Categories in Distress

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The Women's Center at San Francisco State had applied for (modest) funding to bring me in for Women's History Month. But the group controlling Student Activities tried to withhold money, telling the Women's Center director that “Women are not a group.”

—Max Dashú, feminist historian and independent scholar (2005)

I

Feminist theory early in the “second wave” insisted on categories of gender as salient in any theorizing about society, politics, individual being, or identity, perhaps in theorizing about anything at all. Breaking the monism of covertly masculine humanism, feminists recognized the category women and made it a central category of inquiry, theorizing, and the arts. But then feminist theorists put gender categories, and the category women in particular, into question—problematizing them in ways that have led some to suspect that they are utterly unusable, even pernicious, in feminist theorizing: “Woman is just a construct, indeed a construct of phallocentrism”; “Anything anyone says about women will exclude some women”; “Woman is an essentialist notion”; “Gender is a fiction.”

The problems feminists have with the category women are bound up in philosophical problems—that is, tangles of thought rooted in entrenched presuppositions that are borne and reinforced by habits of language and culture. In this case, some of those are habits of thought about categories, what categories are. I want to locate and critique philosophical pictures that lock
us into paradoxes and quandaries about the category women, as it is worked in feminist theory. Although related troubles may well bother feminism as it is articulated in other cultural/linguistic environments, I am engaging with a specific problematic that I encounter in, and take to be indigenous to, Anglophone domains and in the shadow of an Anglo-European cultural and intellectual history, though one need not be a white Anglo-European to have been caught up in it.2

II

In mundane operations of perception, cognition, and linguistic usage, we are always using categories of many sorts with a habitual and unreflective ease. But for almost all the concepts or categories we use, we are stopped dead in our tracks when called upon to define them. It is daunting to try to say what grief is or what accidentally means; it’s only a little easier to say what a pillow is. Put a little pressure on a concept, category, or word, and it becomes mercurial—resisting confinement in slippery ways. There is a lot of weight on the central analytic categories of any theory, and they will be troubled until or unless the theory becomes so widely accepted that it is integrated into a widely shared “common sense”—until, in other words, the troubles are submerged in habit and familiarity. This is, by itself, no reason to abandon them. If the category Men seems less troubled to us than Women (and it certainly has occasioned much less anxiety among feminists), it surely is because its troubles are both submerged in habit and familiarity, and camouflaged by being dressed up as Eternal Philosophical Problems.

There is another interesting example of theoretical novelty and a troubled category that both reminds us that category troubles are not unique to feminism and reinforces the suggestion that troubles with a particular category can be troubles about what categories are. The example is that of evolutionary theory and its central analytic category species. When Darwin and Wallace delivered their theories in the late 1850s, there was already a well-developed and cogent-seeming category species in the repertoire of the scientific and literate community: species were understood to be originally and permanently distinct kinds of living things, and there was a clear and sharp distinction between species and varieties, one taxonomic level down from species. In Darwin’s new theory, species have histories, and they come into and go out of existence, and in some cases varieties become species. This transformation of a theologically natural category into a category of natural history was disturbing. The new category has been problematic for a century and a half, and the problems still provoke intense academic papers and fuel careers.3 Possibly it can console feminists to note that evolutionary theory survived and developed in spite of, perhaps partly because of, all the contention about the category species.

Both of these categorical innovations, Darwin’s species and the feminists’ women, unsettle prior conceptions of what kinds and categories are. The word species is almost a synonym of the word kind, and at least since Aristotle species have been paradigm cases of categories. The shift to mutable species in a frame of natural history generated not just critique but hostility rooted in people’s defensiveness of their world and their place in that world and in particular the place and primacy of men. The category men, sometimes in free variation with the sacred, transcendent, and nonempirical category man, has also been paradigmatic of categories. (Man is a rational animal.) The feminist category women doesn’t fit in the picture of categories in which the category men has this status. Nor was it introduced by authorized males of the appropriate race/class for presenting scientific papers. It and its unauthorized authors impossibly occupy ontological space that is foreclosed by the prior picture of categories and of the category men. And, unlike the evolutionists’ category species, the feminists’ mutant category, though historical, does not have the natural historicity of biological evolutions. It is an artifact. All this unsettles our sense of what there is and what it is to be something and stirs critique that is defensive of the critic’s world and his or her place in it. It is also simply confusing and a possibly daunting challenge to the imagination.

III

Feminist critique of the feminist category women has largely taken shape as various versions of antinessentialism.4 Virtually all academic feminists reject essentialism, and yet like paranoids, we find it everywhere in each other’s work and are prone to diagnosing every ill as “essentialism” (Frye 2000). Also, we celebrate and defend the differences among us, but any cognitive or political recognition of a vector of difference (among us, or between us and any other group), any systematic marking of difference—that is, any generalization—is highly suspect of being “exclusive” and “essentialist.” All this has made me suspect that the essentialism is not being discovered in all these places but is being imported by the critique. That is, the critique presupposes a picture of categories that makes the use of categories, any use of categories, look like essentialism. That’s overly simple. Actually, most of our thinking about social categories has been shaped, simultaneously, by the received image of a species, the idea of a set, the container metaphor, and a kindred picture of linguistic meaning—a positivist referential picture. All of which severally and jointly support the intuition that categorizing, per se, is essentializing.5
IV

One reason feminists have had for being antiessentialist is that as a philosophical position in the domain of social ontology, essentialism just seems wrong. But the more politically significant reason is that we want to steer clear of biological determinism. Throughout most of the second wave, feminists in the humanities and the social sciences have commonly practiced and taught as though accepting any claim in a biological register is a commitment to biological determinism, which, we assume, is essentialism. Any use of the English word *female* as a noun or adjective in articulation of any bit of theory is deemed inadmissible because the category *female* is a biological category. The word *female* has been virtually banished from the discourse of Anglophone academic feminist theory. I think it has occurred to almost no one to wonder why we think biological categories are necessarily essentialist categories and why we think that generalization on biological categories can only be universal generalizations grounded in rigid causal determination by an essence. What picture of biological categories are we carrying around in our back pockets, and where did we get it?

In most contemporary contexts outside the biological sciences, the dominant model of a biological category is a species. We think of an exemplar of a species as being 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. In this picture, it is because of their genes that organic individuals are what they are and do what they do. Feminists resisting what we call "biological determinism" are on the surface resisting the picture of women and men as being two species each with a nature as distinctive as the natures of cats and wombats, causally determining within quite narrow limits typical morphologies, behaviors, capacities, aptitudes, and so on, distinctive to each and making each "fit" in certain physical and social niches and not in others. We object that being a woman, or a man, is not like that. And we are right so to object. But I want to note here that the picture to which we object does not do justice to cats and wombats. They don't have essences, either. That "biologically determinist" picture of women and men metaphorically or analogically assimilates the categories *women* and *men* not to something biologically given but to an ideological and metaphysical construct. This image of biological categories, of species, is also at least in part a back formation from a masculinist construction of the category *men*—a construction of a category as pure, unitary, and ontologically independent.

Conceptions of living kinds are tailored to permit the pure and self-sufficient category *men* to be the paradigm case of a living kind and to permit and support the justification of man's authority and privilege—of his status as para-

digm. Neither in cultural history nor in cognitive order are conceptions of biological categories, or living kinds, separable from or prior to conceptions of the kind of categories: *men*. A biologically determinist, essentialist concept of species or living kinds is a presupposition of the male-supremacist category *men* (or *man*). That is part of how male superiority, and male supremacy, is conceptually locked in.

It seems to me not a good idea for feminists to try to purge conceptions of women and men of their oppressiveness by prizing them off biology, leaving the biological behind and in disrepute, but uncritiqued. We are spooked by the idea that if we ever acknowledge our bodies, our animal-natures, our birth, we will fall from grace into essentialism and biological determinism. This encourages a tendency to somatophobia and tends to make our constructionism a form of idealism; it interferes with our ability to think of ourselves as embodied subjects. Instead of resisting any perception of us in a biological frame, we should resist essentialist constructions of biological kinds, thereby freeing our imaginations for pluralist ideas of what categories are *and*, inter alia, kicking a pin out from under the masculinist category *men*.

I don't have time and space in this context to do more than barely sketch an alternative picture of species. But I want to quickly summarize a picture given by John Dupré in several of his works (Dupré 1981, 1986), because I think there is no chance of abandoning one picture unless one can consider another, an alternative to it. 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 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 con-
formed is simply a corollary of the clustering of individuals in "hill" or "den-
sities" in quality space, not sanctified by the deterministic efficacy of inter-
ior microstructural features (i.e., essences).

The feminist distinction of sex and gender, which was a salutary develop-
ment 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 the for-
mer realm as a realm of essentialist determinism. Other images are possible—
an image of a correlational density in a multidimensional quality space, for in-
stance. 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 ex-
emplars of—generalizations that are contingent and revisable, observa-
tionally supported, neither transtemporal nor atemporal, generalizations that per-
mit the existence of some individual variation and exceptional individuals.
Dupré (1986) claims that the relatively strong empirically supported correla-
tions across one sex of any species except for across the whole species are in
fact pretty few and pretty boring, the only fairly strong ones in the case of
Homo sapiens being about a limited range of morphological features. If that is
so, it would be better to say that than to deny that there are any empirically
supported correlations because we are afraid of biological determinism. (My
own guess is that this rather limited dimorphism is actually quite conse-
quential, though contingently so and very much by cultural mediation.)

The biological register, so understood, is by no means adequate to all of
the kinds of generalizations we make and need to make, many of which cannot
be reduced to correlations of observed attributes or behaviors, and many of
which are not in the biological register. But having an image of living kinds
that has arisen within the domain of biological science and is not an
image of defining and determining interior essences can free up our imagi-
nations and may help us move toward the ability to think of biological kinds
and generalizations as not always and not necessarily essentialist constructs
and processes. Then we may be able to be less biophobic, and then, since
biological kinds have served as a sort of touchstone for how we think of cat-
egories generally, that may help us to be less category-phobic.

V

Feminists have been antiessentialist because they are resisting biological
determinism. Feminist antiessentialism also expresses resistance to habits of
thought that individuate men but "mass" women, as though women are all
"essentially" the same while men are individuals with a variety of aptitudes,
characters, jobs, roles, races, classes, and so on. We have tended to under-
stand this phenomenon as one in which an essence is attributed to women,
in virtue of which we are all alike in all our significant traits, tendencies, and
aptitudes. But I suspect that our diagnosis of this "massification" as a mani-
festation of essentialism is a little off; it is not complex enough. I want to sug-
gest a different reading of it.

One of the models of the category men makes it the A side of an exhaus-
tive and exclusive dichotomy: A/~A. Such a dichotomy organizes a domain
in such a way that everything in the domain either is A or is not A: nothing
is both; nothing is neither. It also casts everything that is not A as an undif-
ferentiated background against which A is defined. The universal reach, the
exhaustiveness (or totality), of the A/~A sort of category is accomplished by
what has been called "the infinitation of the negative." If "vanilla" is as-
signed as the A, then ~A includes not only strawberry, chocolate, and pep-
permint ripple but also triangles, the square root of two, the orbit of Haley's
comet, and all the shoes in the world. So far as the category VANILLA is con-
cerned, the category NOT-VANILLA is an infinite undifferentiated plenum, un-
structured, formless, a chaos undelineated by any internal boundaries (i.e.,
it is in fact not a category). To be A is to be something; ~A is not a "some-
thing" that a thing can be.

When women are "massed," the situation is not as simple as our being
constructed as all alike, presumably because of a common essence. Things
that are not A are all alike, but only vacuously so, in that they are not differ-
entiated. When the category men is working as an A/not-A category, women
are not only "like" each other—we are like children, like nature, like chattel,
like cars and ships, and shoes and sealing wax. Beyond the circle of the cat-
egory MEN there is just . . . everything else . . . where everything is like and
unlike everything. Indifferentiation is not the same thing as the sameness.

Misreading indifferentiation as an imposition of sameness, feminists in
both high theory and the vernacular have resisted it by marking, affirming,
displaying, celebrating our variety. This is, I think, half right. There are
many differences among us—indeed, indefinitely many differences on in-
definitely many vectors of description—but that does not differentiate us
from ships and shoes and sealing wax. Nor does it support any politics. To
precipitate out of the infinite undifferentiated plenum a cluster or complex
that is a distinct category—something that is something one can be—we
have to weave a web of both difference and, well, something that will work
as we thought sameness would work, namely, some kind of principle of co-
herence (Frye 1996). Except for attempts to work out the idea of "being simi-
larly situated" (Alcoff 1988; Young 1994), which have their own problems
about likeness-of-situation, feminists have shied off working out the "same-
ness" or coherence side of this because we are afraid of being committed to
an essence. It seems worth asking why we think that the only alternative to
indifferentiation would be essential sameness. It is, I think, because we buy the idea that if we are going to be something, we have to be-something the same way that dominating A is-something.

What A is, is a set—that thing represented by a circle on a blackboard that one encountered in introductory logic courses. Sets are defined by a list of properties or attributes that are the necessary and sufficient conditions of membership in the set. Each property is required for membership, and only those with all of the properties get in. Set membership imposes the condition that all members of the set are alike with respect to that in virtue of which they are members of the set. The concept of a set is the reduction of multiplicity to unity. The "sameness" involved in the coherence of a set is total, in the sense that every single member of the set is like every other in having exactly the attributes that are definitive of the set. When we think of a social category as a set, we will think that its coherence requires a sameness that has this kind of totality about it, a kind of totality that we have associated with the notion of essence. No wonder we back off.

But social categories are not sets and thinking of them as sets is disastrous.

One thing it leads to is the belief that there aren't really any social categories: that social categories, such as white people, women, journalists, soccer moms, Italians, and lesbians, are fictional, imaginary, unreal. The reasoning goes like this: Thinking of social categories as sets leads to thinking that the only thing that can count as a "definition" of a category is a rack of necessary and sufficient conditions. So, when we find that we cannot provide a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the category women, we declare that it is indefinable. And then we conclude that it cannot be permitted to operate as an analytic category of feminist theory.10

Another mind-binding consequence of conceptualizing categories as sets is its encouragement of the idea that the function of categories is sorting. Thinking of categories as sets, and thus as defined by necessary and sufficient conditions, one sees those conditions as constituting an algorithm for sorting individuals into members and nonmembers; using categories comes to look like chucking pieces of mail in cubby holes or sorting laundry or silverware. This mirrors and is mirrored by an obsolete theory of linguistic meaning, whose grip on our imagination it reinforces. On that theory of meaning nouns like chair or pickle or woman, or adjectives like red, denote sets; the meaning of the word is a rule defining that set; to know the meaning of the word is to know the rule and be able to use that rule to sort things in the world into those that are in that reference set and those that are not. It was in the era of this theory's dominance that Anglo-American philosophers exercised themselves trying to come up with the necessary and sufficient conditions for terms like person, good, language, voluntary, know, and so on. On this theory of meaning, we don't know the meaning of the word woman if we don't know the rule for sorting women out from nonwomen.

Therefore cannot have a cogent thought about women, make any theoretical statement pertaining to women, or organize a women's caucus of a political organization unless I have a rule that draws the boundary around the category women. If I do not know such a rule, then any intellectual or political moment that apparently requires me to draw the boundary will be a moment of embarrassment.11 And since there is no such rule, all of these consequences of not knowing the rule will indeed befall me. So I had better not talk about women or organize a women's caucus.

The observation that there are no necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in social categories should not be taken to demonstrate that social categories are unreal and the words for them meaningless; it should be taken to demonstrate that social categories are not sets. (Indeed, living kinds and other natural kinds are not sets, either. At this point, I'd venture to say that none of the categories that are empirically, socially, or politically interesting are sets.) It should be taken as showing that however social categories work in perception, cognition, behavior, 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 absolute sameness as their principle of coherence, and not by an operation of sorting.

One of the main reasons, in my view, that feminist theory has found its central analytic category women so persistently and irresolvably troublesome is that it has been so very difficult to shake off the habit of thinking of categories as sets. The majority of us have in fact not deliberatively tried to shake it off, it never having occurred to us explicitly that we were assuming categories are sets or that we should stop assuming it.

VI

It seems to be part of the burden of the inheritance of what is called Western history of ideas and culture that we conceive categories and kinds through the twin images of species and sets, which are in a way the same image in two different modes, material and abstract. They blend into the metaphor that in this culture dominates almost all direct thought about categories and kinds outside some specialist enclaves in cognitive and biological sciences: the container metaphor—that is, the picture of a bounded space whose boundary is constituted by a mechanism that guarantees the homogeneity of what's inside the space and sets the contents off apart from everything else. A jar of olives with a perfectly clear label and nothing but very, very similar olives inside. A metaphor that embodies the worst of both images, sets and species (even on a nonessentialist construal of species). Like the image of a species, it blocks thinking of one individual as a member of more than one
category; like the image of a set, it locks in the picture of a fixed and fixing boundary.

In the history of troubles with the category species in the era of evolutionary theory, many of the disputants have persistently believed that there must be a unitary definition of the term species that provides a single decisive "sort" of all living individuals into discrete kinds, or there are no species, and evolutionary theory along with much of the rest of biology, if not all of it, is at bottom incoherent. Quite similarly, in feminist theory, when it becomes clear, which it so easily does, that there are no necessary and sufficient conditions of being a woman (or a man) "given" by biological nature, or by the meanings of the words in English (or their kin in other natural languages), or in feminist discourse, it has looked like the only options were to become gender abolitionists or "strategic essentialists." 13

There are some fairly compelling independent reasons for seriously considering a politics of gender abolition—reasons that have been obscured and spared the trial of real political debate by claims to the effect that the words woman, man, girl, boy, and so on, are meaningless and that "really" there already are no gender categories—indeed, there couldn't be any. Such claims presuppose the picture of categories as containers and make the politics of gender abolition in a sense irresponsible; they relive it of accountability to experience and of the obligation of constructiveness. The other option, which has been called "strategic essentialism," also wholly buys the olive jar metaphor for categories and then, in lieu of any biological, linguistic, or theoretical "given" to fix boundary conditions for the social category women, recommends providing the boundary conditions "strategically," drawing boundaries where convenient, as needed, for particular political purposes. Besides being unnecessary, since categories do not have to have boundaries to "work," this strategy is politically problematic. The difficulties have to do with the agent and her powers. When someone sets up the necessary and sufficient conditions (or, in Heyes's work, when someone draws the line), by what authority are they doing it? And in whose interests? As interpreted by whom? And for what period, spatial scope, and political situation is this going to be the boundary? If she is legislating or regulating, who is she to do that?

These are very sticky questions in the context of a movement as deeply anarchistic, democratic, decentralized, and intercontinental as the women's movement. 14 But also, strategic essentialism, which is a version of what philosophers have called "nominalism," works within the same logic as that within which essentialism works: the logic of the container. It says, "There is no rule fixing a boundary and sorting what is 'in' and what is 'out'; so I must (at least in some situations) institute one . . . albeit temporarily, only strategically." The fact that the "strategic essentialism" approach can appear to be the only way to continue having the category women available as an analytic category of feminism seems to me one of the worst consequences of feminist theory's proceeding for years without having gotten around to seriously and critically reviewing our assumptions about categories—about biological and other natural kinds, social kinds, and the intimately related theories of meaning. It is my view that all the urgency feminist theory attaches to antessentialism is more appropriately attached to liberating our conceptions of categories from the confines of the container metaphor.

VII

Other, nonobjectivist, theories of meaning are available. Wittgenstein made the point decades ago that most working categories are not sets and do not have boundaries. He noted that one can draw a boundary for a particular purpose, but he definitely thought categories work most of the time without a boundary. He displaces the container metaphor with the metaphors of a spun thread and, more famously, family resemblance. Both of these are images of something that hangs together but not by virtue of some single principle of global reach or some distinctive homogeneity. Wittgenstein thus invokes a sort of anarchist's conception of unity or solidarity, as opposed to a totalitarian conception. This is certainly an improvement. I won't go into a fuller discussion of family resemblance here, but I want to note that it is often explained in his terms of "overlapping and crisscrossing similarities," and similarity is then often understood as shared attributes. When family resemblance is understood in this way, it readily invokes a substance-attribute ontology. For example, empirical work on categories in cognitive psychology, which is otherwise very interesting, invokes the notion of family resemblance, constructs categorized objects as substances with attributes, and reduces everything subjects say about their categories to attributes of those objects. For instance, in the case of the category chairs, "you can sit on it" shows up in the list of "common and typical attributes" evoked from experimental subjects (Rosch and Mervis 1975). "You can sit on it" is indeed a central vector of meaning or identity with respect to the category chairs, but it is a distortion to treat "can be sat on" as an attribute of the concrete object in question. 15 That kind of move is standard in translating ordinary language into the first-order predicate calculus and the language of elementary set theory. Everything is reduced to the form "x is P" or the set-theoretical "x ∈ Σ o." This throws us back into a more or less Aristotelian ontology, and, worse, it is the kind of thinking that permits, even requires, the move from recognizing that women are subject to male predation to making "subject to male predation" into an attribute of women, that is, treating that complicated placement in others' repertoires of behavior as an attribute belonging to, as something "proper to," the individual concrete exemplars of this category. In
some cases, placement as the focal point of certain patterns or repertoires of behavior is one of the conditions constitutive of a social category, though it is not an attribute of exemplars of that category. So any picture of social categories that sketches it, however complexly or fuzzily, in terms of attributes of exemplars, is bound to be inadequate.

VIII

Feminists have explored the idea that category membership may have to do with placement in certain patterns or repertoires of behavior more than, or rather than, the thing's own attributes. To me, this has some ring of rightness, but it leaves open the matter of how we are to conceive of social placements and similarity of social placements.16 One way that has occurred to me is suggested by the analogy of social orders with languages. We might think of being an exemplar of a social category on the model of being a word of a language: think of being-a-woman as like being-the-word-duck. I want to expand on this suggestion because I think it provides an articulately theorized picture of real categories that builds in the universal fact of concrete individuals' multiple category membership, a fact unthinkable in the terms of the container metaphor.

In a structuralist understanding of language, the word duck is a word, and is the word it is, by virtue of a network of relations with other words—a quite particular array of relations in certain dimensions. First, duck can be lined up with certain other words in certain orders, to make sensible sentences. For example: The duck is in the water. Go feed the duck. And so forth. These are the word's "distributive" relations. Second, each of these sentences constitutes an environment that duck can occupy. Some other words can occupy that environment, yielding a different but still sensible sentence; yet other words cannot go there and still yield a sensible sentence. For example, the words cat and boat can occur in the environment [The ___ is in the water], but two cannot. In the environment [Go feed the ___], cat can occur, but boat and two cannot. These are the "contrastive" relations the word duck has with other words.

In this theoretical framework, to be the word duck is to be the linguistic element that has exactly this array of distributive and contrastive relations with those other linguistic elements.

Now, imagine a social-symbolic order that parallels the language and social elements that parallel the linguistic elements. And then women (the category) is a "social element" that "fits" in certain ordered combinations with other "social elements" in combinations that "make sense"; and for each such location, there are some other "social elements" that can fit in that place and make sense, and yet others that can't.

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Given that picture, then, what is the relation of a concrete individual thing like me, Marilyn, to this "social element" women that may be conceptualized as being like a word, like a "linguistic element"? The concrete individual can be thought of as a token of a type as in the following line, in which there are two word-tokens of one word-type:

THE the

Tokens are concrete physical spatiotemporal entities. Types are "linguistic elements" materially realized by multiple tokens. We can imagine each of us as a token of the social-type women.

Two things about this picture are very helpful to our efforts to get an explicit cognitive grasp of what social categories might be and what it could be to be "of" a social category. First, consider the arbitrariness of what physical things serve as tokens of a word-type. Tokens only have to be like each other in whatever ways are practically adequate to making them distinguishable from tokens of other types; there is no fixed and particular respect in which they must be materially alike in order each to be a token of the same type. Second, and most interesting from the point of view of conceptualizing a person's simultaneous membership in multiple social categories, a single token can be a token of more than one type. Look at the following sentence:

He saw her duck.

The concrete token of duck that appears on the page of my manuscript, and each of the other tokens that appear on the documents before different readers of this text, is a token both of the noun duck and of the verb duck, which are entirely different and distinct linguistic elements, each with its own distinctive array of distributive and contrastive relations in the language.

This picture of the constitution and identity of an element of a system, and of the realization of such elements by concrete tokens, provides one clear and cognitively quite manageable way of understanding individuals [tokens], categories [elements], and systems of meaning or social symbolics [language].17 Though this picture alone is obviously not adequate to model everything we need to understand about individuals, categories, and social symbolic orders, it is a great advance just to have some intelligible picture that maps them together, linking social category with meaning, and in no way inviting images of containers to dance in our heads. And so far as I can see, there is nothing essentialist or inappropriately unitary here, and there is no Aristotelian metaphysics.

The structuralism on which I draw here has a direct lineage back to Saussure. Oddly enough, another development from Saussure has led not to this
sort of picture of meaning as a matter of relations and contrasts among all of
the multiple elements of the symbolic system, but to the view that meaning
is a matter of hierarchical binary opposition (a picture that makes it look like
the structure of meaning is the structure of domination). The only way I can
see that one can get from a Saussurian starting point to this latter picture is
by sleight-of-hand that reduces multiplicity to unity. I believe that trick goes
as follows:

(1) You note that each element M is constituted as the element it is by its
relations with every other element.
(2) You note that each of these other elements is not identical with M.
(3) You sum up (1) and (2) thus: What M is, is constituted by M’s relations
with things that are not M.
(4) You then construe things that are not M as the undifferentiated nega-
tive of M and recast your conclusion as: To be an element of a sym-

dolic order (to be a signifier), M depends on relation to its negation,
not-M.

And bingo,

(5) the structure of meaning is that of the (totalitarian) oppositional bi-
nary: M/−M. It is also a hierarchical binary; M is logically prior to
not-M.

Thus can one reduce the idea that meaning is a matter of relations and
 contrasts to the idea that meaning is a matter of hierarchical binary oppo-
sitions. Such oppositions are, though, actually a limiting case of “contrast”
since they reduce all contrasts to one and that one is devoid of semantic
content. The “binary” relation is of M to its negation, which really is not a
binary at all, since the “second” element is only the first combined with an
operator.18

It appears to me that this reduction of multiplicity to unity is a flimflam that
is supposed to make a particular male-supremacist construction of the cate-
gory MEN look like it is nothing but what a category must be. (Which takes us
back to a point I made at the beginning of this essay: that the phallocratic cat-
gory MEN serves as the paradigm of what a category is.) As a matter of ac-
tual usage in living discourses, the category MEN does sometimes cast this
structure on situations, and perhaps almost all usages of this category at least
in the Anglophone culture I inhabit invoke this structure at least as a shadow
over the situation. But such usage is not the ineluctable consequence of a
“given” nature of meaning or of the ontologically necessary structure of what
it is for an x to be a φ.

NOTES

1. I believe there is a profound and complicated politics to this reactive develop-
ment, but I am addressing here only one thread of the intellectual and conceptual
matrix that sustains it. Many others have provided useful summaries of the complaints
against the category women. See, for example, chapter 1 of Heyes (2000).
2. Thanks to Allison Wolf for remarks that made me realize I needed to make these
points quite explicit, for my own sake as well as for my readers.
3. Feminism, like evolutionary theory, is tangled with other troubles. One thing
that has troubled both is their service as terrains for the play of racist and racialist an-
xiety. In the nineteenth century, champions of white race purity were interested de-
defenders of a definition of species as reproductively isolated groups. Such a definition,
combined with figuring races as species, could give credence to their views that
cross-race mating was an unnatural “miscegenation” (see Young 1995:11–13). Rival
definitions of species, and even definitions that were only more nuanced and qualified
versions of the reproductive isolation definition, were, then, threatening to that
agenda. In the mid- and late twentieth-century academy, white racial anxiety is
usually very covert, so it is much harder to track. But I believe that the phallocentric
category women is a construct that subserves (among other things) white women’s racial
loyalty to white men and I believe that feminist mutations of the category women
threaten that bond, even if the threat has so far been realized politically in ways only
rarely, and barely, perceptible. (See Frye 1983:121–26 and Frye 1992:160–65.) If I am
right about that link and about white race anxiety being very much repressed in many
settings where feminist thought is explicit, this would suggest interesting read-
ings of the ways themes of race weave in confused, tortuous, and sometimes de-
structive ways through the problematic of the feminist category women.

4. ... And antirealism. Those two have sometimes been taken as pretty much
equivalent, as though you can’t be a realist without being an essentialist. I reject that
equivalence. I think it is essentialist to think you can’t be a realist without being an

5. Some theorists working in a postmodernist frame do, it seems to me, end up
claiming that any invocation of any social categories is essentialist. I think they
thereby reveal the positivist and objectivist presuppositions of their thought.

6. So, for instance, many readers could not read Mary Daly’s use of the term fem-
male energy otherwise than as committing her to biological determinism (i.e., to
essentialism). Her strenuous and explicit arguments against essentialism were not
granted the power to put that reading in doubt. (See Suhonen 2000.)


9. Another way of thinking about something like “similar situation” is described
later in this essay.

10. For a perspicacious example of this, see Bornstein (1994:56–58). She sees the
failure of necessary and sufficient conditions for being a woman or being a man as
grounds for “questioning the existence of gender.”

11. Whenever a situation is so constructed that one is under great pressure to “de-
fine” the boundary of a social/political category, one should carefully scrutinize the
politics of that situation.

12. Hull (1965) gives a definition of species that strikes me as a rather desperate at-
ttempt to force the multiplicity of that notion into a unity defined by necessary and
sufficient conditions. In effect, his definition says that a population is a species if it is
(1) A, or (2) B, or (3) neither A nor B but hasn’t diverged appreciably from ancestors
that were A or B, or (4) is none of the above but is analogous to populations that
satisfy at least one of (1), (2), or (3).

13. The term strategic essentialism goes back to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s
(1987) claim that the Subaltern Studies group was strategically adhering to the essen-
tialist notion of consciousness. Heyes (2000) adopts a sort of “strategic essentialist”
view in the form of an account of “line drawing”; she does address, in careful detail,
the sorts of problems with such a view that I mention here, but I would argue that
she does not distance her views enough from a substance-attribute ontology.

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