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GENDER SCEPTICS AND FEMINIST POLITICS*

ABSTRACT. Some feminist gender sceptics hold that the conditions for satisfying the concept *woman* cannot be discerned. This has been taken to suggest that (i) the efforts to fix feminism's scope are undermined because of confusion about the extension of the term 'woman', and (ii) this confusion suggests that feminism cannot be organised around women because it is unclear who satisfies *woman*. Further, this supposedly threatens the effectiveness of feminist politics: feminist goals are said to become unachievable, if feminist politics lacks a clear subject matter. In this paper, I argue that such serious consequences do not follow from the gender sceptic position.

KEY WORDS: feminist political strategy, Judith Butler, the category of women, the concept *woman*

INTRODUCTION

This paper takes issue with philosophical and political consequences that are said to follow from certain gender sceptic views about the concept *woman*, and the category it supposedly picks out. Much contemporary feminist philosophy has been concerned with the category of women due to its supposedly crucial role in feminist politics. Feminists commonly hold that eradicating women's oppression is their political goal and that achieving this goal requires that feminist politics is organised around those who satisfy the concept *woman*. That is, the concept *woman* marks off the relevant class of individuals that feminism ought to be organised around. It is said

* I presented an earlier version of this paper at the 'Stirling Political Philosophy Group' meeting and am grateful to those present for their constructive criticisms. I am also grateful to Alan Millar, the anonymous referees for this journal and Jenny Saul (who has read more than one version of this paper!) for their detailed and extremely helpful comments and suggestions.

to be 'the central concept for feminists because the concept and category of [women] is the necessary point of departure for any feminist theory and feminist politics'.¹ Now, feminists standardly understand *woman* as a gender concept. They usually distinguish sex from gender where the latter depends on social features (like one's social role, position or self-conception) and the former on anatomical features (like chromosomes and genitalia). 'Woman' and 'man' are used as gender terms, 'female' and 'male' as sex terms. The conditions for satisfying *woman*, then, are thought to be social, not biological. And discerning these social conditions is thought to enable feminists to delimit feminism's scope and to determine the group it ought to be organised around.

What the social conditions for satisfying *woman* are, however, is a major feminist controversy. For a start, feminist philosophers disagree amongst themselves over what constitutes such conditions. Nancy Chodorow, for example, holds that women's sense of self as women captures the social condition that gender depends on. Women's particular self-conceptions result from current parenting practices whereby primary caretakers of small children tend to be women. Very crudely: mothers unconsciously discourage their daughters from developing a clear sense of self while encouraging their sons to do so because they identify more closely with the former. Boys who are pushed away develop a well-defined and rigid sense of self. But girls develop blurred, fragmented and confused self-conceptions finding it difficult to distinguish their own interests and well-being from the interests and well-being of others around them. Certain gender specific self-conceptions, then, constitute the social conditions on which gender depends.² Others disagree: Sally Haslanger holds that the social position one occupies due to certain perceived bodily features (whether actual or presumed) determines gender. Individuals count as women, if they occupy a sex-marked subordinate social position. And they count as men, if they occupy a sex-marked privileged one.³

¹ Linda Alcoff, 'Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory', *Signs* 13/3 (1988) 405–436, p. 405.

² Nancy Chodorow, 'Family Structure and Feminine Personality', in Nancy Tuana and Rosemary Tong (eds.), *Feminism and Philosophy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

³ Sally Haslanger, 'Gender and Race: (What) are They? (What) Do we Want Them to be?', *Noûs* 34/1 (2000) 31–55.

Apart from the disagreements amongst feminist philosophers over what social conditions gender depends on, social and cultural diversity undermines the thought that some shared conditions for satisfying *woman* exist to begin with. Ideas, norms and beliefs connected with womanhood along with women's lives, circumstances and experiences differ from one society and culture to the next. In fact, they differ from sub-culture to sub-culture. It seems, then, that those individuals commonly called 'women' do not share some social feature *qua* women that could serve as a condition for satisfying the concept *woman*. To illustrate, consider the Queen of England and a black Sudanese Muslim woman displaced by ethnic cleansing in Darfur. Given that the Queen is socially, economically and politically extremely privileged, it is unlikely that she experiences gender oppression. The Sudanese refugee lives in desperate poverty amidst a crisis where sexual violence against women is commonplace. Their lives, experiences and expectations *qua* women differ significantly and it is far from obvious which social features the Queen and the Sudanese woman share *qua* women. When *all* women are considered the situation becomes more complex still.

Such diversity in women's social and cultural backgrounds suggests to many feminist philosophers that the following claims are true:

Property claim: The concept *woman* does not pick out a single objective property or feature that all and only members of the category of women possess.⁴

Epistemic claim: The conditions for the application of *woman* (that all and only members of the category of women satisfy) cannot be discerned.⁵

⁴ For example, Marilyn Frye, 'The Necessity of Differences: Constructing a Positive Category of Women', *Signs* 21/4 (1996) 991–1010; Cressida Heyes, *Line Drawing* (London: Cornell University Press, 2000); Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988); Natalie Stoljar, 'Essence, Identity and the Concept of Woman', *Philosophical Topics* 23/2 (1995) 261–293; Iris Marion Young, 'Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective', in her *Intersecting Voices* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) 12–37.

⁵ For example, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 1999); Heyes, *op. cit.*; Stoljar, *op. cit.* My presentation of the two claims is streamlined and the philosophers mentioned express neither the property nor the epistemic claims in precisely this manner. Providing a detailed outline of all the different views these feminist philosophers hold would be a huge task and one that I cannot undertake here. For my purposes, however, these streamlined formulations will suffice and I believe that they are faithful to these philosophers' original views.

Proponents of these claims have expressed various degrees of scepticism about the viability of women as a political category. Here I will focus on a particular sort of gender scepticism that calls into question the category altogether and that is supposedly generated by the epistemic claim. In particular, I will take issue with certain philosophical and political consequences that are said to follow from this kind of scepticism, taking Judith Butler's remarks about the concept *woman* as my example case.⁶ Very roughly: Butler holds that there are no discernible shared conditions for satisfying the concept. Instead, *woman* is open-ended. Further, assuming that there are some discernible conditions for satisfying it hinders, rather than helps, feminism: insisting that such conditions exist and subsequent attempts to discern them, have excluded and marginalised many minority women. By contrast, feminism should not be organised around those who supposedly satisfy *woman* and feminists should *give up* the talk of women as a category.

Views like Butler's are said to have two distinct (although closely related) consequences that I will take issue with. First, scepticism vis-à-vis the identification of conditions for applying the term 'woman' supposedly generates confusion over the term's extension. That is, not knowing these conditions makes it unclear *which individuals* fall within the extension of 'woman' and count as women. This is said to undermine efforts to fix feminism's scope and to say which individuals feminism should be organised around. Call this 'the extensional consequence'. Second, this inability to delimit those individuals feminism ought to be organised around, is said to undermine it politically. Feminism should fight against the oppression members of the category of women face. But if this category cannot be marked off using the concept *woman*, feminism lacks a clear subject matter; if the extension of 'woman' is unclear, it is also unclear who feminism ought to be mobilised around. And this is said to have a politically paralysing effect. Call this 'the political consequence'.

I will argue in response that the epistemic claim Butler endorses does not generate such serious consequences. First, it is true that some degree of confusion about the extension of 'woman' remains unless conditions necessary and sufficient for its application are

⁶ I discuss gender scepticism generated by the property claim in my 'Elizabeth Spelman, Gender Realism and Women', *Hypatia* 21/4 (2006) 77–96.

identified. But, this should not generate scepticism about the category of women *per se*. Many of our concepts and terms are vague and imprecise. Nonetheless, we are able to say that some individuals satisfy such vague and imprecise concepts and (by and large) we are able to distinguish individuals who do from those who do not. Second, it is also true that feminism's scope cannot be precisely fixed to include all and only women, if confusion over the extension of 'woman' remains. But this does not politically undermine feminism since effective feminist politics does not stand or fall with this extensional worry. Quite simply, the consequences that Butler's views are thought to generate are not all that serious. Here's how I will proceed. First, I will outline feminist responses to Butler in more detail, how her view supposedly generates the two consequences mentioned and why these consequences are thought to be politically significant. I will then consider the extensional and political consequences in turn, and show that neither poses a serious challenge to feminist politics.

FEMINIST RESPONSES TO BUTLER

How does Butler endorse the epistemic claim? And how does Butler's endorsement of it generate scepticism about gender?⁷ Traditionally, feminism is thought to represent particular political subjects: women. This view standardly assumes that such political subjects are bound together by the fact that they all satisfy the gender concept *woman*. That is, there are some unchanging, cross-cultural and trans-historical conditions for the concept's application that enable feminist philosophers to pick out those individuals feminism ought to be organised around. In order to qualify for feminist political representation one must satisfy these conditions. This prevalent practice, *if correct*, should pick out all and only women. But Butler argues that the category feminists have picked out with

⁷ Note that other philosophers' terminology differs from mine. Heyes, for instance, characterises Butler's view as linguistic anti-essentialism. Linguistic essentialism about 'woman' is 'the belief that the definition of the term provides the necessary and sufficient conditions of membership in its extension' (Heyes, *op. cit.*, p. 37). On Heyes' view, feminist linguistic anti-essentialists like Butler question the thought that *woman* encodes any identifiable conditions for its application. On my terminology, this view amounts to the epistemic claim.

woman excludes many minority women thereby leaving them outside of feminist political representation. She writes that 'the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of "women" are constructed'.⁸ By contrast, the concept forming the basis of feminist politics, purportedly cross-cultural and trans-historical in content, in fact encodes conditions satisfied by only white, middle-class, Western and heterosexual women.

Betty Friedan's well-known work is a case in point (although not one that Butler herself cites).⁹ Friedan called upon women in general to leave domesticity behind and find jobs outside the home seeing this as the way to end women's social and political subordination. In so doing, she failed to take into account that women from less privileged backgrounds, who are often poor and non-white, have held jobs and worked outside the home for decades to support their families. Friedan's suggestion thus apparently assumes that all women are middle-class housewives with comfortable (albeit perhaps unsatisfying) lives. Her suggestion, then, seems applicable only to a particular sub-group of women whose lives were falsely taken as representative of all women's lives.

Views like Friedan's assumed a particular content to the concept *woman* that, Butler rightly argues, excluded many minority women. But for her, the content of *woman* should not be corrected in order to avoid exclusion. In fact, Butler thinks it cannot be corrected as no uniform conditions for satisfying *woman* can be discerned:

I would argue that any effort to give universal or specific content to the category of women ... will necessarily produce factionalization, and that [shared] 'identity' as a point of departure can never hold as the solidifying ground of a feminist political movement. Identity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary.¹⁰

In fact, feminists cannot discover some objective conditions for satisfying *woman* since they themselves are implicated in those ways of understanding *woman* that have excluded many minority women. Feminist attempts to descriptively identify shared conditions for satisfying *woman* have instead resulted in feminist theorists

⁸ Butler, op. cit., pp. 19–20.

⁹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963).

¹⁰ Judith Butler, 'Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of "Postmodernism"', *Praxis International* 11/2 (1991) 150–165, p. 160.

prescribing certain 'unspoken normative requirements' to which women should conform.¹¹

By contrast, *woman* should be understood as an open-ended concept: '*woman* is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or end ... it is open to intervention and resignification'.¹² Butler further holds that *woman's* definition along with the category it supposedly picks out are 'incomplete', 'permanently moot' and 'permanently deferred'.¹³ Now, if *woman* is open-ended and the conditions for satisfying it cannot be discerned, it seems impossible to maintain that *woman* marks off the class of individuals feminism ought to be organised around. This is a consequence that (I suspect) Butler would be happy with: her view is that feminists should radically rethink what feminism is all about and what role the category of women plays in feminist theory. Her proposal is that it 'ought not to be the foundation of feminist politics'¹⁴ and that feminist political concerns should not be grounded in a unified category of women. Feminism should rather be reconceived with the view of deconstructing *woman*. Rejecting the view that *woman* has some particular content and marks off the politically relevant class of individuals for feminism has the result that

the term ['woman'] becomes a site of permanent openness and resignifiability. I would argue that the rifts between and amongst women over the content of the term ought to be safeguarded and prized, indeed, that this constant rifting ought to be affirmed as the ungrounded ground of feminist theory. To deconstruct the subject of feminism is ... to release the term ['woman'] into a future of multiple significations, to emancipate it from [false] ontologies to which it has been restricted, and to give it play as a site where unanticipated meanings might come to bear.¹⁵

The view Butler is advocating does not prescribe some explicit political programme that feminists should follow, grounded on some particular definition of *woman*.¹⁶ Indeed, it quite resolutely avoids such prescriptions.

¹¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 21, p. 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁵ Butler, 'Contingent Foundations', p. 160.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', in Sue-Ellen Case, *Performing Feminisms* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 1990), p. 280.

My aim here is not to question Butler's claims; nor am I concerned with their truth or falsity. Rather, my focus is on the extensional and political consequences identified above, and specifically on the feminist view that the epistemic claim Butler endorses *has* these two consequences. It is worth noting that I am genuinely unsure whether Butler herself thinks that her remarks have these two consequences. At the very least, I would anticipate, she would welcome both consequences. Take the extensional consequence. Butler's thought is that *woman* is an open-ended concept that cannot be given any stable cross-cultural and trans-historical content. This could be taken to mean either that the definition of *woman* is not only elusive, but that it is non-existent, or that its definition is context-dependent so that there are numerous different ways to define *woman*.¹⁷ It is not immediately obvious which view Butler has in mind, but I take it that she has in mind the former. That is, Butler does not appear to think that the conditions for satisfying *woman* are merely elusive. Her claim seems to be stronger than this: the inability to identify such conditions suggests that there are no conditions to be identified.¹⁸ Her thought is that feminists are wrong to suppose they could ever descriptively articulate some shared conditions for satisfying *woman* – something that the history of feminism has proved to be impossible since feminists themselves are implicated in the exclusionary understandings of *woman*. Because a definition of *woman* will always be prescriptive according to Butler, feminists will never be in a position, at the descriptive level, simply to discern shared conditions for satisfying the concept. This suggests that the extension of 'woman' can never be precisely fixed: our inability to discern conditions for satisfying *woman* will always generate at least some extensional confusion over the term 'woman'.

Next take the political consequence: although Butler does not claim that her proposal will paralyse feminism altogether, she does welcome a rift (as she puts it) in traditional feminist theory that is organised around those who satisfy *woman*. As mentioned, she envisions a new feminist theory that takes as its political goal

¹⁷ The latter reading of Butler is put forward by, for example, Charlotte Witt, 'Anti-essentialism in Feminist Theory', *Philosophical Topics* 23/2 (1995) 321–344.

¹⁸ I have argued elsewhere that this does not follow; we might simply be ignorant of the conditions – see my 'Elizabeth Spelman, Gender Realism and Women', *op. cit.* Whether this is the case or whether there are no conditions for satisfying *woman* that can be discerned, I will leave as an open question in this paper.

to deconstruct *woman*. This suggests (at the very least) that Butler would be happy with the consequence that *woman* is no longer taken to delimit the scope of feminism and that a normative political programme should not be taken to follow from the concept.

While an extensive survey of those positions that take Butler's remarks to have the extensional and political consequences I have identified is not possible here, some brief remarks are in order. Feminist conferences and workshops provide plenty of anecdotal evidence that this assessment is widely accepted, to the extent that it amounts almost to orthodoxy. In writing, feminist philosophers often illustrate that they accept the extensional consequence when discussing the serious political concerns that it is taken to generate. Some examples: Cressida Heyes writes that the confusion over the extension of the term 'woman' generates a number of feminist concerns:

To whom does the word 'women' refer? Can we offer a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for being a woman? How can we make decisions about which similarities between women count as such conditions and which differences are irrelevant to uses of the term? ... Should part of the task of feminist theory be to define the parameters of the concept 'women' or to "get it right" about who women are?¹⁹

Heyes continues by claiming that if these concerns are not satisfactorily responded to and if feminism's scope isn't fixed, 'there can be no basis to feminist mobilizing, i.e., that if the very category "women" is ungrounded, then feminist activism cannot proceed'.²⁰ Similarly, Natalie Stoljar holds that unless the extensional consequence is dealt with, there is no 'justification for feminist action on behalf of women'.²¹ Iris Marion Young claims that gender sceptic positions like Butler's are politically paralysing:

I find the exclusive critical orientation of such arguments [like Butler's] rather paralysing. Do these arguments imply that it makes no sense and is morally wrong ever to talk about women as a group, or in fact to talk about social groups at all? ... If not, then what can it mean to use the term 'woman' More importantly, in the light of these critiques, what sort of positive claims can feminists make about the way social life is or ought to be?²²

¹⁹ Heyes, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39; see also Amy Baehr, 'Feminist Politics and Feminist Pluralism: Can we do Feminist Political Theory without Theories of Gender?', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 12/4 (2004) 411–436, for a discussion.

²¹ Stoljar, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

²² Young, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

She continues arguing that unless there is ‘some sense in which “woman” is the name of a social collective [feminism represents], there is nothing specific to feminist politics’.²³ Any effort to effectively respond to oppression women *qua* women face requires that feminism is organised around the category of women and that feminists can identify such a category: ‘Without conceptualizing women as a group in some sense, it is not possible to conceptualise oppression as a systematic, structured, institutional process’.²⁴

To illustrate what authors like Young take to be at stake, consider sexual violence. Women as a group or category suffer more sexual violence than men and ending this kind of violence against women is an important feminist task. But if feminists give up all talk of women as a category, how can they effectively respond to violence against *women*? How can they aim to end the violence women face, if the category subject to such violence is not (and cannot be) marked off? In this case, not being able to articulate the category of women seems to have precisely the kind of paralysing effect Young notes: feminists would simply be unable to act against sexual violence (the argument goes) in the absence of a specific group experiencing such violence. It seems, then, that articulating the category of women is a prerequisite for effective feminist politics that aims to achieve goals like ending violence against women. And if discerning the conditions for satisfying *woman* enables feminists to articulate this category, not knowing the conditions that enables them to do so seems hugely problematic. Sally Haslanger argues that considerations like these illustrate that *woman* is needed as a tool in feminist fights against injustice. She further holds that feminist philosophers must pragmatically define *woman* for their political purposes, if the conditions for the concept’s application cannot be satisfyingly discerned through other philosophical means.²⁵

These leading feminist philosophers have been convinced by the extensional and political consequences and have offered detailed and nuanced arguments for overcoming the problems that are said to follow from views like Butler’s. I will not, however, discuss their responses here because, as I will argue, such responses are unnecessary: the consequences that are said to result from the epistemic claim are not as serious as feminist philosophers commonly think.

²³ Ibid., p. 13.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁵ Haslanger, op. cit., p. 36.

THE EXTENSIONAL CONSEQUENCE

The inability to discern some conditions for the application of 'woman' is thought to generate confusion over the term's extension. This is said to undermine efforts to articulate the category of women – something effective feminist politics supposedly requires.²⁶ Now, delimiting the category of *all and only* women seems to require that some conditions all and only the members of this category satisfy, be discerned. But I argue next, even though such conditions cannot be articulated, feminist philosophers should not think that the extensional consequence is particularly pressing. My thought is this: there will be some confusion about the extension of the term 'woman' unless some precise conditions for the term's application are discerned. But this extensional confusion doesn't undermine the category of women *per se*. It simply suggests that we cannot rigidly fix its boundaries. If confusion over 'woman' did undermine the category of women, I would expect that similar consequences would follow with terms analogous to it. But this does not follow.

Take the concepts *bald* and *child*. They are analogous to *woman* in that it appears we cannot discern any necessary and sufficient conditions for their application: we are unable to identify the exact point at which someone comes to satisfy *bald* or ceases to satisfy *child*.²⁷ Now, if it follows from the epistemic claim that the category of women is called into question, I would expect that the

²⁶ In fact, I think good questions can be raised about whether effective feminist politics must be mobilised around women, something feminists commonly hold. However, settling this issue would take us well beyond the present discussion.

²⁷ Some philosophers argue that the vagueness of predicates like 'bald' and 'child' is a matter of ignorance: there are exact points at which someone becomes bald or ceases to be a child but we don't know what those points are – see e.g. Timothy Williamson, 'Vagueness and Ignorance', in Rosanna Keefe and Peter Smith (eds), *Vagueness: A Reader* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996) 265–280. If one accepts this epistemic theory of vagueness, it seems that 'woman' is not analogous to 'bald' or 'child'. After all, it seems unlikely that there is such an exact point at which someone becomes a woman (whether or not we are able to identify that point). I take it that 'bald' and 'child' are vague in a more standard manner (see Rosanna Keefe and Peter Smith, 'Introduction: Theories of Vagueness', in *Ibid.*, pp. 1–57). It seems to me that there are no 'facts of the matter' with respect to being bald or a child that we are simply ignorant of. That is, there are genuine borderline bald people and children and no amount of further information can help us settle these cases. In this sense, then, I hold that 'bald' and 'child' are analogous to 'woman'.

same is also true of *bald* and *child* and the respective categories that they pick out. Or, it would seem that since the conditions for satisfying *bald* and *child* cannot be discerned, we would be so confused about their extensions that we could not draw any distinctions between those who are bald and those who are not or between children and adults.

This is clearly false. Although I cannot say what the conditions for satisfying *bald* are, I can say relatively effortlessly that Mikhail Gorbachev satisfies the concept and that Bob Marley did not. Despite not knowing the conditions for satisfying *child*, I can say that my friend's 1 year-old son satisfies *child* and that my 35 year-old friend does not. Although I am unable to state the precise conditions for satisfying *bald* and *child*, there are clearly individuals who satisfy the concepts. Now, at times there will be confusion over the extensions of 'bald' and 'child'. For instance, articulating which 10 to 15 year-olds satisfy the latter, if any of them do, is not straightforward. But this confusion over the extension of the term doesn't undermine the category of children *per se*. Extensional confusion simply suggests that the boundaries of this category are not rigidly fixed and that there are *some* unclear borderline cases. Similarly, with respect to 'woman' uncertainty about its exact extension merely illustrates that the class of individuals the term marks off does not have rigid boundaries; uncertainty does not show that there are *no* boundaries at all. I see no reason, then, to accept that extensional confusion over 'woman' undermines the category of women.

What I have said above, however, raises some important and difficult issues. First, it appears from what I say above that we find it easy to pick out certain *paradigm* women. And one might be tempted to think that on my view this is precisely what feminists should be doing, in order to delimit the class of individuals around which feminism is organised. That is, feminists would appeal to certain paradigm women in order to fix feminism's scope. Such an appeal would start by identifying some women paradigms. Next feminists would employ these paradigms to single out individuals they should politically represent thereby delimiting the category that makes up the proper political subjects of feminism. Now, in feminist theory appeals to paradigm cases of women have often had the consequence of excluding and marginalising minority women since white middle-class Western women have been chosen

as feminists' paradigm women. Just think back to Betty Friedan's work mentioned above. And this might suggest that an appeal to women paradigms may not be the best way to mark off the class of women for fears of repeating old mistakes.

My contention is that feminists should not and need not rely on woman paradigms. Although it is true that feminists must be extremely careful when employing this approach in order to avoid previous mistakes, my reason for rejecting paradigms is a different one: as I see it, an appeal to paradigm cases is unnecessary with respect to the category of women. Quite simply, it is unnecessary because there isn't much extensional confusion over 'woman'. If language users were often confused about its extension, perhaps a good case could be made for appealing to paradigms. For instance, students taking introductory critical thinking courses are often confused about the applications of *validity*. Quite often, they are initially uncertain about which arguments count as valid and, thereby, are correctly termed 'valid'. In order to make this notion more explicit and clarify students' confusion, it is customary to point out some paradigm valid arguments and show how they work. So, students are presented with basic modus ponens and modus tollens arguments as exemplars of valid arguments. Or, they are presented with universal syllogisms like: All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal. In this context a good case can be made for identifying paradigms of valid arguments and using them to help students to mark off the class of valid arguments. But this is so only because students often are confused about the use of 'valid' – if they weren't, appealing to certain paradigm valid arguments would be unnecessary. And this is why I am not advocating that feminists pick out paradigm women: ordinary language users apply the term 'woman' fairly consistently and uniformly, and they are seldom confused about its extension. This point is enough to show that a good case for an appeal to paradigm women cannot be made.

How then should feminist philosophers deal with instances where language users are genuine confused about their applications of 'woman'? How can feminists make sense of judgements about difficult borderline cases without knowing the precise conditions for *woman's* application? I will not offer a detailed strategy for settling these cases here; the suggestion that follows is rather more modest than this. It seems to me that there is no universal recipe that fits

every case, nor a single solution that allows feminists to make sense of the so-called hard-cases. How feminists deal with these cases will depend on two factors: their theory of reference fixing (or what fixes the scope of feminism) and the contexts in which these difficult cases arise. Consider an example discussed by Stoljar. Dil is a male-to-female (MTF) transvestite character in the movie *Crying Game*. According to Stoljar, Dil ‘dresses as a woman, has the gait and bearing of a woman and hence has womanness attributed to her by others’²⁸. Dil satisfies *woman* following Stoljar’s semantic theory, whereby the concept

is a ‘cluster concept’; i.e., there is a cluster of different features in our concept of woman and in order for an individual to satisfy the concept, it is sufficient to satisfy *enough* of, rather than all and only, the features in the cluster.²⁹

Saying that, Dil also ‘satisfies many of the features of the concept “man” and in principle could be a member of [the category] “man”’³⁰.

According to Stoljar’s semantic theory Dil could count either as a member of the category of women, or of men, or both. Now, the way to settle this will depend on how Stoljar’s semantic theory is applied in particular localised contexts and circumstances. For instance, in general it may be perfectly acceptable and unproblematic to include Dil as a member of the category of women based on Stoljar’s cluster concept view. However, in certain specific contexts applying this same semantic theory might generate a different response; for example, whether MTF transvestites like Dil can join an organisation for women will depend on the organisation’s understanding of the conditions for satisfying *woman* and whether in this context MTF transvestites satisfy enough of such conditions. Hard cases like Dil are important and should not be disregarded. Further, they clearly complicate efforts to fix precisely the category of women since in certain contexts it is not clear where to draw the category’s boundaries. Nonetheless, this shouldn’t generate scepticism about the *category* of women: feminists may be unsure about how to categorise some individuals in certain contexts but this does not undermine gender distinctions *per se*. Feminism in general, then, can be seen as organised

²⁸ Stoljar, *op. cit.*, p. 285.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

around the category of women, but in certain contexts it is unclear where the boundaries of this category precisely lie.

THE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCE

Now, consider the political consequence that the extensional confusion supposedly generates. Roughly the idea is this: imagine that bird conservationists (whose actions are organised around aiding those entities that satisfy *bird*) suddenly discover that the concept they have been working with is unsatisfactory. For instance, imagine that new species of birds are discovered that do not neatly fall under the existing definition of *bird*. Suppose that so many new species of birds are discovered that it becomes impossible to discern any precise conditions for satisfying *bird*. In such a case, it seems that conservationists will have to rethink seriously their actions that aim at aiding birds; after all, it seems they can no longer rely on the thought that conservation ought to aid those entities that satisfy *bird*, if the concept cannot guide their actions. The practice of bird conservation is under threat, unless bird conservationists find a way to focus their actions around birds. The situation feminists find themselves is supposedly analogous: if the conditions for satisfying *woman* are unknown, (the argument goes) feminist politics cannot be mobilised around those who satisfy it. And if this is the case, feminism becomes politically paralysed, being unable to effectively respond to gendered oppression that *women* face.³¹

Yet the epistemic claim (that the conditions for satisfying *woman* cannot be discerned) does not generate such a serious concern. The worry about the extension of 'woman' does not bear upon feminist politics in the manner assumed and it does not result in any *real* political problems. My thought is this: the inability to delimit precise conditions for satisfying *woman* seems to suggest that the category of *all and only* women cannot be articulated. But, effective feminist politics doesn't demand this. Feminists ought to be and they *are* able to fight against women's oppression even though the category of women does not have rigid boundaries. This being the case, the thought that serious political problems result from the extensional worry does not get off the ground. Feminist politics is

³¹ See e.g. Young, *op. cit.*

not undermined by this worry since effective feminist politics does not require that some complex conditions guiding my applications of *woman* be articulated or that there is no confusion about the extension of 'woman'.³²

First, if the extensional consequence has an impact on feminist politics in the manner assumed, one might expect that feminist politics would be entirely stifled and impossible. Suppose problem *x* bears upon problem *y* in the sense that only after *x* has been satisfyingly solved can we begin to satisfyingly respond to *y*. That is, without a solution to problem *x*, we cannot begin to address problem *y*. A number of feminist philosophers seem to think precisely this with respect to 'woman': effective feminist politics requires that extensional worries with respect to the term are first solved satisfyingly. This would mean that if these extensional worries have not been definitively responded to so that there is no confusion over the term's extension, effective feminist politics is impossible.

This strikes me as false. Feminist political practice and activism have not been stifled by feminist extensional worries and feminist political action is by no means impossible despite some confusion over the extension of 'woman'. Here are just few examples of such political activism. In powerful international political bodies like the UN and EU the so-called 'gender issues' have become mainstream concerns following campaigns and lobbying from those involved in feminist politics and activism. Issues such as ending violence against women, guaranteeing women access to political decision-making, enhancing equal opportunities and improving women's working conditions (to name but a few) have been included in the EU's core policies under the Treaty of Amsterdam.³³ In the UK, improved sexual harassment and sex-discrimination legislation came into force in October 2005 as a result of sustained campaigns by the Equal Opportunities Commission, an independent public

³² There must, nonetheless, be an adequate approach to understanding the category of women as somehow unified. That is, feminists need to address worries about how women from different backgrounds can be conceived of as part of the same unified category of women for feminist purposes. My view is that understanding that category as unified need not depend on articulating any shared conditions for satisfying *woman*. Instead, I think a unified category of women can be made sense of without conceptual analysis. Providing a detailed outline of this view here, however, would divert the focus away from the present discussion.

³³ Sylvia Walby, 'Feminism in a Global Era', *Economy and Society* 31/4 (2002) 533–557, p. 539.

body campaigning against gender- and sex-discrimination.³⁴ In April 2007, a 'gender equality' duty came into force that will require 'public authorities to promote gender equality and eliminate sex discrimination. Instead of depending on individuals making complaints about sex discrimination, the duty places the legal responsibility on public authorities to demonstrate that they treat men and women fairly'.³⁵ These examples illustrate that confusion over the extension of the term 'woman' by no means renders feminist politics impossible or paralyses it as feminists sometimes suggest. I am not, however, implying that feminist political activism is entirely unproblematic. For instance, due to the differences in women's cultural, racial, class and religious backgrounds, devising feminist policies that aid *all* women is difficult, if not impossible. It is perfectly conceivable that some (perhaps many) policy decisions taken by international bodies like the UN leave something to be desired. There is no guarantee that feminist political activism will be free of bias, prejudice, racism, homophobia, Islamophobia, sectarianism or that it will be truly inclusive and representative of different women's backgrounds. Nonetheless, it seems right to say that feminist political activism (whatever its flaws) does go on despite extensional worries over 'woman'.

Second, if the philosophical worries about *woman* stifle feminist politics, one might expect that similar worries with respect to other politically important concepts would stifle and paralyse other political movements. Again, this does not seem to follow. Take the British Labour party during the past two decades. Historically it has catered for those who come from working-class backgrounds. By the mid-1990s though, the party had been transformed with the view of appealing to a wider audience and New Labour ideology became prominent within the party.³⁶ Membership in a particular social class (the working class) was no longer seen as delimiting Labour's political scope. Rather, Labour's 1997 election manifesto described their vision as follows:

³⁴ *Equal Opportunities Commission*, 'Sexual harassment: what the law says', <http://www.eoc.org.uk/Default.aspx?page=15657>. Accessed 6 December 2006.

³⁵ *Equal Opportunities Commission*, 'What is the gender equality duty?' <http://www.eoc.org.uk/default.aspx?page=17686>. Accessed 6 December 2006.

³⁶ For more, see Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley, *New Labour's Grassroots: The Transformation of the Labour Party Membership* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2002).

We are a broad-based movement for progress and justice. New Labour is the political arm of none other than the British people as a whole. Our values are the same: the equal worth of all, with no one cast aside; fairness and justice within strong communities.³⁷

Casting New Labour's vision and scope in this manner is not, of course, philosophically unproblematic. Political concepts like *equality*, *fairness* and *justice* are notoriously difficult to define and discerning conditions for their applications is by no means straightforward (if at all possible). Even the *prima facie* straightforward notion of the *British people as a whole* becomes unclear when it is examined more closely: what are the conditions for being British? Is it enough to hold a United Kingdom passport or must one reside in the country and/or feel patriotic about the nation? What about the Scots and the Welsh who identify themselves more as Scottish and Welsh than British? And what is the status of immigrants who have made the British Isles their home but who are not officially the Queen's subjects? Are they included or excluded? Delimiting the vision and scope of political movements like New Labour and feminism seems to encounter similar worries: both movements rely on concepts that cannot be defined in a straightforward manner.

Now, if extensional worries stifle feminist politics, one might expect that the same is also true of political movements like New Labour. One might expect that Labour's political aspirations before the 1997 elections would have come to a complete halt because the precise conditions for applying concepts central to New Labour's vision are unknown and that this would have made Labour's 1997 election victory impossible (something that is not, of course, the case). By contrast, Labour's election victory at the time did not depend on articulating conditions for satisfying concepts like *being British*; it was based on something entirely different. And the same goes for the success of Labour's subsequent political programme: whether or not Labour is effective in achieving key goals outlined in their manifesto depends on how successful their efforts are in bringing about these goals, not on how successful they are in settling conceptual worries over notions like *being British*, *equality* and *justice*.

³⁷ 'New Labour because Britain deserves better', <http://www.labour-party.org.uk/manifestos/1997/1997-labour-manifesto.shtml>. Accessed 6 December 2006.

I take it that this example suggests the following with respect to 'woman' and feminist politics: it would be wrong to suppose that the effectiveness of feminist politics stands or falls with a satisfactory solution to extensional worries over 'woman'. Rather, it is much more plausible to think that effective political feminism stands or falls with how effective feminist policies are in fighting sexist oppression. This will (first and foremost) involve identifying what counts as oppression of this kind. But, my contention is, this task does not require that there is no extensional confusion over 'woman'. Identifying persistent inequalities that oppress women is a separate empirical task that does not depend on discerning some precise conditions for satisfying *woman*. For instance, take persistent inequalities in women and men's access to certain jobs and employment prospects. It is quite conceivable (and perhaps very likely) that an analysis of such inequalities will show that those individuals called 'women' encounter many more structural constraints than those called 'men'. What feminists should concentrate on next is devising ways in which these constraints are overcome. Now, the effectiveness of feminist policies in overcoming obstacles to women's career prospects does not depend on any particular definition of *woman* or on the absence of extensional confusion over 'woman'. Rather, evaluation of feminist policies boils down to examining whether they are effective in reducing undesirable inequalities between women and men. That is, the effectiveness of feminist policies depends on how effective they are in changing our social landscape in ways that make women *qua* women less oppressed.

CONCLUSION

The moral of the story put forward here is this: the inability to articulate conditions for satisfying *woman* does not have results as serious as the paralysis of feminist politics. Those feminist philosophers who think that it does are granting too much to gender sceptics like Butler. Which is the correct or most useful analysis of the concept *woman*, is an interesting philosophical issue. But, as I have argued here, much less hangs on it politically. Once this is recognised, feminist theorists can move on and (as I see it) deal with issues that are politically more important and pressing. Rather than getting bogged down by conceptual worries, feminists can get on with

the work of challenging oppressive social conditions with the view of bringing about gender justice. My view is that gender justice will be brought about by effective feminist politics, not by eliminating extensional confusion over 'woman'. Effective feminist politics, then, stands or falls with how effective feminist policies are in fighting gender oppression. Evaluating the efficacy of such policies is an important task but one that I must leave for another time.

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