relational conditions here. However, whilst substantive conditions such as (RA3) are underdeveloped, I believe that the relational conditions (RA1) and (RA2) bring important social aspects of autonomy to the debate.

The main aim of this chapter, though, was to show that the concerns of the two debates *do* intersect, and that it is worth considering the points of intersection. At least, a theorist with commitments in the relational debate may find herself with commitments in the metaphysical debate. It is worth noting that the tensions I have brought out are predominantly between relational conceptions and stripes of incompatibilist view. Thus relational theorists may find compatibilist views of metaphysical autonomy of greater appeal. Moreover, if the tensions cannot be satisfactorily resolved, then it may be that the relational debate has conclusions of import for the metaphysical debate: insofar as these views are plausible, the relational theorist who is inclined towards incompatibilism must take up the challenges that are presented by the relational conditions.

I hope to have shown that concerns in the relational debate and the metaphysical debate intersect; that discussions of relational autonomy bring important considerations to bear on the metaphysical debate; that there are important contributions for feminist philosophers to make to the metaphysics of autonomous agency.

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<sup>11</sup>I mentioned that agnostic incompatibilism was also an option. But this will not be of help here: remaining agnostic between libertarianism or hard determinism would leave the relational theorist agnostic between two positions each of which are in tension with her view.

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## Chapter 8

# Beauvoir on the Allure of Self-Objectification

Nancy Bauer

**Abstract** In the past 20 years feminist philosophy has come to fetishize two metaphysics of gender: (1) gender reificationism, on which what it is to be a man or a woman is taken to be definable with precision, and (2) gender eliminativism, on which the notions of “man” and “woman” are understood as thoroughly political concepts. These two positions, which are not necessarily incompatible, both fail to take seriously the phenomenology of being a woman; and their popularity goes hand in hand with the increasing irrelevance of feminist philosophy in women’s lives. We find an antidote to the current state of affairs in Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir’s metaphysic of sex difference helps us to make sense of the experience of contemporary young women whose investment in their own professional success as “alpha girls” seems decidedly at odds with their apparently retrogressive roles in the current “hook-up culture.” The explanatory power of Beauvoir’s model makes attractive her insistence on the crucial grounding role that everyday experience must play in metaphysical reflection. It also suggests that to be a human being is, and always will be, to be tempted to objectify oneself.

The claim that norms of femininity and masculinity are not biologically or otherwise naturally mandated and that the absoluteness of their normativity makes them inherently oppressive lies at the heart of contemporary feminist philosophy. Judith Butler took this idea to a certain logical limit when she proposed in her landmark book *Gender Trouble* (1990) that gender, far from being a more or less static feature of a person’s identity, bodily based or otherwise, is a kind of continuous apparitional impression that emerges and gets its intelligibility only from a person’s endlessly repeated performances of masculinity or femininity as defined by the reigning gender norms. On Butler’s view, further, “maleness” and “femaleness” are bogeyman concepts: we feel compelled to divide all human beings into two sexed types based on certain physiological criteria only as a way of attempting to anchor whatever gender norms happen to obtain. Our investment in reifying sex and gender, Butler argued, is a function of the punishment, in the form of socially

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sanctioned ostracizing and violence and the accompanying psychological anguish, that awaits those who dare to step over the lines that determine the fundamental meanings of our bodies.

In the 20-year period during which Butler's position has entrenched itself in feminist philosophy, we also find a heartening loosening of gender norms in at least some parts of the world. Until very recently, to be properly gendered meant, first and foremost, to be heterosexual. But over the last couple of decades discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people has been waning, however slowly and incompletely, at least in certain localities. And we might think that if progressive people in great enough numbers continue to expose the socially constructed nature of gender, then we can at least hope to arrive at a world in which gender norms lose their grip on us altogether.<sup>1</sup> This is the world that contemporary feminist philosophy for the most part aims to bring into existence—that is, a world in which there is no longer a need for feminist philosophy per se. Indeed, insofar as the enemy is now *gender*, rather than misogyny, and insofar as gender norms vary according to and intersect with other loci of oppression, such as racial classifications, social class, and norms of bodily ability/disability, it follows, as Butler observed long ago, that for feminist philosophy to privilege the goal of women's liberation or even to make claims about "women's lives" is for it to risk contradicting itself. While we can deploy the concept *woman* in the service of fighting injustice, we must never forget that to use this concept mindlessly is to reinforce the entrenchment of oppression.<sup>2</sup>

There can be no doubt that what you might call gender-eliminativism has inspired some people who might not otherwise have been disposed to fight injustice—say, certain college students who come across the view in feminist theory classes—to take to the streets or at least to notice and question their own heterosexism. But our obsession with gender-eliminativism and our queasiness about making claims about women's experience has also gone a long way toward ensuring the profound irrelevance of feminist theory in the real world. Those feminist philosophers who do worry in full voice about women are for the most part taking up positions that were well defined decades ago, such as Catharine MacKinnon's claim that pornography is at the heart of the social construction of women as mere sex objects. This is not to say that this sort of *claim* has become irrelevant. But discussions of such claims tend to proceed as though social conditions have not changed in any important ways

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<sup>1</sup>See, e.g., Haslanger: "A consequence of my view is that when justice is achieved, there will no longer be white women (there will no longer be men or women, whites or members of any other race). At that point we—or more realistically, our descendants—won't need the concepts of race and gender to describe our current situation" (11). Since I won't have the opportunity to do so later, let me say here that it is not clear to me that the cases of gender and race are parallel in the way that Haslanger implies they are. To put the point in Haslanger's terms: I doubt that there will ever come a time in which there will no longer be men or women, but the reasons for this doubt, which will become clearer later in this chapter, appear to me not to have analogues in the case of race.

<sup>2</sup>See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, especially Chapter 1. For a similar argument about the dicey political effects of deploying the concept *lesbian*, see Butler, "Imitations".

since the pre-Butler era, that what life is like for women these days is fundamentally no different from what it used to be like. Anti-pornography arguments, for example, ordinarily do not even mention, let alone take seriously, the sea-change that the development of the internet has wrought. The apparent assumption is that the widespread and easy availability of photographs and films about every kind of sex act imaginable ought to have no effect on these arguments other than to underscore how correct they are. We find in the feminist philosophical literature pretty much no serious analysis of our now pornography-besotted world and no interest in engaging in anything other than the usual wrangling about whether pornography causes harm to women or constitutes harm to women or is only one factor in women's oppression or is neutral with respect to women or downright good for us.<sup>3</sup>

I am suggesting that in feminist philosophy today actual women's lives have gotten lost between two theoretical fetishes: on the one hand, we have gender-eliminativism, the quasi-nominalist view that women, per se, don't *really* exist; on the other, we have gender-reificationism, the idea that we know exactly what it means to be a woman.<sup>4</sup> At both of these extremes, the actual experience of women, as women, is invisible.

We may be tempted to imagine that this theoretical predicament is thoroughly postmodern. And yet it is precisely the state of affairs that Simone de Beauvoir described in 1949 in the very first paragraph of the Introduction to *The Second Sex*. After identifying the "*querelle du féminisme*" of the previous century as "voluminous nonsense" and noting that it has not resolved the question of whether there is such a thing as a woman and, if so, what a woman is, Beauvoir writes, "One wonders if women still exist, if they will always exist, whether or not it is desirable that they should, what place they occupy in this world, what their place should be (*The Second Sex*, xix)."<sup>5</sup> But these questions, she immediately goes on to claim, lose their grip on us once we pay attention to our everyday experience:

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<sup>3</sup>I do not mean to imply that these issues are not important. My concern is with the long-term stasis in the terms of the debate and the assumptions that guide it.

<sup>4</sup>The key concept here is *fetish*: my point is that what I am calling gender-eliminativism and gender-reificationism do not take the phenomenology of womanhood seriously. They treat women's experience mainly as something to be analyzed away. As my characterization of Catharine MacKinnon's position suggests, however, the two -isms are not mutually exclusive. You can coherently believe both the gender-reificationist view that what it is to be a woman is consistent across beings properly called "women" (namely, to be treated as an object for men's sexual exploitation and consumption) and the gender-eliminativist claim that the world would and could be a better place without "women," so construed, in it. Furthermore, both gender-eliminativists and gender-reificationists can endorse social constructionism. In coining the term "gender reificationism" instead of using the old term "gender essentialism," I mean to underscore, as MacKinnon does, that you can have a definite view about what gender is and still think that gender is socially constructed. For a decisive argument against the view that gender essentialism and social constructionism are mutually exclusive, see Charlotte Witt's forthcoming monograph.

<sup>5</sup>The original French reads: *On ne sait plus bien s'il existe encore des femmes, s'il en existera toujours, s'il faut ou non le souhaiter, quelle place elles occupent en ce monde, quelle place elles devraient y occuper* (*Le deuxième sexe* I, 11).

In truth, to go for a walk with one's eyes open is enough to demonstrate that humanity is divided into two classes of individuals whose clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, gaits, interests, and occupations are manifestly different. Perhaps these differences are superficial, perhaps they are destined to disappear. What is certain is that for the moment they exist with a blinding obviousness. (*The Second Sex*, xx–xi)<sup>6</sup>

Notice that Beauvoir in this passage in effect declares herself agnostic about the nature of the differences between men and women. What she insists upon is the priority of our everyday sense of these differences. As I have argued at length elsewhere, this priority is a function of Beauvoir's making her own experience as a woman the background against which everything she claims in *The Second Sex* must stand in relief.<sup>7</sup> Her own experience is intelligible to her only as the experience of a woman, which is not to say that she understands her experience to exemplify what it is to be a woman any more than any other woman's life does (Indeed, Beauvoir expresses keen awareness, e.g., on p. xxxiii of the Introduction to *The Second Sex*, that because her experience is that of a financially independent intellectual woman, it is in many respects atypical). The bottom-line fact is that she is identified, by herself and others, as a woman; and for her this means that her inquiry into what a woman is must be answerable to this fact.

*The Second Sex* is a book about what it is for human beings to be sexed, which means that as long as people understand themselves to be sexed the book will not be vulnerable to a certain kind of obsolescence. No matter what social and political advances women and other groups oppressed on the basis of their genders make in the world, no matter how level the playing field gets, no matter how strongly, to quote the very last words of the book, "men and women unequivocally affirm their *fraternité*," *The Second Sex* will still have something of the highest importance to say about what it is to be a woman—indeed, a sexed human being of any kind—and what it takes for such a being to live a genuinely human life (*The Second Sex*, 732).<sup>8</sup>

I admit up front that this claim might well have exasperated Simone de Beauvoir herself. As is well known, she was fond of denying that her main avocation was philosophy. More to the point, in *The Second Sex*, especially in that concluding chapter, she is decidedly sunny about women's socioeconomic prospects and might even be

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<sup>6</sup>Translation modified. The original French reads: *Et en vérité il suffit de se promener les yeux ouverts pour constater que l'humanité se partage en deux catégories d'individus dont les vêtements, le visage, le corps, les sourires, la démarche, les intérêts, les occupations sont manifestement différents: peut-être ces différences sont-elles superficielles, peut-être sont-elles destinées à disparaître. Ce qui est certain c'est que pour l'instant elles existent avec une éclatante évidence* (*Le deuxième sexe* I, 13).

<sup>7</sup>"If I wish to define myself, I am obliged first off to declare: 'I am a woman'; this truth is the background against which all further assertions will stand out" (*The Second Sex*, xxi; translation modified). The original French reads: *Si je veux me définir je suis obligée d'abord de déclarer: "Je suis une femme"; cette vérité constitue le fond sur lequel s'enlèvera toute autre affirmation* (*Le deuxième sexe*, 14). For my interpretation of this move of Beauvoir's, see Bauer, especially Chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>8</sup>The French reads: *les hommes et femmes affirment sans équivoque leur fraternité* (*Le deuxième sexe* II, 663).

taken to be predicting the eventual irrelevance of her own point of view. “It seems almost certain,” she writes, “that sooner or later [women] will arrive at complete economic and social equality”—that is, that human beings will establish the conditions under which women can become truly autonomous (*The Second Sex*, 729).<sup>9</sup> She further predicts that this equality “will bring about an inner metamorphosis.”<sup>10</sup> Beauvoir doesn’t say anything further about this metamorphosis, but it is tempting to think that she means that once women are no longer the second sex, men will stop understanding them as such and women will not regard themselves as in any way inferior to men—that, more broadly, it will make no difference to one’s life whether one is a woman or a man or, for that matter, some other sex. If we stretch the point a little, we might say that Beauvoir makes room for the goal that drives gender-eliminativism. This possibility invites us to ask: if the aim of *The Second Sex* is in fact to eliminate at least the second sex, and perhaps by extension all sexes, as such, both socio-economically and psychologically, and if that aim should be achieved, then doesn’t the book stand to become a document of historical interest alone? Might it not, in fact, already have been eclipsed both theoretically and in real life?

For some people, the answer to this question is yes. Though of late there has been a renaissance of interest in *The Second Sex*, feminist theorists ordinarily do not take their bearings from it.<sup>11</sup> And, in my experience at least, the default position for a good number of young women, at least in the West, is to understand themselves to be living in a post-second-sex world.<sup>12</sup>

We find evidence for this claim in *Alpha Girls*, a book written for a popular audience by a Harvard psychologist named Dan Kindlon. Kindlon argues that progressive social changes in the latter part of the twentieth century have spawned a generation of girls who are “reaping the full benefits of the women’s movement,” a movement that, he implies, is now defunct (7). Thanks to the feminism of previous generations, Kindlon believes, today’s young women are now entitled to do pretty much whatever young men are entitled to do. Moreover, because these girls were born into their entitlement, they are “fundamentally different from [their] sisters of previous generations”: not only *are* they now equal to boys, but they also *experience* themselves, Kindlon claims, as entitled to this equality (xiv). As he puts it, “Issues of sex and gender, dependence and independence, and dominance and subordination are largely irrelevant to how [girls] see [themselves] in the world” (xv). Indeed, Kindlon, the father of two teenage girls himself, goes so far as to quote the passage

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<sup>9</sup>The French reads: *Il semble à peu près certain qu’elles accèderont d’ici un temps plus ou moins long à la parfaite égalité économique et sociale* (*Le deuxième sexe* II, 659).

<sup>10</sup>Ibid. The French reads: *entraînera une métamorphose intérieure*.

<sup>11</sup>Butler is actually an exception here. In her very early work in feminist philosophy she explicitly and frequently expresses her debt to Beauvoir. However, Butler’s view is that Beauvoir did not understand the implications of her views when taken to their logical limits. See, e.g., Butler, “Sex and Gender.”

<sup>12</sup>I say “in the West” rather than “at my university” or even “in the United States” because of responses I’ve gotten to this chapter from young European women.

from the last chapter of *The Second Sex* that I cited earlier and then to declare absolutely flat-out that “de Beauvoir’s inner metamorphosis has occurred” (12).

Kindlon bases this conclusion on interviews he has conducted in recent years with American teenage girls who are highly successful by contemporary standards. One of them, a girl he identifies as “Susan,” described to him what happened when she announced to her mother and aunt which colleges and universities she intended to apply to:

“My mother and aunt sat me down for tea at the kitchen table,” said Susan. It took them a little while to spit out what they wanted to say. They felt that the schools to which I wanted to apply weren’t ‘feminist enough.’ They wanted me to apply to Smith, their alma mater. ‘But I’m not a feminist,’ I told them. That stopped them in their tracks. My mom said that later, after I had left the room, my aunt began to cry because I didn’t consider myself a feminist. My mother confessed that she, too, had been upset. I guess they felt that they had been unable to pass along much of what they had spent their lives fighting for. But they got over it. (15)

If, before they get over it, mothers and aunts are disposed to mourn the shape that their daughters’ inner metamorphoses have taken, fathers, according to Kindlon, have reason to rejoice, since they themselves are now enjoying “a profound impact on the way many girls think and feel, how they interact with the world, and what they want and expect from life” (31). The implication is that while alpha girls and their fathers are living in the real world of today, their wives and mothers and aunts and grandmothers (at least those who are not turning in their graves) are *stuck in the past*. They are clinging to a picture of the world according to which issues of sex and gender, dependence and independence, and dominance and subordination are still very much alive.

And yet there are signs that even Kindlon does not think that we old ladies have completely lost our minds. In the preface to his book, he admits, in passing, that some girls still “lack self-confidence and are anxious, depressed, anorexic, or bulimic” and that “sexual harassment and date rape are real problems that affect too many women and girls” (xv). And in the last chapter of his book, entitled “Alphas in Love,” Kindlon quotes numerous girls talking about how much social pressure there is these days to provide oral sex to random boys—sometimes many different random boys at once. One girl tells Kindlon that this practice, which has come to be, for a not insignificant number of women, an integral part of what it is to have a social life on the typical American college campus, “results in a loss of self-respect for the girl and continued expectations on the part of boys” (233); another girl says that performing lots of oral sex on various boys turns girls into “sex toys.”

I wish I could find it remarkable that Kindlon doesn’t see any contradiction between his acknowledgment that, on the one hand, a sizable enough number of girls still are anxious, plagued by eating disorders, sexually harassed, and willing to turn themselves into sex toys, and his conviction, on the other, that girls have now achieved parity with boys, both socially and psychologically. But in suppressing or repressing an awareness of this contradiction, Kindlon in fact epitomizes the so-called “post-feminist” mindset. If you spend a lot of time talking to young women today, which, as the mother of a teenaged girl and as a college professor, I do, you

will see that they *live* this contradiction—and not just the ones who succumb to depression. The feeling that they are obliged to turn themselves into toys for boys sits side by side in their consciousnesses with their conviction that feminism is, at best, archaic and that the world is a place in which your gender no longer stands in the way of your success.

In my experience, college-aged girls (who these days do not refer to themselves as “women”) are inclined to negotiate this contradiction, this split, by construing their way of being in the world sexually not as in tension with their post-feminist strength but as an *expression* of it. I first cottoned on to this logic several years ago, when, after a controversial column in the school paper made the issue a hot topic at my university, I invited students to come together to talk about “hook-up culture.” The meeting took place right before exam period, and it surprised me that dozens of students—girls and “guys” (as they get called), of varied sexual and gender identities and preferences, as well as ethnicities and races—showed up. Most were there to extol the virtues of hooking up. I pretty much just asked questions and listened, though at times I could not maintain a poker face, as when I asked the students whether boys’ performing oral sex on random girls was as popular as the other way around, and an especially independent-minded and articulate pro-hook-ups girl, after turning up her nose at the very idea of this switch, announced that before going to parties she always removed the hair from her vulva because “it’s nasty down there.” The intervention that epitomized for me the mindset of most of the girls in attendance—no one seemed to disagree with the remarks I’m about to summarize—came from a girl who spoke eloquently about how hard both she and her family had to work to get her to college and how single-mindedly she was pursuing her goal to go to law school. This girl explicitly associated hooking up with feminism: she was not interested in “taking care of” some needy boyfriend, and yet she wanted to be sexually satisfied; hooking up allowed her both the freedom and the pleasure she sought. As it turned out, interestingly enough, most of her sexual experience consisted in unilateral oral sex performed on guys. In any event, I’ll never forget the closing sentence of this girl’s speech about why she was so high on hooking-up: “I get all the benefits of a relationship without the responsibility.”

I imagine that this way of thinking is familiar to those college girls who take things one or two steps further and are delighted to bare their breasts for the *Girls Gone Wild* video series. Lifting up one’s shirt in the presence of a camera and a bunch of raucous, beer-drenched guys, and maybe French-kissing your fellow breast-exhibitors while you’re at it, is understood as an act of *autonomy*: these girls are not allowing themselves to be exploited for the sexual pleasure of men; rather, they are exploiting for their own pleasure their singular sexual girl power, a power that, they have learned from the ur-powerful Madonna and her progeny, as well as, perhaps, certain postmodern theorists, is a birthright that could be taken up only once feminism became a thing of the past.<sup>13</sup> Lest this sound like prissy finger-wagging, I must stress here that it is absolutely critical for anyone who cares about these

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<sup>13</sup>For an interesting discussion of *Girls Gone Wild* and related phenomena, see Levy.

matters to *believe* young women when they say, as they routinely do, that this sense of power, the sense you get from making yourself attractive for and arousing men is deeply pleasurable. In *Unhooked*, a recent book on young people's current sexual mores, Laura Sessions Stepp, while trying not to scold young women, argues that being in a monogamous, loving relationship is more conducive to happiness than a casual sexual encounter. This old claim, in my opinion, is a paternalistic canard on the order of the one that says that trying marijuana inevitably leads to a heroin addiction: it wears its speciousness on its face. By the time they are in college, all girls have experienced, either personally or vicariously, the pleasures that lording sexual power over boys yield. Being the object of the helpless desire of a boy you are about to fellate, especially when, at that moment, you're the only one around to fulfill it, can be—excuse the pun—a heady experience for a girl. And the pleasure is only intensified if it's quasi-sadistic (As one of my students once put it to me, “There he is wanting it, and you could just get up and walk away”—though, of course, you don't).

So there is pleasure in pleasuring guys, and this pleasure is *real*. And yet it is not unadulterated. For the stories the girls I've been discussing tell themselves about strength and power and pleasure do not, at the end of the day, cohere. Again, this is not a piece of moralizing on my part. It's a product of the other-shoe-dropping that the girls themselves, at least the ones I've talked to, almost invariably do. They tell you that the pleasures of hooking-up, like the pleasures of getting really, really drunk—pleasures that often, it turns out, go hand in hand—don't last. There's fall-out. There's what I've taken to calling the hook-up hangover. You give the boy your cell number, but he doesn't call or text you later, which means that, unless he's suddenly gone celibate, it turns out that he's not interested in seconds, which means, at the very least, that your power to please him isn't unique. You run into him on the quad the next day and cringe in embarrassment, not just because you can't quite remember what happened last night, but because you've already doped out that he just isn't that into you. You worry that maybe he was one guy too many for you, that maybe in the eyes of the world, your world, you may have slid irrevocably over the line, which is as sharp and fateful as ever, from babe-hood into slut-dom. Then you might wonder whether exchanging a nice dinner for a nice blow job constitutes a fair trade, or why the players are usually guys and the sluts usually girls, or how some sexual Gestalt shift will actually come to pass, post-law school, so that guys will suddenly settle happily ever after for just one girl. Even if a girl never comes to suspect that the playing field may not be even, I am suggesting, she does not always experience her sexual way of being in the world as of a piece with her worldly “post-feminist” ambitions.

And here is a place where *The Second Sex* continues to have something useful to say to us. For Beauvoir's optimism about social change for the better leaves untouched her philosophical picture of the human condition, on which women's and men's achievement of parity with another requires ceaseless *vigilance*. In the conclusion to *The Second Sex*, just a few paragraphs before she mentions that eventual “inner metamorphosis” that she predicts will follow in the wake of socioeconomic parity between women and men, Beauvoir reiterates a claim—a claim that is posed,

restated, and argued for throughout her book—that every human being by definition struggles with what she calls “ambiguity”: she is both a subject (a self-conscious being capable of moving beyond what nature and the world give to her, including her desires as they stand) and an object (an embodied being with characteristics, a style, appetites, and a history, all of which invite the judgment of others). It is fashionable these days to reject this dualistic, Cartesian metaphysic of the human being. But both Beauvoir and Sartre—convincingly, in my opinion—understand the subject/object split not as a mere fact of ontology, as Descartes is at least ordinarily taken to have argued, but more as a *phenomenological dilemma*.<sup>14</sup> In other words, they are interested not so much in claiming that the dualistic picture is true as they are in drawing our attention to the fact that our *experience* is one of dualism, or, more precisely, of a tension between our drive to transcend ourselves and our drive to cement our identities in ways that we and others will find ceaselessly praiseworthy.

Of course, our tendency to deny this tension by pretending that we are only subjects (as when we wish to avoid what our histories seem to imply about us) or only objects (as when we fantasize that we are not ceaselessly bound actually to live our own lives) is what Sartre famously identified as “bad faith.” Someone determined to regard Beauvoir as Sartre’s philosophical handmaiden might understand her to be saying in *The Second Sex* that the way human beings have negotiated sex difference throughout history constitutes a massive collective act of bad faith: we pretend to ourselves, on a huge scale, that men are merely subjects and women merely objects. But this would be to miss a pivotal difference between *Being and Nothingness*, which pictures human individuals as endlessly avoiding their ambiguity through a never-ending chain of acts of bad faith, and *The Second Sex*, which construes the human condition in terms of bad faith so few times that attempting to find a dozen instances of the term in the book’s 700-plus pages could preoccupy you for the better part of an afternoon. When Beauvoir does use the term, she very often is chiding those who think that women “are” inferior to men, in some timeless, absolute way. The verb “to be,” used in judgments about what people are like, she insists, must be read in what she calls its “dynamic Hegelian sense,” that is, as meaning “to become” (*The Second Sex*, xxx). If women are inferior to men at any given moment in history, nothing follows about what they stand to become. Indeed, I am not sure that readers of *The Second Sex* have grasped that we need to read the aphoristic line that launches Part II, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” as a specification

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<sup>14</sup>You could make the case, I think, that Descartes’s understanding of this split is fundamentally phenomenological as well, at least in its origins. Descartes of course postulates that the mind is radically different from the body and in fact has priority over the body when it comes to explaining how we have any experience of the world. But this postulate is a conclusion he reaches from the *experience* of being able to doubt the existence of his body but not his mind. In the introduction to *The Second Sex*, I have suggested, Beauvoir proceeds as though she is rewriting the *Meditations* from the point of view of someone who is investigating what a woman is and therefore cannot doubt the existence of her own body without sabotaging the project from the start. See Chapter 2 of my *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism*.

of this idea, which is laid out explicitly in the introduction to the book (xxx): when we say that a human being “is” something, we are talking about a stopping point that *we impose* on what is essentially a continuous process, that of living a life. To pretend that human beings *are* timelessly this or that, as a cloud, say, is essentially made of water molecules, is, Beauvoir will not hesitate to say, an act of bad faith. But then why does she decline to describe those who fail to object to women’s status as the second sex in these terms?

Abjuring Sartre’s implicit moralizing, Beauvoir claims that from time immemorial human beings have on the whole found a certain satisfaction in exploiting inherently non-normative biological facts to split the difference when it comes to the painful existential fact of human ambiguity: men, according to this way of thinking, will *be* the subjects and women will *strive* to be objects. I put the idea in this odd way to bring out what Beauvoir identifies as the incoherence of this plan: to “be” something, once and for all, is precisely *not* to be a subject; and to strive to be an object is precisely to demonstrate that you aren’t one. If you’re a Hegelian, what this means, in effect, is that the norms of sex difference are dialectically unstable. But then why have these norms been so intractable over the centuries? Why are women, as Beauvoir famously puts it in the introduction to *The Second Sex*, the “absolute” Other? (*The Second Sex*, xxiv).<sup>15</sup>

Put simply, Beauvoir’s answer is that *the system works*, to a very significant degree, for both women and men. Not only do both men and women benefit from the lopsided relationship between the sexes, but also, Beauvoir speculates, both may well be *happier* in this arrangement than they would be if things were otherwise. I trust that the pay-off for men does not stand in need of another rehearsal. But it is worth recalling, from the introduction to *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir’s take on why women are inclined not to fight their oppression:

To decline to be the Other, to refuse to be a party to the deal—this would be for women to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste. Man-the-sovereign will provide woman-the-liege with material protection and will undertake to justify her existence; along with economic risk, she can evade the metaphysical risk of a liberty whose ends must be devised without help. . . . It is an easy path; on it one avoids the anguish and the strain of an authentically assumed existence. (*The Second Sex* xxvii, translation modified)<sup>16</sup>

Beauvoir of course derives this notion of an “authentically assumed existence,” as well as the claim that such an existence involves anguish, from Heidegger, to some extent via Sartre. But in her mouth, the words are not those of some overt or even hidden ethical imperative, whether it be to stop acting in bad faith or to resist the soul-numbing way of being-in-the-world of Das Man or, all on your own, just like that, to refuse to be party to the deal. Rather, for Beauvoir, an “authentically

<sup>15</sup> *Le deuxième sexe* I, 18.

<sup>16</sup> The French reads: *Refuser d’être l’Autre, refuser la complicité avec l’homme, ce serait pour elles renoncer à tout les avantages que l’alliance avec la caste supérieure peut leur conférer. L’homme-suzerain protégera matériellement la femme-lige et il se chargera de justifier sa existence: avec le risque économique elle esquivé le risque métaphysique d’une liberté qui doit inventer ses fins sans secours. . . . C’est un chemin facile: on évite ainsi l’angoisse et la tension de l’existence authentiquement assumée* (*Le deuxième sexe* I, 21).

assumed existence” is one a person can take up only if she is afforded the material and psychological means to face the following facts: that she is inescapably on her own when it comes to the precise shape of her life; that the shape a life is taking at one instant does not guarantee or otherwise determine the shape or value that it might evince at the next; and that other people’s lives are, radically, their own lives to live, which means that other people are metaphysically separate from her. For women, Beauvoir argues, the material means to face these facts must include true economic freedom for women—where the word “true” means that, in addition to ensuring on-paper salary equity, the work world would have to provide for the particular needs of women and children (having to do with pregnancy, childbirth, childcare, and family bonds), and the social mores of this world would have to be such that women *experienced* themselves as free to invest themselves fully in their work.

And the psychological means necessary for a person to assume her existence authentically? These are what Beauvoir has in mind when she writes about the “inner metamorphosis” that she expects human beings will undergo when socio-economic conditions improve: people will no longer understand being a man or being a woman to *entail* a metaphysical division of labor. However, it is absolutely crucial to understand, contra the interpretation of the phrase implied by *Alpha Girls* author Kindlon, that this metamorphosis will necessarily have its limits. For, on Beauvoir’s view, to be a human being is to be forced to grapple with a standing temptation to avoid, as she puts it, “living out the ambiguities of [one’s] situation (*The Second Sex*, 728).”<sup>17</sup> Importantly, Beauvoir thinks that it’s possible to avoid this temptation; indeed, in a stunning break from what Sartre says in *Being and Nothingness*, she even claims that, insofar as two people manage to bear their own ambiguity in relation to one another, each can experience both herself and the other person as a subject and object reciprocally, *at the same time* (To put the point in Sartre’s idiom: in Beauvoir’s hands, the *pour-soi-en-soi* ceases to constitute a hopeless contradiction in terms). Beauvoir makes particularly vivid, throughout *The Second Sex*, the attractions and possibilities of erotic reciprocity, which, she goes so far as to claim, can reveal us at our most human: “The erotic experience,” she writes, “is one of those that discloses to human beings in the most poignant way the ambiguity of their condition. In it they experience themselves as flesh and as spirit, as the other and as subject (*The Second Sex*, 402).”<sup>18</sup>

And yet, Beauvoir warns, any attempt on a woman’s part to achieve erotic reciprocity with a man is bound to be “an enterprise fraught with difficulty and danger,” not least because a woman cannot invariably count on a man to acknowledge and accommodate various facts about her physical vulnerability.<sup>19</sup> That women’s genitalia are not designed to penetrate men, that men and women reach orgasm differently, that women do not have to be sexually aroused or otherwise

<sup>17</sup>The French reads: *au lieu de vivre l’ambiguïté de sa condition* (*Le deuxième sexe* II, 658).

<sup>18</sup>The French reads: *l’expérience érotique est une de celles qui découvrent aux êtres humains de la façon la plus poignante l’ambiguïté de leur condition; ils s’y éprouvent comme chair et comme esprit, comme l’autre et comme sujet* (*Le deuxième sexe* II, 190).

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

in a state of physiological transformation to participate in sexual intercourse, that women can get pregnant from intercourse—all of these facts can lead to a woman's *experiencing herself* as hopelessly at the mercy of her partner's sexual power (I put the point this way to underscore the rigorously phenomenological nature of Beauvoir's philosophical method). Regardless of whether socio-economic parity between men and women becomes a reality, and regardless of how deeply men and women come to value this parity, women will *always* have reasons to succumb to the temptation of objectifying themselves—sometimes because being a sex toy can protect a woman from an even worse fate (Indeed, one of my former graduate students, who wrote a dissertation on these matters, has suggested to me that this fact may help explain what motivates today's young women to perform so much unreciprocated oral sex on men).

A great theme of *The Second Sex*—one that, alas, has yet to find sufficient resonance among feminists—is that the achievement of full personhood for women requires not only that men stop objectifying women in pernicious sexual and non-sexual ways but also that women care about abjuring the temptation to objectify themselves. For Beauvoir, indeed, the line between full personhood and complete self-objectification is whisper thin. A fully human being, Beauvoir thought, acknowledges her desire to be an actor in the world. She seeks the wherewithal to express her sense of what matters in the world; she dares to have a say in it. But there's a catch here. For part of being a subject, Beauvoir thought, is allowing yourself, and your say, to be the object of other people's judgment, rational or irrational: to risk being ridiculed or condemned or ignored or, worse, to find yourself convinced that the harsh judgments of others are true—or, maybe worst of all, to be confused about these judgments, to discover that, after all, you don't know who you are.<sup>20</sup> Here is where we are especially tempted to try to subvert the risk posed by other people's objectifying gazes by preemptively objectifying ourselves. And here is where *The Second Sex*, in making these temptations, as well as what lies beyond them, vivid, can help shore up our courage to resist settling for an adulterated form of happiness and to dare to hope for the satisfactions that might attend the anguish and strain of assuming one's existence authentically. To the extent we repress this fact—to the extent that we fail to read *The Second Sex* as a work of philosophy—we deny ourselves a certain wherewithal to resist the allure of self-objectification. And in our failure to acknowledge this allure, we make feminism irrelevant to our daughters and thereby increase their sense of being torn apart, of living in two worlds that they find they cannot always, or maybe ever, fit together.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>The last few thoughts are expressed in similar form, but in a different context, in Bauer, "Pornutopia".

<sup>21</sup>My thanks to Anne Barnhill, Shannon Mussett, Mark Richard, Jennifer Purvis, and Charlotte Witt for very helpful commentary. Versions of this chapter were read at the Centenaire de la Naissance de Simone de Beauvoir in Paris, a session on Beauvoir at the 2008 Central APA, and the 2008 annual meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and Existentialism. I thank the audiences at these events for stimulating discussions.

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## Chapter 9

# A Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Types, Styles and Persons

Sara Heinämaa

**Abstract** I develop two fundamental ideas about sexual difference on the basis of classical phenomenology. The first idea concerns the perceptual world and its structures. Using the phenomenological distinction between perceptual type and empirical concept, I argue that sexual identity is not one unitary objectivity but includes two different levels of objectivity: one sensuous and the other conceptual. Moreover, our concepts of man and woman do not automatically emerge from our pre-conceptual perceptions of sexed bodies but are constituted by an active focus of attention. Conversely, our critical work on concepts and forms of discourse cannot change or undo the pre-conceptual structures of perception even if it may allow a reflective distance from these structures. The second argument is based on the phenomenological account of selfhood and its temporal nature. I explain the concept of the transcendental person as a temporal unity and show how this concept helps to establish a non-naturalistic philosophy of sexual difference. Ultimately, I show that the subjects that constitute the sense of being are not sexually neutral “consciousnesses” or “humans” (Dasein) but are feminine and masculine persons with different sensual lives and lived motivations. This means that sexual difference is not just an ontological difference but is also a structure in the foundations of ontology.

Simone de Beauvoir starts *The Second Sex* by asking if the concept *woman* is merely nominal or rather grounded in experience of universals. She rejects all versions of Platonism, ancient and contemporary, and criticizes the notion of *femininity* as an eternal unchanging essence that resides beyond the lives of individual women and men and regulates them. For Beauvoir, concrete women are not instances, imitations, or approximations of femininity, but on the contrary, femininity is an ideological outcome of the hierarchical relations and practices that prevail between men and women.

Despite her vehement critique of the ideal notion of femininity, Beauvoir does not hesitate to put forward general statements about women. She argues that each woman has an unique and irreplaceable self-conscious life, but she also claims that

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together such lives constitute a general feminine existence or a feminine way of relating to being. The ideal of the *feminine* must be rejected, she demands, but one should not thereby neglect the simple truth of perceptual experience:

In truth, to go for a walk with one's eyes open is enough to note that humanity is divided into two categories of individuals whose clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, gaits, interests, and occupations are manifestly different. Perhaps these differences are superficial, perhaps they are destined to disappear. What is certain is that they exist with clear evidence. (*Le deuxième sexe I* 13/ *The Second Sex* 14–15)

Beauvoir concludes her comprehensive study by arguing that some differences between men and women are suprahistorical and will never disappear. At the end of her book, she claims that women and men experience and live their own bodies in crucially different ways, and that this fundamental difference affects their relations to other bodily subjects as well as their ways of approaching material reality. This is not a theoretical statement about reproductive biology but concerns the body as it is experienced in affective sensations and perceptions. Thus Beauvoir ends up defending the view according to which sexual difference is grounded in the structures of sensibility:

there will always be certain difference between man and woman; her eroticism, and therefore her sexual world, have a special form of their own and therefore cannot fail to engender a sensuality, a sensibility of a special form: her relations to her own body, to that of the male, to the child, will never be identical with those that the male bears to his own body, to the feminine body, and to the child. (*Le deuxième sexe II* 661/ *The Second Sex* 740)

This view has been extremely unpopular among feminist theorists during the last 40 years. The common conviction and the dominant idea has been, and still is, that sexual difference lacks metaphysical—ontological and epistemological—ground and is merely a discursive effect or a conceptual invention.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Feminists influenced by the Foucaultian theory of power have argued that the categories of sex and gender are constructed in discursive and ideological practices that vary according to historical and social circumstances. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) is the most influential of such arguments. Butler begins her work by questioning the legitimacy of the epistemological and ontological base of gendered thinking and experience: "What happens to (...) the stability of gender categories when the epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality is unmasked as that which produces and refines the ostensible categories of ontology?" (viii) Butler sets to "expose the foundational categories of sex, gender, and desire as effects of a special formation of [heterosexist] power" (viii). Based on this analysis, she argues that feminist politics and feminist thinking become more efficient if they abandon the assumption of a universal and unitary feminine subject (4ff.). Compare Butler's argument to Collette Guillamin's work *Sexe, race et pratique du pouvoir: l'idée de nature* (1992). Both Butler and Guillamin are influenced by Monique Wittig's early essays which build on a historicized version of Beauvoir's idea of becoming woman. See for example Wittig's *Les corps lesbiens* (1972), "La pensée straight" (1980) and "On ne naît pas femme" (1980).

To be sure, such a discursive approach, when developed in extreme, is able to provide sexual difference with an ontological status. This is possible if one takes the transcendental "linguisticist" stand according to which the sense of being is constituted in discourse, speech and writing. Based on this idea, one can contend that woman and man are nothing but effects of language or discursive positions and at the same time argue that as such they are ontological units.

However, some contemporary philosophers have questioned the constructivist thesis and argued that gender identity<sup>2</sup> and sexual difference have an objective basis in the nature of things, despite the plurality of our cultural-historical interpretations and accounts. Within the analytical tradition, Sally Haslanger has proposed the view that the male-female distinction is a structure of reality, a difference between two objective types, independent of human activities and practices (“Feminism and Metaphysics: Negotiating” 107–26). Influenced by “continental” theories of embodiment, Linda Martín Alcoff has suggested that the objective basis of sexual difference is in the biology of human bodies and reproductive functions (“The Metaphysics of Gender” 17–39). Despite their apparent differences, Haslanger and Alcoff share a common starting point: both accept the empiricist and naturalistic notion according to which ontological questions concerning sexual difference can be decided on the basis of positive sciences, such as reproductive biology, empirical psychology, and evolution theory.

It is important to notice that the defenders of objectivity join their constructivist opponents in an antifoundationalist ethos. Both argue, or assume, that philosophy can serve critical feminist goals only if it abandons its foundationalist aspirations of providing a ground for the positive sciences.<sup>3</sup> The common intuition is that philosophy has already lost its position as the first inquiry, or that it must let go of this position if it wants to justify itself as a critical practice. Thus the debate between the constructivists and objectivists takes place within a post-positivistic, Quinean, framework.

The aim of this chapter is to introduce an alternative—non-empiricist and non-positivistic—account of sexual difference in its objective and subjective aspects. This we find in the classical phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. Husserl’s phenomenological approach tracks the constitution of all sense of being and objectivity in subjective acts and lived experiences and ultimately in the passive syntheses of sensibility and time-constitution. These are not psychological entities or processes but belong to the transcendental forms of experiencing, forms which provide the sense basis for all empirical entities and processes, psychological included. Thus the foundation of all objectivity—physical, mental, biological, and historical—is in subjective acts, but these acts should not be identified with any psychological objects but must be understood transcendently. I will focus my discussion on two phenomenological ideas that I find most relevant to contemporary debates about the objectivity and subjectivity of sexual difference.

The first idea concerns sense-perception and the perceptual world. In his late genetic works, Husserl argued that the categories of cognition rest on pre-conceptual

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<sup>2</sup>By the term “gender identity” I refer to the identities of persons as women and men (and as girls and boys). Thus, I do not use the term merely for the cultural interpretations of our reproductive sexuality, but to cover all the aspects of our identities as women and men, bodily and mental, natural and cultural, material and spiritual. For the multiple problems of the sex-gender distinction, see Heinämaa, “Woman—nature, product, style?”

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Haslanger “Feminism and Metaphysics,” “What Are We Talking About?” and “What Good Are Our Intuitions?”

types that are constituted passively on the level of sense-perception. Husserl's distinction between types and concepts makes it possible to differentiate two levels of objectivity, one given in pre-conceptual perception and the other constituted in conceptual experience and knowledge. Moreover, Husserl argued that the pre-conceptual types are not determined or governed by concepts but have their own origin and structure in sensuous experience. Thus they differ from Kantian schemata which have no independent function but merely serve in the application of the concepts to sense impressions.

Based on Husserl's conceptual explications, I will argue that sexual identity is not one unitary objectivity but includes two different levels of objectivity, one sensuous and the other conceptual. More specifically, our concepts of male and female do not automatically emerge from our pre-conceptual perceptions of sexed bodies but are established by an active focus of interest and attention. Conversely, our creative-critical work on the concepts and forms of discourse cannot change or undo the pre-conceptual structures of perception even if it may allow a reflective distance from these structures.

The second Husserlian idea that I find crucial to contemporary feminist philosophy concerns the constitutive role of gendered persons. For Husserl, the transcendental subject which gives sense to objectivity is not a universal or formal principle but is a concrete individual, a person. This means that the foundation of objectivity is not in a isolated self (*solus ipse*), but rather in the intersubjective community established in communicative relationships between personal subjects.<sup>4</sup>

I will argue that Husserl's concept of the transcendental subject as a person grounds a non-naturalistic philosophy of sexual difference. The subjects that give meaning to being, reality, and nature are not sexually neutral "consciousnesses" or "human beings" (*Dasein*) but are feminine and masculine persons with different sensual lives and lived motivations. The intersubjective community that establishes the sense of objectivity includes both modes of subjectivity, so that sexual difference is not just an ontological difference but is also a structure in the foundations of ontology.

It should be emphasized that my argument for a classical phenomenological approach in the study of sexual difference has a historical background. Even before the existential-phenomenological reflections of Simone de Beauvoir, the German phenomenologist Edith Stein used the Husserlian concepts of person and type to establish a theory of gendered persons.<sup>5</sup> While developing my explications and my argument, I will occasionally resort to Beauvoir's and Stein's insights and analyses.

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<sup>4</sup>A good introduction to Husserl's reformulation of transcendental philosophy is provided by Dan Zahavi in "Husserl's Intersubjective Transformation."

<sup>5</sup>Stein published her essays and lectures in the 1930s but her work remained largely unrecognized by later feminist philosophers. There are several different reasons for this neglect: Stein left academic institutions and the Husserlian circles relatively early; she started to develop her own thinking which combined phenomenological philosophy with Christian doctrines and Thomistic anthropology; and she worked as a teacher in a Dominican girls' school and wrote her lectures on women for educational purposes and pedagogic audiences. Stein died in the second world

My aim, however, is not to offer an account of their philosophies nor to defend their metaphysical views but merely to flesh out Husserl's methodological discourse with thematic accounts that already tackled "the problem of the sexes."<sup>6</sup> I open my discussion, however, by citing Edith Stein who very clearly saw that we cannot avoid metaphysical work if we want to solve the practical and theoretical problems related to sexual difference:

In order to answer the question properly, we must understand the relationship between gender, species, type, and individual, that is, we must be clear about the basic problems of formal ontology; in this I perceive what Aristotle means by his concept of *First Philosophy*. *Die Frau* 173)<sup>7</sup>

## What Is Phenomenology?

Before proceeding to explicate the phenomenological concepts of gendered types and personal styles, the nature of this philosophical approach must be clarified. Phenomenology is a transcendental-philosophical investigation into the correlation between subjectivity and objectivity, or consciousness and being, characteristic of all experience. It aims at disclosing the essential features of the intentional acts that take part in the constitution of the different senses of objectivity and being. In addition to these acts, it illuminates the passive aesthetic synthesis which establishes the most rudimentary, primordial objectivities on which acts can operate. As such, phenomenology demonstrates how the different senses of being result from the constitutive activities and passivities of conscious subjects. It covers the whole variety of ontic sense: the being of material things, living things, persons, utensils, tools, values; theoretical entities, linguistic units, works of art; images, pictures, memories; real, possible, probable; present, absent, past, and future.

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war in dramatic circumstances in Auschwitz. For Stein's philosophical anthropology and theory of personality, see her *Der Aufbau* (1932–1933) and *Die Frau* (1928–1932), but compare also to her *Einführung* (1920). For an introduction to Stein's feminist ideas and arguments, see McAlister "Edith Stein: Essential Differences" "Edith Stein"; Calcagno, *The Philosophy of Edith Stein*. Stein's lectures on women's education have been translated into English and published in the second volume of her *Collected Works, Essays on Women* (1996).

<sup>6</sup>In his latest publication, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl devised a series of genetic transcendental problems to be solved by genetic phenomenology. Among these he included the "problem of the sexes." The philosophical task was not to provide causal explanations, empirical theories, or cultural-historical interpretations about the sexes but to inquire back to the ontic sense of sexual difference and its constitutive genesis within our conscious lives (*Die Krisis* 191–2/*The Crisis* 188).

<sup>7</sup>Compare to Beauvoir's explication of her idea of woman's becoming in *The Second Sex*: "(...) animals constitute fixed species which can be described statically (...) whereas humanity is endlessly in becoming(...). It is only in a human perspective that we can study the female and the male of the human species. But the definition of man is that he is a being who is not given, who makes himself what he is (...). Woman is not a fixed reality, but a becoming. She should be compared with man in her becoming, that is to say, her *possibilities* should be defined" (*Le deuxième sexe I* 71–3/*The Second Sex* 66).

This requires a transcendental approach, because we cannot disclose the essential structures of sense constitution and its necessary temporal order<sup>8</sup> if we stick to our habitual convictions about reality and being. Such principles have to be suspended, and this is exactly what the transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and its deciding moment, the *epoche*, is supposed to accomplish. The purpose is not to negate or cancel our ontological convictions, because that would remove an essential and crucial part of our intentional lives, or else replace it with a negation (Husserl *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Erstes Buch* 53–6/*Ideas* 96–9). Instead, the task is to thematize our intentional lives and all the assumptions and convictions involved in them, to suspend our involvement in these convictions and to subject them to a critical eidetic study.

Husserl defines phenomenology as a transcendental-philosophical inquiry into the essential a priori structures of conscious experience.<sup>9</sup> The definition has given rise to several misconceptions because the three defining terms—“transcendental”, “essential,” and “consciousness”—are associated with traditional philosophical doctrines. Thus phenomenology is taken to involve a unfortunate mixture of Kantianism, Cartesianism, and Platonism, and the whole approach has been rejected as an obsolete reinvention of rationalism, subjectivism, solipsism, and/or idealism.

Such readings are shared by feminist and non-feminist critics, contemporary and past. In the 1920s, Gilbert Ryle already attacked Husserl’s philosophy as a mixture of Platonism, subjectivism, and solipsism (“Heidegger’s” 198–204, 214; “Review of Martin Faber” 219–21). The echoes of such statements can still be heard in contemporary feminist debates. Judith Butler, for example, claims that the Platonic and Cartesian inheritance of phenomenology makes it susceptible to sexual hierarchization: “In the philosophical tradition that begins with Plato and continues through Descartes, Husserl, and Sartre, the ontological distinction between the soul and the body invariably supports relations of political and psychic subordination and hierarchy” (*Gender* 12). Also, feminists influenced by pragmatist, existential, and postmodern currents reject Husserlian phenomenology as a form of Cartesianism or Kantianism. Iris Marion Young, for example, states: “The tradition of transcendental philosophy from Descartes through Kant to Husserl conceives the subject as

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<sup>8</sup>Genetic phenomenology explicates the *temporal* order of meaning constitution. It does not confine itself to the investigation of individual histories but, by the methods of eidetic variation, aims at illuminating the essential steps and phases in all temporal institution or establishment of meaning and sense. The mature Husserl argues that static analyses are a necessary part of phenomenology but not sufficient in themselves because phenomenology aims at accounting for the structures of meaning as well as for their genesis and origins (*Cartesianische* 100–14/*Cartesian* 66–81, *Phänomenologische Psychologie* 208–17, *Formale und transzendente Logik* 277–81). For an introduction to genetic phenomenology, see Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*; cf. Bachelard, *A Study of Husserl’s Formal and Transcendental Logic*; Sokolowski, *The Formation of Husserl’s Concept of Constitution*; and Kortoom’s *Phenomenology of Time*.

<sup>9</sup>See, for example, Husserl *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Erstes Buch* 141–3/*Ideas* 160–2; *Cartesianische* 178–83/*Cartesian* 151–6.

a unity and an origin, the self-same starting point of thought and meaning whose signification is never out of its grasp" ("The Ideal" 303).<sup>10</sup>

From the point of view of Husserl's work, such accusations are insubstantial or simply misplaced. Husserl's interest was not in defending any philosophical thesis or doctrine, Platonic, Cartesian, or Kantian. Rather, he struggled to develop, refine, and radicalize the philosophical method while reflecting on the multiplicity of human experience and knowledge. He defined all his positive concepts by methodological terms. Thus "the transcendental" does not mark a separate realm of being for him but denotes a certain way of studying experiences and experienceable objectivities; "a priori" does not mean "prior to experience" but refers to necessary structures of experiencing that can be disclosed by the methods of eidetic variation; and "consciousness" is not posited as a substantial unity but is disclosed as a dynamic relation.

To be sure, Husserl sometimes characterizes his philosophy by traditional doctrinal categories. He asks, for example, what is meant by "positivism" and states that if the term has any coherent sense, then the phenomenologists are "the genuine positivists" (*Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Erstes Buch* 38/*Ideas* 78). He also explains how phenomenology reforms the teachings of transcendental idealism (*Cartesianische* 176ff./*Cartesian* 149ff.) and classical rationalism (*Die Krisis* 106, 347/*The Crisis* 103–4, 299). These statements do not, however, contribute to any arguments for or against traditional doctrines but, on the contrary, serve critical questions concerning their sense and purpose.

Husserl makes clear that his phenomenology provides a metaphysics in the classical sense of "First philosophy" (*Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Drittes Buch* 148ff./*Ideas Pertaining* 415ff.; *Die Krisis* 6–8/*The Crisis* 9–10).<sup>11</sup> This includes, and must include, two aspects: a universal ontology, on the one hand, and its constitutive grounding in the

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<sup>10</sup> Compare to Linda María Alcoff's denunciation which betrays her pragmatist convictions:

Husserl's phenomenology remains (...) too wedded to the goal of establishing certainty and too confident about the possibility of the transcendental reduction. The reduction attempts to achieve through philosophical means that interruption of familiarity that one gets from driving on the opposite side or entering a foreign culture, but can such an interruption be achieved by philosophical reflection alone without a change of location or practice? Husserl's concept of the transcendental ego remained in important respects disembodied, with its valorization of critical detachment as the route to a reasoned assessment of immediate experience. ("The Metaphysics of Gender" 109; cf. "Phenomenology, Post-structuralism" 255–6).

I cannot discuss the misconceptions involved in such forms of critique within the limits of this chapter, but I need to state at least the basic principles to avoid further confusions: The very beginnings of phenomenological studies make clear that consciousness is not unitary, homogeneous, or "transparent" but is an intentional opening; that conscious experience always has obscure, unlighted horizons; that reduction is not a performance but a permanent task; and that perceptual consciousness is embodied by necessity.

<sup>11</sup> See also Dan Zahavi's "Phenomenology and Metaphysics."

sense-giving performances of transcendental subjects, on the other (*Cartesianische* 181–2/*Cartesian* 155–7). An ontology in this sense does not merely provide an account of the formal characteristics shared by all possible entities, but also offers an explication and ordering of the different regions of being, such as physical being, living being, psychic being, and social and cultural being. The task is not to reduce any such region to any other region, or to subordinate them to formal ontology. The goal is merely to describe and to analyze the senses of being as they are found in the different areas of experiencing and to capture their necessary connections and disconnection (*Cartesianische* 177/*Cartesian* 150–1).

Husserlian phenomenology could be said to reform Aristotle's ontology with Descartes' epistemology, but such a comparison should be supplemented with a caution: the radical demand of the transcendental reduction requires that the philosophical inquiry must proceed without any presupposed or posited objectivities, and thus all the abstract entities invented in the metaphysical tradition must be rejected: *eternal being*, *res cogitans*, *the thing in itself*, and the *monad* (*Cartesianische* 63–4, 174–7, 182/*Cartesian* 23–24, 147–50, 156; *Die Krisis* 80–93, 194–200/*The Crisis* 78–90, 191–7). Understood in this way, phenomenology demands a radical self-examination that aims at the explication of all ontic senses operative in our conscious life. The demand is at the core of Husserl's idea of philosophy and motivates his claim that phenomenology continues the Socratic tradition of self-responsibility: "The Delphic motto, 'Know thyself!' has gained a new significance. Positive science is a science lost in the world. I must lose the world by *epoche*, in order to gain it by universal self-examination" (*Cartesianische* 183/*Cartesian* 156–7; *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Drittes Buch* 139ff./*Ideas Pertaining* 406ff.).<sup>12</sup>

A feminist application of this motto says that we must know ourselves—not just as humans or as rational animals, but as women and men. In this vein, we must put the world in brackets with all its gendered structures, in order to disclose its constitution by radical self-examinations.

## Perceiving Women

In his late genetic work *Experience and Judgment*, Edmund Husserl gives a new phenomenological account of the distinction between two modes of generality: the generality of types and the generality of empirical concepts or empirical universals. This section explicates Husserl's distinction and studies how the generality of types relates to the generality of concepts. The aim is to shed light on the problems of gender identity and sexual difference: What is the experiential ground on which political and theoretical discourse on women and men is justified? How can we understand women's studies and gender studies as theoretical approaches in their

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<sup>12</sup>Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie* iv–viii/*Phenomenology of Perception* x–xiii.

own right? What is their object of study: Woman? Man? How can we conceive and make sense of the generality of such objects?<sup>13</sup>

Husserl argues that we encounter entities first “according to types” in our everyday dealings with the surrounding world.<sup>14</sup> We perceive plants and animals, for example, and elements of the landscape, such as rivers, lakes, and mountains. Also temporal processes and events come in different kinds. Examples of such types include weather conditions and seasonal changes, but also many sorts of social and cultural events.

Typified things combine and form whole nexuses or networks of entities and events. For example, when searching for oak saplings in the forest, we are prepared to find many different types of trees, such as pines, alders, and maples, but we also expect to encounter wildflowers, mushrooms, birds, and insects. The nexuses of types are not unidimensional but include hierarchies in which more specific types are included in more general ones (*Erfahrung* 403ff./*Experience* 334ff.). The type *bird*, for example, contains the types *titmouse*, *finch*, and *crow*; and the type *crow* includes the types *raven*, *magpie*, *jay*, and *nutcracker*. On the one hand, all birds resemble one another, and on the other hand, each bird is an individual. Despite their general uniformity and their multiple diversities, we recognize different types, group crows together and distinguish them from finches and titmice.

Human cultures and cultural environments also consist of typical objects and complex hierarchies of such objects, utensils, tools, and constructs; and humans themselves behave and act in cultural and natural environments in many typical ways. We recognize age types, body types, movement types, and personality types.

A simple fact about perception is that it classifies many human behaviors into two gender types, the feminine and the masculine.<sup>15</sup> As Beauvoir stated, one must “only go for a walk with one’s eyes open” to note that humanity includes two different kinds. This typification is not based on the possession of genitals or reproductive capacities.<sup>16</sup> It is not exclusive but allows for other, non-gendered types; and it is not infallible but susceptible to correction.<sup>17</sup> Nothing is gained theoretically by neglecting, overlooking, or belittling this fact about the perceptual field. The task is not to build a theory onto it, but to develop conceptual and methodological tools

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<sup>13</sup>Cf. Stein, *Die Frau* 2–4; Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe I* 13, *Le deuxième sexe II* 9/*The Second Sex* 15, 33.

<sup>14</sup>Everyday experience also includes conceptual structures; these are mixed with structures of typicality. Husserl argues, however, that a completely non-conceptual experience of purely typical objects can be distinguished as a limit; and that non-conceptual experience is genetically a primary form. Cf. Holenstein, *Phänomenologie der Assoziation*.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Stein *Zum Problem* 128/*On the Problem* 115.

<sup>16</sup>There is some empirical evidence to support the notion that gender classification is early in development and is not based on experience of genitalia or reproductive functions; see for example, Wasserman and Stern, “An early Manifestation of Differential Behavior” 129–37.

<sup>17</sup>For an argument, see Heinämaa, “Feminism” 289–308; cf. Stein, *Die Frau* 80ff./*Essays on Women* 88ff.

which allow us to understand the nature of the classification, its permanence, its changeability, and its origin.

Husserl argues that the typification of experience is always, and by necessity, based on earlier experiences, so that connections of similarity are established between present objectivities and past ones already experienced. Our earlier perceptions do not vanish without leaving traces in our consciousness. They remain as “habituated” intentions and leave “sediments” of intendings, which make possible associations between past and present. The presently encountered appears similar to objectivities already experienced, and we cluster them loosely together according to their likenesses. For example, when wandering in the woods, I suddenly notice that something moves among the leaves; this something looks like a squirrel but differs in size and color. Unexpectedly it jumps off from the branch and glides down like an owl. When it hits the ground and starts running, I am able to detect a bushy tail, and recognize the animal. I see a pteromyini, a flying squirrel.

Or consider an example from a very different sphere of life. When trying on shoes in a boutique or a market, we can easily sort the footwear out in different types. The sorting happens without any conscious effort from our part, as if “automatically.” After the fitting, shoes may lie on the floor in disorder, but we can classify them in different types simply by looking at them.

Husserl argues that such associative synthesis of features is passive. No active conscious work or attention is needed because perceived features cluster together as if by themselves. The interest of the perceiver is focused on the present objectivity and all clustering happens unnoticed:

The fact that all objects of experience are from the first experienced as known according to their type has its basis in the sedimentation of all apperceptions and in their habitual continued action on the basis of associative awakening. Association originally produces the passive synthesis of like with like, and this not only within the field of presence but also through the entire stream of lived experience, its immanent time, and everything which is constituted in it. (*Erfahrung* 386/*Experience* 321)

On the basis of typifying associations, anticipations arise concerning the further features of the presently experienced object. In the example above, the animal moving among the leaves first presents itself as similar to squirrels, but when it suddenly jumps in the air and starts its glide, the associative tie breaks down. For a moment, the animal reminds us of owls, bats, and other gliders, but on the ground it surprises us again: a new prominent feature appears, and reconnects the animal with squirrels. As the result, the familiar type *rodent* has been modified: now it also includes flying squirrels.<sup>18</sup>

Husserl’s early work *Logical Investigations* provides us with a more topical example of the anticipations operative in typifying perception. Husserl describes a situation in which we, entering a wax gallery, mistakenly associate a wax dummy with living persons and take it to belong to the feminine type:

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<sup>18</sup>Cf. James, *Principles of Psychology* 194.

Wandering about in the Panopticum Waxworks we meet on the stairs a charming woman whom we do not know (...) we have for a moment been tricked by a waxwork figure. As long as we are tricked, we experience a perfectly good percept; we see a woman and not a wax figure. When the illusion vanishes, we see exactly the opposite, a waxwork figure that only represents a woman. (*Logische* 458–9/*Logical* 137–8)

Our perception proceeds in stages and in accordance with our own bodily movements: we approach the figure standing on the stairs, and new sensory material “comes in” and is “interpreted”. First we associate the perceived object with human persons, and more specifically with women. Its body shape, its posture, and its visual look remind us of the feminine gestalts that we have encountered in earlier experience. This typification generates anticipations that the percept will move and comport itself toward the environment in certain ways. When we approach the figure, coming closer to it, our anticipations are disappointed, as new sensory material does not confirm the type but, on the contrary, conflicts with it. The figure stays motionless; more particularly, what remains absent are the vital movements that characterize living beings and the spontaneous responsiveness that belongs to persons. We realize that the object resembles humans only in visual form but not in movement or comportment, and so the associative synthesis fails, and we see a dummy.<sup>19</sup>

Husserl distinguishes essential types from inessential types by the openness of the chain of anticipation that the typification generates. If all anticipations are disappointed in the course of experiencing and none can provide new ones, then the anticipatory chain closes. Husserl calls such types *inessential*. Thus defined, inessential types provide limited sets of anticipations, and are tied to specific situations and contexts.<sup>20</sup> *Essential* types, on the contrary, sustain great variation of circumstances and can always provide new sets of anticipations. A whale, for example, moves in the water like a huge fish, but its breeding behavior, its respiratory system, and its communicative skills differ crucially from those of the fish. Its shares superficial similarities with sharks and big groupers but its essential type is different:

Immediate experience often separates and distinguishes things solely on the basis of certain obvious differences which can mask an actually existing internal correlation; for example, the membership of the animals called “whales” in the class of mammals is masked by the outward analogy which whales have with fish with regard to their mode of life, something already indicated in the verbal designation [German “Walfisch”]. (*Erfahrung* 402/*Experience* 333–4)

It is illuminative to compare Husserl’s concept of essential type to what Sally Haslanger calls “objective type” in her realist defence of feminist metaphysics. Haslanger argues that the types male and female are objective, that is, real and causally efficient independently of all human interests and practices (“Feminism

<sup>19</sup>Cf. Husserl, *Analysen* 33–7/*Analyses* 72–6.

<sup>20</sup>Compare to interpretations of Wittgenstein’s discourse of family resemblance, e.g., Nammour, “Resemblances and Universals” 516–24; Beardsmore, “The Theory of Family Resemblance” 131–46. See also Lohmar, “Husserl’s type and Kant’s schemata” 109.

and Metaphysics: Negotiating” 117). She attacks the constructivist notion according to which all gender types are either fictitious or artificial, either prescriptive ideals or discursive effects. Haslangar claims that feminists do not need to be anti-realist about types because realism is neutral in respect to the practical significance of types. It does not postulate or imply an unchanging feminine nature or essence with problematic political implications.

Husserl’s concept of type covers both natural and cultural phenomena. So the argument that sexual difference is a difference between two perceptual types does not imply anything about its empirical origin: natural or man-made. A phenomenologist may, however, agree with Haslangar’s ontological analysis on independent grounds and argue that gender types are not human inventions or cultural artifacts, are not created, but found or discovered by human beings.<sup>21</sup> Such a result about the ontic sense of gender types does not, however, annul the transcendental argument that types are passively constituted in associative synthesis. Moreover, the task of inquiring into the constitutive grounds or transcendental origins of gender-perception cannot be carried out by empirical inquiries into the historical, cultural, or biological conditions of our life.

An additional difference is that the phenomenological theory of essential types is not engaged in the development of naturalist or materialist ontologies. In its analysis, gender types are not restricted to, or based on, reproductive functions or habits of sexual conduct but include open series of multiple activities: walking, running, throwing, sitting, touching, looking, speaking. . . .<sup>22</sup> What is at issue is not just the biological type *female*, or the cultural-historical type *feminine*, but the perceptual type *woman*. Accordingly, sexual difference, as a difference between two essential types, is not about the biological unities *male* and *female*, but concerns men and women as concrete human beings. An account of such perception is given by the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

A woman passing by ( . . . ) is a certain manner of being flesh which is given entirely in her walk or even in the simple shock of her heel on the ground—as the tension of the bow is present in each fiber of wood—a very noticeable variation of the norm of walking, looking, touching, and speaking that I possess in my self-awareness because I am incarnate. (*Signes* 67–8/*Signs* 54)

Husserl shows that the generality characteristic of types differs from the universality that belongs to concepts. As modes of generality, both types and concepts extend over an open series of individuals.<sup>23</sup> We can also say that they contain individuals, but they contain individuals in two different ways. The main difference,

<sup>21</sup>For one possible line of argumentation, see Held, “*Fysis ja syntymä [Physis und Geburt]*” 201–16; cf. Edmund Husserl, “Grundlegende Untersuchungen.”

<sup>22</sup>For analyses of motility, see Young, “Throwing Like a Girl;” Grimshaw, “Working Out with Merleau-Ponty;” Reuter, “The Body at Century’s End;” Chisholm, “Climbing Like a Girl.”

<sup>23</sup>The pure concepts of the eidetic sciences, such as geometry and phenomenology, differ from the empirical concepts of the experimental sciences by their extensions: whereas the extension of an empirical concept may be “unlimited” at the best, the extension of a pure concept is *evidently* infinite:

in Husserl explication is, that as members of types, individuals retain their difference and distinction, but when subsumed under a concept they operate as equal instances and participate in an infinity of such instances. In other words, the associative synthesis which constitutes types by connecting similar individuals does not ignore their differences. The members of a type are still perceived as singular objects and not grasped as equal instances of a one and the same universal (*Erfahrung* 388/*Experience* 323).<sup>24</sup>

The difference can be described in subjective terms as follows: when we intend things in perception as members of types, our focus stays on the individuals and on their partial similarities and differences. In Husserl's words: "In the moment of coincidence, the similar blends with the similar in proportion of their similarity, while the consciousness of a duality of what is united in this blending still persists" (*Erfahrung* 387/*Experience* 322). But when we subsume particulars under a concept, we do not anymore intend them as similar and different objectivities but as equal instances or examples of one and the same objectivity.<sup>25</sup> As members of the type *flower*, a rose, a pimpernel, and a poppy, for example, form a chain of likenesses; but as instances of the concept *Flower* they are connected through one objectivity (*Erfahrung* 395/*Experience* 328).<sup>26</sup>

Husserl does not just distinguish the generality of essential types from that of concepts but also argues that types are independent of concepts. This means that the associative syntheses that structures our perceptual experience are not guided by

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With empirical concepts, infinity of extension implies that only that I can imagine an arbitrary number of like particulars without its actually being evident whether, in the progress of actual experience, this presumptively posited 'again and again' might perhaps undergo a cancellation, whether this being able to continue might one day actually reach a limit [*Grenze*]. With pure concepts, on the other hand, this infinity of actually being-able-to-continue is *given with self-evidence*. (Husserl, *Erfahrung* 410/*Experience* 340)

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Lohmar, "Husserl's Type and Kant's Schemata" 109.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. Husserl, *Logische* 661–2/*Logical* 274–75.

<sup>26</sup>As such Husserlian types can be compared with Wittgenstein's "family resemblance concepts." Both types and family resemblance concepts unite individuals on the basis of series of overlapping likenesses, a whole "network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing," to use Wittgenstein's words (*Philosophische Untersuchungen* §66, 57/*Philosophical Investigations* 33). What is decisive for membership is not any essential feature, or any set of necessary and sufficient conditions, but an open series of partial likenesses. Wittgenstein's prime example of such a unity is that of games. We call a multitude of practices and events by this name, but the name does not unite equal instances of a universal; it connects partially similar individuals: "Consider for example the proceedings that we call 'games.' I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don't say: 'There must be something common, or they would not be called games'"—but look and see whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look!" (*Philosophische Untersuchungen* 2003 §66, 56–7). Cf. Hilary Putnam's explication of meaning in "The Meaning of Meaning" 131–93, and to prototype theories developed in philosophy of cognition and cognitive science, e.g., Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*.

conceptual forms. Rather, the relation of dependency is the contrary: our possibilities of forming empirical concepts and intending universal objectivities depends on our capacities to experience pre-conceptual typicalities:

(...) the possibility of the formation of general objectivities, of “concepts,” extends as far as there are associative syntheses of likeness. On this rests the universality of operation of the formation of concepts; everything which, in some way or other, is objectively constituted in actuality or possibility, as an object of actual experience or of imagination, can occur as a term in relations of comparison and be conceived through the activity of eidetic identification and subsumption (*Unterstellen*) under a universal. (*Erfahrung* 396/*Experience* 329)<sup>27</sup>

The radical nature of Husserl’s analysis of pre-conceptual perception can best be captured by comparing his types to Kant’s schemata (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft* A139–47/B178–87).<sup>28</sup> Both types and schemata guide the synthetic unification of sensible material and thus take part in the constitution of perceived objects. So like Kant’s schemata, Husserl’s types bring coherence, order, and unity to the contents given in sensible intuition. But whereas Kantian schemata “correspond” to concepts<sup>29</sup> and assist and mediate in the application of the concepts to sensible manifolds,<sup>30</sup> Husserl’s types emerge already on the level of pre-conceptual experience and structure experience independently of the conceptual order and its discursive forms. In Husserl’s analysis, types result from the passive aesthetic synthesis in which consciousness unifies sensible contents in the guidance of sensibility itself and its primordial structures. Thus types, unlike schemata, do not govern sensibility with any rules that originate in concepts but, on the contrary, they provide a foundation for the establishment of concepts and conceptual unities.<sup>31</sup>

The implications for feminist philosophy and for philosophy of sexual difference are crucial. If gender identity is established primarily on the level of pre-conceptual experience, and not on the level of conceptual thinking or understanding, and if sexual difference is a difference between two pre-conceptual types, then no conceptual revision or subversion will affect our capacities and dispositions to perceive sexually

<sup>27</sup>Cf. Lohmar, “Husserl’s Type and Kant’s Schemata” 109–110.

<sup>28</sup>For a detailed comparison, see Lohmar, “Husserl’s Type and Kant’s Schemata”; cf. Schutz, “Type and eidos” 92–115; Lohmar, “Die phänomenologische Methode der Wesensschau” 65–91, “Kategoriale Anschauung” 209–37.

<sup>29</sup>Concepts are of three different kind: empirical concepts (e.g., plate), pure a priori concepts of sensibility (e.g., circle), and pure a priori concepts of understanding (e.g., causality). The schemata which mediate in the application of the pure concepts, or categories of understanding, to sense impressions are called “transcendental schemata.”

<sup>30</sup>Kant’s schemata are usually described as procedural rules which prescribe how concepts must be related to sense impressions: on the one hand, they prepare sense impressions to the ordering of the concepts; on the other hand, they realize concepts by connecting them to sensibility.

<sup>31</sup>The Kantian framework is complex because both empirical concepts and pure concepts of sensibility and understanding have their own schemata. In all cases, schemata serve the purpose of bridging between intuitions and concepts, but as the role of the concepts differ, so also the function of the schemata varies. Moreover, Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* includes an alternative account of the relation between the universal and the particular; for this, see his discussions on reflective judgments in the Introduction (esp. Section IV) and the First Introduction to *Critique of Judgment*. I am grateful to Martina Reuter, Juliette Kennedy, and Robert Hanna for illuminative discussions concerning this aspect of Kant’s thinking.

different beings, men and women. All attempts to deconstruct, disrupt, and subvert sexual difference by mere conceptual, discursive, or symbolic practices would be futile. The questioning, challenging, and criticizing of the concepts of sex and gender would be merely an intellectual exercise: it would not reach the level of pre-conceptual experience on which passive syntheses structure the sensible given and constitute typical objectivities independently of our active interventions. Simply and concretely: even if the Nietzschean-Butlerian critique may have destroyed our naïveté about the *concepts* of sex and gender, it has not habituated us in *perceiving* mere human beings instead of men and women, or five genders instead of two.

On the other hand, performative acts may produce new combinations of features that are central in the constitution of gender types. Such acts of “gender blending” may challenge habitual chains of association and institute new ones.<sup>32</sup> One should not, however, exaggerate the possible effects of such practices. By generating alternative combinations of gendered features, performative acts are able to disturb our habits of perceiving and challenge our theorizing about sex and gender; but in so far as these exercises remain momentary or local, they cannot reverse the sedimentation of gender types. So the real transformative work is not done in academia, or in theatres and art exhibitions, but in nurseries and homes. The corresponding theoretical task is to study early forms of intersubjectivity and the primordial relations of communication and proto-communication in which human subjects are habituated into perception, motility, and gesticulation. Here genetic phenomenology meets with psychoanalysis and empirical research on infant development.<sup>33</sup>

In the light of our phenomenological explication, the critical feminist question of genesis needs to be reformulated as a question concerning the origin of gender types. Instead of focusing on the genealogy of concepts, we need to study the institution of the types *man* and *woman*. We must ask how types are established in experience, and how the first associative links are constituted and strengthened within the stream of experiencing. The challenging task is to inquiry into the most rudimentary forms of experience but also into the generative links between diachronic subjects of experiencing.<sup>34</sup>

## Personal Styles: Understanding Oneself and Others

Husserl’s phenomenology also offers another challenging perspective on contemporary debates on sexual difference. Thus far we have studied the structures of perception and external experience, but when we turn to phenomenological analyses of selfhood, new senses of difference can be explicated. The main result in this area of investigation is the singularity of the transcendental self. Husserl argues that the constituting self is not a formal principle, as Kant contended, but is a concrete person, with a transcendental history of intentional relations and relata. In *Cartesian*

<sup>32</sup>For such arguments see, e.g., Devor, *Gender Blending*; Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.” Cf. Lohmar, “Husserl’s Type and Kant’s Schemata” 108–9, 112–14.

<sup>33</sup>For such approaches, see, e.g., Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*; Simms, *The Child in the World*.

<sup>34</sup>Cf. Steinbock, “From Phenomenological Immortality” 25–40.

*Meditations*, he explains: “By the method of transcendental reduction each of us, as Cartesian transcendental meditator, was led back to his [her] transcendental ego—naturally with its respective concrete-monic content as this factual ego, the one and only absolute ego” (*Cartesianische* 103/*Cartesian* 69).<sup>35</sup>

The phenomenological-transcendental reduction does not cancel or undo the factual life of the meditating, philosophizing subject.<sup>36</sup> Everything given and intended in the stream of experience remains unchanged and is only brought to focus for reflection. The task is to grasp the possibilities of this self, and to understand its actual intentional life as one of such possibilities. So after the phenomenological-transcendental reduction an eidetic reflection is needed: the self varies its experiences and their mutual references in imagination in order to grasp its essence purified from all empirical restrictions (*Cartesianische* 104–6/*Cartesian* 70–2). This does not yet involve any inquiry into the intendings of other selves, actual or possible:

After transcendental reduction, my true interest is directed to my pure ego, to the uncovering of this factual ego. But the uncovering can become genuinely scientific, only if I go back to the apodictic principles that pertain to this ego as exemplifying the *eidos* ego (. . .) It should be noted that, in the transition from my ego to the ego as such, neither the actuality nor the possibility of other egos is presupposed. I phantasy only myself as if I were otherwise; I do not phantasy others. (*Cartesianische* 106/*Cartesian* 72)

According to the standard interpretation, this step of self-variation is all that is needed for arriving at the essence of selfhood. I would like to argue, however, that if we take seriously the singularity of the meditating self and the temporal coherence and openness of its stream of experiencing, then another task must be carried out. The self needs to enter into special kinds of empathetic relations with others, relations which allow insight into their possibilities of living, unknown or even unimaginable. Husserl describes such an insight in the second volume of his *Ideas*, and distinguishes it from typifying experimental knowledge of the world. The other is not studied as a fellow being in an anticipatory, procedural approach but is understood, at once, as a singular whole through his or her expression: “I grasp what he

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<sup>35</sup>Husserl had first written “Cartesian meditator” but then replaced the term “Cartesian” with “transcendental”. In *Crisis*, he states: “As transcendental ego (. . .) I am the same ego that in the worldly sphere is a human ego” (*Die Krisis* 267–8/*The Crisis* 264), and in a manuscript from 1930 he explains: “I the human being in the world, living naturally only as this human being and finding myself in the personal attitude as this human person, am accordingly *not another ego as that* which I find in the transcendental attitude (. . .) The transcendental ego as pole and substrate of the totality of potentialities is, as it were, the *transcendental person* which comes to be primarily instituted through the phenomenological reduction. This ego now enters the universality of the concrete transcendental and takes on for itself the all-embracing life which brings into play all potentialities and which can now actualize all possible modes of self-sustainment” (*Zur phänomenologischen Reduktion* 200–1). I am indebted to Sebastian Luft for pointing out this latter paragraph. For Luft’s interpretation of the paragraph, see his “Husserl’s concept of the transcendental person.” Compare also the paragraphs quoted to what Husserl writes in *Phänomenologische Psychologie* 294.

<sup>36</sup>Cf. Steinbock, “From Phenomenological Immortality;” Rinofer-Kreidl, *Mediane Phänomenologie*.

[she] is capable of and what is beyond him [her]. I can understand many inner correlations, having fathomed him [her] so. It is in this way that I grasp his [her] ego, for it is precisely the identical ego of these motivations, ones that have this direction and this power" (*Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Zweites Buch* 273–5/*Ideas Pertaining* 286–7).<sup>37</sup>

The singularity of the transcendental self makes possible new questions about gendered persons. If the transcendental self retains all the experiences of the factual person and merely relates to them in a new reflective way, then how does it relate to the gender of the factual self? Sensuous experiences of one's own body, for example, its limits and dimensions, do not vanish in the reduction but become thematic.<sup>38</sup> Eidetic variation explores the necessary aspects of such experiences. At the end, the inquiry may confirm the traditional conviction that sexual difference has no constitutive significance, but at the moment this is not yet established. In the late work *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl warns about the dangers of leaping to eidetic conclusions on the basis of premature self-inspections:

The naïveté of the first [Cartesian] epoche had the result, in taking myself as functioning "I," as ego-pole of transcendental acts and accomplishments, proceeded in one leap and without grounding, that is illegitimately, to attribute to the mankind in which I find myself the same transformation into functioning subjectivity which I had carried out alone in myself. (*Die Krisis* 190/*The Crisis* 186)

To begin to see what is at issue in these methodological reflections, we need to study Husserl's concept of the transcendental self in more detail.

Husserl clarifies the concept of the transcendental self by distinguishing between three different senses of selfhood: first, the self as an act-pole; second, the personal self; and finally, the self in its full concreteness as a monad. This tripartite conceptual framework of selfhood is transcendental for Husserl. The terms "act-pole," "person," and "monad" refer to different structures of transcendental consciousness as it is given after the phenomenological-transcendental reduction. Our main interest here is in Husserl's distinction between the subject understood as the transcendental person and the subject understood as the act-pole.<sup>39</sup>

In Husserl's explication, the self as an act-pole is the subject of intentional acts, that is, the self studied merely as the performer of transient acts. Husserl argues, that every act discernible from the stream of experience radiates from one identical center; every act is given to us as such a ray. So to begin with, the self is the pole of all the acts that stand out from the streaming continuum of consciousness.

<sup>37</sup>Cf. Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität* Nr. 16, 438–65; Stein, *Zum Problem* 129/*On the Problem* 115–16.

<sup>38</sup>Cf. Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe I* 15/*The Second Sex* 1987, 15.

<sup>39</sup>For a complete account of the phenomenological transcendental concepts of act-pole, person, and monad, see Sakakibara, "Das Problem des Ich;" Mertens, "Husserls Phänomenologie der Monade." Cf. Heinämaa, "Selfhood, Consciousness and Embodiment;" MacDonald, "Husserl, the Monad and Immortality;" Steinbock, "From Phenomenological Immortality".

However, having made this basic point, Husserl argues that the transcendental self is not merely an act-pole or a formal principle of transient acts. It is also a temporal formation, and as such it refers to its own past (*Cartesianische* 100/*Cartesian* 66).

Husserl uses the terminology of “habits” to describe the temporal constitution of the self as distinct from the self in its function of performing acts. We should not take this terminology in its everyday sense of routines and social customs. The reference is to certain processes in internal time in which acts are established and new acts are habituated or sedimented on earlier ones thus forming a kind of act-form or act-gestalt. This gestalt is unique to the individual, and we can thus say that the self has a unique mode or style of acting (*Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Zweites Buch* 273–8/*Ideas Pertaining* 285–90).<sup>40</sup>

Husserl calls the “transcendental person” the gestalt that is formed in the establishment and habituation of acts in internal time. For him, the self is not a momentary actor that wills, enjoys and posits being, but the self that has already willed, has enjoyed and has posited being.<sup>41</sup> The self is not merely the totality of actual or possible acts but is formed in time. In other words, the self has a genesis, an internal past and an origin. And more: the self is its own past.

Husserl illuminates the process of habituation of acts by studying the case of judgment formation. He explains that always when we make a judgment, the judgment becomes our own in a specific way: it becomes part of our transcendental habitus. The judgment remains our own in this way, until we refute it by another act, and after this it still remains ours as a judgment once held and acted on, and then refuted. This does not mean that we repeat the judgment in every moment until we refute it, but that we are, from the very moment of making the judgment, the ones who thus judge and believe.

The same process of *gestaltung* covers also non-judgmental acts, i.e., axiological and practical acts. Thus the transcendental person is not just a bundle or heap of habituated judgments but includes also habitualities of affective intentions and goal-directed acts. Moreover, Husserl argues that all this is founded on the passive synthesis of sensation and not on the body as an objective reality.<sup>42</sup>

We can draw several important conclusions from this explication. First, we see that the self as a pole is merely an abstraction from the concrete whole of the self, constituted as a process of change and development in inner time. Accordingly, the self as an act-pole is not a-temporal but trans-temporal or supra-temporal.<sup>43</sup> Second, the self should not be understood as a universal principle in which all humans or all rational beings take part. Rather it is an individual with individual characteristics and with an individual style of changing and developing. To

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Sepp, “Geschlechterdifferenz” 58–9.

<sup>41</sup>The phenomenological concept of person differs from the traditional concept which is defined by the ideas of social roles and role playing. Cf. Waldenfels, “Fremdheit des anderen Geschlechts” 65.

<sup>42</sup>See, e.g., Husserl, *Die Krisis* 222/*The Crisis* 218.

<sup>43</sup>Cf. Kortooms, *Phenomenology of Time* 212.

be sure, this individual exhibits certain essential forms, such as the forms of inner temporality and development, but these forms do not have any separate being or existence as distinguished from the stream of lived experience. On the contrary, the essential forms of becoming show or disclose themselves only within such a stream.

From these results we can draw further conclusions which concern sexual difference. My crucial idea is that Husserl's personalistic concepts of style offers the possibility of formulating the question of gender identity and sexual difference in a radical philosophical way. We do not need to restrict ourselves to explaining such identities and differences by empirical realities: hormones, genes, stimulus response-systems, social roles, or historical facts. More fundamentally, we can understand sexual difference as a difference between two styles of intentional life, i.e., as a difference in ways of intending realities and idealities and being motivated by experiences and experiencable objects (*Cartesianische* 103/*Cartesian* 69). As stylistic characteristics of transcendental persons, "manhood" and "womanhood" are not anchored on any particular activities or objects, but denote two possible ways of establishing objectivity.

Moreover, as sensibility, motility, and sense perception exhibit specific forms of intentionality, we can include an account of the sexed body in this framework and ask in what sense sensuous experience is fundamental to gender identity and sexual difference. Thus understood, sexual identities are not constituted on the top of physical bodies or in addition to them but are formed together with our sensing living bodies. And in so far as the sensing, moving body takes part in the constitution of spatiality and spatial objectivity, also the sexual duality of embodiment may have constitutive significance.<sup>44</sup>

Understood in this way gender identity is not an adjectival identity but an *adverbial* one.<sup>45</sup> It characterizes the way in which our intentional activities and passivities link to one another within the internal time of experiencing. And when the style of intentional living itself changes—for example, in childhood, adolescence, sickness, or old age—then "it does so in a characteristic way, such that a unitary style manifests itself once more" (*Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Zweites Buch* 270/*Ideas Pertaining* 283).

## A Methodological Conclusion

The methodological lesson to be learned from these reflections concerns both our androcentric tradition of philosophizing and our feminist attempts to question its assumptions. Phenomenology teaches us something crucial about the order of investigation. Instead of postulating or positing a general "human style" and then studying feminine and masculine styles as its instances,<sup>46</sup> we must proceed in a

<sup>44</sup>For a detailed argument, see Heinämaa, "On Luce Irigaray's Phenomenology of Intersubjectivity" 243–65.

<sup>45</sup>Cf. Heinämaa, "What Is a Woman?" 26–7; cf. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* 79.

<sup>46</sup>Such as, for example, in Schutz's "Husserl's Ideas, Volume II" 33.

contrary way and start from individuals. Instead of hypothesizing a feminine style, we must first focus our attention on the lives of individual men and women. The task is not to dwell on these singularities, but to capture what is necessary and possible in them and for them.

However, if one hastens in one's self-exploration, then the basis of the eidetics remains obscure. Thus the first task is to become aware of one's own intentional life and its dynamic form, to explicate one's own style of acting and being affected. From the singular, one can proceed to other singulars, not by generalization from experience or by abstraction from one's own case, but by encountering the unfamiliar.

Feminist phenomenologists, starting with Stein and Beauvoir and continuing with Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, have argued that our theories of intersubjectivity are based on immature self-reflections.<sup>47</sup> As Beauvoir contends: "There is a whole region of human experience which the male deliberately chooses to ignore because he fails to think it; this experience woman lives" (*Le deuxième sexe II* 501/*The Second Sex* 622). The intimate relation of proto-communication, for example, which is established between the pregnant mother and the fetus has been bypassed by philosophers as a merely empirical issue, or simply ignored as an insignificant exception. The intentional and temporal aspects of this primordial relation, its peculiar spatiality and sensitivity, have not been included in the process of "free" variation, and thus its possibilities have remained missing from the resulting eidetics. What is presented as a human essence—the self standing in opposition to objects and other selves—is merely an elevated self-image of a male philosopher.

These omissions cannot be corrected by constructing a general theory of feminine experience or women's world. In so far as postmodern critics attack hasty generalizations made by feminists, they are correct. Women too come in many different kinds and many variations; some are born female, some are made female; some desire men, some desire other things; many women give birth to children but many engender also ideas and speeches; some have white skin, others have brown skin or black skin; and still others identify themselves by ancestry, religion, or language. All these differences deserve our philosophical attention.

However, a postmodern critique of eidetics should not lead to a dogmatic rejection of the possibility of womanhood or a feminine essence.<sup>48</sup> Rather our task is to start a tedious work: We must engage in disturbing reflections and carry through detailed analyses of experience; we must study critically the analytic concepts that are handed down to us and we may need to forge new ones. Most importantly, we must be prepared to argue in public for the idea that difference, and not unity, is the route to wisdom about essences.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup>For these connections see Heinämaa, "Feminism" 500–13, "Cixous; Kristeva and Le Dœuff."

<sup>48</sup>Cf. Kristeva, "La génie féminin" 7–20, "Y a-t-il un génie féminin?" 537–66/"Is there a feminine genius?" 403–27.

<sup>49</sup>Cf. Plato, *Symposium* 210d–e, 493.

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**Part III**  
**Power, Ideology and Reality**



# Chapter 10

## The Politics and the Metaphysics of Experience

Marianne Janack

**Abstract** This chapter argues that the dilemmas that arise about the proper place of experience in knowledge are artefacts of a particular theory of mind and the contents of experience: what Alva Noë calls the “brain photoreceptor” model. By giving up this model, we can see that the critiques of experience that have been leveled by feminist theorists and allied anti-foundationalists lose some of their bite. I argue that a model of mind that assumes a fully embodied and active subject—as the brain photoreceptor model does not—does not run into the same conundrums about experience.

### Introduction

In ordinary discourse, the invocation of “experience” is a shorthand way of marking a certain claim as epistemically privileged. “I know from experience that. . .” is often a way of offering argument-stopping evidence. In this respect, arguments from experience are offered to vindicate a position that is both perspectival and privileged, and that draws its authority from our pre-philosophic commitment to the reliability of first-hand sensory experience. An appeal to experience operates as a thick description: it captures not just a description of how I came to know something, but also carries with it a justification or evaluative charge. When I say, “I know from experience that will never work,” I am describing the way I came to know something and, in the very same gesture, marking that source of knowledge as epistemically privileged—my knowledge is, so to speak, “first-hand,” not subject to the deformations of translation, testimony, or interpretation. Its grounds are (assuming that I am a rational, autonomous being)<sup>1</sup> given the imprimatur of authenticity and reliability.

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<sup>1</sup>But see, for instance, Steven Shapin for an interesting analysis of the ways in which social position, gender, and class contributed to, or detracted from, one’s status as a reliable “experimenter.”

This ordinary sense of “experience” is often contrasted with theoretical knowledge, or knowledge that is justified by other beliefs I already accept.<sup>2</sup>

Foundationalism is the epistemology that is built on this understanding of experience. Foundationalism assumes that all of our knowledge claims are eventually traceable to something which is itself immediately justified, rather than immediately justified by other beliefs. Beliefs that are immediately justified might be *a priori* judgments (as in the case of Cartesian and Leibnizian rationalism) or they might be beliefs we hold on the basis of sense data or sense experience (as in the case of Lockean empiricism). The privileging of experience generally as a foundational ground can thus be seen as an aspect of modern empiricism.

Yet, our post-Kuhnian theories of perception and experience seem to be reasons to reject this privileging. If we know anything about perception and experience, it seems that after Kuhn we know that there can never be an “innocent eye” that sees things as they are in and of themselves. According to post-Kuhnian doctrine, perception and experience are deeply indebted to theories, outlooks, paradigms, world-views or conceptual schemes (pick your favorite disciplinary metaphor here) and our views of the world are structured by those theoretical commitments. We do not see the world as it is—we see it only as it can show up for creatures like us, whose contact with the world is necessarily mediated through the thick interpretive lens of frames or theories.

Like the appeal to experience as unimpeachable first-hand knowledge, our common, everyday understandings of experience have been influenced by this Kuhnian analysis as well. In addition, however, the Kuhnian analysis has provided feminist politics with a particular model of activism: a model in which recognizing the ways in which our experience of the world is shaped by our identities is an essential part of the political process. In a recent workshop I attended on teaching about race, class and gender issues, the moderator emphasized the value of trying to get students to adopt a different “perspective” or “mind-set” that would allow them to see the ways in which privilege operates to structure their experience of the world. Helping students to recognize the effects of class, race, or gender privilege is a process that must begin with getting them to take up a different perspective, according to the moderator, which will allow them to have different experiences of the world. Quoting from Joan Scott’s essay “The Evidence of Experience”, the moderator reminded us that “experience is always political.”

These two models of experience—the first, in which experience is understood as giving us authentic, reliable first-hand knowledge I will call the “Romantic” model, and the second, in which experience is taken to be theory-dependent I will call the “Kuhnian” model—create a particular dilemma for feminist theory and practice. This dilemma has, in turn, given rise to a skepticism about experience that co-habits uncomfortably with a feminist politics that has given experience a big role to play in grounding feminist demands.

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<sup>2</sup>Williams (116–7) tracks the ways in which “experience” and “empiricism” are contrasted with “theoretical knowledge”—sometimes as an invocation of authenticity, sometimes as a way of condemning it as random or as “mere observation.”

The claim that experience is always political is as close to a cornerstone of twentieth and twenty-first century feminist theory and politics as we are likely to come. Postmodernists, analytic feminists, pragmatist feminists, standpoint theorists, feminist phenomenologists—I think it is fair to say that none would object to the claim that experience is always political. But what does this claim amount to? To say that experience is always political is often taken to mean that we learn to see the world in certain kinds of ways that support certain kinds of political agenda, and that our experience of the world is an effect of the theories we already—consciously or unconsciously—accept. Such theories make us take notice of certain things and ignore others. According to this metaphysic of experience, our experiences of the world are interpretations of the world, not simply data we receive from “brute” reality, and are structured by—indeed, perhaps determined by—our “perspectives” on that world. These perspectives are themselves understood as the conceptual schemes that yield these interpretations of the world, which we often mistake for direct, unmediated apprehensions of reality. Perspectives are, in essence, theories that we learn, and that we mobilize in our attempts to know the world. They might also be called “worldviews.” In this sense, the claim that experience is political amounts to a reiteration of the Kuhnian model of experience.

But if we accept this metaphysic of experience, on what basis could we convince others to adopt this new and different—and, presumably, superior—“worldview,” “perspective,” or “conceptual scheme” of feminism or anti-racism? The challenge seems insurmountable, especially if their experiences of the world either explicitly contradict these constituent theoretical commitments (“Women just are worse than men at reasoning”) or, minimally, fail to support them (“I’ve never seen any instances of sexism, and I’ve never been discriminated against, so what’s the big deal?”). How would one get outside this closed loop? It seems that we do, in fact, escape that loop, at least some of us do some of the time. Accounts of feminist epiphanies constitute examples of such escapes. But if we aren’t entirely enslaved by our worldviews, it seems that we would need some version of the Romantic model to explain how this can happen. And therein lies the dilemma: feminist politics seems to need both the Kuhnian and the Romantic models of experience.

It seems that the only way to make it possible to have experiences of the world that testify to the presence of race, class, or gender privilege on the Kuhnian model is to take up a “perspective” or adopt a “conceptual scheme,” “worldview,” or “mind set” that accepts the thesis that there is such privilege, and which will in turn yield a different interpretation of the world that will confirm that thesis. In essence, it seems that in order to be willing to take up such a perspective, we must already, to some extent, accept it, or see it as a desirable perspective to adopt. But if, from the perspective of feminist politics, the experience of the marginalized is to serve as a catalyst for political change, and if that experience is to be taken to constitute an account of the world that reveals something true about the world—and that this perspective is superior to the perspective from which these facts are hidden—then it seems that we must have access to the type of experience posited by the Romantic model: experience that is true, authentic and to which our theories are answerable. This would be experience that can itself serve as an arbiter and a source of insight

into the world independent of our “perspectives” or “worldviews.” But the Kuhnian model of experience has, presumably debunked that model.

Catherine MacKinnon offers consciousness-raising as a possible strategy for breaking out of this loop: “Through consciousness-raising, women grasp the collective reality of women’s condition from within the perspective of that experience, not from outside it” (536), and “as its own kind of social analysis, within yet outside the male paradigm, just as women’s lives are [consciousness-raising] has a distinctive theory of the relation between method and truth, the individual and her social surroundings” (535–6). The metaphor of “inside” versus “outside”, and the invocation of feminism as the theory of “women’s point of view” or “perspective” which lies somehow outside the male “paradigm” (535) is suggestive. MacKinnon wants to claim both that women’s experience is an effect of our social position within patriarchy, and that there is something of the outsider that allows women to engage critically with that experience. Consciousness-raising is the attempt to reinterpret women’s personal experiences and transform those experiences into a source of political insight, rather than understanding them as the purely personal and subjective experiences of a particular woman. What is it that women occupy? A “perspective” or a “point of view”—both ocular metaphors for a theoretical and political position.

MacKinnon’s analysis of women’s social position seems to imply that women’s perspective can constitute a critical perspective because it is both “inside” and “outside” of the patriarchal perspective or paradigm (these terms seem to be used interchangeably). Women’s experience has its roots in the tension between being a part of the patriarchal order but also being excluded from it. This understanding of experience, with its echoes of authenticity and veridicality, seems to harken back to Romantic notions of experience, and of women as a (natural?) class with greater access to this authenticity. But to the extent that women’s experience is constructed by patriarchy, it is difficult to see how to make sense of that authenticity. MacKinnon’s claims for women’s experience, then, seem to appeal to both the Kuhnian and the Romantic accounts of experience in a way that is difficult to account for: women’s experience is an effect of patriarchy, yet it can, at the same time, provide the resources for resisting patriarchy in virtue of its greater authenticity and its “outsider” status. We must have access to experience that is not determined by patriarchal paradigms, otherwise it would be hard to see how one might have experiences that “put the lie” to patriarchal interpretations. But for this to make sense, then women would have to either have access to Romantic experience, or, following the Kuhnian model, women would have to already have committed to a “feminist perspective” that would allow them to have the kinds of experiences that would put the lie to patriarchal interpretations.

It might be tempting at this point to just pitch “experience” into the dustbin of outmoded terms and concepts, like “phlogiston” or “soul” or “the ether.” Following out the theoretical consequences of the Kuhnian model of experience, Richard Rorty argues just that. Appeals to experience, and the epistemological machinery such appeals invoke, are wedded to a concept of mind as mirror, according to

Rorty. The model of mind as mirror, a model that Rorty attributes to Descartes, encourages us to think of the subject of experience as a passive recipient of data. In John Dewey's words, it is part of a spectator theory of knowledge, in which knowledge has no—indeed ought to have no—constitutive connection to human interests or identity, and in which the subject of knowledge is ideally a passive spectator of the world. Similarly, this model assumes that the most objective subject is one whose “mirror” is relatively free of cultural or social influences; ideally, each mirror would be identical (and interchangeable) with any other mirror. Appeals to experience, then, are underwritten by the concept of the autonomous subject of liberal theory—an individual subject who exists as such prior to culture, and is, in this sense, a metaphysical posit. Thus, in the invocation of, and appeal to experience, we discover an assumption about the nature of individuals and subjects that emphasizes their status as ontologically given, and their social identities as either sources of bias, or as irrelevancies. The model of mind as mirror serves a particular political role, then, as well as framing a particular approach to epistemology.

According to Rorty, we cannot free ourselves from this objectionable model of mind and identity if we continue to invoke “experience.” Better to jettison the term entirely, Rorty thinks, or replace it with “discourse.”<sup>3</sup> But for feminists, this move seems to ignore the very important role that appeals to experience can play in feminist politics, and so to jettison “experience” as a concept in order to escape the model of mind as mirror—and the related versions of objectivity it supports—seems a rather high price to pay. Joan Scott and Louise Antony, for instance, both reject the model of mind as mirror, but neither feels compelled to jettison the term “experience” in the wake of that rejection. As I will show, however, the alternatives that Scott and Antony offer cannot solve the ideological dilemma posed by the Kuhnian and Romantic concepts of experience.

This dilemma, it seems to me, is itself an artifact of a particular model of mind—“mind as interpreting machine”—which, even as it has promised to help us avoid particular problems having to do with objectivity, has had its own troublesome aspects. I shall begin with a discussion of anti-foundationalist critiques of traditional empiricism and the theory of mind that anti-foundationalists identify as supporting that tradition, but then argue that the discussion of experience we find in anti-foundationalist theorists ends up “linguistifying” experience and agency, as in the case of Scott's theory or, alternatively positing a priori a thin account of experience, as in Antony's theory. These moves represent a privileging of a particular model of objectivity, and a particular model of mind, that in combination give rise to the tension between the Romantic model of experience and the Kuhnian model.

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<sup>3</sup>This exchange between Rorty and an interviewer is probably the clearest statement of Rorty's position. When asked what he thought of Dewey's theory of experience, Rorty replies: “I regard that as the worst part of Dewey. I'd be glad if he'd never written *Experience and Nature*.” When the interviewer then asks whether a philosophy shorn of its model of truth as representation and its pursuit of the theory of knowledge might not need a theory of experience, Rorty replies, “I'd prefer ‘discourse’ to ‘experience’.” (As quoted in Mendieta 20)

I offer an alternative, naturalistically-informed model of mind that takes agency as constitutive of mind and that offers the possibility of *avoiding* rather than solving, the ideological dilemma.

## **Anti-foundationalism, Feminism and the Escape from the Model of Mind as Mirror**

In her very influential essay “The Evidence of ‘Experience’” Scott draws on the Rortian attack on foundationalism and its theory of mind to critique feminist projects that put “experience” at the center of a programme for documenting women’s experience or that appeal to experience as a grounding for political claims—such as MacKinnon’s claims about consciousness-raising and women’s experience. This critique has had significant influence in feminist theoretical circles. Among other things, Scott charges that projects or justifications that give a central place to experience tend to “naturalize” experience and the experiencing subject, trading on the idea of experience as a non-linguistic, asocial encounter with the world on the part of a subject who exists as such “naturally.” Appeals to experience, then, are troublesome from an epistemological perspective, because of their complicity with foundationalism, but they also operate with an assumption about the ontological givenness of the subject of experience, and thereby disguise the ways in which subjectivity is an achievement, not an ontological given.

Scott’s claim against empiricist foundationalism and the accompanying Romantic model of experience can best be captured with a paraphrase of Simone de Beauvoir: one is not born a subject; one becomes a subject. Subjecthood in its political sense—related to concepts of social identity, agency, and power—is an achievement marked by the successful appropriation of certain kinds of skills and performances that mark identities and constitute existents as subjects with interior mental lives and perspectives. The correlate of this that Scott emphasizes is the role of language in the constitution of subjects of experience: one might say that the possibility of claiming “linguistic space” is essential to the constitution and achievement of subjectivity because only this allows others to recognize one as a locus of desires, motives, intentions and beliefs. The role of language, however, cannot be overemphasized in Scott’s critique: not only is the possibility of claiming linguistic space essential to the status of subject, but experience, Scott claims, cannot be disentangled from its expression in language. Experience is not prior to language, but is constituted by it.

Scott advances this position by elaborating on the role of discursivity in the constitution of subjects of experience.<sup>4</sup> According to Scott, appeals to experience

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<sup>4</sup>I realize that it can be frustrating to philosophers to encounter terms like “discursive” or “discursive practices” when they seem to have no clear referent. My interpretative strategy when I encounter these terms is to understand them as referring to the concrete context of reason-giving, discussion, and theory construction—that is, as concrete, particular instances of such practices. For anyone with a bent for logic, the idea of a universe of discourse might be a good entry point for

and the related project of making experience visible assume that experience and its meaning are prior to language and that language is put at the service of representing or expressing experience; in essence, Scott argues, the relationship between experience and language is taken to be one in which experience can be meaningful prior to its expression in language, and this assumption commits such a position to the idea of a pre-discursive autonomous subject. According to Scott this subject is, yet again, the liberal individual for whom matters of identity and identification are irrelevant, and for whom experience of the world is “natural” and unmediated, as opposed to “learned” or “constructed.”

Rorty’s related claims about the role of linguistic innovation in the constitution of subjects make this position especially clear. According to Rorty’s analysis of feminist politics and feminist rhetorical strategies, women’s status as agents is a discursive effect, rather than a prior (metaphysical) truth that must be captured or represented accurately (“Feminism”). In claiming for women a new moral identity as agents, feminists have not unearthed a pre-existing truth that has been hidden by patriarchal ideology, Rorty argues; we have created that identity, rather than discovering it. Agency and autonomy, as defining characteristics of subjects, are cultural posits or constructions, according to Rorty and Scott. To be an agent is to be taken to be such, and the process of going from non-agent to agent is a process of persuasive redescription. The status of agent is not a metaphysical status. It cannot be established *a priori*.<sup>5</sup> Status as an agent is conferred, and is itself a function of being interpreted as exercising agency. But appeals to experience, Rorty and Scott imply, are always in danger of invoking and reinforcing the idea of mind as mirror and of an autonomous individual who pre-exists the effects of culture and social learning.

In addition to their tendency to reinforce a debunked metaphysics of agency and mind, appeals to experience are, for both Rorty and Scott, “ocularcentric.” Vision and visibility are the dominant models for knowledge and with this model we invoke at the same time the model of mind as mirror and the conception of experience as veridical (ocular) representation.<sup>6</sup> We are misled by this metaphor, Rorty argues, and Scott argues that feminist appeals to experience, and the correlative privileging of a metaphor of visibility mean that this metaphysics of subject and experience are still exerting their undesirable force. Just as subjects of experience are discursively constructed, objects of experience are also so constituted. Objects of experience and of knowledge are constituted by their roles in epistemic practices and regimes of knowledge. They are picked out by their descriptions under some vocabulary

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understanding how this term is used. Whether Scott means to invoke these meanings is not clear from the article, but it seems the most promising and sympathetic reading.

<sup>5</sup>See Scott: “. . .[S]ubjects do have agency. They are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them” (793).

<sup>6</sup>Scott has a further objection to this emphasis on visibility, drawn from Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary practices. While this is an important aspect of her argument, it is not connected directly to the metaphysical issues that are my concern in this chapter.

or rubric. We might think that visual representation is the result of an encounter between the passive eye and the simple (and brute) object of vision, but Scott emphasizes the embeddedness of all objects and subjects in discursive practices, without which they would have no meaning. Thus, if we follow the anti-foundationalist lead that Rorty and Scott have laid out for us, we come to see that vision is not the passive in-take of information from the world *an sich*, since visual experience is mediated by theories, and thus by language. Visual experience is learned—it is not natural—and it is, essentially, discursive—that is, tied up in discourse and knowledge practices.

While she agrees with Scott and Rorty in rejecting the model of mind as passive (and blank) screen onto which visual images are projected, Antony draws on cognitive science to make her case. Unlike Scott, Antony is not concerned that vision and experience might be overly “naturalized” in the model of mind as mirror, but that it is not naturalized enough. Antony argues for the epistemic value of “bias” by drawing on Quinean and Kuhnian arguments about the theory-dependence of experience and the naturalized approach to the mind that they implicitly (in the case of Quine, explicitly) mobilize. According to Antony, a naturalized approach to epistemology and philosophy of mind shows us that “far from being the streamlined, uncluttered logic machine of classical empiricism, the mind now appears to be much more like a bundle of highly specialized modules, each natively fitted for the analysis and manipulation of a particular body of sensory data” (137). Antony argues that the most objectionable aspects of “traditional” epistemology and philosophy of mind, from a feminist perspective, are the aspects of it that come down to us from classical empiricism, which assumed that the *tabula rasa* of the mind was written on only by experience, and any elements contributed by the mind itself would inevitably distort that experience and thereby undercut the possibility of objectivity and knowledge. In this respect, she and Rorty and Scott are fellow travelers; all three critique a model of mind and an allied version of empiricism that eschews any kind of in-put from the mind. And all three see the inevitability—and necessity—of such in-put as requiring a revision of that model.

Drawing on Quine,<sup>7</sup> Antony argues that we cannot have knowledge of the world without “bias”:

A completely ‘open mind’ confronting the sensory evidence we confront could never manage to construct the rich systems of knowledge we construct in the short time we take to construct them: from the point of view of an *unbiased* mind, the human sensory flow contains both too much information and too little: too much for the mind to generate *all* the logical possibilities, and too little for it to decide among even the relatively few that *are* generated. (137)

Experience, according to this naturalized approach, is a thin dribble of sensory in-put from the world that is insufficient for the task of producing knowledge of the world; to produce full-blooded knowledge of the world we must draw inferences

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<sup>7</sup>This is another respect in which Antony and Rorty (but not Scott) are fellow travelers; both take themselves to be drawing out the consequences of a Quinean critique of classical empiricism.

or come up with explanations (for ourselves) of that in-put. Since the possible explanations of in-put are underdetermined by that in-put in virtue of its thinness, then we must furnish the rest from our other cognitive resources.

Those resources are, to a certain extent, theoretical (and discursive), but they are also, to a certain extent, hard-wired into the brain, according to Antony. The theoretical resources are what Antony captures in her discussion of “worldviews” (139): analogous to scientific paradigms, worldviews give us a common language, shared mores and values, and a common ground for starting inquiry. According to Antony, worldviews do some of the work of simplifying and streamlining cognitive tasks, but, *contra* Rorty and Scott’s version of anti-foundationalism, they do not do all the work. When Antony speaks of the mind as a bundle of highly specialized modules, or of the role that native conceptual structure (137) plays in helping us to process information about the world, she is drawing on the approach to cognitive science pioneered by people like Jerry Fodor, who argue that the physical structure of the brain—its modules—make certain kinds of cognitive short-cuts possible, and that the organizing function of such modules is what allows experience to be intelligible to a subject.

One might justifiably ask what Antony’s approach has in common with Rorty’s and Scott’s, other than an appeal to Kuhnian analyses of paradigms, a commitment to anti-foundationalism, and a theory of vision and the subject in which that subject brings something of her own to her visual encounters with the world. After all, one might object, Antony embraces the results of naturalistic investigations into the brain and mind to argue against the Romantic model of experience and the model of mind as mirror, while Scott and Rorty seem to prefer to take up dramatically different weapons, *viz.*: the idea of experience and subjects as discursively constructed, and what we might think of as an “externalized” model of mind. Rorty shares with Antony an enthusiasm for Quine, it’s true, and that might be said to have trickled down to Scott, but still the fact of the matter is that, other than a thin veneer of agreement on the fact that experience is “theory-dependent,” the route that Antony follows would seem to be a violation of the dictum laid down by Scott that “feminists shall not naturalize.” In that respect, it would seem that the differences between Scott and Antony constitute an unbridgeable gulf.

However, what they share is perhaps more important than what they do not. Scott and Antony search for a way to reframe experience that does not invoke foundationalist assumptions about the subject of experience. Vision is, according to Rorty and Scott, the organizing metaphor for knowledge and mind that animates foundationalism. They object to this privileging of vision because vision seems to be a passive faculty, in which information from the world is passively absorbed and, ideally, reflected without distortion in the mirror of nature—the mind. Antony does not take up the issue of whether the model of visual knowledge is appropriate for understanding our attempts to know the world generally, but she does, with Scott and Rorty, take issue with the model of mind and perception she sees as animating the marriage of classical empiricism and foundationalism. While Rorty and Scott emphasize the role of language in the constitution of experience and mind, Antony emphasizes the role that theory (closely allied to, if not necessarily identical with, language)

and brain modularity play in helping us come to know the world through experience. The commitment to elaborating a model of mind and the knowing subject that eschews the model of mind as passive is a deep similarity: the mechanism for establishing the non-passivity of mind for Scott is language and discursive practices. Recognition of the role these play in the construction of subjects and experience should lead us to give up the model of mind as an interior space or canvas on which experience writes. For Antony the mechanisms of non-passivity are theories and brain structure. While “mechanism of non-passivity” might seem a cumbersome and ugly stylistic choice on my part, I have a reason for not equating these “mechanisms of non-passivity” with activity and agency, as I will show in the next section.

In the next section I will argue that the approach to the problem of experience that we find in Scott and Antony represents a particular model of objectivity, one that essentially eviscerates the concept of experience. This model of objectivity is captured both by the linguistifying move that Scott makes in her appeal to discursive practices and the externalized model of mind they give rise to, and by Antony’s appeal to cognitive science and its characterization of experience as a type of thin in-put to a visual system which must then do something with it to come up with the meaningfulness of states of affairs. In each case, however, we lose the robust model of experience that characterizes the Romantic model of experience, and to which feminist politics appeals. This might seem to be the price we must pay to escape the model of mind as mirror. But the escape from the hall of mirrors need not lead us to cede the term “experience” or replace it with a thin imitation of what it once was. Recognizing agency and the first-person perspective as essential aspects of mind provide us with other options.

## **Impersonal and First-Person Perspectives: Critical Positions Versus Avowals**

Viewed from the third-person perspectives of the anthropologist, the historian, or the sociologist, the analysis of experience is an opportunity to learn about how a subject understands her world: what she takes to be important, how she organizes that world, and how those understandings are deployed in explanation. But from this perspective, experiences are treated as “experiences”: they are merely data points, or phenomena in need of explanation. The scare quotes imply a certain ironic stance, as we see in the title of Scott’s essay. Scare-quote experiences are not taken at face value as revealing the world as it is, but as revealing the way that a particular subject interprets her world. The challenge that arises for the historian, the anthropologist, or the sociologist in understanding how the personal (first-person) and impersonal (third person) perspectives on a given experience or experiences relate to each other is the challenge of grappling with an irreducibly personal phenomenon (experience) from an impersonal perspective (“experience”). Yet, when viewed from the impersonal perspective, the grounds of experience’s epistemic

and rhetorical authority threaten to slip away—its veridicality can be called into question, its theoretical grounds or constitutive frameworks viewed and criticized.<sup>8</sup> The impersonal perspective is, essentially, a critical or ironic position.

Taking up this critical position with respect to our experiences, however, is itself an achievement.<sup>9</sup> It is, in essence, the stance of objectivity and critical distance, but this stance also seems to threaten with evaporation the very phenomena it seeks to critique: in taking up a third-person perspective toward our own experiences (and those of others) we do not necessarily commit ourselves to the theories or frameworks that inform and shape that experience—we hold those experiences at a distance, so to speak, without avowing the truth of their deliverances. Experience becomes “experience”—no longer carrying with it the presumption of veridicality or the assumption of a revelation from an objective world, and shorn of its subjective bases.<sup>10</sup> From the critical perspective, we see the mind as an interpreting machine, processing in-put from the world, but for the subject of these “experiences” the activity of the interpreting machinery must remain unacknowledged. From the impersonal perspective we have only “experience”; it is only the first-person perspective that can give us non-ironic, no-scare-quotes experience.

This asymmetry between the third-person and first-person perspectives manifests itself in our analyses of agency as well; while the critical perspective views the subject’s “experience” as data points—as providing us with information about how the subject interprets the world—the out-put of that interpretation, when viewed from this perspective, can only be behavior, rather than agency. Agency is itself something that is essentially constituted from the first-person perspective; it is a way of understanding behavior that necessarily invokes the trappings and presupposition of subjecthood.<sup>11</sup> Viewed from the third-person perspective, agency can be inferred or imputed, but in taking up a third-person perspective toward some being, I am at the same time viewing that being as an object—that is, as a non-subject. The sideways-on view of a person, or of a set of beliefs, is then different from the first-person perspective that has as its essential ingredient agency, and which

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<sup>8</sup>Edward Bruner reflecting on his own discipline of anthropology says: “Traditionally, anthropologists have tried to understand the world as seen by the ‘experiencing subject,’ striving for an inner perspective. . . [but] we systematically remove the personal and the experiential in accordance with our anthropological paradigms; then we reintroduce them so as to make our ethnographies more real, alive” (Turner and Bruner 9).

<sup>9</sup>See, for instance, John McDowell and Wilfred Sellars, both of whom argue that the ability to distance ourselves from our experiences is an achievement that is associated with an “objective stance.” Critical distancing from experience is also a hallmark of rationality in some moral theories that place a high value on reflective equilibrium as a model for reasoning.

<sup>10</sup>Kwame Anthony Appiah (60) makes a similar argument about the ways in which third-person and first-person stances interact with attributions of agency.

<sup>11</sup>See, for instance, Moran and a slightly orthogonal, but still relevant argument in Dennett (254–5) where he argues that I cannot but see myself as a person, and thus as a subject, in Scott’s terminology.

avows certain beliefs or commitments. In the case of both experience and agency, the first-person perspective is essential to the constitution of these concepts. The third-person perspective that Scott's account privileges—the perspective of critical distance and objectivity—threatens with dissolution these concepts—experience and agency—since the first-person perspective from which they are avowed non-ironically is itself taken to be a discursive effect; an effect that is essentially third-person.

Appeals to experience (as in the case of the Romantic model of experience) and anti-foundationalist critiques of these appeals (as in the Kuhnian model) are caught in this conflict between the third-person “objective” or critical stance and the first-person stance of avowal. For the anti-foundationalist the conflict is resolved in favor of the impersonal, critical stance—the stance of objectivity. The objective stance that Scott and Rorty privilege is also inconsistent with attributions of agency, since taking up the impersonal perspective is just that perspective that is constituted by exiling agency. To see oneself or others from the impersonal (or third-person) perspective is just to interpret them as behaving, rather than as acting, since the intentions that would make something an action rather than a mere behavior are invisible from the third-person perspective. Viewed impersonally from the third-person perspective intentions can only be imputed or inferred on the basis of other behaviors (including testimonies). The anti-foundationalist premises from which Rorty and Scott derive their claims about experience and to which they appeal in arguing that agency is conferred would be *expected* to deliver these verdicts on experience and agency because we can get only “experience” and behavior when we take up this critical position. But, in the attempt to avoid the model of mind as mirror, Rorty and Scott replace it with a model of mind as interpreting machine that “outputs” behavior.

Antony's version of anti-foundationalism also exiles agency from her account, but does so by focusing on cognitive modularity and “worldviews.” Antony, like Scott, offers an essentially third-person approach to the subject and agent, where experience becomes “experience.” Unlike Rorty and Scott, however, Antony explicitly elaborates the concept of experience as thin in-put to a visual system which then works with that thin in-put, contributing resources from its cognitive resources (worldviews, paradigms, theories and cognitive modularity) to produce for the experiencing subject a world of states of affairs, three-dimensional objects, and meaningfulness. But the assumption that experience is the thin in-put to the interpreting machine that is the mind is an a priori commitment to a story about what experience must be like according to the model that Antony advocates, rather than a thoroughly naturalistic version of experience. It is one way of approaching mind naturalistically, it is true, but the naturalistic stance that takes seriously the phenomenological aspects of experience is also viable, as we shall see, and allows us to preserve some of what is valuable in the Romantic model of experience. Models serve certain kinds of research purposes—they delineate a field of study and provide methods and simulacra for the target of investigation. The model of mind as interpreting machine has provided solutions to pressing problems in cognitive science. But the ideological dilemma that presents itself in feminist politics as the dilemma

of interpreting our social experiences, and the relationship of our gendered/raced identities to those interpretations, might be an arena for which the model is unsuited.

One of the virtues of the model of mind as mirror and the Romantic model of experience that accompanied it was its ability to fold the first-person aspect of experience into mentality. Not only did it preserve the phenomenological aspects of experience, but it also helped explain the persuasiveness of experience to the experiencing subject. Scott, Rorty and Antony begin with models of mind that privilege “scientific” or third-person approaches to mind—in the case of Scott and Rorty, the model is primarily drawn from the social sciences, in Antony’s case from cognitive science—that are essentially antithetical to the development of a robust concept of experience, since these models have exiled the first-person and phenomenological aspects of experience in an attempt to overcome the problems with the Romantic model of experience and the model of mind as mirror. The problem of experience as we find it posed in the dilemma between the insights of anti-foundationalism and the desire to salvage something of experience as a way of coming to know the world—between the Kuhnian and the Romantic models of experience—is a relic of a priori assumptions about the mind, sense experience, and our attempts to know the world that assume that the vehicle of meaningfulness for our interactions with the world is theory and language, and that the non-passivity of the mind must be attributed not to a fundamental agency, but to theories or brain structures that essentially project meaning onto the world. The model of mind that Scott, Rorty, and Antony are assuming is that of mind as an information processing system or interpreting machine, where theories or “perspectives” are taken to be the software or “instructions” according to which in-put from the world is processed. Antony adds as well the “hardware” of modularity to this story. But putting agency at the center of our account of mind fundamentally reorients the issue, and gives us a different way to understand knowledge, mind, and the constitution of subjects. I think this shift can be justified on the basis of both its “naturalistic” credentials and its promise for allowing us to evade the dilemma that is posed by the model of mind and experience that we have inherited from this branch of anti-foundationalism. A different model of mind can displace this dilemma.

## Agency and Models of the Mind

Before going further with the argument, I should explain the role that models play in theorizing about the mind, since it is my contention that at the heart of the ideological dilemma is the assumption that we must choose between two opposing models of mind, one of which has been debunked (the mind as mirror) and the other of which has been forced upon us by advances in theory and science. Models, according to Joseph Rouse, like simulacra “[mimic] features of the world which interest us in an object that we can manipulate in different ways than we can manipulate the things simulated” (*Engaging Science* 227). Models are stand-ins for the target of scientific investigation: minds, atoms, hurricanes, or the trajectory of a flying golf

ball can all be targets of investigation via computer models, mathematical models, or in some cases, pictorial models.<sup>12</sup> The distinction between metaphor of mind and model of mind is blurry in the discussion of experience, however. While models are used in scientific research, the feminist discussion of experience seems to be as much a part of our common, everyday language as it is a problem for science,<sup>13</sup> and yet the two domains overlap. The spillover of scientific models into the non-scientific discourses of mind and experience may be one of the things that distinguishes present-day psychology from present-day physics; while most non-physicists still resort to and privilege folk physics in their interactions with the world, folk psychology has been interwoven with scientific psychology as well as with social scientific models in accounts of behavior. Models are important to scientific research programmes because they make certain aspects of the target of investigation more perspicuous, but the cost of that level of resolution is that other characteristics of the target object are obscured, or vanish altogether. When models are taken up in everyday political discourse, their role as model—and the pragmatic ground of that role—is often forgotten: models are then assumed to be simply descriptions of the entity in question.

Scott is correct when she says that the objects of experience and of knowledge are discursively constructed—and this is nowhere so evident as it is in the discussion of mind and experience itself. The discursive construction of mind and experience has been the effect primarily of the overlap between our “everyday” need to understand others and ourselves with the discourses of anthropology, sociology, neuroscience, and other branches of scientific psychology. While the models of mind we have adopted from the social sciences and from scientific psychology have helped solve certain problems, they have given rise to other problems—in particular the ideological dilemma. But the problem is that the ideological dilemma is not just a narrowly defined scientific puzzle—it is also, for feminist politics and theory, an important aspect of political life and engagement. The model of mind as mirror and the Romantic model of experience gave rise to certain problems to which the model of mind as interpreting machine provides answers. In some cases, the introduction of the model of mind as interpreting machine actually led to the dissolution of old problems (e.g., the missing shade of blue). But the model of mind as interpreting machine requires that we exile from our account of mind the phenomenological aspects of experience, including the essentially first-person character of experience and agency that was a central component of the Romantic model of experience and of mind as mirror. A particular model of objectivity seemed to dictate this exile, but that model seems to have its own drawbacks when we try to use it for feminist

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<sup>12</sup>Unlike paradigms, however, models are models in virtue of being taken up in scientific practices, and are themselves more objects in the world. For an informative discussion, see (Rouse, *Engaging Science* 227–30).

<sup>13</sup>My use of the term “science” in this chapter is meant to include not just the natural and physical sciences, but also the behavioral and social sciences.

political purposes: it gives rise to the ideological dilemma. The ideological dilemma itself may be dissolved by adopting a different model of mind.<sup>14</sup>

Recent developments in empirical psychology have questioned the value of the “input-output” (or “interpreting machine,” as I have been calling it) model of mind, in which sensory data is the in-put from the world to the mind while action is the output of mind to the world. The “enactive theory of mind” fundamentally re-orientes the conflict between first-person and third-person approaches to agency and experience that constitutes the feminist intellectual inheritance of the struggle between the Romantic and the Kuhnian models of experience. By placing agency and practical activity at the nexus of mind and world, the enactive theory of mind can preserve the meaningfulness of experience to its subject without reverting to the model of a passive and disembodied mind that mirrors the world.

Much of the motivation for Antony’s naturalistic account of the theory-dependence of perception comes from her commitment to the characterization of sensory experience as “thin”—a conception that comes from Quine, who himself borrows it from the going psychological theories of the mid-twentieth century. According to Irving Rock’s summary of theories of perception, the dominant approaches to explaining sense perception share a commitment to a model of sensory experience as a thin (proximal) stimulus provided by the “optical array,” which is itself furnished by brute physical objects in interaction with sources of light (the distal stimulus). While different schools might disagree over the mechanism for producing meaningful representations out of the thin stimulus of the optical array, none of the dominant computational models questions the assumption that the in-put is “thin” (Rock, 12). Alva Noë calls this the “brain-photoreceptor” model of mind, in which the in-put available to the experiencing subject is analogous to that which is available to a camera, and the brain then “processes” that thin in-put to produce, from two-dimensional images, a world of three-dimensional objects.

The most striking thing from a feminist perspective about this model of the brain-photoreceptor and the concomitant assumption that sensory in-put is thin—analogueous to the information available, in essence, to a camera—is the absence of an embodied and active subject of experience. The alternative offered to us by cognitive science on which Antony draws does not seem to solve matters very much. While some cognitive scientists (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson) have bemoaned the absence of a body in philosophical theories of mind, the body that is usually incorporated in an attempt to correct that error is only a brain, or perhaps a brain in a body-schemata. This remains true of the model of mind as interpreting machine—both in its cognitive science guise, and in its linguistified guise.

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<sup>14</sup>I hasten to add that I am not arguing that we ought to give up the model of mind as interpreting machine entirely—clearly, models have pragmatic value for solving certain kinds of problems in psychology. What I would argue, though, is that we make a mistake when we take that model of mind to be a description of what the mind and experience really are, rather than understanding that model as a problem-solving tool.

The discussion of the political nature of experience as we find that in the move to replace “experience” with “discourse” and in discussions of identity has not fared much better in including the body in its conceptual grounding. The critique of subjectivity that we find in Scott (and, to a certain extent, in Judith Butler) has taken as its primary lens of analysis the linguistic/discursive aspects of experience. The problem with this approach is that it tends to miss the fact that discursive practices are also constituted by material practices—they are not merely linguistic in nature.<sup>15</sup> Linda Martín Alcoff, Sonia Kruks, and Paula Moya have been critical of these approaches for this very reason: they see in Scott’s approach (and the related approach to experience that we find in Butler) a failure to appreciate the non-discursive aspects of experience, including the material basis of embodied identity and agency. While Alcoff, Linda Martín, Kruks, and Moya draw on the existential and phenomenological philosophical traditions, the enactive theory of mind focuses on experimental evidence to do essentially the same thing. For the enactivist, perception is a bodily-based “skillful activity,” rather than the processing of neutral in-put.

As we saw earlier, part of the goal of the anti-foundationalists is to show that the mind is not a blank and passive recipient of neutral data from the world; Scott’s analysis focuses on the ways in which experience is not a thin, neutral in-put from the world, but is, rather, “discursively constructed”; Antony’s approach is to accept the premise that the in-put is thin and neutral, but to emphasize the way that the experiencing subject gets interpretive help in giving that in-put meaning from paradigms, worldviews, and brain structure. Yet the Kuhnian analysis of experience they offer lends itself to skepticism about the possibility of experiences revealing to us a world that is independent of our pre-conceived theories or “paradigms.” The possibility of genuinely revelatory experiences and the phenomenological, first-person attachment to this is offered by the Romantic model of experience that underwrites feminist appeals to experience, but this model seems wedded to the model of mind as mirror. Given that feminist political practice seems to support both the revelatory potential of experience and the commitment to a conception of experience as “educable” through political engagement, we must look beyond the dominant model of mind as interpreting machine and the assumption that identities can be cashed out in the highly theoretical—and intellectualized—terms of “worldviews.” Understanding perception as a type of skillful activity, where such activity is substantially embodied, not merely a brain process, allows us to preserve aspects of both the Kuhnian and the Romantic models of experience and evade the ideological dilemma.

The idea that we directly perceive, rather than infer, the characteristics of our environment as affording us certain opportunities for action (Gibson 127) is central to the ecological approach to sensory perception, and is adopted by contemporary philosophers of mind who advocate the enactivist model of mind. Both reject the a priori assumption that sensory experience is thin by resituating the mind as an

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<sup>15</sup>See, for instance, Alcoff, Linda Martín (*Real* 121–6) and Rouse (“Understanding” 449–51).

embodied aspect of a subject of experience who is actively engaged in interacting with the world, not merely as a brain-photoreceptor system, but as a walking, talking, exploring and curious agent. Perception is conceptually and developmentally linked to agency.

Gibson introduced the idea of “affordances” to capture what it is that we directly perceive when we perceive a state of affairs, and to offer an alternative to the assumption that experience is thin. Gibson connects his own theory to that of the gestaltists who, he argues, rightly recognized that the meaningfulness and value of objects seems to be directly perceived: “The accepted theories of perception, to which the gestalt theorists were objecting, implied that no experiences were direct except sensations and that sensations mediated all other kinds of experience. Bare sensations had to be clothed with meaning” (140). The way the gestaltists tried to explain the direct perception of meaningfulness and value, according to Gibson, was by postulating the existence of a “phenomenal object” as distinct from the physical object. The gestaltists explained the seeming immediacy and directness of the perception of value and meaningfulness as the result of the interaction between the ego and the phenomenal object. Gibson argues that we can preserve the phenomenology of the immediacy of perception by foregrounding an animal or organism’s active engagement with, and perception of, the environment. Affordances, then, “afford” the organism in question with possibilities for action—possibilities that are both embodied and culturally enriched. For the gestaltists, “it was the *phenomenal* postbox that invited letter-mailing, not the *physical* postbox. But this duality is pernicious. I prefer to say that the real postbox (the *only* one) affords letter-mailing to a letter-writing human in a community with a postal system. This fact is perceived when the postbox is identified as such. . . .” (139). The “worldview” within which letter-writing and letter-mailing are possible, and in which we can see the affordances of a postbox, is not encoded in a theory, but in a way of acting in the world that is both culturally variable, learned, and, for all that, not modeled on a disembodied perspective the characteristics of which are encoded in language or theories. The perceiver in this case sees what can be done with the postbox, and that affordance is directly and immediately perceived when one sees the postbox as such. Perception is a skillful activity and always involves the possibility for action and use. In addition, the ecological approach to perception, and the enactivist theory of mind that builds on it, emphasize that the world is not a cabinet full of neutral objects, but is rather a world full of meaning—affordances—that are taken up by perceiving, active agents as possibilities for action. Objects are directly perceived as meaningful to agents, understood as embodied subjects for whom action is an essential ingredient in coming to know the world.<sup>16</sup>

The dilemma that seems to press so hard on feminist politics—the conundrum of how we can have transformative political experiences that are not mere projections of our going theories—is a dilemma that we’ve inherited from traditional

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<sup>16</sup>Sheets-Johnstone gives a good overview of the evidence for the centrality of agency to self-consciousness, and Hurley argues that it is essential to the unity of perception.

theories of mind and perception. The dilemma arises as a result of thinking that the vehicles of meaning must be theories of some sort, or theories plus brain structure (on the Kuhnian conception of experience in conjunction with the model of mind as interpreting machine) or that experience constitutes mental images that are projected onto an internal screen, and carry their meanings as such images (as on the Romantic conception of experience in conjunction with the mind as mirror model).

According to the enactive model of mind, mind is not just “in the head”—it has intentional relations with the external world—but it is also developed through *practical* engagement with a world that is not sharply distinguished from the cultural practices in which human beings engage. The line between the “natural” world and the “cultural” world is blurry. At the same time, however, these cultural practices do not entirely dictate the affordances of objects, since, as in Gibson’s example, a postbox can be either an opportunity to mail a letter or, in other instances, an annoying thing that the snowplow tends to knock down every winter. States of affairs and objects remain open to new and different possibilities as our practical engagement with the world shifts and morphs. Furthermore, contrary to Rorty’s and Scott’s claims, our understanding of experience as veridical need not invoke a “spectator theory” of knowledge; attention to a naturalistic account of sense perception reveals that sense perception is essentially active, but need not, on that account, be understood as the product of interpretation or inference. Meaning need not be created or discovered on this model, since it is *both* created and discovered, to some extent. So, while Scott argues that the problem with our concept of experience is that it leads us to “naturalize” experience and the subject as agent, the problem seems to be that we have not naturalized experience and the agential basis of subjectivity enough.

The enactivist approach has the virtue of taking seriously a first-person perspective on our engagement with the world, allowing us to reconstruct the developmental and phenomenological aspects of our attempts to know the world, and yet it does not require the assumption of a transcendental subject that is the metaphysical conduit of agency. Agency is, indeed, “imputed” or inferred in this model, but that agency is simply the practical activity of reaching for things, grasping them, using them and understanding them in relation to their potential for such activity. This is not the metaphysical agency to which Scott and Rorty object; it is a naturalized agency in a different sense—drawn from our own observations of the world and our recognition of the relatively seamless integration of subjective states and a world of objects that are encountered as meaningful.

## Conclusion

What I hope to have shown is that the assumption that subjectivity is achieved, paired with the idea that experience is educable, does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that we can only “see”—metaphorically and actually—what we already believe. In this respect, I hope to have clarified some of the issues at stake in the claim that experience is always “political.” In addition, I hope to have made a

case for moving beyond an *a prioristic* approach to the analysis of experience, an approach that seems to assume that our only choices for an analysis of experience are limited to a model in which we accept experience as “given” and subjectivity as an ontological primitive or brute (the Romantic model), or a model in which we understand experience as theory-laden, and subjective projection as inescapable (the Kuhnian model). What we need, in truth, as feminists and philosophers, is a different approach to the old problem of mind, one that understands mind as embodied, agential, and responsive to the problems that present themselves as we try to be politically and responsibly engaged in the world.

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# Chapter 11

## Ideology, Generics, and Common Ground

Sally Haslanger

**Abstract** Are sagging pants cool? Are cows food? Are women more submissive than men? Are blacks more criminal than whites? Taking the social world at face value, many people would be tempted to answer these questions in the affirmative. And if challenged, they can point to facts that support their answers. But there is something wrong about the affirmative answers. In this chapter, I draw on recent ideas in the philosophy of language and metaphysics to show how the assertion of a generic claim of the sort in question ordinarily permits one to infer that the fact in question obtains by virtue of something specifically about the subject so described, i.e., about women, or blacks, or sagging pants. In the examples I've offered, however, this implication inference is unwarranted. The facts in question obtain by virtue of broad system of social relations within which the subjects are situated, and are not grounded in intrinsic or dispositional features of the subjects themselves. The background relations are obscured, however, and as a result, the assertion is at least systematically misleading; a denial functions to block the problematic implication. Revealing such implications or presuppositions and blocking them is a crucial part of ideology critique.

### Introduction

Are sagging pants cool? Are cows food? Are women more submissive than men? Are blacks more criminal than whites? Taking the social world at face value, many people would be tempted to answer these questions in the affirmative. And if challenged, they can point to facts that support their answers. But there is something wrong about the affirmative answers. I deny that sagging pants are cool, cows are food, women are more submissive than men, and blacks are more criminal than whites. And moreover, I maintain that there is an objective basis for denying these

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claims even though the facts seem to support the face value affirmative response. But how can that be? We all know that male urban youth can barely walk with their pants belted around their thighs, that beef is a staple in the American diet, that blacks are incarcerated in the United States at a much higher rate than any other race, and that women defer to men in both work and family life. How could a denial of these facts be justified?

In this chapter I will sketch a way to interpret claims such as the ones listed in the previous paragraph that shows how they convey more than they seem. To do so, I will draw on recent ideas in the philosophy of language and metaphysics to show how the assertion of a generic claim of the sort in question ordinarily permits one to infer that the fact in question obtains by virtue of something specifically about the subject so described, i.e., about women, or blacks, or sagging pants. In the examples I've offered, however, this implication is unwarranted. The facts in question obtain by virtue of broad system of social relations within which the subjects are situated, and are not grounded in intrinsic or dispositional features of the subjects themselves. At least this is what social constructionists undertake to establish. The background relations are obscured, however, and as a result, the assertion is at least systematically misleading; a denial functions to block the problematic implication. Revealing such implications or presuppositions and blocking them is a crucial part of ideology critique.

## Ideology

What is ideology and how does it pose a philosophical problem? There is much disagreement over the nature of ideology, yet in the most basic sense ideologies are representations of social life that serve in some way to undergird social practices.<sup>1</sup> There is an important sense in which social structures are not imposed upon us, for they are constituted by our everyday choices and behaviors. We are not simply cogs in structures of subordination, we enact them. And something about how we represent the world is both a constitutive part of that enactment and keeps it going.<sup>2</sup> Comparing the Foucauldian notion of *discourse* with the more traditional concept of *ideology*, Trevor Purvis and Alan Hunt argue that

... ideology and discourse refer to pretty much the same aspect of social life – the idea that human individuals participate in forms of understanding, comprehension or consciousness of the relations and activities in which they are involved. . . This consciousness is borne through language and other systems of signs, it is transmitted between people and institutions and, perhaps most important of all, it makes a difference; that is, the way in which people comprehend and make sense of the social world has consequences for the direction

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<sup>1</sup>Especially useful discussions of the notion of ideology include Geuss, Fields, McCarthy, Purvis and Hunt, and Shelby.

<sup>2</sup>Although there is much controversy over the question whether “ideology” or the Foucauldian notion of “discourse” is better suited to the role described here, the controversies are not directly relevant to my purposes. Moreover, there seems to be a core notion shared by both. See Purvis and Hunt.

and character of their action and inaction. Both ‘discourse’ and ‘ideology’ refer to these aspects of social life. (474; see also McCarthy 440)

Ideology in this broad sense—sometimes referred to as the descriptive sense—is pervasive and unavoidable. The term “ideology” is also sometimes used in a narrower and pejorative sense to refer to representations of the relevant sort that are somehow misguided, e.g., by being contrary to the real interests of an agent or group of agents.<sup>3</sup> As I will be using the term, however, ideology is the background cognitive and affective frame that gives actions and reactions meaning within a social system and contributes to its survival.

I have argued elsewhere that it is not useful to think of ideology as a set of beliefs, understood as discrete and determinate propositional attitudes, though an ideology may include such attitudes (“But Mom”). In addition to beliefs, the ideology that undergirds social practices must include more primitive dispositions, habits, and a broader range of attitudes than just belief. (See also Langton, “Beyond Belief”.) The less belief-like form of ideology is sometimes referred to as “hegemony”:

Ideology and hegemony are opposite ends of a continuum. . . . At one end. . . ‘ideology’ is used to refer to struggles to establish dominant meanings and to make justice claims on the basis of alternative ideologies. . . . At the other end. . . the term ‘hegemony’ is used to refer to situations where meanings are so embedded that representational and institutionalized power is invisible. (Silbey 276)

Although Silbey’s quote is a bit unclear on this point, the idea is that ideologies can be more or less contested, more or less hegemonic. The more hegemonic, the less conscious and less articulate they are.

There are at least two sets of philosophical challenges posed by the phenomenon of ideology. The first concerns how ideology, usually without our awareness, constitutes the social background of our action. This is partly an empirical question that requires work in psychology and sociology to answer. But an adequate theory of ideology must also explicate how individuals know the collectively constituted framework for action, how actions draw on that framework to give them meaning, and how the framework can be contested and resisted. The second set of challenges concerns the normative evaluation of ideology. As mentioned, not all ideologies are pernicious, and ideology, as I’m using the term, is necessary for there to be any social coordination, both just and unjust. Because some ideologies constitute and sustain unjust social structures, there are normative questions about how to evaluate them. Some of these questions will be epistemic: How do we evaluate the adequacy of an ideology in relation to how the world actually is? Some questions will be moral and political: Are the social structures that a given ideology constitutes and sustains just?

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<sup>3</sup>Sometimes ideologies are taken to be sets of beliefs, sometimes forms of “practical consciousness,” that reside in the minds of individual agents; sometimes they are cultural phenomena presupposed somehow in collective social life; sometimes they are explicit theories articulated by politicians, philosophers and religious figures, among others. The causal or explanatory role of ideology within a broader social theory is also unclear (Geuss; Elster 468–9; Marx 36–7; Althusser).

This chapter engages the first set of challenges. It considers what the relationship is between ideology and social structures, and how an ideology can become hegemonic and so invisible to those who employ it as they collectively constitute their social milieu. There are serious epistemic problems in asking how ideology critique is even possible, for once we constitute our social world, descriptions of it not only appear true, but are true. For example, if laws concerning marriage require that the parties to the marriage be one man and one woman, then it is true that marriage cannot occur between two men or two women, and virtually anyone living within that the social milieu is justified in believing this: it constitutes important social knowledge. When heteronormative ideology is hegemonic, the “cannot” in this claim not only describes the boundaries of our legal system and the world as we know it, but also most of our imaginations. Similarly, under conditions of male dominance, women are, in fact, more submissive than men. This is a true generalization and those who live under male dominance are justified in believing it. But again, if male dominance is hegemonic, this seems not only to describe how women happen to be, but more than this: how women *are*. Again, our imaginations are foreclosed. But the issue isn’t just one of imagination: it concerns the adequacy of our frameworks for interpreting and constituting the social world.

When ideologies become hegemonic, their effects blend into and, in an important sense, become part of, the natural world, so we no longer see them as social. Hegemonic ideology and the structures it constitutes are extremely hard to change. Social scientists and psychologists offer important resources for revealing the workings of hegemony. But the work of philosophers and linguists is also necessary, for the primary medium of social life is language: it forms the basis for intentional action, shared meaning, and collective organization. Attention to the ambiguities and slippages between different linguistic forms is useful in explaining how ideas become entrenched and social practices seem natural and inevitable. Or at least this is what I will argue in what follows.

## Generics, Semantics and Pragmatics

Let us return now to the statements with which we began. What is being claimed when someone says, “women are more submissive (nurturing, cooperative, sensitive. . .) than men”? Surely not *all* women are more submissive than *all*, or even *most*, men. Is the claim intentionally vague? Is it elliptical for a different claim? In fact, generalizations that omit quantifiers such as “some,” “all,” or “many” fall into the linguistic category of generics, and generics call for a quite different analysis than ordinary quantified statements. Plausibly, “generic sentences are not about some specific instances of the category mentioned in the [subject], but rather about the category in general” (Leslie, “Generics” 21).<sup>4</sup> We are not abbreviating an

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<sup>4</sup>Note that this is a different claim from one saying that the generic is about the kind, e.g., *dodos* are extinct. See Leslie, “Generics” 5, fn 3. Generics seem to be concerned with open-ended generalizations. Enumerative generalizations and open-ended generalizations differ in ways that matter

enumeration of cases, but are saying something about the group as an open-ended class.

In considering generics, we might ask: what is the *meaning* of a generic? Or, we might ask, what are generics typically used to say? The study of meaning is semantics. The study of what we say is pragmatics: “Pragmatics is the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed. There are two major types of problem to be solved within pragmatics: first, to define interesting types of speech acts and speech products; second, to characterize the features of the speech context which help determine which proposition is expressed by a given sentence” (Stalnaker, “Pragmatics” 275). I propose that attention to the pragmatics of typical generics will illuminate ways in which politically salient ones can seriously mislead. This, in turn, will give us resources to think further about the role of social constructionist claims as part of ideology critique. My goal in this part of the chapter is to lay out components of one possible account of generics so that we see how they might mislead in a small range of cases; we’ll then turn in the second part to consider what social consequences it might have. The tools we will need first are the notion of a generic, a generic essence, and the common ground of a conversation.

## Generics

The first hypothesis I’d like us to consider is that with generics of the form Ks are F (“tigers have stripes”), or K<sub>1</sub>s are more G than K<sub>2</sub>s (“tigers are more dangerous than cheetahs”) there is normally an implication that the connection between the Ks and F or G holds primarily by virtue of some important fact about the Ks *as such*.<sup>5</sup> This is a very broad claim that I will not be able to support because of the complexity of cases; for simplicity I will focus on non-comparatives such as “tigers have stripes,” “women are submissive (nurturing, cooperative),” “blacks are criminal (violent, hostile),” and “sagging pants are cool,” rather than statements that explicitly compare kinds or groups.

As mentioned above, generics of the form Ks are F cannot be understood as elliptical quantifications, for in contrast to quantifications,

[Generics’] truth conditions seem to be enormously complex. Why, for example, is ‘birds lay eggs’ true, while ‘birds are female’ is false? It is, after all, only the female birds that lay eggs. And why is ‘mosquitoes carry the West Nile virus’ true, and ‘books are paperbacks’

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for confirmation and induction: “this coin in my pocket is silver” doesn’t inductively confirm “all coins in my pocket are silver” because it doesn’t lend credibility to the untested cases. In addition, there are a number of issues concerning the use of bare plurals that deserve consideration (Carlson). In some cases, bare plurals seem to have existential rather than generalizing force, e.g., “he grew tomatoes in that plot,” or “flour moths have invaded my kitchen.” I will only be considering the generic bare plural.

<sup>5</sup>I’m actually not sure whether it is better to consider it an implication or a presupposition. I’m willing to adjust my account to accommodate evidence for either. My goal in this paper is programmatic and I am aware that much more work needs to be done on the details.

false given that less than one percent of mosquitoes carry the virus while over eighty percent of books are paperbacks? Such puzzling examples abound. (Leslie, "Original Sin" 2)

Although there is no consensus on the best account of generics, Sarah-Jane Leslie suggests convincingly that generics are the expression of a very primitive "default mode of generalizing," that picks up on significant or striking properties and links them to a psychologically salient kind. Very roughly, the idea is that we have a very basic capacity to sort the world into kinds of things that seem to behave in similar ways and generics highlight striking or important features that members of these kinds typically exhibit.

In exploring this idea, we must be sensitive to different kinds of generalizations. For example, Prasada and Dillingham ("Principled" and "Representation") highlight two importantly different relations between the kinds and the properties of concern in generics:

Principled connections involve properties that are determined by the kind of thing something is (e.g. having four legs for a dog). Statistical connections involve properties that are not determined by the kind of thing something is, but that are highly prevalent connections to the kind, e.g., being red for a barn. Principled connections are proposed to support formal explanations (Fido has four legs because he is a dog), normative expectations (Fido should have four legs and has something wrong with him if he doesn't), and the expectation that the property will generally be highly prevalent (most dogs have four legs). (Leslie et al., "Conceptual" 479)

Leslie notes that this distinction between principled and statistical connections, although important, is not sufficient, by itself, to accommodate the range of different generics, for, as noted above, there are true generics that do not ascribe (and are not presumed to ascribe) a prevalent property to the kind, e.g., "Ducks lay eggs".

On Leslie's view, there are three kinds of cases ("Generics" 43):

- *Characteristic generics*: Cases such as "tigers have stripes" and "dogs have four legs" assert more than a statistical correlation between tigers and stripes. They purport to tell us what is characteristic of the kind, what a good example of the kind will exhibit.<sup>6</sup> But how, then, should we understand cases such as "birds lay eggs" or even "bees lay eggs" even if the majority of the kind don't lay eggs, and cases such as "police officers fight crime" even if there is no crime in their district? Leslie proposes that we have background knowledge that

provides an outline of information to be gathered about a new kind; characteristic dimensions provide a learner with an informational template. When a value is found for a characteristic dimension of a kind, it is hereby generalized to the kind by the basic generalization mechanism, and so the generic that predicates that property of the kind is

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<sup>6</sup>In ("Generics" 43), Leslie suggests that if the attributed property is true of almost all of the kind (almost all tigers have stripes), and there are no positive counterinstances (it is not the case that the tigers who don't have stripes have bold pink spots), then the characteristic generic is true. However, the role of positive counterinstances is more complex, for there may be abnormal counterinstances (albino tigers) that do not defeat the generalization (Leslie, private communication), so the better account will need to rely on some notion of what's a good example of the kind.

accepted. Ducks, being an animal kind, has reproduction as a characteristic dimension, so the inductive learner looks for a value to fill the dimension; even limited experience will deliver *laying eggs* as the appropriate value, and so the property is generalized to the kind and ‘ducks lay eggs’ is accepted as true. (“Generics” 32–3)

In the case of artifacts, institutions, and social kinds, the template has us look for information about the function or purpose of the kind and this explains the truth of statements such as “police officers fight crime” (“Generics” 43).

- *Striking property generics*: How can we accommodate such cases as “mosquitoes carry the West Nile virus,” even though only a small fraction do, and those that do are not plausibly characteristic of their kind? In such cases, she maintains, “The sentence attributes harmful, dangerous, or appalling properties to the kind. More generally, if the property in question is the sort of property of which one would be well served to be forewarned, even if there were only a small chance of encountering it, then generic attributions of the property are intuitively true” (“Generics” 15). Leslie goes on to suggest that in order for these generics to be true, being a member of the kind must be a reasonably good predictor of the striking property, and members that don’t have the property must be disposed, under the right circumstances, to have it.<sup>7</sup> (“Generics” 41)
- *Majority generics*: Speakers are also willing to assent to weaker generics such as “cars have radios” or “barns are red” that only capture statistical or enumerative generalizations. However, speakers find these less natural than characteristic generics (“Conceptual” 480), and resist alternative syntactic forms for the generic, e.g., “a tiger has stripes” is considered more natural than “a barn is red” (“Conceptual” 482, 484).

Leslie’s account of generics is controversial (and also more complicated than I have suggested here<sup>8</sup>), but for my purposes, it is not necessary to accept her account

<sup>7</sup>A different hypothesis worth considering is that the striking property generics are picking out a feature that is remarkable or important in the context. This differs from Leslie’s proposal in two ways: the feature may not be dangerous or harmful, and what properties are eligible vary from context to context. For example, Cohen (“Think Generic!”) provides a contrastive account on which (roughly) generics are true just in case they attribute a property to a kind that is more likely to hold of members of that kind than the alternative that is salient in the context. Leslie argues against Cohen’s account in (“Generics” 10–12), though others defend versions of it (Carr, “Generics”).

<sup>8</sup>For example, Leslie rightly points out that there is an asymmetry in how generics are responsive to counterinstances. Recall that “birds lay eggs” is true, even though there are a substantial number of counterexamples (the male and non-fertile female birds). “Birds are female,” however, is false, even though there are almost as many counterexamples. Leslie proposes that in the case of “birds are female,” the non-female birds manifest a positive alternative, viz., being male, whereas in the “birds lay eggs” case, it is not the case that there is another form of reproduction in place of laying eggs. If some birds gave birth to live young, then “birds lay eggs” would be false. “There is an intuitive difference between simply lacking a feature and lacking it in virtue of having another, equally memorable, feature instead” (“Generics” 35). She draws the conclusion that generics are highly sensitive to whether the counterinstances to the claim are *positive* or *negative* (33–7).

in full detail, for my emphasis will be on pragmatics; rather than asking what generics *mean*, or under what conditions they are *true*, we are asking: what do we use generic statements to say? The point to take from Leslie is that generics are a distinctive kind of statement that should not be treated as ordinary quantified statements, and that they draw heavily on background knowledge and patterns of inference to highlight a significant property (either characteristic, striking, or common) of a kind.

### *Essences, Natures, and Coincidences*

The notion of essence has a complicated and sometimes problematic history. Within the Aristotelian tradition, each member of a genuine kind has an essence or nature which consists of a set of intrinsic qualities that explains the characteristic behavior of things of that kind. An individual tiger has a nature without which that tiger could not be the individual it is. All full members of the kind have the essence though they may fail to fully exhibit it due to interfering circumstances, e.g., an injured or deformed tiger or a tiger in a zoo may not exhibit all of the characteristic traits of healthy tigers in the wild, but it is still part of their nature to do so—they would have if they had been in the right circumstances.<sup>9</sup>

However, the fundamental notion of essence within this tradition is of a definable type or kind.<sup>10</sup> When we ask what it is to be a human being, or an artichoke, we are looking for the essence of the kind *human being* or *artichoke*. This notion of essence has been called *generic essence* to distinguish it from *objectual* essence. So there are two ways of “having” an essence. Kinds “have<sub>g</sub>” an essence that constitutes what it is to be of that kind; individuals are instantiations of this kind-essence and “have<sub>o</sub>” the kind-essence as their individual essence.

This notion of generic essence can then be extended beyond genuine kinds, i.e., kinds that constitute the being of their members, to properties and ways of being more generally. We can ask not only what it is to be a human being, but what it is to be a mother, to be a citizen of the United States, or to be just. For example, when Plato raises the issue in *The Republic* (Bk II) whether justice benefits the just person, he is careful to distinguish the claim that justice accidentally benefits the just person in cases where society rewards justice, and the claim that justice by its

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<sup>9</sup>In contemporary metaphysics, this notion of *objectual* essence (the essence of objects) has been reframed in terms of an object's essential or necessary properties. An object's essential properties are all and only those it could not exist without; its accidental properties are those that it has but might not have had. So, I am essentially a living being, but only accidentally a mother. I am interested in notions of essence that are *not* best understood as a set of necessary properties but are closer to the idea of natures that may be realized more or less fully (Fine, Correia).

<sup>10</sup>In Aristotle's terms, the substantial form *is* the essence, the matter *has* the essence, and the matter together with the essence constitutes the material object. The species is the matter and form “taken generally.” I'm using the term “kind” in the first part of this paragraph as roughly equivalent to “substantial form,” but I quickly revert to a more ordinary notion of “kind.”

very nature benefits, and would do so even if being just accrued no social rewards. The suggestion is that justice has a (generic) essence, even if nothing is (objectually) essentially just.

Following Kit Fine and Fabrice Correia, it is useful to consider essentialist statements as making a claim about the ground of certain facts in natures. On this approach, if G is part of the generic essence of F, just in case:

Fs are G by virtue of the nature of F-ing.

G-ing is something Fs do by virtue of what it is to be an F.

It is true in virtue of what it is to F, that Fs are G.

It is important to emphasize that in the sense intended here, the generic essence of F is not to be understood simply in terms of what is entailed by being F, for essences are invoked as part of an explanatory project that assumes that some properties are prior (metaphysically, epistemically) to others (Fine). Moreover, if we grant that natures may not always be fully realized (remember the injured tiger), statements of generic essence may not even support true universal generalizations, much less necessary generalizations. Even if Fs are by nature G, it may not be that every case of F is a case of G, for there may be interfering conditions; Fs, however, are typically G, due to what it is to be F.

Ordinary English speakers don't often use the term "essence," and although the term "nature," as in "a dog's nature," is more common, we seem to find other ways of speaking about natures. Consider, claims such as, "fish swim" or "lilacs bloom in May." A speaker uttering the former would seem to be suggesting that there is an important connection between being a fish and being able to swim, that the ability is somehow grounded in what it is to be a fish; similarly for lilacs and their blooming season. It appears, now, that there is a close connection between the kind of generalization we find in at least some generics (F-ing is a characteristic dimension of Ks; F-ing is striking and Ks are disposed to F; being a K is a good predictor for being F) and claims concerning generic essence. We will return to consider this connection shortly.

## *Common Ground*

In order for us to communicate, we must take certain things for granted as background to our conversation, i.e., we must presuppose certain things as *common ground* (Stalnaker, "Common Ground" 701; see also Stalnaker, "Context", and Lewis). Stalnaker suggests that "to presuppose a proposition in the pragmatic sense is to take its truth for granted, and to assume that others involved in the context do the same. . . . Presuppositions are propositions implicitly *supposed* before the relevant linguistic business is transacted" ("Common Ground" 279–80). In the simplest case the common ground consists of the shared beliefs of the parties to the conversation; the belief may be wholly tacit, however, "presuppositions are probably best viewed as complex dispositions which are manifested in linguistic behavior,"

("Pragmatics" 279) and in the more complex cases involve something less than full belief, e.g., assumption, pretense, presumption ("Common Ground" 704).<sup>11</sup>

The common ground of a conversation is constantly changing, for as one party to the conversation speaks, the other(s) will at least adjust their beliefs to include the fact that the first party spoke. Typically other beliefs will change as well. For example, if I say to you "I'm sorry I can't make it to the 5:00 pm meeting because I need to pick up my son at the campus daycare," you will probably come to believe not only that I will be absent from the meeting but also that I have a preschool aged son attending the daycare (understanding "preschool" to cover ages prior to kindergarten). Conversation conveys information by means other than by what is explicitly stated.

One way inexplicit communication occurs is through *implicature*, another through *presupposition accommodation*. The idea is that in ordinary conversations in which we judge each other to be competent and cooperative, we aim to achieve and maintain equilibrium in the common ground, to share presuppositions at least for the purposes of the conversation.<sup>12</sup> For example, if it is clear from my utterance that I am presupposing something, then unless you have reason to suspect my sincerity or credibility, you can legitimately infer the proposition I presuppose, and I can assume that the common ground has adjusted to include my presupposition, unless you indicate otherwise. In conversation, we rely on general maxims that govern the common ground, but what constitutes the common ground is also always up for constant renegotiation. For example, if, after hearing my excuse for not being at the meeting, you reply, "I thought your children were teenagers," this indicates hesitation to accept the proposition "Sally has a preschool aged son," into the common ground. We need to backtrack and repair the common ground. In response, I might confirm that I do in fact have a preschooler, or clarify, "You're right, he is volunteering at the daycare during spring break." At that point, the common ground may be further updated with new beliefs about my teenaged son. Similarly, updating and correction of common ground happens through implicature. If I write a letter of recommendation to graduate school for a student in my class and spend most of the letter expressing enthusiasm about his handwriting, you may infer that I do not think well of him as a philosopher (Grice). Often we say more by what we don't say than by what we do.

Whenever something said in conversation introduces a new element into the common ground, the interlocutor has the option of blocking the move. Lewis uses the metaphor of "scorekeeping in a language game" to capture the dynamic process of updating. Negation is one device for blocking. Even if a statement made in

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<sup>11</sup>Rae Langton has argued that presupposition accommodation may also require accommodation of desire and other attitudes. See Langton, "Beyond Belief".

<sup>12</sup>It is a difficult and contested matter how to distinguish what enters the common ground through implicature and what enters through presupposition. For my purposes, little hinges on this; what matters is that the common ground can be updated in ways that are not explicit and need not even be noticed by the audience or speaker. I will use the model of implicature to account for the examples we're looking at, but it may be that they are better handled differently.

conversation is literally true, one can deny the statement as a way to block what the statement conveys (either the implicature, or the presupposition); this is known as metalinguistic negation (Horn).<sup>13</sup> A standard example is, “He’s not meeting a woman, he’s meeting his wife!” As I will explain more fully as we proceed, my point in saying that we should deny the generics with which we began (Are sagging pants cool? Are cows food? Are women more submissive than men? Are blacks more criminal than whites?) is that an assertion of them pragmatically implicates a falsehood, and our metalinguistic denial blocks that falsehood from entering the common ground.

It is worth emphasizing that the updating of the common ground is not a matter of what is *semantically* presupposed or implied by the proposition expressed by the speaker. Rather, common ground is a *pragmatic* notion that concerns what is presupposed by the speaker and what is implicated, given certain conversational maxims, by her utterance. Updating of the common ground is a dynamic process that depends on the particular conversation; however, there is considerable social pressure on those who want to communicate smoothly with others to conform to the common ground of those around them.

## ***Generics and Implication***

We are now in a position to begin putting the pieces together. In uttering a generalization, one has several options. One can express the generalization using a quantified statement such as

All [most/some] Fs are G.

One can also use a generic:

Fs are G.

In choosing a generic, it appears that one is saying *of a kind of thing*, specified in the statement, that its members are, or are disposed to be G (or to G) *by virtue of being of that kind*.<sup>14</sup> The speaker conveys that being G is somehow rooted in what it is to be an F: G-ing is what Fs do (or are disposed to do) by virtue of being F. This locates the source of the Gness in being (an) F.<sup>15</sup>

One might develop the pragmatics in a number of ways. I propose the following. It seems that in the case of at least some generics, the semantics requires that there

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<sup>13</sup>I recommend Horn (esp. §2) for a full discussion of metalinguistic negation with examples of some interest to feminists, e.g., “She’s not a lady, she’s a woman!” or “She’s not an uppity broad, she’s a strong, vibrant woman!”

<sup>14</sup>This seems a quite straightforward claim for template generics and striking generics; it is less clear for ordinary generics. It is more plausible if the subject of the ordinary generic is a basic-level kind (Leslie, “Generics”), and referred to by a term that makes the kind explicit. In such cases the correlation between the kind and the selected property seems to call for explanation in terms of the kind’s nature.

<sup>15</sup>More needs to be said about what it is to be a “source” of truth. I’m drawing on Fine.

is some non-accidental or non-coincidental connection between the Fs and being G (recall the truth conditions for both characteristic generics and striking generics). The details may plausibly be spelled out along the lines Leslie suggests.<sup>16</sup> However, given the usefulness and universality of the default mode of generalizing that Leslie describes, if one asserts that Fs are G, then it is implicated that under “normal” circumstances it is something about being an F that makes an F a G, that Fs *as such* are disposed to be G.<sup>17</sup> This is a pragmatic implicature and can normally be defeated or canceled. But if unchallenged, it licenses the inference from the generic Fs are G to a claim of generic essence: Fs are G by virtue of what it is to be (an) F. In conversations where we credit our interlocutor with the ability to recognize this default inference, we take their utterance of, say, “tigers are striped,” to introduce into the common ground the further claim “tigers are striped by virtue of what it is to be a tiger.”

To avoid confusion, let’s look at some other examples. Consider the claims:

(a) Women have noses.<sup>18</sup>

This, it seems, is true. Most women have noses, it is not the case that those women who lack noses have trunks or antennae instead, and it is not a mere accident that a woman has a nose. However, it is also a very weird thing to say unless there is some doubt raised. It would be tempting, I think, if someone offered (a) as an insight to reply, “Yes, well, humans have noses.” Such a reply is apt because an assertion of (a) implicates that there is something special about women *as such* that explains their having noses. But this presumption is false. The reply corrects the implication without denying the truth of the claim.

Consider another claim that seems to pose a challenge for my account:

(b) Dobermans have pointy ears.<sup>19</sup>

As I hear (b), it would depend significantly on context whether it would prompt resistance. On one hand, it seems apt to respond to (b), “They don’t *really* have pointy ears. Their ears are cropped when they are puppies.” But it might be clear from context that the question is how they typically appear as adult dogs, in which case there would be no reason to resist. In the latter case, (b) is assertable because

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<sup>16</sup>The semantics of generics may be as complex as Leslie describes, or much simpler. I’m sympathetic with Leslie’s view but I am not taking a stand on the semantics here. I believe that my claims about the pragmatics are compatible with several different accounts of the semantics.

<sup>17</sup>More should be said about why it is plausible that this presupposition or implicature is added to the common ground. Relevant support includes (i) further arguments for the value of the default mode of generalization and its connection to generics, (ii) further arguments concerning the relation between generics and inductive inference, (iii) the application of Gricean maxims of relevance and quantity, and (iv) the idea that the grammatically simpler a statement, the more paradigmatic the phenomenon described is implicated to be (Levinson).

<sup>18</sup>This example was raised and discussed in a graduate seminar devoted to this topic at MIT. My memory does not allow me to thank each individual for their particular contribution, so thanks to the group (all mentioned in the paper’s acknowledgements) for help with this case.

<sup>19</sup>Thanks to Mahrad Almotahari for this example.

it is not a coincidence when one comes across an adult Doberman that it will have pointy ears; it is to be expected because that is the standard for the breed. Given, however, that these days the standard is being challenged, it would also be reasonable for someone to reply, “As a matter of fact, Dobermans have all sizes and shapes of ears,” suggesting not only that it is not universal, but that in fact a dog’s being a Doberman is not a good basis for predicting that it will have pointy ears because the standard is contested. As I hear it, however, in ordinary cases, (b) seems at least confusing and demands clarification because the default implication is that Dobermans, by nature, have pointy ears.

Finally, let us consider:

(c) Bachelors are unmarried.

Claim (c) is surely true. However, the assertion of (c) does not allow us to infer of John, who is a bachelor, that he is *by nature* unmarried. That would be to take the implication relevant to (c) to be a presumption of objectual essence, i.e., that the individuals of the kind have as part of their essence the property expressed by the predicate. The account I have proposed takes the presumption to concern the nature of the kind or type, what I’ve been calling the generic essence. The relevant inference is that bachelors, as such, i.e., insofar as they are bachelors, are unmarried; and this is true.

In light of this hypothesis about the pragmatic effect of generics, let’s consider the statements we started with:

- (1) Sagging pants are cool.
- (2) Cows are food.
- (3) Women are submissive (nurturing, cooperative).
- (4) Blacks are violent (criminal, dangerous).

Case (1): We all know that sagging pants are only cool, insofar as they are, by virtue of being viewed as such by an in-group. But those who experience them as cool, experience *them* as cool. The coolness seems to have its source in the particular cut, hang, whatever, of the pants. Fashion examples are useful because for those even the least bit sophisticated, the temptation to regard the coolness of the fashion as having its source in the objects is unstable; although we can find ourselves drawn into the idea, we can also easily resist it by recognizing that the coolness is a relational fact derived from the social context. When we see through the essentializing of fashion, we need not deny the claim that sagging pants are cool, for we can allow the implicature to enter the common ground without actually believing it or even believing that our interlocutor believes it (Stalnaker, “Common Ground” Section 5). It may be a presupposition we are willing to pretend is true for the purposes of the conversation.

An importantly similar, but more complicated, example<sup>20</sup> is:

(1b) Women wear lipstick.

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<sup>20</sup>Thanks to Jennifer Carr for this example and suggestions for how to handle it.

There are a number of options for reading (1b) based on context. In some cases it might be clear that the assertion of (1b) is simply a majority generic indicating that a significant number of women (or of the subgroup of women the speaker has in mind) wear lipstick. However, as a woman who never wears lipstick, it is not hard for me to imagine (1b) being used to implicate a kind of reproach: *good* women, *real* women, *normal* women wear lipstick. This may reflect a pretense that fashion and other cultural forms are linked to our natures: consider the belief that there is something unnatural about a man wearing a dress. Along these lines, in response to the question, “Why is that person wearing lipstick?” one might find it tempting to respond, “It is a woman!” The suggestion (or pretense) is that this is just what a good instance of womanhood does, that being a woman is sufficient to explain why she is wearing lipstick; the more pressing question is why Sally, for example, doesn’t.

Case (2), “cows are food,” is complicated. One reason is that it is not the sort of thing people tend to say. They are more likely to say that beef is food. Being a vegetarian, I believe that beef isn’t food although it is wrongly considered to be food by many. Beef is the flesh of a dead cow; “beef” is used to mask the reality of what is being ingested. Of course, humans can consume and digest dead cows. But being edible is not the same as being food. There are many edible things, even nutritious things, that don’t count as food because they taste bad or smell bad; they are associated with disgusting things; they are too intelligent; they are our pets or our children. Food, I submit, is a cultural and normative category. However, if someone asserts that beef is food, understanding this as a generic, it is tempting to accept the implication that there is something about the nature of beef (or cows) that makes it food.

To accept this implication, I believe, is a mistake similar to the mistake made about fashion, but with a moral dimension. It is true that not just anything could count as food (an aluminum soda can is not food), but just containing certain nutrients or having a certain chemical composition is not sufficient. This, however, is obscured in saying that cows are food or beef is food. Creeping into the common ground is the suggestion (pretense) that cows are *for* eating, that beef just is food.<sup>21</sup> Given that I believe this to be a pernicious and morally damaging assumption, it is reasonable for me to block the implicature by denying the claim: cows are *not* food. I would even be willing to say that beef is not food. This is compatible, however, with someone reasserting the claim that cows are food as a majority generic and

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<sup>21</sup>This example is worth much more discussion than I will provide here. In particular, it is not clear how to understand the term “beef”. Is beef just a slab of dead cow flesh? Or does it include as part of its meaning that the cow flesh is prepared (perhaps even just cut) in a way suitable for eating? Would a slab of cow flesh found on the road after a cow’s collision with a truck be rightly called “beef”? I am intending to be provocative here, though I also have a more substantive point: within the Aristotelian tradition, some natures must be understood functionally. Eyes are *for* seeing. I believe that it is characteristic of omnivores that they regard the slabs of flesh they consume *as food*, which is to say that they just are *for eating*. This is, I submit, to be mistaken about what they really are.

canceling the implicature. People *do* eat cows; Beef *is* served as food. *But this is not what cows are for; it is the result of optional (and, I submit, immoral) human practices.* Or more simply, “cows are food, given existing social practices.” This I would not deny.

Given the treatment of cases (1) and (2), it is likely predictable how the discussion of (3) and (4) will go. The general strategy of argument is to show that there is a set of problematic generics that introduce implicitly into the common ground a proposition about a generic essence, about how beef or women or blacks *are* by nature or intrinsically. These cases are problematic because the introduced proposition is false, so we have a reason to block it. But as we’ve seen already in the move from fashion to food, human convention picks up on the natural properties of things, and the line between the natural and the social can become blurred. So it will be useful to look more closely at the interaction between the natural and the social in constituting food, genders, races, and other social kinds. I will then return to (3) and (4) and the idea of ideology critique.

## Structures, Schemas, and Resources

What is a social structure? There is considerable interdisciplinary work on this topic by social historians, social psychologists, and sociologists interested in subordination and critical resistance. As I am using the term here, “social structure” is a general category of social phenomena, including, e.g., social institutions, social practices and conventions, social roles, social hierarchies, social locations or geographies and the like.

William Sewell (a social historian), drawing on Anthony Giddens, argues for an account that takes structures to be “both the medium and the outcome of the practices which constitute social systems” (4, quoting Giddens, “Critique” 27; see also Giddens’ “Central Problems” and “Constitution”). Sewell continues: “Structures shape people’s practices, but it is also people’s practices that constitute (and reproduce) structures. In this view of things, human agency and structure, far from being opposed, in fact presuppose each other” (4). More specifically, Giddens is known for identifying structures as “rules and resources.” On Sewell’s account, however, the combination becomes “schemas and resources” in order to avoid the assumption that the cognitive element must always take the form of a rule (8). Sewell takes schemas to include:

...all the variety of cultural schemas that anthropologists have uncovered in their research: not only the array of binary oppositions that make up a given society’s fundamental tools of thought, but also the various conventions, recipes, scenarios, principles of action, and habits of speech and gesture built up with these fundamental tools. (7–8)

It is crucial to Sewell that these schemas are not private and personal patterns of thought, but are intersubjective and transposable in response to new circumstances. Responding to Sewell, Judith Howard (a social psychologist) points out that Sewell’s use of the term “schema” differs from its use in social psychology.

Whereas social psychologists tend to think of schemas as concerned with the organization of an individual's thought, Sewell develops the notion in a way that highlights its cultural deployment. She suggests:

A synthesis of these conceptions of schemas might prove remarkably useful: the stricter social cognitive models provide a sound basis for predicting how and when intra-individual schemas change, whereas the more recent sociological conceptions say more about how group interactions shape the formation and evolution of cultural schemas. (218)

If we take Howard's idea seriously, we should explore the interdependence between individual schemas and their cultural counterparts: "Schemas, for example, are both mental and social; they both derive from and constitute cultural, semiotic, and symbolic systems" (Howard 218).

What are we to make of this? Let's take schemas to be intersubjective patterns of perception, thought and behavior. They are embodied in individuals as a shared cluster of open-ended dispositions to see things a certain way or to respond habitually in particular circumstances. Schemas encode knowledge and also provide scripts for interaction with each other and our environment. Understood in this way, schemas are plausibly part of the common ground we rely on to communicate. Although some may be rather specific to a small community others will extend broadly, even across cultures.

On this view, schemas are one component of social structures, resources are the other. Social structures cannot be identified simply as schemas because social structures have material existence and a reality that "pushes back" when we come to it with the wrong or an incomplete schema. For example, the schema of two sex categories is manifested in the design and labeling of toilet facilities. If we're analyzing social structures, then in addition to the mental content or disposition, there must be an actualization of it in the world, e.g., an enactment of it, that involves something material. Resources provide the materiality of social structures. On the Giddens/Sewell account, resources are anything that "can be used to enhance or maintain power" (Sewell 9). This includes human resources such as "physical strength, dexterity, knowledge" (Sewell 9) in addition to materials—animate and inanimate—in the usual sense.

How do schemas and resources together constitute social structures? Sewell suggests a causal interdependence:

A factory is not an inert pile of bricks, wood, and metal. It incorporates or actualizes schemas. . . . The factory gate, the punching-in station, the design of the assembly line: all of these features of the factory teach and validate the rules of the capitalist labor contract. . . . In short, if resources are instantiations or embodiments of schemas, they therefore inculcate and justify the schemas as well. . . . Sets of schemas and resources may properly be said to constitute structures only when they mutually imply and sustain each other over time. (13)

So on Sewell's view a social structure exists when there is a causal, and mutually sustaining, interdependence between a shared or collective schema and an organization of resources. Sewell's claim that the two elements of structure "imply and sustain each other" suggests a constitutive relationship as well: the pile of bricks, wood, and metal is a punching-in station because schemas that direct employers to

pay employees by the hour and employees to keep track of their hours are enacted with this tool. The schema for keeping track of hours is a punching-in schema because there is a punch-clock that the employer will use as a basis for calculating wages. Without the invention of the punch-clock, there could be no punching-in schema. There is a causal relationship, but not just a causal relationship. What else is it?

Consider a familiar example: a statue and the bronze of which it is composed. The bronze constitutes the statue, e.g., the figure of Joan of Arc on horseback in New York City's Riverside Park. The bronze is the statue not only by virtue of its shape, but also by virtue of having a certain history, function, interpretation, etc. Think of the bronze as resource; think of the dispositions that give rise to the statue's history, function, and interpretation as (roughly) schema. The role of schema may be still more evident in the constitution of it as a memorial. The Joan of Arc statue commemorates "the 500th anniversary of Joan of Arc's birth." The statue consists of the shaped bronze, and the statue in turn constitutes the memorial, understood as a further schema-structured resource [[[bronze, shape], statue], memorial]. Thus it appears that the schema/resource distinction can be applied in ways analogous to the matter/form distinction.

More helpful for our purposes may be an example of a social event rather than a social object: the performance of a Bach minuet on the piano. The performance is an event that involves both the piano, the sheet music, fingers and such (as resources), and also a set of dispositions to respond to the sheet music by playing the piano keys in a certain way, plus the various ritualized gestures that make it a performance rather than a rehearsal (as schema). Considered in this light, most actions involve not only an agent with an intention and a bodily movement, but a set of dispositions to interact with things to realize the intention; think of cycling, cooking, typing. These dispositions conform to publicly accessible and socially meaningful patterns and are molded by both the social and physical context. Because often such dispositions give rise to objects that trigger those very dispositions, they can be extremely resistant to change (think of the challenge of replacing the qwerty keyboard).

This sort of schematic materiality of our social worlds is ubiquitous: towns, city halls, churches, universities, philosophy departments, gyms, playgrounds, homes, are schematically structured and practice-imbued material things (cf. a "ghost town" or "a house but not a home" whose schemas are lost or attenuated). The social world includes artifacts which are what they are because of what is to be done with them; it also includes schemas for action that are what they are because they direct our interaction with some part of the world. Thus at least some parts of the social/cognitive world and material world are co-constitutive.

If a practice is the structured product of schema (a set of dispositions to perceive and respond in certain ways) and resources (a set of tools and material goods), it is not "subjective" in any of the ordinary uses of that term. Social structures are not just in our heads (just as the statue is not just in our heads); social structures are public (just as the bronze only constitutes a memorial by virtue of the collective interpretation and pattern of action in response to it); although social structures are not simply material things, they are constituted by material things. They are "constructed" by us

in the ordinary way that artifacts are created by us. One can believe in them without accepting the idea, sometimes endorsed by “social constructionists” that our thought constructs, in a less ordinary way, what there is in the world (Haslanger, “Social”).

This rough account of social structures helps to define the idea of a social milieu. As we saw above, the schemas that constitute social structures are intersubjective or cultural patterns, scripts and the like, that are internalized by individuals to form the basis of our responses to socially meaningful objects, actions, and events. In many cases, perhaps even most, the dominant cultural schema will also be the one that individuals in that context have made “their own.” However, it is not always that simple. Individuals bear complex relations to the dominant schemas of their cultural context; they may be ignorant of or insensitive to a schema, may reject a schema, or may modify a schema for their own purposes. One may be deliberately out of sync with one’s milieu, or just “out of it.” It is also the case that different schemas vie for dominance in public space. Plausibly the negotiation over schemas at least partly happens linguistically through the formation of common ground.

For the purposes of this chapter it will be useful to define an individual’s (general) social milieu in terms of the social structures within which he or she operates, whether or not the public schemas in question have been internalized. Although we can choose some of the structures within which we live, it is not always a matter of choice, e.g., I am governed by the laws of the United States whether I choose to be or not. Of course, individuals do not live within only one milieu, and milieus overlap. One’s workplace, place of worship, civic space, and home are structured spaces; each of these structures are inflected by race, gender, class, nationality, age, and sexuality to name a few relevant factors. So it will be important to specify an individual’s milieu at a time and place and possibly in relation to specified others. In this essay I will not be able to give precise conditions that specify what milieu is operative for an individual in a given context; we’ll just have to rely on clear-enough cases for now.

To summarize briefly, schemas and resources together constitute practices, and patterns of interdependent practices constitute structures. The schemas—dispositions, interpretations, experiences, beliefs and the like—are an important part of the common ground we rely on to communicate; they are also, I maintain, a form of ideology. On this view, ideology is not just a set of background beliefs that purport to justify social structures: ideology in the form of schemas partly constitutes the structures.

## **“Looping” and Social Kinds**

In his discussion of social phenomena, Ian Hacking has emphasized the phenomenon of “looping.”<sup>22</sup> On his view, the continuum between the natural and the social depends on a distinction between indifferent and interactive kinds (32, 102–5). Hacking describes the contrast this way:

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<sup>22</sup>I discuss Hacking on “looping” kinds also in Haslanger, “Ontology” and Haslanger, “Social”. See also Langton, “Speaker’s Freedom”.

The [kind/classification] “woman refugee” can be called an “interactive kind” because it interacts with things of that kind, namely people, including individual women refugees, who can become aware of how they are classified and modify their behavior accordingly. (32)

The classification “quark,” in contrast, is an indifferent kind: “Quarks are not aware that they are quarks and are not altered simply by being classified as quarks” (32). As Hacking elaborates the idea of an interactive kind it becomes clear that the interaction he has in mind happens through the awareness of the thing classified in being so-classified, though it is typically mediated by the “larger matrix of institutions and practices surrounding this classification” (103; also 31–2, 103–6).<sup>23</sup> For example, if a particular woman is not classified as a woman refugee,

... she may be deported, or go into hiding, or marry to gain citizenship. ... she learns what characteristics to establish, knows how to live her life. By living that life, she evolves, becomes a certain kind of person [a woman refugee]. And so it may make sense to say that the very individuals and their experiences are constructed within the matrix surrounding the classification “women refugees.” (11)

Hacking concludes that the individuals so-affected are themselves socially constructed “as a certain kind of person” (11).

Hacking is especially interested in a certain kind of object construction, viz., construction that works by the social context providing concepts that frame the self-understanding and intentions of the constructed agent. In cases like this, agents incorporate (often consciously) socially available classifications into their intentional agency and sense of self, but as their self-understanding evolves, the meaning of those classifications evolves with them. This forms a “feedback loop” (hence the term: “interactive kinds”) between what we might think of as objective and subjective stances with respect to the classification. To emphasize the importance of the agent’s active awareness in this process, we might call this “discursive identity construction.” It is important to note, however, that relationship between schemas and resources in the constitution of social structures is, in general, loopy. Resources are formed to trigger dispositions (schemas) that are manifested in ways that, in turn, utilize and shape the resources. Cuisine is a good example (Pollan). In a less-globalized world than ours, food crops were grown to support the local cuisine and the local tastes and culinary techniques evolved in ways that took advantage of the crops. In more complex and broadly social changes we can watch consumer taste develop so that certain products become “must haves” in a particular milieu. Trends in cuisine can become trends in production which, in turn, affect trends in labor, and this affects schemas of class and taste, etc.

This loopiness can obscure the social dimension of social structures. When ideology is uncontested and hegemonic, it is insufficiently conscious to be aware of its

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<sup>23</sup>The contrast between indifferent and interactive kinds is not a simple binary distinction, for there are several different factors that may play a role determining whether a kind is more or less indifferent or interactive. One factor is the degree to which we can have, and have had, a causal impact on members of the kind; in cases where we have had a causal impact, a further issue is whether the similarity amongst the members that forms the basis for the kind is due to our influence.

own effects. So the causal impact of hegemonic schemas on resources is typically invisible. Because the “trigger” for a schema is external—in the world—we attend to this, and social structures come to seem inevitable, natural, “given”:

Although all ongoing social organizations incorporate contest and struggle over the constitution of their world, most aspects of social structure are taken for granted. . . . Social actors accept a good part of their social worlds as necessary, and often as natural, as perhaps they must do to function at all in those worlds. Often invisible, and certainly uncontested, these taken-for-granted structures are thus unlikely to be the subject of justice claims and critiques, although they may be a source of disadvantage and injustice. . . . hegemony colonizes consciousness. . . . (Silbey 289)

The reliance on, say, wheat in a particular cuisine may seem inevitable, natural, “given.” Wheat is what is available; wheat just is what we eat. But the wheat is available because of the impact of schemas on resources that establish farming practices, food distribution, etc. Given the stability of such structures, culinary taste conforms. In this context quinoa, or soy, or spelt tastes bad and has a funny texture too; so who would want to plant it? Hegemony colonizes consciousness.

## Critique

### *Refusing to Accept the Common Ground*

If ideology partly constitutes the social world, then it seems that a description of the ideological formations will be true, and it is unclear what is, epistemically speaking, wrong with them. The material world reinforces our tutored dispositions—qwerty keyboards reinforce our qwerty dispositions which reinforce the use of qwerty keyboards; racial classification reinforces racial segregation, which reinforces racial identity, which reinforces racial classification. Social structures, good or bad, constitute our lived reality and they become a matter of common sense for us, i.e., they become hegemonic.

Hegemony, just or unjust, appears inevitable, natural, “given.” We’ve seen that this false appearance is easily generated due to the “loopiness” of social structures: we respond to the world that has been shaped to trigger those very responses without being conscious of the shaping, so our responses seem to be called for by the way the world is. This, I submit, is what our problematic generics (1)–(4), and others like them, articulate: they describe the world as if it is, by its nature, how we have interpreted it, and from there caused it, to be. Cows are food, women are submissive, and blacks are violent. In purporting just to capture the facts, the generics import an explanation, implicate that the source of the truth of these claims lies in what cows, women, and blacks *are*. Implications and presuppositions of this sort become part of the common ground, often in ways that are hard to notice and hard to combat, and they become the background for our conversations and our practices. Once the assumption of, e.g., women’s submissive nature has been inserted into the cultural common ground, it is extremely difficult and disruptive to dislodge it.

A first step in ideology critique, then, is to reject such claims and to make evident the interdependence of schemas and resources, of the material world and our interpretation of it. It is not the case that women are submissive, even if most women are submissive, in fact, even if *all* women are submissive, because submission is no part of women's nature. Let's consider examples (3) and (4) in a bit more detail.

Start with:

(4) Blacks are violent (criminal, dangerous).

This seems to be an example of a striking generic because the attribution in question is "harmful, dangerous or appalling" (Leslie, "Generics" and "Original Sin"). Recall that striking generics, as in "mosquitoes carry the West Nile virus," require only a tiny percentage of the kind to exemplify the property in order to count as true. Nevertheless, the implicature is that all members of the kind are disposed, by nature, to have the property. So (4) is either itself false or highly misleading by virtue of inserting into the common ground a false claim about the nature of blacks,<sup>24</sup> and one would be right to object to it.

However, suppose someone, Bert, who is highly invested in (4), is challenged; he would probably deny intending the implication in the first place. The claim, he might say, was just intended as an ordinary quantified generalization and the implicature was not intentional. But what quantification makes sense of (4)? The fact that "some blacks are violent" is too weak to underwrite (4) as a majority generic (which requires that most of the kind have the property). But both "all blacks are violent" and "most blacks are violent" are false. So it is tempting to conclude that (4) is not assertable even if the implicature is canceled. Both (4) *and* its implicature are false. Not just metalinguistic negation is called for, but ordinary negation as well.

Bert, however, may still be convinced that there is a truth being expressed by (4), and given that striking generics can be compelling with very few instances, this may be a strong commitment. If he is committed to the claim that blacks are violent and recognizes that "some blacks are violent" is not sufficient to support the claim as a majority generic, he is likely to infer that "most blacks are violent." Why else, he asks, is it reasonable to assert (which he is committed to) that blacks are violent? Thus the falsehood, "most blacks are violent" comes to seem legitimately part of the common ground. So even if Bert rejects the claim of generic essence, viz., that

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<sup>24</sup>I am not in a position to argue for a theory of the truth conditions for generics; in fact, I want to avoid taking a stand on the semantics of generics (though I admit that the line between semantics and pragmatics is unclear). My suggestion has been, however, that the generic essence claim is only pragmatically involved. If this is true, then whether Bert's statement "blacks are violent," is false will depend on our semantic account and complicated facts about how we want to explain the apparent violence of (some) blacks. For example, if there is an explanation of black violence in terms of a response to racist oppression, then there may be a non-accidental correlation which would allow the generic to be true *as a striking generic* even if only a very few blacks are violent; but we will be right to resist or deny it by virtue of how it affects the common ground. The interlocutor's denial is a "meta-linguistic negation" that blocks the implicature that blacks are by nature violent. This is also relevant in the case of fashion because we may want it to be true that a fashion item is cool even if we don't grant the essentialist claim.

blacks, by virtue of being black, are violent, there is still a tendency to reinterpret the claim and accept another falsehood in the common ground: “most blacks are violent.” It is the responsible interlocutor’s job, in such a case, to resist this as well.

Consider now:

(3) Women are submissive (nurturing, cooperative).

What (3) implicates will, of course, depend on context. Moreover, it is not clear how the example fits into Leslie’s categories of generics. Neither being submissive, nurturing, or cooperative fits the criteria for being a striking generic. Is it a characteristic generic? Are women, by nature, submissive (nurturing, cooperative)? There are definitely many positive counterinstances. But here again the idea could be that *good*, or *normal*, women are submissive (nurturing, cooperative), where “normal” is not understood as “statistically normal” but in terms of what individuals are good examples of the kind. Or is there a template in the background: Recall that we can say “birds (or bees) lay eggs” even if most don’t because there is a template for animals that has a box for reproductive mechanism, and “lays eggs” is one of the options considered acceptable. Is there a template for animals, or for humans, that offers a pull-down psychology menu? There might be a story to tell: in interacting with other creatures we need to be able to predict whether they are going to be easy to interact with or hard to interact with, whether we are going to have an easy time being dominant or whether we are likely to be dominated. The claim that women are submissive provides a value for that box in the template and a basis for predicting behavior. Yet another option is that it is just a majority generic and is true just in case most women are submissive (etc).

Given these options, I think there is reason to deny (3): it is neither characteristic (part of what it is to be a good example of womanhood) or generally the case that women are submissive (nurturing, cooperative). However, even if it is unclear what are the truth conditions for (3), we can still consider its pragmatic effects. The implication of (3), on the account I am proposing, is that women are, by nature, submissive; women who aren’t submissive are, nevertheless, disposed to be under the right circumstances, because this is how women *are*. Perhaps the implication is that the category of woman is a functional kind: women are *for* nurturing, or women are *for* being dominated. Again, this is how women *are*. If this is conveyed in conversation, it may be hardly noticeable, but once it takes hold, it becomes a schema that shapes our social world. Blocking the implication is called for.

In this case, the invested defender of (3), in the face of objections, might have an easier time defending the quantified substitute for the generic: “most women are submissive (nurturing, cooperative)” and may also regard this as an adequate basis for asserting (3) as a majority generic (not taking into account the many non-submissive women). But the tempting slide (and apparently good inference) from “most women are submissive,” to “women are submissive,” must keep us on our guard to block the essentializing implicature.

One might object, however, that feminists and antiracist theorists regularly employ generics that, on my account, have problematic implications. Consider, for example:

- (5) Women are oppressed.
- (6) Blacks in the United States suffer racism.

How should we handle such cases? If (5) and (6) are simply majority generics, then both are plausibly true (assuming, as I do, that the oppression and racism affect all women and all blacks in the circumstances at issue). In asserting (5) and (6) however, does one implicate that women are oppressed *by nature*? Or that blacks are naturally targets of racism?

I can think of two options for handling such cases. One is to claim that the context cancels the implicature because the point of making such a claim is to criticize the practice, not to justify oppression or racism as appropriate or natural to women or blacks. Thus there is no need to block the implicature. This strategy is also important for understanding majority generics such as “barns are red” and “cars have radios,” more generally. The idea is that in cases where it is obvious that there is no non-accidental connection between the kind and the predicate, i.e., where it is clear that what is being expressed is a majority generic rather than a characteristic or striking generic, there is no implicature, and so no implicature to be blocked or negated.<sup>25</sup>

The second option is to allow that there is a non-coincidental or non-accidental connection between being a woman and being oppressed, or being black and being the target of racism. The idea is not that women or blacks are naturally treated this way; rather, the point is that being a woman or being black are good predictors for the unjust treatment. So it is not necessary to block or negate the implicature because it is true. This may seem troublesome, but the appearance of trouble hinges, I believe, on a slide we need not make. According to some accounts of gender and race, being unjustly subordinated is part of what it is to be gendered man or woman and to be raced (Haslanger, “Gender and Race”). On this view, it is true that women are oppressed by virtue of being women, and a paradigm example of a woman is someone who is oppressed. So when someone asserts (5), both the utterance and the implicature are true. Does this entail that women are oppressed by their very natures? How could that be acceptable? It isn’t acceptable, but neither is it entailed. Consider the comparison:

It is true in virtue of what it is to be a bachelor that bachelors are unmarried.  
with:

It is true in virtue of what it is to be a woman that women are oppressed.

or

It is in virtue of being poor that the poor are disenfranchised.

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<sup>25</sup>There is empirical evidence that we are aware of the distinction between majority and characteristic generics. In the case of characteristic generics, speakers are more willing to count both bare plural and indefinite singular forms of the generic as natural to assert than majority generics, e.g., “tigers have stripes” and “a tiger has stripes” are both judged assertable, whereas speakers are more likely to differ in their assessment of “barns are red” and “a barn is red” (Leslie et al., “Conceptual” 482).

In each of these cases the non-accidental link is being asserted between properties. As long as one allows that no individual is by nature a bachelor, or by nature a woman, or by nature poor, then it doesn't follow that the individual is by necessity unmarried or oppressed or disenfranchised, or that they should be. There is a further scope error, however, that many find tempting. Consider:

- (7) Women are [non-accidentally, by virtue of what they are, by nature] oppressed.
- (8) Sally is a woman.
- (9) Therefore, Sally is [non-accidentally, by virtue of what she is, by nature] oppressed.

Of course this conclusion is unacceptable, but the inference is invalid and requires the stronger premise:

- (8\*) Sally is [non-accidentally, by virtue of what she is, by nature] a woman.

If we deny (8\*), which is needed in place of (8) to infer (9), then we can avoid the problematic conclusion.

Whether this second strategy is an acceptable option (and I'm not convinced it is!), will depend on several considerations. In particular, it will depend on the details of how we spell out the precise content of the implicature: what sort of non-accidental connection is being claimed between the kind and the property referred to by the generic, what is involved in a claim of generic essence, how should we interpret assumptions about nature(s). The issue here is, I believe, metaphysical, in the sense that we need good metaphysical distinctions to make sense of the alternatives, but more than metaphysical, it is psychological. The goal is to understand what people *tend to believe* when they hear someone assert a generic. There has been valuable research on the human tendency to essentialize (Gelman "Essential Child", "Conceptual Development") and a better account of the pragmatics of generics should take this research into account.

## *Critique?*

The project of at least many social constructionists is to make explicit how the world we respond to, the world that triggers our schemas, is shaped by us and is not inevitable, natural, or "given." In other words, the project is to make evident the role of schemas in shaping resources that "fit" our schemas. Once the loop is laid bare, new questions can be asked about the adequacy of the schemas, the distribution of resources, and alternative structures that might be put in place. The goal is to make explicit the hegemonies that hold us in their grip so that they can be challenged and contested. My arguments thus far have attempted to connect this understanding of social construction and the formation of hegemony with practices of speech and conversation that help constitute the common ground. If what I have argued is correct,

there is less mystery how confused and mistaken ideologies become hegemonic—they are absorbed as the background to successful communication. Moreover, we need not assume that the parties to the conversation are deviously insinuating the false beliefs into the cultural background. It may be that the mechanisms of presupposition accommodation and implicature that are essential to establishing shared meanings and the contours of our social world are simply not serving us well in these domains.

Is the point of ideology critique, then, to make explicit the content of hegemony, to bring it to the level of belief to be evaluated? There is much emphasis in discussion of ideology on this idea that what is gained through critique is an understanding that things could be different. Catharine MacKinnon emphasizes that in unveiling ideological illusion one comes to see that how things are is not how they must be:

Women's situation cannot be truly known for what it is, in the feminist sense, without knowing that it can be other than it is. . . . Patterns of abuse can be made to look more convincing without the possibility of change seeming even a little more compelling. Viewed as object reality, the more inequality is pervasive, the more it is simply "there." And the more real it looks, the more it looks like the truth. As a way of knowing about social conditions, consciousness raising by contrast shows women their situation in a way that affirms they can act to change it. (101)

This fits with the idea that what is inserted into the common ground by the problematic generics is a claim of generic essence. If the presumption is that subordinated groups occupy the social positions they do because of facts about their nature or essence, then effective resistance requires that we first explore the possibilities that this move has foreclosed (see also Taylor "Interpretation"). But it is one thing to recognize the possibility of a different social structure and another to offer a critique of one. Is the revelation of alternatives sufficient to provide social critique?

A simplistic hypothesis might be that once one is exposed to the social workings of one's milieu, one will come to see the weaknesses of it. On this view, the unveiling of the illusion of inevitability can disrupt an investment in one's current (inadequate) milieu and provide opportunities for improvement. Further critique, strictly speaking, is not necessary; one need only broaden the horizons of those in the grip of an unjust structure and they will gain "consciousness" and gravitate to liberation.

It is true that this can happen, but it is far from guaranteed, and there is a danger that not all such gravitation is toward liberation. Ideology critique begins by taking aim at the particular masking of social schemas that occurs when they become hegemonic, but it takes further moral or political critique to determine whether the structures they constitute are legitimate or just. Questions of justice don't arise for the common sense world that is taken for granted. To raise normative issues we must first make visible the social dynamics that create our social worlds; once articulated ideology can (in principle) be debated. So showing how something is simply presupposed as common ground and that it needs critical examination is one goal of ideology critique. This is an important step, but alone is insufficient to capture the critical dimension. Moreover, as noted, schemas are entrenched dispositions

and often don't change in response to cognitive engagement. A further, often unacknowledged, concern is that components of hegemony are polysemic, so we cannot assume that it is possible to articulate "the content" of hegemony (Ewick and Silbey, "Subversive Stories" 212; Silbey 293):

The hegemonic is not simply a static body of ideas to which members of a culture are obliged to conform. . . [it has] a protean nature in which dominant relations are preserved while their manifestations remain highly flexible. The hegemonic must continually evolve so as to recuperate alternative hegemonies. (Silberstein 127, qtd in Ewick and Silbey, "Subversive Stories" 212)

This "protean" nature of hegemony can protect it from critique (Ewick and Silbey, "Subversive Stories" 212), but can also make room for resistance and counter-hegemony:

Since power is exercised through the patterned distribution of resources and schemas, if there is resistance to this power it must also operate through the appropriation of these self-same structures. Resistance, as much as power, is contingent upon the structural resources available to the relational participants. . . "Counter-hegemony has to start from that which exists, which involves starting from 'where people are at.' Such a conception of counter-hegemony requires the 'reworking' or 'refashioning' of elements which are constitutive of the prevailing hegemony" (Hunt, 316). (Ewick and Silbey, "Narrating" 1335 (including Hunt quote))

In studies of hegemony and counter-hegemony, many humanists, legal theorists, social scientists, have focused on narrative. Narrative is important because of its power to entrench social scripts that have plots which are transposable to different contexts; narratives frame the personal in cultural forms. Acts of resistance to social scripts can also be narrated using the "elements which are constitutive of the prevailing hegemony" and become subversive stories (Ewick and Silbey, "Narrating").

Narratives—subversive or not—are crucial components of the schemas we bring to social life. However, they are not the only component. For example, feminists have long noted that dualistic conceptual frameworks that oppose reason/emotion, mind/body, nature/culture, masculine/feminine guide and distort our thinking. It is also plausible that schemas include presumption rules that direct our reasoning in cases where evidence is slim (Ullman-Margalit). Such rules are often encoded in narratives, but we have seen that they are also ubiquitous in conversation and other forms of social interaction. And habits of body and mind—including non-intentional behavior, "body language," moods, feelings, emotions, suspicions, and the like—play an important role in social life, and their interpretation and coordination depends on socializing individuals to fit (roughly) within a pattern of collective dispositions.

So it would seem that ideology critique can and should take a variety of forms. For example, we can articulate the hegemonic in ways that open space for contestation and justice claims, e.g., by criticizing conceptual frameworks and offering new ones, by noting and challenging presumption rules that occlude evidence of alternatives, by pointing to the effects of social practices on consciousness. We can give

voice to the counter-hegemonic by describing and recommending resistant interventions and practices. We can analyze social conditions and organization in terms that are broadly accessible so that the looping of social structures is rendered visible and so less fixed or inevitable. We can also promote norms and standards for contesting ideology that are more democratic and alert to the muting (and deafening) effects of hegemony. We can reject generics that support false claims about generic essences: it is not the case that women are more submissive than men; that blacks are more violent than whites; that cows are food.

A further goal, of course, is social change resulting in greater justice. Ideology critique of the sort I've described can help create conceptual space for such change, but thought can never replace action. The power of consciousness raising is not just to offer new avenues of thought, but to create social spaces where new schemas can be acted out, and eventually new—less oppressive—practices can become hegemonic. Describing what those practices should look like is a task for further normative debate.

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# Chapter 12

## Experience and Knowledge: The Case of Sexual Abuse Memories

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**Abstract** This chapter argues for a politically informed but realist approach to sexual abuse memories. A number of theorists have set aside questions of truth from understanding the memory wars—some because they reject the possibility that memory can be a domain of truth since it is so susceptible to suggestion, some because they work within analytic frames (psychoanalysis, for example) in which questions of truth are largely eclipsed by theories of projection and transference, and some because they believe that once we move into the domains of narrative and politics and have a properly sophisticated account of memory formation we must leave the question of truth behind. I argue we cannot leave the question of truth behind; however, this does not mean we can jettison a political account of the ways in which truth is framed, narrativized, and even made possible.

### Introduction

Ian Hacking opens his recent book on multiple personality disorders with the following lines:

Memory is a powerful tool in quests for understanding, justice, and knowledge. It raises consciousness. It heals some wounds, restores dignity, and prompts uprisings. What better motto for automobile license plates in Quebec than *Je me souviens*—I remember. (3)

With these lines Hacking reminds us of memory's force in both personal and social life, as well as memory's usefulness for various prosaic agendas. In this book, whose full title is *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*, Hacking develops a Foucauldian-inspired archaeology of the phenomenon of multiple personality disorder, a disorder that is often attributed to repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse. He argues that the disorder is a species of social construction, a cultural pathology of sorts, which does not make it false or unreal, but does complicate its etiology. But his main concern is to defend a thesis of skepticism about the way in which we rely on memory to heal the soul and improve

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the world. The so-called memory wars, which have concerned child sexual abuse and recovered memories as well as various genocides, have been fought for justice, Hacking says, on “the terrain of memory” as if in this terrain “there is such a thing as knowledge to be had” (5). Hacking’s (roughly) Foucauldian approach to the objects of the psychological sciences, an approach that I (roughly) share, causes him to have concern about the way in which the scientific and political fights over memory assume realist and/or naturalist ontologies—that is, they take memories to be something like reports. Though I am largely in agreement with Hacking’s analysis in this book, the issue of the realism of memory is an area of disagreement.

What Hacking along with others call the new “sciences of memory” emerged, coincidentally perhaps, just as feminist inspired movements to address memories of childhood sexual abuse became something of a public phenomenon, certainly a cause célèbre on the talk-show circuits of mass culture. These twin developments, emerging from very different locations—one squarely academic, the other more in therapeutic and social activism circles—were sure to eventually crash into one another, as they did in the controversy of the 1990s over the issue of repressed and recovered memories. The flurry of empirical experiments on memory retrieval, on the susceptibility of memory to influence, and on the way in which memories are “filled in” by other schemata or by unrelated memories were taken up by various forces, some of whom had political and or personal agendas of their own, to quash the idea of repressed memories. And in their turn, some defenders of abused survivors tended to view the new sciences of memory as the enemy, from whom they could learn nothing.

From my point of view, these public feuds provide a good example of the poor state of contemporary public discourses when it comes to thinking about the relationship of politics to knowledge, or the relation between political and epistemic concerns. The clash was presented as if we had to choose between apolitical objectivity of the memory researchers and the subjective, politically motivated feminist activists, or, alternatively, between the infallibility of victims to know the cause of their difficulties and the nefarious politically motivated forces of patriarchal science.

I found, and continue to find, these characterizations inadequate, and this chapter is an attempt to chart a different path, a genealogy of truth, in Foucault’s sense of genealogy, but one that will less ambiguously than Foucault support a realism or referential take on the truth claims involved in the cases under dispute. For different reasons, a number of theorists, including Hacking, have set aside questions of truth from understanding the memory wars—some because they reject the possibility that memory can be a domain of truth, since it is so susceptible to suggestion, some because they work within analytic frames (psychoanalysis, for example) in which questions of truth are eclipsed by theories of projection and transference, and some because they believe that once we move into the domains of narrative and politics (once we have a properly sophisticated account of memory formation, in other words) we must leave truth behind (See the discussion of this in Campbell, *Relational* Chapters 2 and 3; Kahane 25; and Loftus and Ketchum). I argue we cannot leave the question of truth behind; however, this does not mean we can jettison a

political account of the ways in which truth is framed, narrativized, and even made possible.

Certainly in regard to high profile work that is career-making, a politically informed sociological analysis of empirical research is always important to do. Moreover, we need to look with a viewpoint attentive to the history of science for the ways that the object of inquiry has been framed, and for what might be left out of that frame, as well as at the norms of theory choice and evidence gathering. We need also to invite, rather than summarily reject, the possibility of connecting movements of social justice with the best research there is; to have an egalitarian collaboration of victims, activists, therapists, and researchers; and to see such dialogue as an epistemic mandate, not a politically defensive gesture.

Such a vision of collaboration is, alas, all too utopian, although there were moments of sincere efforts at dialogue even in the infamous debates in the pages of the *New York Review of Books*. (Though many actual practitioners of research and therapy did not have such simple-minded views about the memory debates as I have characterized them; unfortunately, the loudest participants, or those that the press gave the most attention, helped confirm, rather than disconfirm, the misrepresentation of the epistemic issues.<sup>1</sup>)

Yet two books by philosophers have emerged in the last few years that have attempted a new way to understand the debates and advance our thinking about what memory is: Hacking's as already mentioned, and Sue Campbell's *Relational Remembering: Rethinking the Memory Wars*. Neither book promotes a simplistic rapprochement between sides; yet each offers a way to transcend the false dilemmas of objectivity vs. subjectivism that infested the debates. While Hacking uses Foucault, Campbell uses more standard analytic approaches to argue in a similar vein that memory is a great deal more complex than simple reports, that memories are expressive and reconstructive rather than archival, and are always in some sense collectively influenced. Alterations of memory over time can result from an enhanced conceptual repertoire and new motivations to attend to different aspects. Campbell gives careful but strong critique of the celebrated work of memory researcher Elizabeth Loftus, who also argued in favor of a complex notion of memory but who accepted, and promoted, the false idea that research into women's memory of child sexual abuse could occur in a no-politics zone, despite the fact that dominant discourses about women's excessive vulnerability to influence and emotional instability continue to circulate at all levels in our society. Campbell's project, unlike Hacking's, is not merely to voice political and epistemic skepticism, but to analyze the politics of the debates as well as to offer a reformulated conception of what memories are that incorporates their necessarily social formation without characterizing this as always having a distorting effect.

My concern in this chapter is with the question of truth: that is, the issue of whether and to what degree memories are produced by experiences in the world. Although Campbell's work goes a long way toward showing how truth concerns

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<sup>1</sup>I would put Frederick Crews' writings squarely in this category. See esp. 1995.

need not be relinquished when we develop a more accurate understanding of the complexity of memory, truth is not her main concern.<sup>2</sup> Hacking deconstructs the question of the external reference of memory's content, and thus disconnects what phenomenologists would call our lived interiority from its contextual sources. His approach is emblematic of the tendency of those who insist on memory's complexity, its susceptibility to construction, and its relationship to affect, to then argue against its epistemic status as a source of knowledge. This is an unnecessary sacrifice, or so I shall argue. Hacking also, oddly, motivates his critique by a concern for individual autonomy against social influences, in this case, the influence of the public domain that uses memory to support various independent claims, which has the result of "rewriting the soul." Here I shall argue that his analysis mistakenly imagines the possibility of decoupling memory from politics. As if.

## I

The relationship of knowledge and subjective experience has had a starkly contradictory history. Knowledge claims based on interior types of experience, whether these are physical pains such as toothaches or psychic pains such as heartache, have enjoyed unparalleled status in western Anglo-American epistemologies. First-person reports on internal states (e.g., "I am appeared to F-ly") were for a long time considered the most justified beliefs we can have. More recent debates have erupted over the nature of the experience for which one might argue for a first-person privilege, or the nature of the introspected states, and some functionalists argue that whether an individual is in pain, for example, depends on facts that are in principle accessible to a third party. But there remains a significant group who take first-person "raw feels" to be uniquely privileged.

However, the connection between first-person states and the external world has long been a key problematic in empiricist epistemologies. Arguing that because "I am appeared to F-ly," then there must be F-ly causing things that exist independent of my mind, has proved to be difficult. My concern here is not to rehearse the history of representationalism but to consider the epistemological impact of this problematic and the ways in which we have responded to reports of interior experiences by certain subjects. When there is evidence that would disconfirm the first-person affective report, one avenue that has been pursued in recent decades is to talk about *virtual* experience, or *virtual* pain, with some going so far as to argue that there is no distinction between *virtual* pain and real pain. The concept of the virtual here provides a way to maintain the first-person privilege over interior experiences whether or not there is objective confirmation (In an earlier period a similar discourse was all about "psychosomatic" pains.) The concept of virtual experience allows us to say that a person is truly experiencing the affect he or she reports, but it has no physiological correlate. The tickling of the phantom limb may be caused by nerve

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<sup>2</sup>And, in her earlier work on the role of affect in psychological explanation, she argued that the expression of affective states should not be taken as reports. See Campbell, *Interpretation*.

endings at the point of amputation, or by the chaotic firing of messenger cells whose patterns of stimulation have been disrupted by amputation, but it is not caused by the absent and imagined limb itself. Thus to name something virtual is to suggest that its etiology is artificial or merely internal rather than external, that there is a disconnect between the content of the experience and the external world.

Examples of theories that propose a disconnect between one's inner and outer worlds include theories about psychic distresses that are internally initiated such as paranoia and the psychoanalytic concepts of projection, hysteria, and transference. Psychoanalysis in some ways initiated the scientific treatments of such disconnect, as opposed to the magical or religious treatment of it; yet psychoanalysis stands oddly on both sides of the memory wars, assailed by the False Memory Syndrome Foundation as responsible for the concept of "repressed memories," but also used by some to explain reports of sexual abuse, incest, date or acquaintance rape, and sexual harassment as forms of projection or the manifestation of latent desire rather than accurate reports of events. Similar to the way in which "virtual pain" is treated, in these cases it is not the internal symptoms of the suffering victim that is called into question but whether those symptoms are causally related to the world. Critics of the concept of date rape, for example, do not necessarily contest the nature of the experience the woman reports, such as the existence of post-traumatic stress, but question whether the affective experience reported has sufficient cause in the disputed event or whether its manifestation needs further explanation.

In raising the question of how to think about the etiology of memory, I am intentionally sidestepping numerous distinctions that can be made and, indeed, should be made certainly if we were trying to assess any given case. Thus for example Erik Erikson, in his own discussion of how to judge the connection of action to reality, says we can distinguish "'acting in regard to reality', 'action vis-à-vis reality', and 'acting in the outer world'" (46). Some also want to distinguish the content of a memory claim from its subjective state and its associated emotions. For my purposes, staying at the gross level will serve to keep our focus on the issue I want to address.

As Campbell points out, the formulation of the theories of both repressed and projected memories and the ensuing debates cannot be separated from the persistence in the general cultural climate of a preemptive, epistemic dis-authorization of women. This means that certain hypotheses can unfairly benefit from re-animating powerful stereotypes of women as "easily influenced, narcissistic, and vindictive" (Relational, 7), with the result that insufficient evidence is taken to produce a persuasive case or a sound argument. The association of women with susceptibility to influence and an excessive emotionality is so prevalent that, as Janice Haaken points out, even feminists may be concerned to avoid accepting women's reports "for fear of losing credibility" (quoted in Campbell, *Relational* 7). As a result, the discursive space in which we might work on memory, especially to explore its social, political, and relational aspects, has been foreshortened.

Debate over the epistemic status of subjective responses to events is not unique to the kinds of cases that especially involve women. Recall the recent public debate over American responses to the pictures at Abu Ghraib prison, and in particular,

the debate over negative, affective experiences of shame and disgust reported by numerous viewers of the pictures. According to Senator Inhofe from Oklahoma, our responses should not be shame, outrage, or disgust but anger that such a fuss is being made over “murderers. . .terrorists. . .and insurgents” with “American blood on their hands.” For Senator Inhofe and Rush Limbaugh the “media” incited an emotional response on the part of American viewers which was unjustified and unnecessary. Limbaugh argued that “This is no different than what happens in the Skull and Bones initiation, and we’re going to ruin people’s lives over it, and we’re going to hamper our military effort, and then we’re going to really hammer them because they had a good time” (quoted in Sontag). The “they” in this context are the US soldiers, and for Limbaugh our experience in looking at the pictures should be solidarity and sympathy solely with the soldiers, who are simply having a good time and getting an emotional release. For Limbaugh and Inhofe, those who look at the pictures from Abu Ghraib prison with shame and horror may be genuinely having these experiences, but the etiology of the affect has been artificially induced by politically biased media reports rather than accurate assessments of wartime realities. This example may seem a different matter altogether from the epistemic status of rape memories, but both concern how we assess the causal etiology of affective responses. To argue against Limbaugh and Inhofe it is not enough to say that viewers have a right to their responses without giving a narrative of how those responses arise within a pattern of reasonable judgments.

The affective responses by US viewers to the pictures of tortured Iraqi prisoners have been far from uniform. But even if they had been, the existence of affect is not sufficient indication of crimes committed, of course, although it can serve as *prima facie* cause to investigate further. My argument is not to induce truth from affect but simply that the question of truth cannot be set aside in understanding subjective responses. The epistemic questions behind the charges of media influence or of feminist extremism are legitimate questions to raise, even if some of the critics who raise these questions are political idiots. It matters whether a person’s affect has a causal link to an event, what kind of link it has, and whether the event should be understood as imaginary or real, that is, as connecting to the way things are. Part of the reason it matters is because this will affect responsive actions by third parties, for example, requiring a reassessment of the way we understand an aspect of our shared world and shared social relationships, or whether we merely take the reports as indirect calls for help to be addressed by therapy or education rather than policy reforms or social protest. But raising the epistemic question should not be taken as a reason to avoid or demote the political issues at stake in some of these cases. Recall Foucault’s approach to assessing a discursive context: he asks, who is speaking, who has the authority to speak in an expert voice, who is listening? In other words, what are the distributive relations of epistemic authority and presumption? And how are these contributing to the current “regime of truth”?

## II

Consider the psychoanalytic concept of projection, in which repressed feelings are ascribed to others through a defensive mechanism of avoidance. One’s own

repressed desire, for example, may be ascribed to someone else, as classically portrayed onscreen in the suggestive portrayal of Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In this case Blanche's experience of Stanley Kuwolski's desire is seen as a projection, a psychic event that tells us more about her own desires than about Stanley's. Applying the concept of projection to Blanche delegitimizes her judgment of her surroundings. A better illustration for my purposes is one of Freud's most famous case-studies of projection, the case of Dora.

Freud's case-study of his 18 year old patient Dora is a story of failed therapy that becomes part of the basis of the theory of transference. The facts that Freud does not dispute are these: that Dora's father has tried to engineer her liaison with an older man, Herr K.; that Herr K. is married to the mistress of Dora's father; and, therefore, that Dora's father was probably motivated to promote the relationship either as a way to distract Herr K. while he is with Herr K's wife or to offset Dora's anticipated disapproval of his extramarital affair. Freud also accepts the fact that Herr K. had made sexual advances on Dora when she was 14, advances that she had unambiguously rejected, although they remained on friendly terms afterward. But the issue of interest here is an event whose nature Freud does dispute, in which Dora recounts walking in the park with Herr K. when he propositions her and she slaps him. In Freud's reading of this moment, Dora's slap of Herr K. is exemplary of her psychic state, not a response nor engagement with reality or with him. Freud's arguments for this reading are that, prior to the slap, Dora's relations with Herr K. were amicable, and because Herr K. and Dora's father deny that a proposition took place. So given these facts, Freud sees the slap as a manifestation only of Dora's interior life and affect rather than her perception of and response to the world around her. He further believed that, like Blanche, Dora's accusation against Herr K. was linked to her own desire for the older man. Dora's subsequent resistance to Freud's analysis of the event in the park is taken as further evidence of this denial of her own desire.

Numerous commentators have disputed Freud's analysis in this case (see e.g., Benjamin, Lear, Rose, Gallop, Moi). But most commentators, even those criticizing Freud's sexist treatment of Dora, contest his diagnosis while following his example of setting aside Dora's own attempts to have Freud believe her version of the story in the park. In other words, they set aside the question of truth in favor of alternative strategic readings of the various affects and agendas, both Freud's and Dora's, at play in their dispute. Yet the assessment of the truth about what happened that day is the cornerstone of this case, as Steven Marcus noted: "...the cause of her greatest embitterment seems to have been her father's 'readiness to consider the scene by the lake as a product of her imagination.'... The three adults to whom she was closest, whom she loved the most in the world, were apparently conspiring—separately, in tandem, or in concert—to deny her the reality of her experience" (Marcus 61). Dora is first brought to Freud by her father, after she has tried, unsuccessfully, to relate to her parents what happened with Herr K. They don't believe her, or say they don't, and take her to Freud hoping he will change her mind about what happened. During their sessions Freud never seems to consider the possible veracity of her version of the events, and never considers it in the subsequent diagnosis. Frustrated after several months, Dora refuses to go back, yet she returns again a year and a half later with the hope of convincing Freud that her account of the incident in the

park was accurate. He becomes angry at this point at her own refusal to accept a "far more radical cure for her troubles" (122). At this, Dora leaves and does not return.

There is a great deal more that might be said about this case but I want to focus simply on the topic of the perceptual report. Toril Moi offers a reading of the case that takes up the question of epistemology, noting Freud's own resistance to accepting Dora as justified in her beliefs and his dismissal of her methods of belief acquisition, which he criticizes as fragmentary (because her views of Herr K. are inconsistent over time) and collective (because she consults with others). Moi's essay is helpfully focused on the different approaches to justification taken by Dora and Freud, and on Freud's characterization of Dora's approach as feminine. But at the end of her article Moi retreats from the concern with truth and provides a strategic motivation for the focus of her article on epistemology: she argues that we (meaning feminists) must work on the terrain of epistemology only because we need to defeat phallogentric epistemology from within, "since there can be no outside" (198). The difference between Dora's and Freud's modes of justification are again reduced to political strategy and narrative practice.

However, it seems entirely plausible to read the case of Dora not as a manifestation of psychic projection which overlays a veneer of affective response on top of reality, but rather, as an engagement and negotiation with reality based on an accurate interpretation of her actual situation and position within various social relations. Freud has affected a double epistemic disauthorization of Dora: not only is she disauthorized as inappropriately assessing her immediate surroundings, she is also disauthorized in assessing her own emotional state, since Freud contests her description of this state by positing sexual desire for Herr K. (also for Frau K. and for her father). Significantly, the subsequent manifestations of behavior that Freud and others took to be hysteria date from Dora's first failed attempt to have her account of the event in the park accepted.

My point here is not to repudiate the concept of projection itself; thus I would disassociate myself from Crews, Masson, and others who take Freud's failure to believe his women patient's testimonies of abuse as a disconfirmation of every theory he developed. There is ample evidence for (something like) projection and transference, and even the theory of hysteria might be salvaged with radical revision. Rather, my point here is simply to note the utility of theories such as the theory of projection in reassigning epistemic authority based on a claim of mistaken attribution. That is, in a climate where the perspectives of various groups are routinely set aside as uninformed, inaccurate, or hysterical, we have a far from politically neutral space within which determinations of projection are made, or judged. In the context of therapy, the diagnosis of projection eclipses the epistemic question: Does the attribution being made have any accuracy? Of course, in many cases, especially in therapeutic contexts, we just cannot know. And in some cases, projection might be exactly the right diagnosis. But it is unclear what would justify a diagnosis of projection if the question of truth has not been decided, or was never pursued.

### III

Consider next another treatment of subjective experience that will bring us back to the issue of memory. If some take Freud's legacy to have an epistemically *disenabling* effect on claims of sexual assault and abuse, because of the way in which he reinterpreted reports of abuse as reports of fantasy and desire, his influence has had an interestingly *enabling* effect on claims of what Ian Hacking calls "traumatic forgetting." That is, Freud's theory of the split self has enabled the idea that the conscious self can functionally forget traumatic experience while the unconscious self remembers, harboring signs that may be read at a later date. In such cases of forgetting, continuous memories may be absent, but the collection of symptoms suggest the possibility of a previous real experience of trauma. Thus, in this case, memory skeptics are motivated not to make common cause with Freud, but to defeat him.

Ian Hacking puts forward a form of memory skepticism that is not the usual kind espoused by those who denounce Freud or who support the False Memory Foundation. In his study of multiple personality disorder, Hacking considers the ways in which experiences can come under different descriptions. He suggests that re-descriptions occur when there is a *reframing* of the experience, which in turn can have the effect of reworking the self. Hacking names this process a "semantic contagion," a rather loaded term given the negative associations of the word contagion. Semantic contagion occurs, according to Hacking, when a new description of a given action influences us to reclassify other actions. For example, if spanking with a belt becomes reclassified from "normal parenting" to "child abuse," this reclassification might then influence us to reconsider other types of punitive measures one might take with children as also abusive. Semantic contagion is the hardest sort of influence to counteract, according to Hacking, because it is internally prompted via connotations and associations, i.e., it is not prompted by independent or external events.

Hacking defends his use of the word contagion because he thinks that such semantic influences "tend to go to the extremes" (255). But his main concern is not with the extremism of the descriptive judgments but with their etiology: he explains, "There may also be a thoroughly non-logical element driving semantic contagion, namely, the recent popularity among middle-class people who can afford therapists, of seeing oneself as victim" (255). In this case, Hacking is suggesting that an accusation of child abuse can be traced to a desire for a certain self-image or subjective positionality in regard to one's relationships. Reports of experience in such a case would be seen as reports about the nature of the claimants' psyche rather than about the reality or the history of their relationships. We can note both similarities and differences here with the Freudian notion of projection: Hacking's hypothesis does not posit a deep psychic structure, but it does locate the source of an experience (e.g., the experience of abuse) in something other than an external event.

Hacking formulates his own etiology of certain politically contested and historically recent experience claims, such as multiple personality and child abuse, as based on what he calls a theory of "traumatic forgetting," borrowing his analysis

heavily from Foucault. His overall argument, roughly, is that contemporary political and moral confrontations about the treatment of children have taken the form they have because of a discursive context that has assumed two things: (a) that there is a truth about memory, and (b) that memory is the key to the soul, or in secular language, to the self. Hacking explains that:

The politics of personal memory is a politics of a certain type. It is a power struggle built around knowledge, or claims to knowledge. It takes for granted that a certain sort of knowledge is possible. Individual factual claims are batted back and forth, claims about this patient, that therapist, combined with larger views about vice and virtue. Underlying these competing claims to surface knowledge there is a depth knowledge; that is, a knowledge that there are facts out there about memory, truth-or-falsehoods to get a fix on. There would not be a politics of this sort if there were not that assumption of knowledge about memory, known to science. Power struggles are fought out on the basis of surface knowledge, where opponents take the depth knowledge as common ground. (211–12)

In Hacking's view, the depth knowledge which serves as common ground among the disputants in the memory wars is the epistemic claim that we can have knowledge about the referential implications of certain memories, i.e., whether they are accurate or inaccurate reflections of real events. The fact that political movements have latched onto knowledge claims about experiences based on memory as the strategy for challenging oppression is the result of discursive shifts of the sort Foucault described as archaeological and genealogical, to denote, respectively, the background conditions of intelligibility, and the association with regimes of power. Archaeology considers the constitution of objects of inquiry, which renders them not true or false but candidates for truth value, whereas genealogy considers the relations between regimes of truth and regimes of power, in which hypotheses may become supported through an intensification that results when they are circulated within matrices of power and desire.

Hacking takes this Foucauldian lens to suggest a different approach than Judith Herman, a feminist and pioneer analyst of the traumatic after-effects of child sexual abuse and one of the most respected theorists by all sides of the debate. Hacking explains, "My thesis is altogether consistent with what Herman writes, but it reverses the direction of her inquiry. She sees the study of trauma, especially forgotten trauma, as arising within. . . political movements [such as feminism]. I see the way in which those movements latched onto trauma as part of a politics of memory legitimated by, indeed made possible by, the new sciences of memory. . . it is the underlying depth knowledge—that there are certain sorts of truths about memory and forgetting—that makes the politics possible" (213). Now, for Hacking to use the term *depth knowledge* here might be misleading, especially in a context where Freud's legacy looms large. Hacking's distinction between depth and surface knowledge is meant to invoke Foucault's distinction between *savoir* and *connaissance*, which in turn is parallel in some important respects to Rudolf Carnap's distinction between internal and external questions in science. Internal questions are decided through agreed upon procedures that operate within a frame of reference involving shared metaphysical assumptions, experimental methods, and conceptual approaches. For internal questions, epistemic justification can be schematized in

something similar to Hempel's deductive-nomological method. But external questions are altogether different: these involve questions of choice between alternative frames of reference and can only be decided on the basis of what Carnap called pragmatic criteria. In other words, external questions are not empirically determined or even, necessarily, conditioned. Depth knowledge for Hacking operates very much like Carnap's external questions, and like Carnap (at least the later Carnap), Hacking believes it is unintelligible to ask about reference with regard to external questions. Thus, there is no commitment to either the truth or the falsity of the framing elements that are external to a scientific paradigm. So, what Hacking calls depth knowledge might be more accurately designated with a term like "framing concepts."

Hacking's characterization of depth knowledge as epistemically benign sits uncomfortably, I would suggest, in juxtaposition with his critique of semantic contagion. The idea of depth knowledge necessarily involves the ways in which individual knowers are influenced by a community of epistemic standards, assumptions, and practices. That is, ideas like depth knowledge or Carnap's external questions work to repudiate individualist epistemologies which require individual knowers to supply the grounds of their justification in its entirety before they can claim justification. Why, then, does Hacking warn us to steer clear of semantic contagion? It is not as if his argument is that only some semantic influences are problematic; he does not target only the framing assumptions about memory, for example. Rather, his concern about semantic contagion is based in his idea of moral responsibility, freedom, and "our best vision of what it is to be a human being" (267) which is to "take responsibility for one's own character, one's own growth, one's own morality" (264). Simply put, semantic contagion is a problem because it conflicts with moral and rational autonomy.<sup>3</sup>

I sympathize with Hacking's goal of epistemic responsibility, but I'm skeptical, along with an increasing number of others, about the adequacy of individualistic accounts of processes of justification. If framing concepts play a constitutive role in what kind of claims can have a truth value, then we need to move away from individualist models of knowing. There is certainly an individual component for which we are responsible, but (1) that component is insufficient for knowing, much less believing; and (2) we need ways to bring the production of framing concepts into the realm of epistemic analysis, since, although these are not individually produced, they are collectively produced and reinforced and can be subject to normative evaluation. The question, then, is whether we can resituate the idea of epistemic responsibility in a more metaphysically adequate description of our situation vis-à-vis first-person experiential reports, a description that does not assume individualism. Here Sue Campbell's work is particularly useful.

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<sup>3</sup>It is fascinating that Hacking, one of the foremost interpreters and ablest defenders of Foucault for the English-speaking epistemological audience, should make such an argument, given Foucault's effective demonstrations about the limits of epistemic autonomy. On the other hand, Foucault did believe in the possibility of an ethics of self-fashioning, and this idea may be behind Hacking's worries about semantic contagion.

Campbell makes the realistic assumption that influences on our memory processes might have both distorting and non-distorting effects. Memory responds to promptings, and when there are no prompts, there is no occasion for a rehearsal of the event. Any meaningful sense of autonomy requires reflective self-awareness, and such awareness is best done, perhaps only done, in collective or dialogic process involving others. The centrality of memory to this process is not explained by an archaeological reference to the existence of shared, framing concepts about the epistemic status of memory, or by the fact that sexual memories are the “key to the soul,” but simply by the necessarily narrative character of self-reflection. We explain ourselves, and narrativize our past, in the process of real (or imagined) conversations. Thus, on Campbell’s view, the collective nature of memory is a standard feature; what requires scrutiny is not influence *per se* but its source and its purpose. This indicates to me that Foucault’s concept of genealogy is more useful than archaeology to unravel the intensified focus on memory in political movements.

First-person memory reports of many events will be resistant to corroboration. This does not make them unjustified or untrue: the requirement of external corroboration has a long history of political abuse, requiring it for some identity-based groups but not others, which indicates that we need a politically reflective analysis of the demand for corroboration. As many theorists of testimony argue, the default position we generally take with testimony is credulity, though I agree with Miranda Fricker that a low level critical faculty must still be operative in this default mode because we are able to move away from credulity very quickly when some reason presents itself (70). But the analysis of when and how we make that move away from credulity cannot be pursued effectively in a “no-politics” zone.

## Conclusion

My claim has been that we are making a mistake to set aside the epistemic question of truth or reference in regard to claims of subjective experience, even in the extremely difficult case of memory reports. My argument for this claim has been that truth has been set aside preemptorily and unnecessarily in the context of theories that politically interrogate the place of memory in the subjugation of women or other social movements. But I have also argued that the pursuit of truth requires an analysis of power.

It is noteworthy that Hacking is himself inconsistent on the question of the importance of truth. On the one hand, he says that the question of depth knowledge is not something that can be judged in terms of reference, and that the mistake of this particular depth knowledge is the very claim that there is a truth of the matter in regard to memory. Thus he argues for a setting aside of truth. On the other hand, however, his concern with the etiology of multiple personality syndrome and the claims of “traumatic forgetting” have everything to do with their strong connection to semantic contagion and weak connection to real events. He goes so far as to suggest that MP is a form of false consciousness and that the problem of false consciousness is that it is “contrary to the growth and maturing of a person who knows herself” (267).

In other words, false consciousness is the opposite of self knowledge. So Hacking's ultimate critical motivation in his analysis of what he calls "memoro-politics" is (rightly) with the question of their truth, even though he claims the problem with memoro-politics is its belief that memory can be a domain of knowledge.

The founders of the False Memory Foundation and the scientists of memory associated with them, such as Elizabeth Loftus, are also primarily concerned about the question of truth. The Foundation was created by accused parents who were concerned that their children were suffering because of the untoward influence of feminist therapists. Their concern with their child's current trauma is connected to their belief that that trauma has a disconnect to the reality of their shared history (Of course it can also be the case that some parents are entirely and exclusively motivated by self-protection, but my point here is that they may also be motivated, or singularly motivated in some cases, by a concern with their child's welfare.) But these proponents of truth have put political blinders on to guard against concerns about the history of epistemic disauthorization of women, or the political reasons that lend support to individual versus social models of belief formation in regard to self-knowledge. This makes them less likely, not more, to develop reliable theories.

The situation is also complicated by the fact that the discursive domains in which the memory wars have been fought out are psychotherapy and courtrooms, neither of which are domains organized by a dominant consideration of truth (certainly not in the adversarial US court system). Epistemic assessments of memory are not the business of therapists, nor the guiding consideration of case lawyers. Yet I would make two points about these domains. In therapy, it exceeds plausibility that effective diagnoses could disregard the question of truth entirely, and symptomatic readings of memory reports are themselves parasitic on a prior skepticism about the referential status of the memory. I would agree that taking memories as simple reports whose reference needs to be assessed is far from all there is to the understanding of subjective experience and trauma, but the ways in which truth circulates should be itself an object of the dialogic inquiry in therapy, not a set-aside. Dora's treatment would have been more successful if truth were on the table. I realize that therapists are not generally in a position to assess truth, and often have even less associated knowledge than Freud had in this case because, unlike him, they are not friends with their patients' family and social circle. Yet this in itself is no reason to support a theory that would say that truth is properly irrelevant to therapeutic diagnosis or clinical treatment. In regard to the courts, the mistake has been to conflate norms of evidence required in the courtroom—norms which are quite various across legal systems—with norms of evidence *simpliciter*. Courts are neither the only domain of inquiry nor arguably the best, given their overriding focus on meting out punishment. This conflation is not a mistake philosophers tend to make, but the public domain of discourse routinely assumes that courtrooms decide truth, and where courtrooms do not decide truth, there is no truth to be had.

It is perhaps because of the limitations of these two domains—therapeutic and legal—that some are incited to look to lab-coated memory researchers as the best bet for reliable belief formation. But the domain of the empirical sciences is no less susceptible to framing concepts that are entwined with solidified social roles

and hierarchies, especially in psychology. Moreover, the circulation between these fields of discourse—legal, therapeutic, and scientific—that affects which domain is made use of by whom, needs further analysis. Genealogy, in this instance, does not override the epistemic concerns but augments them.

Hacking holds that the current conflagrations over memory are the result of a shift at the level of depth knowledge about the centrality of memory to the soul or self: this is the shift from the religious to the secular alluded to when he says that “a politics of memory [is] legitimated by, indeed made possible by, the new sciences of memory.” (p. 213) What Hacking misses is that the particular memory claims that elicit a conflagration are ones where the epistemically marginalized are making criminal charges. This is no small detail for a reflective assessment of their circulation and their uptake.

We cannot sidestep the question of truth in regard to reports of experience. If depth knowledge or conceptual framing assumptions are constitutive of such claims, these also need assessment in relation to questions of truth and reference and not merely their pragmatic effects. And against Hacking here, I would put Arnold Davidson’s readings of Foucault, which argue that the latter’s concern with the history of concepts and with the variable way in which statements are made candidates for truth value should not be seen as mere sociology or ideology critique. The pursuit of truth will be enhanced if we come to a better understanding of how the domains of knowledge emerge, are delimited, and constrained by the peculiar ways in which concepts are formed in different historical moments. This means that we can make an epistemic evaluation of contrasting notions of the relation between sexual practices and identity, for example, in regard to Foucault’s best known work, rather than merely a comparison of political effects where we take no position on whether sexual object choice constitutes a stable deep truth about the self.

I’m well aware that truth cannot always be established, and I don’t take truth to be complete, singular, unproblematic, or description-transcendent. Yet we *can* make epistemic distinctions between more and less accurate accounts of events or experiences even if we hold that all perception is mediated by concepts that are themselves only one of several ways to understand any given experiences.

The notion of semantic contagion itself needs a genealogical critique. I’d suggest we need non-individualist epistemic methods of assessing first-person reports of experiences. Given the communal nature of concept formation, the historically contextualized nature of discourses and framing assumptions, and the ways in which we are all affected by the schemas of intelligibility made possible within our own discursive environment, outside influence is not sufficient as an indicator of distortion.

Here we can return to Foucault’s questions: Who is speaking? Who has the authority to speak as the expert? What is the logic of a given distributive economy of epistemic roles? We need, in other words, to do something like the equivalent of “following the money” in regard to beliefs. But this indicates that we need an epistemic assessment of the quality and nature of the connection between experience and the external world as well as a politically inflected assessment of the sources

of belief in existing systems of power. The latter should augment and improve, not replace, the former.

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