

# Resisting sex/gender conflation: a rejoinder to John Hood-Williams

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## Abstract

The irony of the rejection of the sex/gender distinction is that it renders sociology *per se* an impossible enterprise. For it is my submission that, *contra* Hood-Williams (1996) and others, the biological and the social constitute distinct, irreducible levels of reality: to conflate (in a 'downwards' or 'upwards' direction) the two levels is immediately to render analysis of their relative interplay at best intractable. It is indeed arguable that Hood-Williams is not so much concerned with (rightly) rejecting the so-called 'additive' approach to the biological and the social where the biological base is seen *a priori* as immutable, but more fundamentally with rejecting the necessary dualism of nature and culture (ie the biological and the social). In contradistinction, a realist defence of the sex/gender distinction will be made, involving critical reference to various major writers in the field and offering a brief but tentative discussion of the provenance of gender.

## Introduction

As Lynda Birke points out, feminists have rightly become concerned with biology (sex) because gender (social) differences have almost invariably been conceptualised in biological terms. Indeed, women have often been (and are) depicted as passive victims of their biology in ways that men, generally speaking, have not: women are portrayed as possessing an 'underlying biological nature, an essence of femininity, which provides constraints on what is individually possible for them. The social position of women thus becomes seen as determined – and limited – by their biology' (Birke, 1986: 2). Intrinsic to the latter is the necessity of

analytically separating the social and the biological; in other words, the indispensability of adopting the now-famous sex/gender distinction. This important distinction was popularised by Ann Oakley who, in 1972, wrote that '(s)ex is a biological term; "gender" a psychological and cultural one' (Oakley, 1972: 158). Birke is rightly critical of the way in which the notion of natural sex difference has been utilised particularly in political debates *vis-à-vis* gender inequality to assert that men and women are ultimately different, thereby closing off further discussion and moreover legitimating extant gender inequalities. Essentially, Birke is getting at the fact that we are dealing with two levels of reality which are irreducible by virtue of the fact that one can criticise ideas about biological differences. This is precluded by conflation.

Throughout this paper my main concern will be with defending the analytical indispensability of the ontological sex/gender distinction. Thus, to claim that we are necessarily dealing with two *levels* – the dynamic interplay of which is central to the feminist enterprise – is fundamentally to make an *ontological* claim; namely one that recognises that reality is quintessentially stratified. This is to adopt a realist position, *viz.* that the social is *emergent* from the biological and that moreover each level possesses irreducible powers (which may remain unexercised) that interact and thus require analytical separation (ie the adoption of *analytical* dualism) in order to examine their relative efficacy.<sup>1</sup> The fact that the social and the biological interact and mutually influence certainly does not entail the abandonment of the (ontological) distinction. It merely means that methodologically speaking, sociological life is not as simple as we would like! Indeed, as Hood-Williams notes, there are real difficulties in assigning the relative causal efficacy of each level, but it does not follow that the distinction should be abandoned on the basis of such difficulty (Hood-Williams, 1996: 14). As Sayer argues, '(t)here are also cases . . . in which the biological may be socially mediated in every instance and respect, but this does not mean that what is mediated cannot be biological. Whether people are "naturally" aggressive, or males, or patriarchal or whatever can *only* be decided by research which pays careful attention to *stratification and emergence* and is alive to the *problems of defining the 'natural' and the 'social'* (Sayer, 1992: 121). Any conflationary approach to the study of gender and in particular gender inequalities immediately renders the feminist enterprise impotent. For not to acknowledge that the social and the biological constitute *emergent levels*

*of reality* violates our inherent ability *qua* agents to delineate possibilities for socio-cultural and economic change. Indeed, without the important recognition that gender is not heuristically but ontologically distinct from biology, that is, to admit the existence of a particularly efficacious cultural/ideological property, then logically sociology *per se* is a non-starter.

We are compelled inexorably to distinguish between sex and gender, for gender, *qua* ideology derived from biological differences, has been and indeed continues to be wielded for the benefit of men *contra* women. Indeed, *contra* Hood-Williams and others, it is precisely because of the relative efficacy of ideology that we can, or rather must, acknowledge the dualism of nature and culture. For as Popper pointed out, ideologies are quintessentially the product of human minds, but *qua* product they acquire an ontological status of their own, in turn rendering them independent of knowing subjects (Popper, 1979; 1994). To reiterate, a wholly non-conflationary approach is intrinsic to the sex/gender distinction. Given that the social and the biological are so mutually influential, one would have expected 'central conflation' to have been the most attractive, though nonetheless fallacious, theoretical position for some writers to adopt. However, this is not the case. There are those writers (feminist and non-feminist alike) whom I would label 'upwards conflationists', since they would want to eradicate gender by arguing that cultural differences are really natural; but *more* conspicuous amongst the theoretical fold are those whom one can quite legitimately label 'downwards conflationists'. Downwards conflation has proved to be quite attractive to a growing number of writers (particularly those of a post-modernist/post-structuralist hue, including Hood-Williams).

Thus to Laqueur, 'there has been a powerful tendency among feminists to empty sex of its content by arguing that natural differences are really cultural. In Gayle Rubin's account . . . the presence of the body is so veiled as to be almost hidden. Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead further erode the body's priority over language with their self-conscious use of quotation marks around "given" . . . [and furthermore] Gender to Joan Scott . . . is not a category that mediates between fixed biological difference on the one hand and historically contingent social relations on the other' (Laqueur, 1994: 12). And thus, as Laqueur rightly points out, the distinction between nature and culture *collapses* as the former folds into the latter. Whilst Laqueur is absolutely right to argue that we must not conflate the body and the social context

('the fact we become human in culture . . . does not give us licence to ignore the body'), non-conflationists would conceivably want to place a question mark over his assertion of the fixity of the body within the extant socio-cultural milieu. It seems that Laqueur is endorsing the so-called 'additive' conceptualisation of the relationship between the biological and the social, where the biological base assumes primacy. This ultimately precludes the possibility of a two-way interplay.

Moreover, it could be argued that Laqueur ultimately follows the downwards path of idealist-inflected conflationism, as will be discussed. He rightly endorses the important (ontological) sex/gender distinction and indeed emphasises the considerable efficacy of gender ideology when he writes, for example, that 'theories of sexual difference influenced the course of scientific progress and the interpretation of particular experimental results' (1994: 16). However, this, I will argue, is vitiated slightly by ontological confusion which in turn could be used *contra* Laqueur by adherents of conflation. In a similar vein, Nelly Oudshoorn (1994) has splendidly delineated the way in which gender filters through extensively to the scientific world where *the* natural body was taken as axiomatic, and how endocrinologists in particular eventually contradict the deeply-entrenched notion of a clear, irreducible demarcation between men and women. Oudshoorn does not wish to dispense with the sex/gender distinction. Her substantive criticism is directed at those feminists who, in utilising the distinction, 'did not question the biological sex of those subjects that became socialized a woman; they took sex and the body for granted as unchanging biological realities that needed no further explanation . . . the concept of sex maintained its status as an *ahistorical attribute* of the human body and the body remained excluded from feminist analysis' (1994: 2-3). However, the *exact* utility of the distinction is left to be discerned by the reader and in fact one gets the distinct impression that Oudshoorn, like Laqueur, ventures unwittingly down the path of conflationism, as exemplified by her endorsement of the constructivist approach to the study of science and scientists. My ontological concerns *vis-à-vis* Laqueur and Oudshoorn will be discussed at a later stage in the paper.

It should be clear from the foregoing that I unequivocally endorse the view that gender is perhaps best conceptualised as ideational in nature (pertaining to the propositional register of society, which is utilised/manipulated socio-culturally) and is in

some way intimately (though not arbitrarily) related to biology: both constitute distinct, irreducible levels of reality. However, as well as maintaining this ontological distinction, I further want to proffer an explanation, albeit tentatively, as to why *women* have been oppressed (more so than men) via the articulation of the material (economic) and the ideational (socio-cultural; anchored in objective biology). Despite Delphy's untenable ontological proposition that gender precedes sex (since logically ideas emerge from, and are thus posterior to, the body), her emphasis on the social division of labour is important, but not elaborated: the precise linkage between the biological and the exigencies of capitalism are not enunciated by Delphy (1993). Consequently, I will briefly draw on Alison Assiter's work, in which she posits three broad preconditions for gender inequality (Assiter, 1992). Indeed, not to incorporate the material realities of women's existence would necessarily vitiate my defence of the sex/gender distinction which is the ontological springboard for an *adequate* sociology of *anything*, for the *very possibility* of sociology is predicated four-square on the existence of events, objects and processes which occur or exist independently of human conception. *All* sociology is underpinned by philosophical assumptions and thus it is necessary that sociologists are *fully* cognisant of their (often implicit) philosophical underpinnings.

### **The indispensability of the ontological sex/gender distinction**

As already mentioned, the distinction has been employed by such feminist writers as Birke to critique biological reductionism. Assertions regarding the (putative) naturalness of gender differences are often intended to mean that the trait is biologically determined, that is, pre-ordained by nature. Hence the prevalent notion that women, above all, 'naturally' want to be mothers because of a supposedly intrinsic maternal instinct – it is in their *biological* make-up to do so. Alice Rossi claims that gender differences are directly determined by biology; she argues for the importance of 'innate factors' in fostering the mother-child relationship and, moreover, contends that pre-natal hormonal influences predispose children to learn 'socially defined appropriate gender behaviour' (Sayers, 1982: 152). She concludes that 'there *may* be a biologically based potential for heightened maternal involvement in the child . . . that exceeds the potential for invest-

ment by men in fatherhood' (1982: 152). *Contra* Rossi, if gender differences are intrinsically biological and thus immutable, why is it that children *learn* 'socially defined appropriate gender behaviour'? If everything social could be reduced to (or is reducible to) the biological then logically there would be no *predispositional* hormones: either hormones determine or they do not! Whether there *may* be a biologically-based potential for heightened maternal investment is irrelevant, since it *is* the case that mothers and fathers are equally nurturant (1982: 153).

Furthermore, *vis-à-vis* sexuality, women are deemed (stereotypically) to be passive and receptive, men active and aggressive; a dichotomy which is attributed to underlying biological differences. However, the notion of an underlying biological urge to account for the latter is wholly incongruous with the way in which sexuality has been (and is) expressed cross-culturally and historically. Thus to Birke, '(p)ositing some underlying biological urge cannot usefully explain something as rich and varied as human sexual expression' (Birke, 1986: 13). The issue of male violence is often taken to be the ineluctable result of innate biological differences. It has been suggested that women are 'prone to violence' and that women subjected to male violence become addicted to what Pizzey and Shapiro call 'hormonal highs' as a result of the high level of 'stress' hormones released during a violent confrontation. The latter is an extreme form of biological determinism where ultimately the victim (ie, women) is blamed. Essentially, Pizzey and Shapiro fail to emphasise that it is quintessentially an issue of *male* violence towards women; they refer only to genderless people (1986: 34). The many *social* reasons for the fact that some women find themselves in such violent situations are completely ignored by Pizzey and Shapiro. And as Connell has pointed out, insofar as psychologists have been successful in measuring such traits as aggressiveness, 'a great deal of overlap between women and men is exactly what they found' (Connell, 1987: 70).

The principal inherent problem with the above is the palpable lack of acknowledgement that human action is highly structured in a collective sense. As Connell argues, it is constituted interactively, 'not by context-free individual predispositions . . . The idea that differences in hormone levels reach out through the complex situational, personal and collective determinants of individual behaviour . . . supposes a mechanism of hormonal control far more powerful than psychological research has actually found'

(1987: 71). Furthermore, as Oudshoorn points out, by 1940 biochemists had persuaded their colleagues (though not all scientists) that the production of female and male sex hormones was not restricted to one sex and that in fact they even subsequently proposed to *overthrow* the entire concept of sex hormones (Oudshoorn and Wijngaard, 1991: 462–3). In the latter, we clearly have an ontological hiatus: the biological (bodily/hormonal functions) is distinct from the social (notion that sex-specific hormones *determine* behaviour). And so without the sex/gender distinction we would not be able to proffer a critically-discursive account of, for example, the so-called ‘Baby M’ case in the United States, for in this particular case (involving a reneged surrogacy contract) a link was made by the Courts between reproductive (female) bodies and irrationality. As Smart points out, the body of the biological father does not enter the Courts in the same way as the biological mother’s: the father’s body, in contradistinction to the mother’s, is not a cultural signifier of negative meanings (Smart, 1989: 103). To reiterate, then, unless we can make the distinction we cannot ever hope to explicate the complexity and variability of patriarchy/androcentrism, that is, the ways in which women generally have been (and are) devalued and excluded to the benefit of (most) men.

The distinction is thus a major part of the feminist armoury in the ongoing fight against biological reductionism and the fundamentally inegalitarian precepts that have followed from it. Notwithstanding, the distinction clearly has substantive concomitant *political* functions. With the distinction, it is possible to claim that in criticising masculinity (with its patriarchal/androcentric connotations especially), one is *not* perforce rejecting or aiming to expunge biological maleness, or all people of the male sex (one hopes!); and similarly for women. Thus, one is now in a position to pinpoint what is changeable and what is not in the context of socio-economic reality.

### **Conflationist objections: some realist rejoinders**

One of the most compelling but ultimately specious objections raised against the sex/gender distinction is the putative division between the fluidity of the social and the *unchanging* biological which the distinction *seems* to presuppose. Nelly Oudshoorn has cogently delineated the way in which scientific classification of

hormones according to sex was greatly influenced by *pre-scientific* ideas about men and women: 'the idea that the male gonads are the seat of masculinity is a very old one. From the earliest times, the testis has been linked with male sexuality, longevity and bravery. Greeks and Romans used preparations made from goat or wolf testes as sexual stimulants . . . in the seventeenth century . . . the pre-scientific idea of testes as agents of masculinity became for the first time incorporated into medical science' (Oudshoorn, 1994: 117–118). Basically, Oudshoorn, in her analysis of the scientific discovery of hormones, has convincingly demonstrated the untenability of the notion of distinct, *unchanging* biological differences between men and women. The original assumption (which was predicated wholly on the largely-accepted two-sex model) that each sex could be recognised by its own sex hormones was gradually replaced by a model in which male and female sex hormones are present in *both* sexes. This did not, however, result in the abandonment of the pervasive notion that there exist only two irreducible sexes.

Yet moreover sex-specific hormone ideologues *cannot* now retreat to the initial assertion of ineradicable sex differences on the basis of genital structure, for as Birke rightly emphasises, 'even here the *differences are not absolute*, and some individuals are born with *ambiguous genitals* [. . .] So, to state that a difference is not absolute is to say that there is some degree of overlap' (Birke, 1992: 83). As Hood-Williams would want to rightly emphasise, there is thus a variety of hormonal conditions which occur in individuals who are genetically male or genetically female which occasionally results in an overlap between 'male' and 'female' physical types. Kaplan and Rogers have thus concluded that the 'rigid either/or assignment of the sexes is only a convenient social construct, not a biological reality' (Kaplan and Rogers, 1990: 214). It is therefore the case that the *biological criteria constitutive of sex are not always congruent*, and this in turn renders the notion of two distinct genders problematic. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that the ideology of only-two-genders has conspicuous causal efficacy *vis-à-vis* the body. Indeed, in order to render incongruent biological facts coterminous with the rigid, two-gender dichotomy, medicine has, as Julia Epstein points out, developed a technology for removing ambiguities with surgical and hormonal intervention, which as a result has permitted the maintenance of a legal fiction of binary gender as an *absolute* (Epstein, 1990: 128–9).



What, then, are the implications of the above for the sex/gender distinction? It is clear from the foregoing that, as Oudshoorn *et al.* would most certainly want to emphasise, we are not simply dealing with two ahistorical, fixed male and female biologies. However, this does not, *contra* Jaggar (1984) and Hood-Williams (1996), automatically render the distinction analytically defunct. In fact, Oudshoorn, as already mentioned, wants to retain the distinction, but does not reorient her work accordingly which she should have done given her corrective to earlier feminist writings that took for granted an ahistorical, two-sex model. Consequently, she emphasises the social construction (largely on the part of scientists) of the 'natural' body; an accentuation which arguably has some resonance with downwards conflation. This will be elucidated in a moment. Essentially, the above discussion on the constitutive nature of sex evinces the need for one to employ the sex/gender distinction with analytical precision, *not* an abandonment. It could *only* be abandoned if it could be held that sex and gender did not interact; clearly they do!

Crucially, the sex/gender distinction does not ineluctably entail that we must restrict ourselves only to two genders or two sexes. As Val Plumwood argues, '(a)lthough we should view human sexual reproduction in the light of an account of general biological reproduction, which is dimorphic, it seems equally clear that the Western view of gender as dimorphic has in turn influenced the theory. The evidential support basis . . . really only provides a basis for saying that there must be *at least* two sexes, not that there must be *exactly* two sexes and no more' (Plumwood, 1989: 4-5). Indeed, Oudshoorn herself reaches the conclusion that during the period endocrinology developed it might have been perfectly possible to introduce a classification of *multiple sexes*. Given that we are not dealing merely with two irreducible male/female biologies whose putative dimorphism underpins two genders, Plumwood states that there are 'fuzzy areas' of overlap between the biological *and* the social, and that consequently the sex/gender distinction should not be treated as sharply exclusive; there is an absence of a sharp boundary whose 'fuzziness' does not constitute grounds for abandoning the distinction.

Regrettably, Plumwood is arguably falling into the trap of conflation. There is no 'fuzzy overlap', as she puts it: this is not simply a conceptual impossibility but an ontological impossibility. Rather, there is *interaction*. To assert the simultaneity of interaction *and* overlap is contradictory. For if the biological and the

social have autonomy (the edifice upon which the sex/gender distinction stands), then to posit an overlap is to withdraw autonomy from both levels since analytical separation remains ever intractable. Thus, 'overlap' ultimately precludes methodological unpacking of the duality, thereby greatly reducing, if not expunging, the explanatory purchase of the feminist-inspired sex/gender distinction. However, to be fair, Plumwood does go on to discuss how certain cultures systematically endeavour to eliminate *biological* overlap (see also Epstein, 1990) which, she rightly maintains, is a result of 'a conceptual feedback of gender structures into sexual ones' (Plumwood, 1989: 5). It may simply be that Plumwood has absentmindedly inserted the untenable proposition that the biological and the social overlap (and thereby conflated). However, it is important to reiterate that the two interact and to recognise, as Plumwood does, that the independent (ie, logically anterior to) reality of biology *qua* non-*pandimorphic* entity is impinged upon, remoulded by, the social context. The salient point is not to lose sight of the fact that *once* embroiled in socio-economic reality, the body/biology does not lose autonomy. This is a tempting slippage and one which must be sedulously avoided.

The point I want to labour, then, is that the body is *ontologically distinct from, and irreducible to, its socio-cultural entanglement*. As Judith Butler rightly points out, 'nature has a history, and not merely a social one' (Butler, 1993: 5). Here, Butler is arguing, albeit unwittingly, for the self-subsistent reality of nature which exists *independently* of human conception/existence. I want to take this a stage further in order to highlight some ontological deficiencies *vis-à-vis* Oudshoorn and Laqueur, both of whom anchor their respective *oeuvres* in the sex/gender distinction. It is fundamental that we explicitly recognise that the human body, *viz.* its biochemical properties, functions, etc., is not dependent upon/reducible to human conceptualisation. In other words, I am not disclaiming that the body has been (ideologically) misconstrued (as in Oudshoorn's lucid analysis of the genesis of endocrinology, for example), but that this *social process* of misconstrual does not mean that there is not a *real* (and therefore *natural*) body whose hormonal constituents *inter alia* exist independently of our construction. To assume otherwise is to endorse idealist-inflected downwards conflation.

One gets the impression that this important ontological distinction is obfuscated in both authors' work. Oudshoorn confidently writes that 'there does not exist an unmediated, natural truth of

the body. Our perceptions and interpretations of the body are mediated through language' (Oudshoorn, 1994: 3). Her first remark is only correct in the context of her study of the way in which gender ideology affected the way in which the body was deemed to function (dimorphically) and influence/determine gender-specific behaviour. But one cannot deny *a priori* an objective natural biology (which on the whole is dimorphic). To do so is to reduce ontology to epistemology, thereby committing the epistemic fallacy.<sup>2</sup> Gender ideology clearly affected the *interpretations* of the discovery of hormones, but this in itself does not affect the reality of hormones! Importantly, there *is* a truth of the body, or rather bodies, *human* knowledge of which is *fallibilistic*. Oudshoorn should have made this distinction, for it clearly buttresses the indispensability of the sex/gender distinction in showing that *within* a socio-cultural context, meanings, interpretations, signifiers, are basically *given* to us and are thus not natural. This in turn necessitates an analysis of *how* they are given and moreover *why*. The *why*-question will be addressed later. (And hopefully will answer Hood-Williams' question of why gender ideology has been produced in relation to objective biology.)

Similarly, Thomas Laqueur, though successfully employing the sex/gender distinction in his careful analysis of biological/social interaction from the Greeks onwards, also rejects the important realist notion of an independent, self-subsistent natural reality. Thus he writes: 'Anatomy, and *nature as we know it more generally*, is obviously not pure fact, unadulterated by thought or convention . . . .' (Laqueur 1994: 163). Again, anatomy is pure fact; what is not pure fact is the way in which its *objective existence is socio-culturally manipulated*. Laqueur should be more careful to eschew committing the same error as those downwards conflationists he rightly castigates! Indeed, the one-sex model was grounded in *natural* differences and such differences were ideologically concealed via socio-cultural manipulation with, as Laqueur points out, considerable logical inconsistency. The salient point, which is not adequately teased out by Laqueur, is that such logical inconsistency was not of any substantive social import because socio-cultural power was employed by *men* to diminish its potential importance. Thus, it is my contention that while there is biological overlap, *men and women are ontologically distinguished by their respective reproductive capacities* (though men and women are fundamentally not qualitatively different *kinds* of people), and that it is this objective fact – which *pace* Hood-

Williams was socio-culturally misrepresented by the Greeks *et al.* – that has particular *social* salience. The social importance of this objectivity is exemplified by the ostensibly natural imperative to rectify the ‘anomaly’ of hermaphroditism, remove facial hair on the part of women, etc. This is the two-way interplay which needs to be theorised in terms of stringency of constraints/degrees of freedom.

Although Hood-Williams rightly enjoins that we must not ignore the importance of the human body (Hood-Williams, 1996: 14), this is somewhat negated by his idealist-inflected adherence of downwards conflation. For he clearly wants the reader to concur that ‘*both sex and gender are social*’ (1996: 12). This is untenable. Certainly, as he points out, ideology affected the scientific classification of chromosomes, but the existence of chromosomes is not ontologically dependent upon human beings’ knowledge; and moreover, he does not seem to want to accept that there are minimally-necessary biological factors that enable us to identify a particular body as male or female. It is not being disclaimed that such biological properties need not be unchanging (although there are obvious limits to change), but, as Assiter succinctly argues, ‘(t)here is a minimally necessary set of bodily or biological features present in every female, features the presence of which enables us to identify the person as female. This set will consist in some combination of chromosomes, genitalia and secondary sex characteristics. This forms the “real essence” or the nature of the kind “female” in something closely akin to a Lockean sense. The real essence properties of a kind being essential does not imply that they are fixed by nature’ (Assiter, 1996: 125).

Briefly, a further and splendid example of downwards conflation is provided by the philosopher Elizabeth Grosz. For Grosz the ontological distinction between the biological and the social is wholly untenable. Grosz denies that there is a *real* body on the one hand, and its various cultural and historical representations on the other. Thus to Grosz: ‘[i]t is my claim . . . that these representations and cultural inscriptions *quite literally* constitute bodies and help to *produce* them as such’ (Grosz, 1994: x). Inadequate ontological presuppositions have led her to follow the downwards path of conflation. Grosz is rightly critical of the Cartesian mind/body dualism, but her ‘solution’ remains ever elusive given her irrealist stance. The *only* way of resolving the Cartesian dualism, and thus avoiding Grosz’s elusive ‘somewhere-in-the-middle’ approach (1994: xii), is explicitly to acknowledge that reality is

intrinsically stratified. Here, then, the mind is emergent from the body, just as the social is emergent from the conjunction of other minds (ie, people). We thus have the following ontological schema: body > mind > social > further emergent social strata. But importantly, this stratified schema/model does *not* presuppose that one stratum automatically has causal primacy. And furthermore, we don't have to work back through all the successive constitutive strata in order to understand objects in any specific stratum (Sayer, 1992: 120).

Grosz's somewhere-in-the-middle approach is the ineluctable corollary of *not* conceptualising reality in terms of stratification and emergence. It is hardly surprising that this lack of a stratification model has led to ontological contradiction. For, as mentioned above, Grosz states that the body exists *only* by virtue of its socio-cultural signification/recognition, yet in the next breath writes that '(i)t is not adequate to simply dismiss the category of nature outright, to completely retranscribe it without residue into the cultural' (Grosz, 1994: 21). But, of course, the natural is logically distinct and irreducible to the social, thereby conceding the realist's case that we are dealing with levels of reality. The fact that we are dealing with distinct levels of reality is evident in a further comment relating to bodies: '(p)art of their own "nature" is an organic or ontological "incompleteness" or lack of finality, an amenability to social completion, social ordering and organization' (1994: xi), for here Grosz is again conceding that the two are ontologically distinct. In fact, this is in transparent contradiction of her initial contentious assertion that the body does not exist without socio-cultural signification, for Grosz is now arguing that it is not 'fully' real until it has been socio-culturally 'inscribed'! The fundamental point that Grosz has not yet grasped is that the biological and the social are constitutive levels of a duality, where *analytical* dualism (*not* Cartesian dualism) can be invoked to examine their interplay.

It should be clear that sex (biology) is not subject to just any old change and that gender is not wholly amenable to change: both can (and should) be conceptualised as susceptible to *some* change. And so the distinction is quintessentially not a distinction between the unchangeable and the readily/easily changeable. Indeed, as Epstein has shown, it is easier to change (given the current socio-economic configuration) the facts of biology than it is to change those of gender! Importantly, however, one cannot assume *a priori* that the 'facts' of gender are intrinsically more

amenable to change than those of biology: their differential mutability has to be examined empirically/historically within the matrix of structure, culture and agency. Moreover, it does not follow from the fact that gender is not determined by sex that it therefore "floats" free in this strong sense of being an unrelated addition, or that the body is taken to be neutral in the sense of not favouring any possible social meaning over any other' (Plumwood, 1989: 6). Indeed, in the next (final) section, I want to argue that it is *precisely* because of the respective reproductive capacities of men and women (ontology limiting the range of possible interpretations) which has skewed a specific (inegalitarian) interpretation/construction given the conjunction of *material* reality in which we are all compelled to live.

### Gender: its provenance

It has been argued that sex and gender are not just analytically distinct but ontologically so, and that conflation in any direction vitiates the sociological enterprise. My position is thus wholly antithetical to post-modernist approaches to gender, ie, *contra* post-Lacanian psychoanalysis, Derridean deconstruction and Foucauldian genealogy.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, conflation would necessarily preclude an analysis of, *inter alia*, the interplay between capitalist (pharmaceutical) interests *vis-à-vis* the pill and their well-documented deleterious effects on women; *in vitro* fertilisation; parenting; and so on. Clearly, therefore, gender is not simply 'added' to an underlying, fixed, ahistorical body. This so-called 'additive model' rightly recognises the importance of the social *and* the biological, but it wrongly presupposes a *fixed*, underlying biology onto which social factors are added. One of the main problems, as Connell points out, is that the model fails to take into account that people find important in the experience of sex and gender; and the correct relative weighing of social versus biological determination is never accurately established (Connell, 1987: 74).

Before moving on to Plumwood's conceptualisation of gender *vis-à-vis* the body, I again want to voice an ontological objection. In rightly criticising the 'additive model', she interestingly writes that 'there can be no pure "sex" or purely detachable biology which can occur without social elaboration' (Plumwood, 1989: 7). But what about Robinson Crusoe? Does it follow that because he

was palpably asocial he did not have a biology? Naturally I accept that we are indeed born into a social context which we necessarily confront, but the point is that we are dealing with two irreducible levels of reality, with *the biological not ontologically dependent upon social signification*. If we cannot 'detach' the two, then how can we examine their interplay over time? The obdurate social imperialist, like Grosz, would conceivably retort that Crusoe came from a social context, which in turn remained with him, *qua* memory traces. But this is fundamentally to miss the point, for it remains possible for Crusoe (and indeed socially-embedded beings) to have *non-social relations with non-social reality*. If one accepts the latter then one has to accept that society is not the gatekeeper of the whole world, and that consequently biology *inter alia* has an independent existence which in itself provides the human being with a *non-social sense of self*. Indeed, direct interaction with the otherness of nature is necessarily prior to being able to distinguish social others (Archer, 1995: 290). I suppose the basic problem for some feminist philosophers is that because we *are* socially embedded, it is subsequently forgotten or rather denied that biology constitutes a distinct stratum of reality which must not be rendered epiphenomenal *vis-à-vis* other emergent strata. Nonetheless, Plumwood concludes that 'gender involves a *story* (theory) about sex. Our own Western Story, *shared social fantasy*, has until recently been difficult to see because it was so basic and so little questioned . . .' (Plumwood, 1989: 8). At a basic level this is quite unobjectionable, *but* it does indeed beg the question why a particular 'story' or 'shared social fantasy' legitimates/underpins fundamental inequalities between women and men. This is not addressed by Plumwood.

In an interesting and plausible piece on the origins of gender ideology and concomitant inequality, Alison Assiter notes that while biological differences provide *insufficient* grounds for inequality, 'surely the fact that women bear the children is a difference of sufficient magnitude to give rise to an inequality. Women bear children. They are also biologically fitted for rearing them for long periods during the first few months . . . The mother provides the milk. These facts about the mother-child relationship, though they do not make it necessarily true that this *will* be the case, surely make it more likely that women will tend to have a greater responsibility than men' (Assiter, 1992: 78). Assiter is not endorsing the view that *only* women are intrinsically suited to childrearing; rather this is likely to be *ideologically* deemed so

because of their biology and its place within the materiality of existence. Therefore, in class societies people upon birth are not able to choose their social class and, of course, their sex; and moreover a surplus must be extracted and the 'producing class' be reproduced. Thus, '(g)iven human biology, it is not surprising that these two functions have, often, in the history of capitalism been assigned to different sexes. Working-class males, serfs, etc. have "gone out" to work; females . . . have frequently worked in the home' (1992: 79).

Consequently, in such capitalist societies especially, the existence of groups of which membership is largely pre-determined is taken as axiomatic and, concomitantly, buttresses the 'belief' that one group will 'naturally' be fitted to certain work. In summarising, Assiter posits three broad preconditions for gender inequality: 1) the 'biological data'; 2) the use of such data in particular contexts, including class societies; and 3) the way in which the biological data are viewed – the ideological factor (1992: 79). Thus, to take but one example, without the sex/gender distinction, whose provenance I have somewhat briefly endeavoured to ground materially, one would not be able to proffer an analysis of the apparent world-wide preference for male offspring, which has led to sex-selection, the ramifications of which include infanticide. In this example, ideology results in successful biological regulation, which in turn reinforces male domination and the 'natural' superiority of men, who, by virtue of their structural position within capitalism, perpetuate, and benefit from, this ideology. Here we have a two-way interplay, whose separation is fundamental to the feminist enterprise.

### **Concluding remarks**

It has been argued that there is an important ontological distinction between the social and the biological: the two *interact*, but do not overlap. Thus, *pace* Kaplan and Rogers, we are not exclusively concerned with 'a convenient social construct'. It is indeed convenient for men, but the story-telling does not end there. To over-accentuate the social (often at the expense of the biological) is to commit the fallacy of (downwards) conflation, a theoretical tendency which Oudshoorn rightly berated in her critique of early feminist writings. Conflationism in all its guises is intrinsically antithetical to sociology *in toto*. For if we cannot separate the



biological, the social, the material, then logically we will *never* be able to theorise about their interplay and hence nullify our capacity to pinpoint possibilities for social change. Gender is thus ideological, for it obfuscates the (unnecessary) reality of inequalities. Its antecedents, I have intimated, are materially grounded, but once ideationally registered, so to speak, such ideas *react back*, as evidenced in the current and ever-expanding array of technologies designed to 'rectify', 'help' or 'cure'. Indeed, the new reproductive technology, for example, has been considered by some feminists to constitute a locus for struggle over women's autonomy, whereby economic and professional interests, pro-natalist ideology, etc., interact (Strickler, 1992). Such an analysis would *logically be impossible without the ontological sex/gender distinction*.

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## Notes

- 1 For purposes of brevity, I am using the social and the biological as portmanteau terms to cover the fact that *both* realities are stratified, with no *a priori* limit placed on the number of emergent strata.
- 2 That is, statements about being can be reduced to statements about our knowledge of being, which in turn can (and often does) lead to anthropocentrism.
- 3 For a brief discussion, see Diana Coole, 'The Gendered Self', in D. Backhurst and C. Synovitch (eds), *The Social Self*, Sage, 1995, pp. 123-139.

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**Note:** John Hood-Williams is preparing a reply to Robert Archer for *The Sociological Review*.

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