47 For an account of how much is properly involved in this notion, see my 'Disempowered Speech', where allowance is made for fine-grained individuation of languages, so that sense can be made e.g. of 'dialects'.

48 I thank my co-editor for her comments on an earlier draft.

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SALLY HASLANGER

Feminism in metaphysics
Negotiating the natural

Introduction[1]

Metaphysics has never been without critics. Plato's efforts have repeatedly been a target of attack; Hume ranted against the metaphysicians of his day; and one of the founding missions of logical positivism was to show that metaphysical claims are meaningless. More recently, feminist theorists have joined the chorus. To reveal among academic feminists that one's specialization in philosophy is metaphysics is to invite responses of shock, confusion and sometimes dismissal. Once after I gave a presentation at an American Philosophical Association meeting on social construction, a noted senior feminist philosopher approached me and said, 'you are clearly very smart, and very feminist, so why are you wasting your time on this stuff?' Academic feminists, for the most part, view metaphysics as a dubious intellectual project, certainly irrelevant and probably worse; and often the further charge is levelled that it has pernicious political implications as well.[2]

Academic feminism has never been without critics either. If academic theorizing is an effort to achieve objective accounts of the world and its parts, and if feminism is a political movement guided by substantive moral and political values, then, some have suggested, the idea of academic feminism is oxymoronic.[3] Philosophers have been especially keen to discount the relevance of feminist thinking to research outside of normative moral and political theory, and the idea that feminism might have something to contribute to metaphysics is often regarded as ridiculous.[4] Reality is what it is, and the metaphysician's goal should be to discover what it is apart from the social and political values we bring to it.

These representations of metaphysics and of academic feminism are distorted and presuppose cartoon versions of contemporary research in the two areas. Yet even if we allow that there are more subtle understandings of metaphysics and feminist inquiry, the questions remain: is

there a place within feminist inquiry for metaphysics? Does feminist theory have anything to offer metaphysicians? My goal in this chapter is to begin to answer these questions, with full awareness that both subject areas are too large, too multifaceted, and too contested to capture comprehensively. The best I can hope to do is make clear what facet of each I'm considering as we proceed. At the start I should make clear that my discussion will focus exclusively on Anglo-American metaphysics and Anglo-American feminism.

With this limitation in mind, we need to ask: what is metaphysics, anyway? Oversimplifying considerably, it can be organized into three main parts: (i) A study of what there is, or what is real. (This area is also known as *ontology*.) E.g. Are minds distinct from bodies? In addition to physical objects, does the world include properties, natural kinds, universals, essences? (ii) A study of the basic concepts employed in understanding ourselves and the world, e.g. existence, predication, identity, causation, necessity. (iii) A study of the presuppositions of inquiry, or first principles.

There has been significant feminist work addressing many substantive ontological issues: personal identity, mind/body, free will.[5] The question I will focus on here is how feminism might contribute to the more abstract issues in metaphysics. What would it mean to have a feminist theory of causation or modality? Can feminist inquiry help us discover the basic categories of being?

Feminists themselves disagree about whether and how feminist inquiry might engage with metaphysics. It is important to distinguish at least two different reasons behind their attitude of suspicion. Some have argued that the questions and claims of certain dominant metaphysical theories are male-biased, and recommend less male-biased replacements; whereas others have argued that feminists have good reason to reject the project of metaphysics altogether. Feminist critique of the second sort resists the temptation to engage in any metaphysical theorizing; though, as we shall see, metaphysical issues are not completely ignored.

I shall elaborate these critiques a bit further in the following sections, offering some examples. Both forms of critique, I believe, raise important questions, but are also flawed. After considering these flaws I will suggest some ways to build on their strengths to develop yet another approach to feminist metaphysics.

Androcentric versus gynocentric metaphysics

In the 1980s there was a surge of feminist work that looked behind the debates over concrete political issues such as sexual violence, reproductive

rights, and equal pay, to consider how sexist beliefs are embedded in our theorizing.[6] Some of this work was motivated by the awareness that (supposed) reasoned debate was not always an effective tool for combating sexism because its epistemological and metaphysical assumptions were preventing certain points of view from being heard or taken seriously. It became clear that science and philosophy are at least as prone to sexism as any other social institution; what's worse, they often provide the tools to buttress the institutions that are the more immediate problem.

Blatantly sexist theories – ones that assert women's inferiority to men, claim that women's subordination is good or appropriate, or recommend gender-stereotyped behaviour – are not absent from philosophy. But feminist theorizing in this period also raised questions about the less obvious ways that philosophical theorizing contributes to women's subordination. One important form of such critique is directed at *androcentrism*. Very briefly, a theory is androcentric if it takes males or masculinity to be the norm against which females and femininity are considered deviant,[7] or if it considers its subject matter from the point of view of men and simply ignores women or women's perspective.[8] Let me mention just two sample arguments that raised the question of androcentric bias in metaphysics.[9]

In their paper, 'How Can Language be Sexist?', Merrill and Jaakko Hintikka argue that an ontology of discrete particulars is biased towards males:

> [W]omen are generally more sensitive to, and likely to assign more importance to, relational characteristics (e.g. interdependencies) than males, and less likely to think in terms of independent discrete units. Conversely, males generally prefer what is separable and manipulatable. If we put a premium on the former features, we are likely to end up with one kind of cross-identification and one kind of ontology, if we follow the guidance of the latter considerations, we end up with a different one.[10]

Hintikka and Hintikka go on to point out that 'Western philosophical thought' has emphasized an ontology of discrete objects 'individuated by their intrinsic or essential (non-relational) properties', and has been 'unfavorably disposed towards cross-identification by means of functional or other relational characteristics'. They ask, 'Is it to go too far to suspect a bias here? It seems to us that a bias is unmistakable in recent philosophical semantics and ontology.'[11] In response they recommend Jaakko Hintikka's contextually based methods for cross-identification.

Iris Young argues in her paper 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation' that attention to the phenomenology of pregnancy 'jeopardizes

dualistic metaphysics altogether. There remains no basis for preserving the mutual exclusivity of the categories of subject and object, inner and outer, I and world.'[12] For example, 'Pregnancy challenges the integration of my bodily experience by rendering fluid the boundary between what is within, myself, and what is outside, separate. I experience my insides as the space of another, yet my own body.'[13] Pregnancy does not only make vivid the 'externality of the inside',[14] however, but also challenges a disembodied conception of agency based in the 'dichotomy of subject and object'. In the experience of pregnancy, Young argues, awareness of the body need not be in tension with the accomplishment of one's aims. 'The pregnant woman experiences herself as a source and participant in a creative process. Though she does not plan and direct it, neither does it merely wash over her; rather she *is* this process, this change.'[15]

These critiques have in common the idea that metaphysical theorizing as we've known it tends to draw uncritically on experiences and patterns of thought that are characteristically male or masculine, and ignores or devalues those that are characteristically female or feminine, in a context where there is no reason to think that the male or masculine perspective deserves to be privileged. This charge of androcentrism is not simply a political charge, but concerns the epistemic credentials of a theory. If men and women do differ systematically in their perspectives on the basic features of reality (let's call these proposed perspectives 'androcentric' and 'gynocentric' perspectives), and if a particular metaphysical theory has reflected only the androcentric perspective, then it is right to charge it with male-bias. Likewise, theorizing entirely from a gynocentric perspective would not be warranted unless there were grounds for privileging a gynocentric perspective on the issue. Perhaps for this reason, this genre of feminist critique has been more effective in revealing the limitations of mainstream views than in defending gynocentric ontologies.

Note, however, that many feminists reject this form of critique. In the first place, it is very difficult to establish convincingly systematic differences between the perspectives of men and women on the kinds of phenomena in question. As feminist philosophers of science have often pointed out, research 'documenting' the differences between men and women along stereotypical lines has often been credited with accomplishing much more than the evidence warrants because it tells us what we've been taught to expect.[16] Because the stereotypes also serve socially to keep women in their place (marking those who fail to fit the stereotype as deviant), this research requires heightened scrutiny.[17]

One major difficulty in establishing that there are systematic differences between men's and women's perspectives is that men and women are so

tremendously varied as individuals, and across race, class, culture and historical period. As a result it becomes very difficult to describe the experiences of women 'as a group'. Consider Young's reports of the phenomenology of pregnancy. The problematic of embodied agency that her experience eloquently refutes is actually culturally specific. It is not hard to imagine a different scenario in which the extent of agency involved in being pregnant is simply not an issue, or in which the mother does not experience herself as an agent in the process. This might occur either because the cultural meanings of pregnancy do not engage the issue of agency, or because of the individual history of the woman or the pregnancy in question. A single experience of the breakdown of subject/object or inner/outer in pregnancy (such as Young's) can be enough to challenge the reigning metaphysical dichotomies. But in such a case it is difficult to charge the dominant view with *androcentrism* if the claim is only that it is insensitive to the experiences of some pregnant women. In short, we need to ask: what exactly is a 'gynocentric' perspective? Must a 'gynocentric' perspective capture the experiences of all or most women? And if not all women have access to a 'gynocentric' perspective, do efforts to describe such a perspective rely on problematic normative stereotypes about how women *should* be?

It is plausible that gender is a factor affecting one's perspective on the world. But if gender itself is a culturally variable phenomenon, then it may not be possible to capture *the* mediating force of gender in terms of a shared content to be found in women's thought. This being said, however, it would be wrong to neglect the failings of a theory that systematically ignored or devalued a female or feminine perspective, as it appears in context. Consider for example a context where women are socialized to be sensitive readers of emotions and men are socialized to be emotionally insensitive. A theory constructed in that context (by those who are socialized in this way) that denied the reality of emotion would be at least *contextually androcentric*. In making the charge of 'contextual' androcentrism, however, care must always be taken to look carefully at the potentially complex meanings of gender in the context, as well as variations across contexts.

To sustain a distinctively gynocentric metaphysics, one would have to argue that either having a female body, or being socialized as a female, provides one with better access to reality.[18] However, those who are committed to the idea that there are distinctive (and competing?) androcentric and gynocentric perspectives, and yet are wary of privileging any perspective, may opt instead for the idea that neither men nor women know what is real because it is impossible to overcome the distorting effects

of gender (and other social factors) on our thinking. This is the direction Jane Flax takes:

> To the degree that thought depends upon and is articulated (to ourselves and others) in language, thought and the 'mind' itself will be socially and historically constituted. No ahistorical or transcendental standpoint exists from and by which the Real can be directly and without construction/distortion apprehended and reported in or by thought.[19]

The idea seems to be that once gender (and other social factors) mediates our access to reality, it does not make sense to claim privilege for a gynocentric perspective; no perspective can tell us what's 'Real'.

Many metaphysicians are likely to hear this as a bold metaphysical view (how can you tell what would distort reality without some access to undistorted reality as a basis for comparison?). Setting such concerns aside, however, the thought is clear enough: because our thinking is culturally conditioned, we are not able to discover what is really 'Real'. So any scheme of metaphysics that attempted such a project of discovery would be profoundly misguided. If one adopted this view, one might then go on to argue that a gynocentric perspective is preferable, not because women have privileged access to reality, but on the basis of other virtues, perhaps epistemic, perhaps political. This challenge goes well beyond a critique of particular metaphysical claims. So let us now turn to the broader critiques of metaphysics as a whole.

Feminist anti-foundationalism

In describing the subject area of metaphysics (in my introduction), I set out what I take to be the central questions without saying much about the method for addressing them, or more generally, the epistemology of metaphysical inquiry. What methods should we employ to analyse our basic concepts or to discover the categories of being? Suppose it is true that we don't have 'direct' access to reality. Does it follow that the project of metaphysics is impossible or indefensible?

It is difficult to emphasize too strongly that method has always been a matter of controversy within metaphysics. Unsurprisingly, method in metaphysics has reflected the influence of broader trends in epistemology. In periods where foundationalist epistemology was dominant, foundationalism tended to be dominant in metaphysics. (By *foundationalism* I mean here the philosophical view that a belief is justified only if it is itself certain, or is derivable from premises that are certain.) But in periods where foundationalism has been questioned, metaphysicians have worked with

other epistemic frameworks. In mid century, ordinary language philosophers were keen both to address questions about what there is and to provide conceptual analyses of basic metaphysical concepts through subtle reflection on ordinary language; and linguistic/semantic analysis is to this day an important and much-used tool in addressing metaphysical questions. Language is assumed to be a medium through which we have access to what there is; and there is no assumption that the truths being analysed are known with certainty. In the context of post-Quinean metaphysical debate, the thought that we might have *or need* certainty, or direct access to reality, in order to make legitimate ontological claims, has been rejected.

Despite this, it is not uncommon to find feminist theorists criticizing metaphysics because of its 'foundationalism'. There are two strands to this critique (though some theorists focus on one strand, others on the other). The first concerns the nature of our access to reality. Do we have direct access to reality, e.g. unmediated by gender socialization or other cultural norms, and does the project of metaphysics assume that we do? The second concerns the 'foundational' role of metaphysical claims in non-metaphysical theorizing. Does metaphysics function to constrain our theorizing within patriarchal limits by setting unquestioned and unquestionable starting points? The two issues can be linked; for if metaphysicians wrongly assume that we have unmediated access to reality when in fact our access is culturally conditioned by background sexist and racist beliefs, and if metaphysics also functions to constrain our theorizing within the limits it sets, then this poses a very serious problem for any effort to overcome oppressive attitudes and practices.

I'll return in the next section to consider the first strand of this critique in more detail. A more pressing issue is that the critique has as its target a very substantive conception of metaphysics that is, as far as I can tell, completely outdated. Let me sketch what I take to be a very widely endorsed approach to metaphysics in the contemporary Anglo-American tradition, which I'll call the *aporematic* approach. Here one begins inquiry by asking a question and looking for answers. Theorizing starts when one finds a particular puzzle, tension, or contradiction in the answers, either in one's beliefs on the question or, more generally, in the claims made on a certain topic. The goal is to resolve these puzzles in order to achieve a broadly consistent set of beliefs, allowing beliefs to be weighted according to plausibility. Other theoretical virtues may also play a role, though the question of which virtues and what role is controversial and should itself be explored through an aporematic inquiry. Sometimes resolution of the puzzle comes by rejecting the original question as ill-formed or confused; sometimes it comes in rejecting one or another of the conflicting claims as unwarranted.

Puzzles from different subject areas interact with each other, so that in theorizing about metaphysical topics, for example, attention to the broader picture is required. Any results achieved will be revisable as inquiry proceeds.

On this view metaphysics is not, at least in the traditional philosophical sense, a foundational project at all: it is not a quest for self-evident premises on which one can build the edifice of knowledge. Aporematic metaphysics might reasonably be considered immanent metaphysics: the questions, the puzzles, and the proposed answers arise within our thinking in response to current theoretical and practical demands. My sketch is rough enough to accommodate a variety of different non-foundational epistemologies; but it is certainly common for theorists working in this model to adopt an account of justification that is *holist* – a belief is justified if it coheres widely with other beliefs one has – and is, in two senses, *fallibilist* – all beliefs are revisable, and one might be epistemically justified in believing something that is nonetheless false.

Moreover, there is no suggestion that an aporematic approach to metaphysics need be foundational in the senses suggested by the feminist critique briefly mentioned. On an aporematic approach, making justified claims about the world does not require direct access to it; and metaphysics makes no claim to authority over other forms of inquiry: it is perfectly consistent with, and is in fact required by this approach that our metaphysical inquiry should be responsive to a broad range of experience as well as theoretical pressures from other domains, including normative inquiry in epistemology and moral theory.

It is in this last respect, I believe, that contemporary Anglophone metaphysics tends, in practice, to fall short of its epistemic responsibilities: the common strategy of 'analytic' philosophy to break down questions to simpler ones and to focus on everyday examples masks the selectivity involved in prioritizing the phenomena the theory needs to accommodate. Feminist and anti-racist theorizing is especially attentive to phenomena that have been eclipsed both by dominant theorizing and 'common sense', and is highly sensitive to unstated priorities; for these reasons metaphysical discussion would more fully approximate the aporematic ideal by attending to and engaging with the feminist and anti-racist literature.

Still, it should be recognized that feminist theorists are not merely tilting at windmills when they argue against metaphysics as a 'foundational' project. Feminist theory is an interdisciplinary field, and often theorists are responding to philosophical claims or assumptions made in their field, rather than to current work in philosophy. Consider, for example, Joan Scott's characterization of history:

> History has been largely a foundationalist discourse. By this I mean that its explanations seem to be unthinkable if they do not take for granted some primary premises, categories, or presumptions. These foundations (however varied, whatever they are at a particular moment) are unquestioned and unquestionable; they are considered permanent and transcendent . . . In the minds of some foundationalists, in fact, nihilism, anarchy, and moral confusion are the sure alternatives to these givens, which have the status (if not the philosophical definition) of eternal truths.[20]

In many cases the feminist challenge to foundationalism is a request to reconsider the starting points of the author's field, to ask whether these starting points are biased, and what purposes have been served by treating these assumptions as unquestionable. Because very often the starting points take the form of a commitment to certain kinds of entities, to certain kinds of explanation, to a certain basic conceptual framework, and because these are entities, explanations and concepts that also fall within the subject matter of metaphysics, the critique is reasonably lodged against the use of metaphysical assumptions in the field in question. But this does not make it a critique of metaphysical inquiry within academic philosophy.

If we take an aporematic approach to metaphysics, then we must acknowledge that what questions we ask, and what puzzles arise in our attempts to give answers is going to be, to some significant extent, a parochial matter: it will depend on cultural and historical context, broader theoretical needs, etc. In a social context in which sexist and racist views are widely held and institutionalized, there is a compelling need for theories that diagnose, explain, and replace the sexist and racist beliefs. We need not suppose that these theories will be gynocentric – in the sense that they privilege a special female or feminine perspective; rather, they are feminist insofar as they engage the realities of women's oppression with the goal of ending it.[21] As these theories emerge, they may be relevant to metaphysics in two ways: feminist theories – including feminist moral and political theory and epistemology – may have repercussions that must be accommodated in our metaphysics; and feminist insights into the cultural/historical context of the metaphysical puzzles we consider may defuse and/or replace them.

Admittedly, all this remains very vague and abstract. To enrich the discussion, let us return to the issue of 'direct access' and consider a topic of considerable importance in both metaphysical and feminist theorizing: natural kinds.

Feminist metaphysics: natural and social kinds

One of the major preoccupations of traditional metaphysics is the extent to which the mind is involved in constructing the world. Is there a structured

world existing independent of us, whose 'joints' we can sometimes capture in our theorizing? Or is the appearance of structure entirely dependent on us?

The question of the mind's involvement with the world is also of primary concern to feminists theorizing gender (and race). Traditional efforts to justify what we now view as racist and sexist institutions have portrayed women and people of colour as 'different', and often explicitly 'inferior', *by nature*. In these contexts there is an unmistakable pattern of projecting onto women and people of colour, as their 'nature' or as 'natural', features that are instead (if manifested at all) a product of social forces. This projective error has led feminists to be extremely suspicious of natural kinds and objective types: if one function of references to 'nature' or 'natures' is to mark the boundaries of what is socially possible, thereby 'justifying' pernicious institutions, we must be wary of the suggestion that any category is 'natural'.[22] Yet feminists have also recognized that there are some limits on what social arrangements are possible for human agents. So we are left with a host of questions. Is there any meaningful (and politically viable) distinction between the natural and the social, and if so, where does the line fall? Is there any way to theorize about what's natural that does not depend on the projection of our political biases? If so, how?

The terminology of 'natural kind' is used in several different ways, so it will be helpful to draw a couple of distinctions. The term 'kind' is sometimes used in the classification of substances, where the paradigm substances are ordinary (physical) objects. Substances are to be classified according to their essence, so kinds consist of groups of objects with a common essence. For example, tigers constitute a kind of thing because each tiger has essentially a certain cluster of properties that define the kind. On other occasions, the term 'kind' is used to refer to what I'd like to call here *types*. Types are groups of things, sometimes substances, but possibly (e.g. in the case of higher-order types) non-substances, that have a certain unity. This unity is typically not a matter of sharing essential properties. So, for instance, red things constitute a type (their unity consists in their all being red), even though redness is seldom an essential property of the things that have it. Unity seems to come in different degrees, so, for instance, the things on my desk might be thought to constitute a weak sort of type (they have in common the fact that they are on my desk), and at the limit there are highly gerrymandered sets of things that have no unity at all and so fail to constitute a type.

Given these different uses of the notion of 'kind', the problem of 'natural kinds' appears in different forms. One version concerns whether there are groups of things, in particular, substances, that share a common essence.

(This debate links directly to debates over 'Aristotelian' essentialism.) Another version is whether there are what I will call *objective types*. Assuming that there is a distinction between types and random gerrymandered sets, the question is what distinguishes types from the rest? A realist about objective types is someone committed to there being a kind of unity independent of us that distinguishes certain groups of individuals – the objective types – from others. Anti-realists may simply be *sceptical*, arguing that we cannot know whether there are objective unities, or they may be *nominalist*, granting that there is a distinction between types and random sets of things, but maintaining that the basis for being a type is non-objective, i.e., dependent on us. In the context of feminist theory, *realism* about both kinds and types – the view that there are natural kinds/types and that we can come to know what they are (or at least what some of them are) – is generally assumed not to be an option. Forms of scepticism and nominalism are by far the preferred positions. This, I think, is a mistake. In what follows I'll look briefly at some feminist concerns about kinds, but will concentrate on the issue of types. My goal is to indicate why a modest realism about types is compatible with feminist insights into the problematic political rhetoric of 'natures' and what's 'natural'.

The social construction of the body

For some time feminists have been concerned to challenge the idea that there is such a thing as 'women's nature' (or 'men's nature'). Historically dominant views about men and women assume that anatomical sex, social position and sexual preference come in two distinct packages: there are those who are anatomically male, socially men and sexually desire (only) women; and there are those who are anatomically female, socially women and sexually desire (only) men. Those who don't fit into one or the other of these packages are considered deviant, and are devalued and abused. The picture driving this package deal seems to be one in which individuals have gendered natures or essences that explain the 'normal' combinations of anatomy, social position and sexuality; and various institutions (from medicine to the law) justify their treatment of individuals by taking the alleged natures as normative – the law protects individuals who are appropriately expressing their gendered/sexual nature, and it punishes those who are not; medicine is framed with the 'normal' packages in mind and undertakes to rebuild those who aren't normal in this sense.

It has been a primary goal of feminist theory to challenge the givenness, naturalness and stability of this picture. Judith Butler, for example – along with many others – argues that the normalized conjunctions of body/

gender/sexuality are not grounded in natures or essences (as she puts it: genders are not substances); rather, we are to think of these conjunctions as natures through participating in social institutions that are structured to take advantage of the limitations they also impose upon us.[23] Butler, in particular, suggests that we should work to break up the dominant model by proliferating alternative bodily possibilities, and specifically encourages gender crossings that parody the assumption of natural gender configurations (such as drag).

These arguments at the very least provide an important case study for debates about essentialism and natural kinds (in the first sense mentioned). If our investment in gendered natures is as politically grounded and as misguided as suggested, then we need to reflect carefully on our broader commitments in the area to determine whether our inquiry has been biased in favour of an ontology that serves particular political ends. What other ontologies have been ignored? Why? And at what cost?

Recent feminist discussion has gone on to question not only our commitment to natures, but also objective types. Turning again to Butler, it is clear that simply rejecting the idea of gendered natures wouldn't by itself destabilize the idea that there are two acceptable sexes (male/female) with two acceptable sexualities (male desire for female; female desire for male). One can grant that gender is constructed and still maintain that there are right and wrong ways for bodies to be, and to be sexual. Butler's somewhat unexpected next move is to reconsider the category of sex:

> And what is 'sex' anyway? Is it natural, anatomical, or hormonal, and how is a feminist critic to assess the scientific discourses which purport to establish such 'facts' for us? Is there a history of how the duality of sex was established, a genealogy that might expose the binary options as a variable construction? If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender . . .[24]

The point of her rhetorical questions here is to suggest that sex, i.e. the distinction between male and female, is not a natural 'given', but a construction, and moreover, a construction parasitic on the social categories of gender. Roughly, the idea is that if we ask why we divide human beings into the two groups we do, along the lines of 'sex', then the answer can't simply be: because bodies naturally come in these two forms; a complete answer will have to make reference to the gendered structure of our social worlds.

To illustrate this point, consider Monique Wittig's analysis of the social category of gender.[25] On Wittig's account, gender is defined in terms of the social/sexual positions made available under regimes of compulsory heterosexuality: *very roughly*, one is a woman by virtue of serving the heterosexual and reproductive needs of others; and one is a man by having one's heterosexual and reproductive needs served. Compulsory heterosexuality in this context is understood as a social institution regulating what sorts of bodies we recognize – and it does so by treating one of many anatomical distinctions between people as fundamental and, importantly, casting this choice of distinctions as determined entirely by natural facts about our bodies. Under such regimes, what matters most in thinking about human bodies is who has a penis and who has a vagina, and so these are the markers we focus on in making our basic distinction between kinds of human beings.[26]

Butler's discussion of sex suggests that the distinction between males and females is not objectively grounded even in non-essential facts, and instead is motivated by forces that are politically problematic; in particular, by the forces sustaining compulsory heterosexuality. In other words, we're not (or not simply?) mapping nature's joints in distinguishing males and females; we're enforcing a political regime.

Anti-realist commitments?

There is no doubt that oppressive regimes justify themselves and eclipse alternative political arrangements by casting their representation of the world as revealing nature's real structure. This motivates Butler's broad argumentative strategy: when an oppressive regime purports to be grounded in objective or independent facts, show that the supposed facts are neither objective nor independent, but are 'constructed' by the regime itself. Then add to this critical project positive suggestions for new sorts of distinctions that would at least provide the conceptual space for alternative social arrangements. This strategy is in many respects familiar and appealing; and the creativity and insight feminists have demonstrated in challenging the objectivity of entrenched categories is remarkable. But it is not clear that this line of thought provides reasons for accepting an anti-realist approach to objective types; if anything, it seems to presuppose such an anti-realism (otherwise, how can one be confident that an effort to challenge the supposed objectivity of the regime's grounding will be successful?). What is the basis for such an assumption?

It will help to return to the idea that our access to reality is mediated. Let's grant for the moment that there are many social and cultural factors – notably gender among them – that affect how we conceptualize the world, and that there is no way we can 'step outside' all conceptualization to determine which, if any, will provide the resources to capture how the

world really is. Gripped by these insights, it is tempting to locate ourselves once again behind a 'veil of ideas', not a veil as opaque as Descartes supposed necessarily, but one at least that filters any information we might receive. A translucent veil, however, would seem to be little help so long as we're not in a position to compare what we experience through the veil with the reality behind it; we still have no way to distinguish in experience between what is real and what is a result of the veil's filtering effects. The best we can hope to accomplish is to describe the world-as-it-appears-through-the-veil, and to offer each other new veils that filter the world in different ways, hoping for ways that will invite us to restructure our political arrangements to be less oppressive. So, for example, a world consisting of males and females appears when we wear one veil, but if we change our veil we find a much more complex array of human bodies. On this view, the claim that the world itself (i.e. unveiled) really contains males and females should be regarded as suspect, for no one has access to unveiled reality. An insistence on the reality of males and females is instead serving a political function, normatively positioning certain bodies as preferable to others.

This picture, I think, guides a lot of feminist thinking about metaphysics and epistemology. Within this picture the suggestion that there are objective types of which we can gain knowledge makes little sense: perhaps we can have knowledge of types-as-they-appear-through-the-veil, but this is knowledge of types constituted in part by us, not objective types. Of objective types we must remain, at best, sceptical. I believe this picture is misguided in several ways.

Consider an argument that would seem to support it. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler maintains that discourse does not 'construct' things (such as the sexes) in the sense of bringing them (wholly) into existence; nonetheless we can only refer to things that have been partly constituted by discourse:

> To concede the undeniability of 'sex' or its 'materiality' is always to concede some version of 'sex,' some of 'materiality'. ... To claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes, or exhaustively composes that which it concedes; rather, it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body. In this sense, the linguistic capacity to refer to sexed bodies is not denied, but the very meaning of referentiality is altered.[27]

> Indeed, to 'refer' naively or directly to such an extra-discursive object will always require the prior delimitation of the extra-discursive. And insofar as the extra-discursive is delimited, it is formed by the very discourse from which it seeks to free itself. This delimitation ... marks a boundary that includes and excludes, that decides, as it were, what will and will not be the stuff of the object to which we then refer.[28]

In short, our discursive practices mediate our relation to the world in such a way that any attempt we might make to refer to something independent of discourse compromises the independence of that to which we 'refer'. Why? Because any act of reference depends upon a boundary that we set (to refer to an object or a kind is to refer to something with the particular boundaries we determine), the boundaries of the objects and kinds we refer to are constituted by us. Therefore, the things we can know or refer to are not 'pregiven', or 'extra-discursive', i.e., their boundaries are not objective. But this argument is fallacious.

One way to capture the fallacy is to see it as ignoring a crucial scope distinction. The following claim is ambiguous:

> (i) We make it the case (through our discursive practices, etc.) that the things we refer to have the boundaries they do.

On one reading (i) makes a relatively uncontroversial point:

> (i_a) We make it the case (through our discursive practices, etc.) that *the boundaries of our reference*, i.e., our referents *qua* things referred to, are what they are.

On (i)'s other reading, the point is highly controversial:

> (i_b) We make it the case (through our discursive practices, etc.) that *the boundaries of objects we refer to* , i.e., our referents *qua* individuals, are what they are.

Butler's argument seems to slide from (i_a) to (i_b). But if we reject that inference, then it is possible to grant that our acts of reference depend upon often problematic background presuppositions, while also maintaining that some things and some kinds have objective boundaries. In other words, we can eagerly develop the political potential of (i_a), without relinquishing the belief that the world includes some 'pregiven' and 'extra-discursive' objects.

Two main questions underlie what is at issue here. First, does it follow from the fact that our epistemic relation to the world is mediated (by language, by concepts, by our sensory system, etc.) that we cannot refer to things independent of us? Certainly not. Intermediaries do not necessarily block access: when I speak to my sister on the phone, our contact is mediated by a complicated phone system, but I still manage to speak *to her*. And intermediaries sometimes improve access: there are many things in the world I cannot see without my glasses, and there are many things I cannot recognize without my concepts. Donna Haraway reminds us of the

amazing prosthetic devices – telescopes, microscopes, listening devices, cyborgs – that enhance our access to the world through their mediation.[29] If we aren't in a position to compare our experience with the reality 'behind it', then is it not as contentious to hold that our experience/discourse is a 'further formation' of that reality as it is to say that it aptly captures it?

Second, does it follow from the fact that I cannot get outside of myself to 'check' my experience against reality that I cannot know what's real or what's true? Again, no. This takes us back to the epistemological issues raised in the previous section. Admittedly, some philosophers have insisted on certainty as a condition for knowledge. But there are many other conceptions of knowledge that accept this limitation and set alternative, satisfiable conditions on justification. There is a temptation to think that if we cannot 'get outside' of ourselves to test our beliefs against reality, then there's nothing further we can do epistemically to regulate belief; we're left with only political negotiation. But there are other epistemic considerations that can be brought to bear on belief, and provide grounds for claims to truth, for example coherence, evidential support, fruitfulness, etc. Oddly, many feminists feel pressed to scepticism about an independent reality because they implicitly endorse a traditional conception that requires certainty or direct access to reality in order to have knowledge of it, while at the same time they often find the traditional conception of knowledge problematic. In fact, metaphysical inquiry should be no more problematic than other forms of inquiry if certainty/direct access is not required for legitimate claims about what's real, and if an alternative epistemology – a feminist social empiricism, say – can be developed to replace the traditional one.

Is there now any further reason why someone sympathetic to a feminist political agenda need adopt either a nominalist or sceptical stance towards objective types? More specifically, if we acknowledge that our ways of classifying human bodies are motivated by problematic sexist, racist and heterosexist concerns, must we deny that there is an objective difference (or a knowable objective difference), say, between males and females? I don't think so. Remember how the move to nominalism functions in the structure of Butler's strategy: if there is no objective basis for distinguishing one group from another, then no political regime – especially the dominant one – can claim authority by grounding itself in 'the way the world is'; instead (I assume) the choice between political regimes will have to be made on the basis of normative argument. The worry seems to be that if we allow objective types, then we are politically constrained to design our social institutions to honour and sustain them.

But that worry is unfounded. One can easily maintain that the choice

between political regimes requires normative debate while accepting a form of realism about types. Even if there are objective types, the question remains which of them are morally and politically relevant. The realism I've been defending is an ontological view: the idea is that some properties are more important than others in structuring the world, and it's not up to us, so to speak, which these are.[30] More precisely, some properties, in themselves and not in relation to us, play a fundamental role in determining what the world (as a whole) is like and how it evolves. There are a number of factors that might be relevant to whether a property should count as fundamental – and it is certainly not settled – but traditionally philosophers have pointed to the need to account for non-trivial similarity relations and causal laws. So, if we compare the set of all hydrogen atoms with a gerrymandered set (e.g. that consisting of the Statue of Liberty, the cars currently parked in the lot at the San Diego Zoo, and the last sentence of each of Toni Morrison's novels), both may be the extension of some property, but the property determining the former set is more fundamental than the property determining the latter.

Realists and non-realists can agree that any grouping of things, however miscellaneous, constitutes a set; and they can also agree that some sets are more important to us than others. What makes a set important *to us* will depend on our purposes.[31] For example, the miscellaneous set of things in my refrigerator is important to me when I'm trying to decide what to make for dinner; the set of things on the top of my desk is important when I'm trying to pack my office to move. Depending on what I want to know and why, different properties of things are relevant, and how fundamental they are usually matters little. Some decisions, moreover – about who counts as an American citizen, or who counts as a mother – are politically and legally important, and cannot be settled simply by deciding what divisions are to be found in 'nature'. The realist can agree with the non-realist that our classification schemes are often motivated by interest-laden concerns, and that we need to look beyond questions of what is ontologically fundamental to determine how to structure our lives socially and politically; these issues are not ones that divide the two sides of the debate. The realist begins to diverge from the non-realist, however, when she claims that in some cases it is important to know what sets are fundamental, e.g. what properties are causally significant, in order to effectively interact with or understand the world.

The strategy of challenging oppressive regimes by arguing that their representation of the world is inadequate is a good one, and introducing alternative conceptual frameworks on which to construct new political arrangements is essential to social change. But these political insights don't

provide a basis for accepting an anti-realism about types. Even the most extreme realist about classification may grant that social factors play a role in determining what classification scheme we use, and that it is appropriate that they do so. In the case at hand, a realist could argue that there are lots of relatively objective unities to choose from in thinking about human bodies, and any one we mark will be marked for social reasons. Or she could argue that the categories of male and female are not objectively unified to any significant degree, but that we have been simply taught to think they are for political reasons. Or again, she could argue that the distinction between males and females is fundamental, but that it should still not be a basis for drawing moral or political distinctions. Any of these options allows for the social change Butler is concerned to promote. None of them denies the existence of objective types.

Conclusion

The previous section is an example, I hope, of feminist metaphysical debate. What makes the discussion feminist is not that it claims privilege for a woman's perspective, or that it assumes that women have different access to reality than men. It is feminist in its concern with the ways in which our views about the mind and reality either sustain or challenge oppressive patterns of thought and behaviour. It is also, I hope, an example of aporematic metaphysics. The background issue is whether ontological realism is compatible with the feminist insight that oppressive regimes mistakenly justify themselves by claiming that their political arrangements are grounded in 'nature' or are based in 'the way the world really is'. If one's metaphysical views must fit with other well-justified claims to be justified themselves, and if feminist argument suggests that there isn't 'a way the world really is' or that we could never know what way that is, then one's realism must be put to the test. I've argued that feminist doubts need not lead one to an anti-realism about types, and in doing so I've also touched on the question whether feminist metaphysics itself – understood as a feminist inquiry into what there is – might be possible.

NOTES

1 For valuable discussion on related topics, many thanks to Elizabeth Anderson, Richard Holton, Rae Langton, Mary Kate McGowan and Sam Ruhmkorff. For that and comments on an earlier draft, thanks to Miranda Fricker, Jennifer Hornsby and Stephen Yablo. Special thanks to Miranda and Jen for their patience and excellent editorial advice.

2 E.g. N. Fraser and L. Nicholson, 'Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Post-modernism', in L. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 19–38; J. Butler, 'Contingent Foundations', in J. Butler and J. Scott, eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3–21.

3 E.g. S. Haack, 'Epistemological Reflections of an Old Feminist', *Reason Papers* 18 (Fall 1993), 31–43.

4 E.g. J. Searle, 'Rationality and Realism: What Is at Stake?', *Daedalus* 122 (1993), 55–83.

5 See e.g. S. James, 'Feminism in Philosophy of Mind: The Question of Personal Identity', and N. Scheman, 'Against Physicalism', in this volume.

6 E.g. S. Harding and M. Hintikka, eds., *Discovering Reality* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983).

7 As is common, I use the terms 'male' and 'female' to refer to the two standard anatomical sexes, 'man' and 'woman' to refer to the two standard genders (understood as social positions), and 'masculine' and 'feminine' for the norms associated with the genders.

8 See E. Anderson, 'Feminist Epistemology: An Interpretation and Defense', *Hypatia* 10 (Summer 1995), 58–9.

9 Psychoanalytic feminism offers another sort of androcentric critique not discussed here. See, e.g. J. Flax, 'Political Philosophy and the Patriarchal Unconscious', in Harding and Hintikka, eds., *Discovering Reality*.

10 M. Hintikka and J. Hintikka, 'How Can Language Be Sexist?' in Harding and Hintikka, eds., *Discovering Reality*, p. 146.

11 Ibid., p. 146.

12 I. Young, 'Pregnant Embodiment', in her *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 161; see also I. Young, 'Breasted Experience', in *Throwing Like a Girl*, pp. 189–209.

13 'Pregnant Embodiment', p. 163.

14 Ibid., p. 163.

15 Ibid., p. 167.

16 See C. Tavris, *The Mismeasure of Woman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

17 Note, e.g. that Hintikka and Hintikka cite as the basis for their claim about cognitive differences between the sexes a study on children in second to fourth grades that was already twenty years old when they published their paper. When they generalize the result to 'women', they cite a paper that still only surveys research on children, and moreover, questions their empirical premise: E. E. Maccoby, 'Sex Differences in Intellectual Functioning', in E. E. Maccoby, ed., *The Development of Sex Differences* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), esp. pp. 27, 41–2.

18 See, e.g. N. Hartsock, 'The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism', in Harding and Hintikka, eds., *Discovering Reality*, pp. 283–310; and S. B. Hardy, 'Empathy, Polyandry, and the Myth of the Coy Female', in Ruth Bleier, ed., *Feminist Approaches to Science* (New York: Pergamon, 1986), pp. 119–46.

19 J. Flax, 'The End of Innocence', in Butler and Scott, eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political*, p. 453.

20 J. Scott, 'Experience', in Butler and Scott, eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political*, p. 26.

21 See H. Longino, 'In Search of Feminist Epistemology', *The Monist* 77 (1994), 472–85.
22 See my 'On Being Objective and Being Objectified', in L. Antony and C. Witt, eds., *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 85–125, and 'Ontology and Social Construction', in Sally Haslanger, ed., *Feminist Perspectives on Language, Knowledge and Reality*, special issue of *Philosophical Topics* 23:2 (1995), 95–125.
23 J. Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), and *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
24 *Gender Trouble*, p. 7.
25 M. Wittig, 'The Category of Sex', in *The Straight Mind* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), pp. 1–8.
26 Controversy in defining sex may emerge because reproductive and heterosexual needs focus on different body parts: heterosexual concerns with sexuality highlight perceptible bodily organs; concerns with reproduction highlight reproductive function, including hormonal/chromosomal factors.
27 *Bodies That Matter*, pp. 10–11.
28 Ibid., p. 11.
29 D. Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: the Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14: 3 (Fall 1988), 575–99.
30 See M. K. McGowan, 'Realism or Non-Realism: Undecidable in Theory, Decidable in Practice', PhD Thesis, Princeton University, 1996; and D. Lewis, 'New Work for a Theory of Universals', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 61:4 (December 1983), 343–77.
31 See E. Anderson, 'Knowledge, Human Interests, and Objectivity in Feminist Epistemology', in Haslanger, ed., *Feminist Perspectives*, pp. 27–58.

7

RAE LANGTON

Feminism in epistemology
Exclusion and objectification

Introduction

Philosophy leaves everything as it is, or so it has been said.[1] Feminists do not leave everything as it is. We are always interfering, always fighting for something, always wanting things to be otherwise and better – even in philosophy itself. But if philosophy leaves everything as it is, shouldn't feminists leave philosophy as it is? If philosophy leaves everything as it is, then it cannot hurt women, and it cannot help women. To be sure, if philosophy leaves everything as it is, it leaves oppression as it is, but one should no more hope otherwise than one should hope for the stones to cry out for justice. Shouldn't feminists let philosophy be? Well, not everyone agrees with the one who said philosophy leaves everything as it is. Someone else began his meditations thus:

> Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again . . .

He thought that philosophy can shore up prejudice – but can also uproot it, 'demolish everything completely', destroy 'the habit of holding on to old opinions'.[2] Descartes has been a villain of the story for many feminists, but on this question at least – on the question of philosophy's passivity or power – we are perhaps on the same side.

Many a woman has experienced vividly at first hand that demolition, that shaking of established belief, which Descartes thought necessary for the acquisition of knowledge – and it has happened not because she is a philosopher, retreating to a room of her own, but because she is a woman in the wide world. At some, usually early, point in her life, the news of women's oppression arrives as a shock, a sudden discovery that things are

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