Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Philosophy

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This article revisits the ethical and political questions raised by feminist debates over essentialism, the belief that there are properties essential to women and which all women share. Feminists' widespread rejection of essentialism has threatened to undermine feminist politics. Re-evaluating two responses to this problem—'strategic' essentialism and Iris Marion Young's idea that women are an internally diverse 'series'—I argue that both unsatisfactorily retain essentialism as a descriptive claim about the social reality of women's lives. I argue instead that women have a 'genealogy': women always acquire femininity by appropriating and reworking existing cultural interpretations of femininity, so that all women become situated within a history of overlapping chains of interpretation. Because all women are located within this complex history, they are identifiable as belonging to a determinate social group, despite sharing no common understanding or experience of femininity. The idea that women have a genealogy thus reconciles anti-essentialism with feminist politics.

The heated feminist debates over 'essentialism' of the 1980s and early 1990s have largely died away, yet they raised fundamental questions for feminist moral and political philosophy which have still to be fully explored. The central issue in feminist controversies over essentialism was whether there are any shared characteristics common to all women, which unify them as a group. Many leading feminist thinkers of the 1970s and 1980s rejected essentialism, particularly on the grounds that universal claims about women are invariably false and effectively normalize and privilege specific forms of femininity. However, by the 1990s it had become apparent that the rejection of essentialism problematically undercut feminist politics, by denying that

women have any shared characteristics that could motivate them to act together as a collectivity. An 'anti-anti-essentialist' current therefore crystallized, which sought to resuscitate some form of essentialism as a political necessity for feminism.[1] One particularly influential strand within this current has been 'strategic' essentialism, which defends essentialist claims just because they are politically useful. In this article, I aim to challenge strategic essentialism, arguing that feminist philosophy cannot avoid enquiring into whether essentialism is true as a descriptive claim about social reality. I will argue that, in fact, essentialism is descriptively false, but that this need not undermine the possibility of feminist activism. This is because we can derive an alternative basis for feminist politics from the concept of 'genealogy' which features importantly within some recent theoretical understandings of gender, most notably Judith Butler's 'performative' theory of gender.

To anticipate, I will develop my argument for a 'genealogical' and anti-essentialist recasting of feminist politics in the following stages. I begin by reviewing the history of feminist debates surrounding essentialism, identifying in these apparently highly disparate debates a coherent history of engagement with an 'essentialism' that carries a relatively unified sense. My overview of these debates will trace how anti-essentialism came to threaten feminism both as a critique of existing society and as a politics of change. I shall then assess two attempts by feminist thinkers to surmount the problems posed by anti-essentialism without reverting to the idea that all women share a common social position and form of experience. These attempts are, first, strategic essentialism and, second, Iris Marion Young's idea that women comprise not a unified group but an internally diverse 'series'. Both these attempts, I shall argue, are unsatisfactory, because they continue tacitly to rely on a descriptive form of essentialism, even as they explicitly repudiate it. Nonetheless, Young's rethinking of women as a series is important in indicating that we need to overcome the problems generated by anti-essentialism by reconceiving women as a specifically non-unified type of social group. Building on this point, I shall argue that feminists could fruitfully reconceive women as a particular type of non-unified group: a group that exists in virtue of having a genealogy. The concept of genealogy, as I understand it, provides a way to reject essentialism (and so to deny that women have any necessary or common characteristics), while preserving the idea that women form a distinctive social group.

My project of reconceiving women as having a genealogy is loosely derived from Judith Butler, whose declared aim in *Gender Trouble* is to outline a '*feminist genealogy* of the category of women'.[2] By briefly tracing out the Nietzschean background to recent feminist appropriations of the concept of

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1.   I take the locution 'anti-anti-essentialism' from Cressida Heyes, *Line Drawings: Defining Women Through Feminist Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 67-72.
2.   Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 5; italics original.

genealogy, I will suggest that women always become women by reworking pre-established cultural interpretations of femininity, so that they become located—together with all other women—within a history of overlapping chains of interpretation. Although women do not share any common understanding or experience of femininity, they nevertheless belong to a distinctive social group in virtue of being situated within this complex history. This rethinking of women as having a genealogy entails a concomitant rethinking of feminist politics as coalitional rather than unified. According to this rethinking, collective feminist activities need not be predicated on any shared set of feminine concerns; rather, they may arise from overlaps and indirect connections between women's diverse historical and cultural situations. I hope that my exploration will begin to show how a genealogical rethinking of women could enable feminists to oppose (descriptive) essentialism while retaining belief in women as a group with a distinctive, and distinctively oppressive, history—an ongoing history which is an appropriate target of social critique and political transformation.

Feminist Debates around Essentialism

The first step towards any defence of an anti-essentialist, genealogical perspective within feminist philosophy is to recall what was centrally at issue in the controversies over essentialism that dominated much 1980s and 1990s feminist writing. Identifying any central themes within feminist discussion of essentialism is complicated, however, as this discussion contains a bewildering variety of strands. Given this variety, the notion of essentialism itself has taken on a correspondingly wide range of meanings for feminists, leading some commentators, such as Gayatri Spivak, to conclude that 'essentialism is a loose tongue'.[3] Reviewing the huge body of literature on this question, Cressida Heyes has highlighted four different senses of 'essentialism', all regularly criticized within feminist discussion: (1) metaphysical essentialism, the belief in real essences (of the sexes) which exist independently of social construction; (2) biological essentialism, the belief in real essences which are biological in character; (3) linguistic essentialism, the belief that the term 'woman' has a fixed and invariant meaning; and (4) methodological essentialism, which encompasses approaches to studying women's (or men's) lives which presuppose the applicability of gender as a general category of social analysis. Heyes suggests that the first two 'forms of essentialism [which are] premised on metaphysical realist claims about pre-social truths have been marginalized within the typology of essentialism', and that feminists have most regularly addressed and opposed methodological essentialism.[4]

3.   Gayatri Spivak, 'In a Word: Interview with Ellen Rooney', in N. Schor and E. Weed (eds.), *The Essential Difference* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 159.
4.   Heyes, *Line Drawings*, p. 37. Charlotte Witt argues that feminist critiques of essentialism have four similar targets: (1) the metaphysical belief that gender and sex are core

Heyes's typology helpfully clarifies the range of possible varieties of essentialism, but, because she introduces precise distinctions into the 'essentialism' which feminists have generally discussed and criticized as a relatively unified phenomenon, her account obscures how feminist debates around essentialism have actually developed. Despite the variety of strands within these debates, retrospectively they can be seen to be engaged with an 'essentialism' that has a relatively unitary meaning, deriving from the traditional philosophical understanding of essentialism. This relatively unitary sense of essentialism gives feminist debates a coherent history, within which different contributions can be recognized to interweave with and build upon one another. To support this assertion, I shall briefly reconstruct this history, starting from the philosophical sense of essentialism which forms the point of departure for feminist explorations.

Philosophically, essentialism is the belief that things have essential properties, properties that are necessary to those things being what they are. Recontextualized within feminism, essentialism becomes the view that there are properties essential to women, in that any woman must necessarily have those properties to be a woman at all. So defined, essentialism entails a closely related view, universalism: that there are some properties shared by, or common to, all women—since without those properties they could not be women in the first place. Essential properties, then, are also universal. 'Essentialism' as generally debated in feminist circles embraces this composite view: that there are properties essential to women and which all women (therefore) share.[5]

It is notable that, on this definition of the 'essentialism' with which feminists have been concerned, the properties that are essential and universal to all women can be either natural or socially constructed. This is reflected in that critics of essentialism from the later 1980s and 1990s typically attack any view that ascribes necessary and common characteristics to all women, even if that view identifies those characteristics as culturally constructed. Equally, though, it must be acknowledged that feminist thinkers often use 'essentialism' and 'biological essentialism' as interchangeable terms (apparently precluding the possibility that essential characteristics of women could also be

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attributes of the self; (2) biological determinism; (3) the belief that the word 'feminine' has a fixed meaning; (4) the practice of making false generalizations about women; see Witt, 'Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Theory', *Philosophical Topics* 23.2 (1995), pp. 321-44.

5.   Naomi Schor stresses that essentialism and universalism differ in 'This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray', in N. Schor and E. Weed (eds.), *The Essential Difference* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 24. One might, for instance, argue that there are certain characteristics which all women share, but which are accidental rather than essential (that is, these features could be changed without women thereby ceasing to be women)—such as, perhaps, the feature of being disempowered relative to men. Yet, though universal features need not be essential, essential properties are necessarily universal, hence 'essentialism' and 'universalism' are generally assimilated in feminist discussion.

cultural). There is an obvious reason for this elision: if there are properties necessary to and shared by all women, these properties, *qua* necessary, can most readily be identified as natural. Thus, essentialism easily slides into biological essentialism because women's necessary properties are most readily identified as biological.

Such simple, biological essentialism was commonly held prior to second-wave feminism, typically as the view that all women are constituted as women by their possession of wombs, breasts and child-bearing capacity. Arguably, this view played a crucial ideological role in justifying women's confinement to the domestic sphere as natural and necessary. Second-wave feminists therefore opposed essentialism in its pre-feminist, biological incarnation. However, feminist antipathy to essentialism rapidly extended to elements of biological essentialism perceived to persist *within* feminism. In the 1970s, socialist feminists criticized the essentialism they detected in the work of some radical feminists who urged revaluation of women's allegedly natural features, such as their child-bearing capacity.[6] Within these socialist feminist critiques, (biological) 'essentialism' was typically contrasted to 'social constructionism', which relies on the distinction between biological sex and social gender. On the social constructionist view, sexed biology is both different from, and causally inert with respect to, gender—an individual's socially acquired role and sense of identity. So, while being *female* may require certain anatomical features, being a *woman* is something different, dependent on identification with the feminine gender—the social traits, activities and roles that make up femininity. Following this recognition of the gap between gender and sex, social constructionists could reject biological essentialism for confusing these two levels of analysis and consequently making a fallacious—and ideologically motivated—attempt to read off the contingencies of social arrangements from the necessities of biology.

Despite repudiating biological essentialism, many influential feminist theorists of the 1970s and early 1980s went on to endorse non-biological forms of essentialism. Having identified femininity as socially constructed, these theorists sought to identify an invariant set of social characteristics that constitute femininity and that all women, *qua* women, share. Possibilities included women's special responsibility for domestic, affective or nurturant labour (as Nancy Hartsock argued), their construction as sexual objects rather than sexual subjects (according to Catherine MacKinnon) or their relational, contextual and particularist style of ethical and practical reasoning (Carol Gilligan).[7]

6. For a classic socialist feminist critique of radical feminism, see Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female?* (London: Virago, 1987).

7. See, respectively, Nancy Hartsock, *Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism* (New York: Longman, 1983); Catherine MacKinnon, 'Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: An Agenda for Theory', *Signs* 7 (1982), pp. 515-44; Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). Gilligan has subsequently revised her ethical theory to mitigate the exclusive tendencies that critics detected in

My claim that theorists such as MacKinnon are essentialists might sound odd, given the frequent contrast between essentialism and social constructionism. Yet social constructionists can readily *be* essentialists if they believe—as do these influential feminist theorists—that a particular pattern of social construction is essential and universal to all women.

Moreover, in the later 1980s, a large number of feminist thinkers began to attack the positions of Gilligan, MacKinnon and others as—precisely—essentialist. These critics argued, in considerable detail, that universal claims about women's social position or identity are invariably false. It cannot plausibly be maintained that women's experiences have any common character, or that women share any common location in social and cultural relations, or sense of psychic identity. Essentialism, then, is simply false as a description of social reality. Moreover, critics pointed out that the descriptive falsity of essentialism renders it politically oppressive as well. The (false) universalization of claims about women in effect casts particular forms of feminine experience as the norm, and, typically, it is historically and culturally privileged forms of femininity that become normalized in this way. Essentialist theoretical moves thereby end up replicating between women the very patterns of oppression and exclusion that feminism should contest. This point has been pressed particularly forcefully by Elizabeth Spelman, whose classic critique *Inessential Woman* castigates recurring tendencies within feminism to take certain privileged women's experiences or situations as the norm.[8]

One might wonder whether we could defend essentialism without postulating any social or cultural characteristics common to all women if we instead identified women's essential properties with their biologically female characteristics. This need not entail returning to the traditional, misleadingly anatomical, definition of womanhood: one might hold that femininity is socially constructed in diverse ways, but that all these constructions are united in that they build upon and interact with individuals' biologically female characteristics. This option was foreclosed by feminist philosophies of embodiment which developed in the 1990s. Judith Butler, Moira Gatens and Elizabeth Grosz, in particular, argued that bodies are thoroughly acculturated, and therefore participate in the same diversity as the social field that they reflect.[9] These thinkers argued that our bodies are first and foremost the bodies that we live, phenomenologically, and the way we live our bodies is culturally informed and constrained at every point. Sexed embodiment is therefore not external but *internal* to the gendered realm of social practices

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it: see J.M. Taylor, Carol Gilligan and A.M. Sullivan, *Between Voice and Silence: Women and Girls, Race and Relationship* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

8.   Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (London: The Women's Press, 1988).

9.   See Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1996); Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

and meanings. Consequently, one cannot appeal to any unity amongst female bodies to fix the definition of women, since the meaning of bodies will vary indefinitely according to their socio-cultural location.

Following this recognition of the cultural character of bodies, a growing number of theorists in the 1990s rejected the previously popular essentialism/constructionism antithesis. They argued that constructionism remains unduly close to essentialism, since it accepts the existence of natural bodily properties but simply denies them any role in constituting the essence of woman. According to these critics, constructionism remains problematic because, in retaining the belief in natural properties of female bodies, it leaves permanently open the possibility of making a (spurious) appeal to these properties in the attempt to ground unity amongst women. The most consistent form of anti-essentialism, then, which developed in the 1990s, denies that any features—natural *or* social—are common to all women, who are fully socially and corporeally diverse.

The increasingly radical rejection of essentialism prompted a counter-tendency within feminist thought, however, emphasizing the neglected importance and political potential of essentialism. Feminists became increasingly concerned that accusations of essentialism often silenced thinkers, condemning their arguments out of hand. Naomi Schor, famously, complained that these accusations had become 'the prime idiom of intellectual terrorism and the privileged instrument of political orthodoxy…endowed…with the power to reduce to silence, to excommunicate, to consign to oblivion'.[10] This prompted a reconsideration of whether essentialism might be philosophically or politically fruitful. Notably, feminist rejection of essentialism had posed several interwoven problems. First, it had 'cast doubt on the project of conceptualizing women as a group'.[11] By denying women any shared features, anti-essentialism seemed to imply that there is nothing in virtue of which women could rightly be identified as forming a distinct social group. This undermined feminism as a critique of existing society, insofar as this critique is premised on the claim that women constitute a distinctly disadvantaged or oppressed social group. Anti-essentialism appeared also to have undermined feminist politics: if women do not share any common social location, then they cannot be expected to mobilize around any concern at their common situation, or around any shared political identity or allegiance. Thus, anti-essentialism seemed to undermine feminism both as social critique and as a political movement for social change.

Faced with these problems, 'anti-anti-essentialists' reconsidered how far some form of essentialism might be necessary for feminist social criticism and political activism. One of the most important strands in this reconsideration has been 'strategic' essentialism: the defence of essentialism not as a

10.   Schor, 'This Essentialism Which Is Not One', p. 42.
11.   Iris Marion Young, 'Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective', *Signs* 19.3 (1994), p. 713.

descriptive claim about social reality, but merely as a political strategy. In the next section, I will argue that strategic essentialism is unstable: although it attempts to avoid endorsing essentialism as a description of social reality, it ultimately remains forced to rely on descriptive essentialism to support its claim to political efficacy. I will then assess how a similar instability infiltrates Iris Young's suggestive attempt to reconceive women as a 'series', an attempt which nonetheless paves the way for my subsequent argument that women might productively be reconceived as having a genealogy.

Strategic and Descriptive Essentialism

Despite their concern to reappraise the political fertility of essentialism, few 'anti-anti-essentialists' have sought to reinstate the belief in shared social characteristics common to all women. Rather, anti-anti-essentialists have tended to defend essentialism by arguing that it can take multiple forms, some more complex and subtle—and defensible—than its familiar ones.[12] In particular, it has been argued that essentialism need not take the form of a *descriptive* claim about social reality. According to 'strategic' essentialism, which became increasingly popular in the later 1980s and 1990s, feminists should acknowledge that essentialism is descriptively false in that it denies the real diversity of women's lives and social situations.[13] Nonetheless, in delimited contexts, feminists should continue to act *as if* essentialism were true, so as to encourage a shared identification among women that enables them to engage in collective action. To take a controversial example, many of the bold statements in Luce Irigaray's later work have often been construed as strategically essentialist. In *Thinking the Difference*, she claims that women share certain bodily rhythms which give them a deep attunement to nature, and which mean that women are particularly adversely affected by ecological disasters such as the Chernobyl accident.[14] It seems plausible to think that, rather than attempting to describe women as they really are, Irigaray is encouraging women to *think* that they suffer particularly from environmental problems, as a strategic identification that will galvanize them to collectively resist ecological degradation.

   An objection immediately arises to this strategic essentialist position. Any political strategy is effective only inasmuch as it allows agents to recognize and intervene into the real social events, processes and forces which make up the social field. But it seems reasonable to think that a strategy can be effec-

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   12. See, especially, Schor, 'This Essentialism Which Is Not One', p. 43.
   13. 'Strategic' essentialism is, of course, primarily associated with Gayatri Spivak, who coined the term in 'Feminism, Criticism and the Institution', *Thesis Eleven* 10/11 (1984–85), pp. 175-87. Spivak, however, introduced strategic essentialism in relation to subaltern studies: her term was taken up within feminist contexts in ways she did not intend.
   14. Luce Irigaray, *Thinking the Difference: For a Peaceful Revolution* (trans. K. Montin; London: Athlone Press, 1994), pp. 24-26.

tive, in this sense, only insofar as it embodies an accurate understanding of the character of social processes. This implies that a strategy of affirming fictitious commonalities among women will fail to facilitate effective action given a world where women do *not* really have any common social characteristics or locations. Rather, such a strategy appears destined to mislead women into fighting against difficulties which are either non-existent or—more likely—really affect only some privileged subgroup of women.

This objection can be resisted, however, as it (implicitly) is by Denise Riley in '*Am I That Name?*'. Riley claims that 'it is compatible to suggest that "women" don't exist—while maintaining a politics of "as if they existed"—since the world behaves as if they unambiguously did'.[15] In other words, for Riley, the fiction that women share a common social experience is politically effective because the social world actually does treat women as if they comprise a unitary group. Riley accepts that women are *not* a unitary group and that the socially prevalent idea that they are unified is false. Nevertheless, this false idea informs and organizes the practices and institutions that shape women's experiences, so that those—very different—experiences become structured by essentialist assumptions. A strategy of affirming fictitious commonalities therefore *will* be effective given this world in which (false) descriptive essentialist assumptions undergird women's social existence.

Riley's argument has a problem, though: she cannot consistently maintain both that women's social experience is fully diverse and that this experience is uniformly structured by essentialist assumptions. If essentialism informs and organizes the structures that shape women's social experience, then this experience will be organized according to certain shared models and will acquire certain common patterns and features. More concretely, the idea that women are a homogeneous group will structure social institutions so that they position all women homogeneously, leading to (at least considerable areas of) shared experience. Thus, Riley (and other strategic essentialists) may be right that essentialist constructions are socially influential, but they cannot, consistently with this, also maintain that descriptive essentialism is false. Furthermore, it is not obviously true that any uniform set of essentialist constructions informs all social experience. These constructions may all identify women as a homogeneous group, but they vary widely in their account of the context of women's homogenous features. Consequently, these constructions will influence social structures in correspondingly varying directions, against which no counter-affirmation of common experience can be expected to be effective.

Strategic essentialists, then, have attempted to resuscitate essentialism by arguing that it can take a merely political and non-descriptive form. But this attempt proves unsuccessful, because one cannot defend essentialism on strategic grounds without first showing that there is a homogeneous set of

15. Denise Riley, *'Am I That Name?': Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 112.

essentialist assumptions that exerts a coherent influence on women's social experience—which amounts to defending essentialism on descriptive grounds (as well). Advocates of essentialism therefore need to show that it accurately describes social reality. Here, though, critics can retort that essentialism is descriptively false, since women do not even share any common mode of construction by essentialist discourses. Yet this retort reinstates the problem of anti-essentialism: its paralysing effect on social criticism and political activism. Strategic essentialism has not resolved this problem, for it has not stably demarcated any merely political form of essentialism from the descriptive essentialism which critics have plausibly condemned as false and oppressive.

Women as a Series

To resolve the problems posed by anti-essentialism, feminist philosophers need to oppose essentialism as a descriptive claim—that is, to recognize the diversity of women's lives and social characteristics—and yet to continue to identify women as a distinctive (and distinctly disadvantaged) social group. This conjunction of anti-essentialism with feminist social ontology appears difficult to achieve, but could be accomplished if we reconceive women as a social group of some specifically *non-unified* type. Iris Marion Young takes this step in her paper 'Gender as Seriality'.

Young urges us to reconceive women as a *series*, where a series is a kind of group that is non-unified: 'vast, multifaceted, layered, complex and overlapping'.[16] Employing the terminology of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Young distinguishes series from groups in the strict sense: the latter are collections of individuals who mutually recognize significant areas of shared experience and orientation to common goals. In contrast, membership in a series does not require members to share any attributes, goals or experience. Instead, the members of a series are unified, passively, through their actions being constrained and organized by particular structures and constellations of material objects. Women, for example, are passively positioned in a series by the particular cluster of gender rules and codes which infuse everyday representations, artefacts and spaces. Young's understanding of women as assembled into a 'series' allows her to deny women any common identity or characteristics, by arguing that they take up the constraints of gender structures in variable ways, within the contexts of entirely different projects and experiences. At the same time, Young can consistently claim that women retain the broad group status of a series insofar as the same set of 'feminizing' structures remains a background constraint operative upon them all. Having secured women the status of a determinate social group—in this broad, non-unified sense—Young concludes that it is possible for women to become conscious of their group status and so to become motivated into co-operating together politically.

16. Young, 'Gender as Seriality', p. 728.

Unfortunately, Young's approach has a drawback which is structurally similar to that of strategic essentialism: her defence of women's group status tacitly reinscribes the descriptive essentialism from which she explicitly distances herself. Although she denies that women share a common experience or identity, she does maintain that all women's activities and lives are 'oriented around the *same* or similarly structured objects [and]…realities'.[17] From Young's perspective, there must be some features that unify these social structures and realities such that they can be said to co-operate in constituting women as a single, distinct gender. As Young says, it is from the sameness of the objects structuring women's activities that the 'loose unity of the series…derives'.[18] Although, as she admits, the content of these objects and realities varies contextually, she still maintains that, despite their diversity, these realities share certain unifying characteristics. In particular, for Young, they all embody the expectation, first, of normative heterosexuality— which, she claims, 'constitute[s] women cross-culturally'[19]—and, secondly, of a sexual division of labour—the content of which, Young observes, 'varies with each social system, [although in each case] a division of at least some tasks and activities by sex appears as a felt necessity'.[20] Of course, she also insists that women experience these expectations differently given their diverse situations and activities. Yet the claim that these expectations organize the realities of all women's lives is itself ambiguous. Insofar as all women's lives are organized by a sexual division of labour, the *content* of this division varies widely, as Young herself admits. Likewise, the meaning of heterosexuality is highly varying (although, as a minimum, normative heterosexuality expects women to desire men, the meaning of this expectation will vary greatly relative to changing conceptions of masculinity and of desire, sexuality, and their social significance). So, Young's claim is plausible only if it acknowledges that the expectations that ultimately organize all women's lives are themselves varied; but, consequently, these expectations cannot be said to unify the structures by which women are serially positioned.

Young, however, needs to identify this unity because she can only retain a coherent feminine gender by arguing that, although women have no common features, there *are* common features—common expectations—organizing all the social realities that constrain women's lives. Hence she has to maintain, for example, that normative heterosexuality has a universal, cross-cultural meaning. This brings Young into a difficulty, parallel to that of the strategic essentialists—she continues, ultimately, to rely on a descriptive form of essentialism, insofar as she has to affirm that there are certain universal norms that constitute all women as women (even though women do not share a common experience of those norms). Young's residual essentialism

17. Young, 'Gender as Seriality', p. 728; emphasis added.
18. Young, 'Gender as Seriality', p. 728.
19. Young, 'Gender as Seriality', p. 729.
20. Young, 'Gender as Seriality', p. 730.

can be traced back to the Sartrean framework from which she derives her con-
cept of a series. Sartre insists that series should not be equated with groups
in the strict, unified sense. Groups in the strict sense involve shared goals
and experience, so that series count as groups only in a broad or, as Sartre
puts it, 'neutral' sense.[21] Yet the reason why Sartre continues to identify
series as groups in this broad sense is because he regards series as *self-alienated*
versions of strict, unified groups. For Sartre, series are self-alienated groups
in that their unity is located outside them, in the objective artefacts or
structures by which their members are constrained and organized.[22] Thus,
from Sartre's perspective, series only count as groups at all to the extent that
they remain unified, albeit in a relatively indirect, exteriorized way.

Young's Sartrean concept of the series proves inadequate to the task which
she wishes it to play: that of enabling her to reconceive women as a specifi-
cally non-unified type of social group. Despite this failing, the importance of
Young's argument lies in her more basic insight that reconceiving women as
a non-unified type of social group could surmount the problems generated
by feminist critiques of essentialism. I therefore propose to develop Young's
insight, by jettisoning the idea that women constitute a series, and instead
rethinking women as having a genealogy—that is, as constituting a group
that is internally diverse, and yet remains a group in virtue of having a com-
plex history composed of multiple, overlapping threads of interpretation.

Women as Having a Genealogy

In this section, I will argue that an appropriation of the concept of genealogy
can provide a way to reinstate the idea that women comprise a distinct social
group even in the absence of any common properties that constitute them all
as women. Several prominent feminist thinkers have already drawn on the
concept of genealogy: for example, in *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler proposes
to outline a genealogical understanding of what it means to be a woman.[23]
Similarly, Moira Gatens praises the 'project of charting a genealogy of the
category "woman" or "women". On this approach "women" itself is under-
stood to have a history, a genealogy, a "line of descent"…a genealogical
approach asks: how has "woman"/"women" functioned as a discursive
category throughout history?'.[24] These approving references to genealogy by
Butler and Gatens imply that ideas of femininity should be understood as
historically constructed in multiple, shifting ways, their fluctuations in
meaning registering changes in social relations of power. In this, though,
Butler and Gatens appear concerned to trace the history of the concept

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21. Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. I. *Theory of Practical Ensembles* (trans. A. Sheridan-Smith; London: New Left Books, 1976), p. 256.

22. Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, pp. 258-59.

23. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 5.

24. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, p. 76.

'woman' rather than the history of women themselves. Yet the concept of genealogy can only provide a way of grasping women as a distinct (albeit non-unified) social group if women *themselves* have a genealogy—that is, to anticipate, if their experiences and psychologies are shaped in overlapping and historically interconnected ways. Thus, any anti-essentialist appropriation of the concept of genealogy must clarify the relationship between the genealogy of ideas concerning femininity and the genealogy of women themselves.

To do this we can return to Nietzsche, from whom both Butler and Gatens derive their concepts of genealogy. Gatens draws deliberately upon Nietzsche,[25] and, although Butler draws more explicitly upon Foucault than Nietzsche, she herself repeatedly stresses that Foucault's practice of genealogical enquiry is deeply indebted to his interpretation of the concept of genealogy in Nietzsche.[26] In *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887),[27] Nietzsche sketches a distinctive form of historical enquiry which traces how historically changing concepts—such as 'guilt', 'duty', 'community', 'good' and 'evil'— shape lived social experience. He also traces how the power relations that are at work within people's social experiences lead them to reshape those concepts in turn. In explicating Nietzsche's approach, I shall draw on Foucault's presentation of it in his important methodological essay 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' (1971).[28]

In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche denies that any common characteristics unite all the institutions, practices and beliefs normally classified under the rubric of morality. Nietzsche thus adopts an anti-essentialist approach to morality, taking its constituent practices and beliefs to be highly diverse,[29] and to fall under the single rubric of morality solely in virtue of belonging within a distinctive history. Foucault stresses that, for Nietzsche, this history is not to be studied through 'traditional' modes of historical enquiry, which misleadingly presuppose an underlying unity among moral phenomena. Instead, the history of morality should be approached through a novel mode of enquiry—'genealogy'—which attends to the fluctuating and

25. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, pp. 76-77.

26. See, especially, Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 226-28; *Gender Trouble*, pp. 20-21, 150, 161.

27. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (trans. Carol Diethe; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

28. Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', reprinted in J. Richardson and B. Leiter (eds.), *Nietzsche* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 341-59. On the importance of this paper for Foucault's subsequent work, see, *inter alia*, Michael Mahon, *Foucault's Nietzschean Genealogy: Truth, Power, and the Subject* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).

29. See Raymond Geuss, 'Nietzsche and Morality', in Raymond Geuss (ed.), *Morality, Culture and History: Essays on German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 167-69.

internally heterogeneous character of its object of study.[30] In particular, the genealogist traces how some contemporary practice (for example, punishment) or experience (for example, guilt) has arisen from an indefinitely extended process whereby earlier forms of that practice or experience have become reinterpreted by later ones. Thus, the genealogist treats any historically arisen phenomenon as the reinterpretation of a pre-existing phenomenon, upon which the new interpretation 'has impressed…its own idea of a use function'.[31] A genealogy takes shape as a practice or experience becomes subjected to repeated reinterpretations which impact upon its 'meaning [*Sinn*], purpose and expectation'.[32]

According to Nietzsche, any reinterpretation must install itself by accommodating, as far as possible, the meanings embedded in the pre-existing phenomenon,[33] though necessarily it sheds the elements of those meanings that remain incompatible with its own agenda. This makes reinterpretation a conflictual, agonistic process, in which present forces strive actively to take over recalcitrant elements of the past. The outcomes of these conflictual activities of reinterpretation are always variable and contingent, as Foucault particularly stresses.[34] A key point, though, is that any practice or experience that succumbs to reinterpretation has itself already taken shape as the sedimentation of earlier layers of interpretation. No common core of significance persists through all these layers of interpretation. Because incompatible elements of meaning become shed upon each occasion of reinterpretation, a process of attrition takes place through which earlier layers of meaning gradually get eroded away altogether. For example, Nietzsche traces how the experience of bad conscience becomes reinterpreted by Christianity—and consequently re-experienced, re-lived—as sinfulness.[35] In similar fashion, the earlier meanings of all the constituents of the institution of morality are gradually and continuously being etched out by new acts of reinterpretation.[36]

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30. Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', p. 346.

31. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, p. 55.

32. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, p. 57.

33. As Geuss explains, Nietzsche's conflictual model implies that no reinterpretation will ever 'encounter…just a tabula rasa, but a set of actively structured forces, practices etc. which will be capable of active resistance' (Geuss, 'Nietzsche and Genealogy', in *Morality, Culture, and History*, p. 13). This resistance ensures that new interpretations will 'not in general be so fully successful that *nothing*…remains' of the pre-existing meanings (p. 11).

34. Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', pp. 347-48.

35. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, p. 100.

36. This insight underlies Nietzsche's claim that genealogists trace the 'descent' (*Herkunft*) of phenomena rather than their putative 'origins' (*Ursprünge*). Because any historical phenomenon arises gradually through the concatenation of an indefinite multiplicity of events, there is no definitive point at which that phenomenon can be said to have 'originated' (see Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, pp. 4-7; Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', pp. 342-43).

Nietzschean genealogy, then, traces how concepts such as 'guilt' and 'evil' undergo varying interpretations, where these interpretations—and the concepts which they organize—continually reshape our experience and practices. To study these experiences and practices genealogically is to situate them within a particular group—for example, the group 'morality'—not because of any essential characteristics that they share with all the group's other members, but just because each member in the group stands in the appropriate historical relationship to (one or more of) the others. More specifically, a set of such items is grouped together only in virtue of the fact that each takes shape through the reinterpretation of one or more of the others. The items in this group need not have anything in common, but need only be connected together through a complex process of historical drift in meaning. From a Nietzschean perspective, any set of concepts, experiences or practices that become related in this overlapping way has a genealogy.

Nietzsche's idea that any chain of historically overlapping phenomena has a genealogy makes it possible to reconceive women as a determinate social group without reverting to the descriptive essentialist claim that all women share a common social position or mode of experience. Any such 'genealogical' analysis of women must start by recognizing that concepts of femininity change radically over time, and that these changing concepts affect women's social position and lived experience. In particular, a genealogical analysis of women is premised on the view—articulated in Judith Butler's work—that women only become women, or acquire femininity, by taking up existing interpretations and concepts of femininity. As Butler puts it, taking on a gender involves finding 'a contemporary way of organizing past and future cultural norms, a way of situating oneself in and through those norms, an active style of living one's body in the world'.[37] As this remark suggests, the taking on of femininity consists not merely of a process of mental identification with existing concepts, but—more fundamentally—of a process of acquiring a feminine way of living one's body, of inhabiting one's physiology. Moreover, this does not entail being passively moulded by exterior cultural forces; rather, women become women through active appropriation and personalizing of inherited cultural standards.

Butler also stresses, however, that each appropriation of existing standards concerning femininity effects a more or less subtle alteration of their meaning: individuals always 'interpret received gender norms in a way that organises them anew'.[38] In actively appropriating existing standards, individuals necessarily adapt them with reference to the varied contexts, power relationships and personal histories within which they are located. Received meanings regarding gender continuously become subjected to practical reinterpretation,

37.   Judith Butler, 'Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault', in S. Benhabib and D. Cornell (eds.), *Feminism as Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 131.
38.   Butler, 'Variations', p. 131.

which individuals undertake with tacit reference to their differing personal and cultural experiences. That the meaning of femininity undergoes incessant modification implies that it is considerably less unified than one might, at first glance, assume. There is no unitary meaning of femininity on which all women agree: for, even although all women may identify with femininity, they will always understand and live their femininity in different ways. Nonetheless, according to a genealogical approach, all women remain identifiable *as* women. Although they do not share any characteristics simply *qua* women, in each case they become feminine by reworking pre-established interpretations of femininity with reference to their specific situations. In virtue of carrying out this reworking, each woman becomes located within a historical chain of women, a chain composed of all those who have successively engaged in reinterpreting the meaning of femininity. All women thus become located within this ongoing chain of practice and reinterpretation, which brings them into complex filiations with one another. The genealogy that arises through this process is not only a history of concepts of femininity, but is also, simultaneously, a history of women themselves, as individuals who become women by taking on and adapting existing concepts of femininity.

Since genealogical reinterpretation is an agonistic process, each reinterpretation of femininity must overlap in content with the interpretation that it modifies, preserving some elements of that pre-existing interpretation while abandoning others. Through the resulting process of attrition of meanings, each woman will find herself in a series of gradually diminishing connections with women of previous generations. Moreover, within a single generation, each woman's reinterpretation of femininity will overlap in content, to varying degrees, with other women's reinterpretations; these overlaps must arise, insofar as all these women are engaged in reworking the same set(s) of pre-existing meanings. An understanding of women as having a genealogy thus entails that, instead of forming a unitary group, they are connected together in complex ways and to varying degrees, and, in particular, that they are linked by their partially and multiply overlapping interpretations of femininity.

This genealogical conception of women might be criticized on two, closely interrelated, grounds. First, one might object that it is not ultimately very different from Young's idea that women form a series. Just as Young preserves women's status as a group by arguing that their lives are shaped by a universal set of normative expectations, likewise the genealogical view argues that women participate in a unitary history. This history is unitary in virtue of the continuity between its constituent phases, a continuity that arises insofar as every reinterpretation of femininity—and every re-experiencing of womanhood—builds upon, and so retains a partial overlap with, pre-existing interpretations and experiences. But, just as the expectations that Young believes to organize women's lives are more plausibly seen as diverse than singular in content, likewise the history of femininity and women might be most plausibly seen as *dis*continuous. Arguably—and this is the second objection—the genealogical view over-emphasizes overlaps and continuities between different

interpretations and experiences of femininity, ignoring the deep chasms that regularly open up between understandings of femininity—the breaks in the chain of (re)interpretation. This objection takes on special importance because such discontinuities will typically reflect exactly those asymmetries of power that appear to impede the possibility of women achieving any solidarity as a group.

Against these objections, I suggest that the strength of the genealogical approach is that it can accommodate the reality of historical discontinuity alongside that of continuity. According to this approach, successive modifications in the meaning of femininity necessarily build upon one another, leading to the formation of distinct historical patterns of interpretation of femininity, which branch apart from one another in particular directions. This branching, moreover, will typically follow along differentials in power (which lead women to modify the meaning of femininity in particular ways). As the branching occurs, the process of attrition whereby earlier elements of meaning get worn away will ensure that quite separate cultures of femininity emerge. Women located within these separate cultures—cultures that occupy different positions within relations of power—will have ceased to share any experience as women, even though they all identify themselves as feminine. In such cases, women remain connected together only indirectly—via the long chains of overlapping meaning and practice that span the gulf between them. Thus, a genealogical approach itself implies the inescapability of both continuities *and* discontinuities within the history of femininity.

As a consequence of these discontinuities in the meaning of femininity, women must be considered not merely as an internally diverse group but also, more strongly, as a group fractured and torn apart by divisions in power. Recognizing this, for instance, Butler refers to the incessant occurrence of 'rifts among women over the content of the term' (that is, 'woman').[39] Yet, however severe this rift, it remains compatible with women's existing as a distinctive social group. This is because women remain defined by a single history, even though this history is extremely complex and follows multiple branches. Women's history should be understood on the model of a tree, which remains singular even as it continually ramifies into innumerable (multiply interwoven) branches. Properly understood, then, the genealogical view avoids reinstating descriptive essentialism because it holds that what unites women— their history—is internally complex. At the same time, this view insists that this complex history remains singular, and hence does constitute women as a group whose history, and consequent social positions, can be identified as distinctively oppressive.

This rethinking of women and femininity as having a genealogy opens up the possibility of an anti-essentialism that supports, rather than paralyses,

39. Judith Butler, 'Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of "Postmodernism"', in S. Benhabib *et al.* (eds.), *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 50.

feminist politics. To the extent that women remain a social group (united in their participation in a single history), they can mobilize together in pursuit of distinctive concerns. Nonetheless, since women's history is internally complex, and women's concerns are correspondingly diverse, the only mode of collective activity appropriate for women must be similarly diversified—allowing women to pursue concerns that are specific to them as women, yet which differ from one another as well. This mode of political activity must, in addition, be capable of accommodating deep rifts and divisions among women, by providing them with the space for difficult negotiation over their divisions. These two conditions suggest that a coalitional politics is uniquely appropriate for women. This is, indeed, the political practice generally endorsed by advocates of a genealogical approach.[40] But what is a coalitional feminist politics?

Coalitions may be said to arise when different women, or sets of women, decide to act together to achieve some determinate objective, while yet acknowledging the irreducible differences between them and the often highly divergent concerns that motivate them to pursue this objective. On the basis of the idea that women have a genealogy, we can explain why women might, despite these irreducible differences, reasonably seek to mobilize together on such a coalitional footing. First, each woman's historically shaped experience inevitably overlaps in content with that of at least some other women, which gives them areas of commonality that they might reasonably seek to transform together, despite being very different in other respects (and so approaching these objectives from quite disparate perspectives). Second, in each woman's case, there will be many other women with whose experience her own has no direct overlap, and with whom she is only indirectly connected (through the whole web of overlapping relations between women). These might typically be women to whom she stands in a deeply asymmetrical power relationship. Nonetheless, there might be many cases in which she could reasonably seek to act in concert with those women, because she could expect improvements in either of their situations to indirectly have positive repercussions for the other. Since women remain connected indirectly by long chains of reinterpretation of femininity, an improvement in the situation of any of the women should impact positively upon those women whose interpretations of femininity overlap, so that, through a kind of wave effect, even the women at furthest remove could anticipate some indirect benefit. Those women might, at least, be benefited in the sense that any change exposes the meaning of femininity as contingent and malleable, making it easier to undertake transformative reinterpretations of the meanings of femininity that have become sedimented within their own cultures. Certainly, such potential gains would be obstructed if privileged groups of women respond to improve-

40. See, for example, Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, 'Social Criticism Without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism', in L. Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 35.

ments in their situations in ways that reinforce hierarchies between women. Nonetheless, a genealogical conception of women and femininity at least suggests ways to reflect upon the spectrum of motivations that might lead women to enter coalitions, different motivations that correspond to women's varying degrees of cultural overlap and connectedness.

Conclusion

I have attempted to reassess feminist debates around essentialism in a way that brings out the philosophical, ethical and political significance of the questions they have raised. As I have traced, these debates pose a central, and widely acknowledged, dilemma: essentialism is plausibly seen as false as a descriptive claim about the social reality of women's lives, yet appears necessary to feminist politics and social criticism. I have argued that this dilemma cannot be solved by endorsing essentialism merely as a political strategy, since essentialism can only be defended on strategic grounds if it is held to be descriptively true as well. Instead, the dilemma should be solved by accepting that essentialism is descriptively false, but reconceiving women as a specifically non-unified sort of social group. From this perspective, I have suggested that we might rethink women, and femininity, as having a genealogy. This provides a way to identify women as a definite social group without falsely attributing to them any common characteristics that constitute them all as women.

According to my argument, every woman becomes a woman by taking over and reinterpreting pre-existing cultural constructions of femininity, constructions which in turn exist as a result of preceding activities of reinterpretation, so that all these interpretations of femininity—and all the women who produce and experience them—come to belong within overlapping chains. These chains make up a unique—albeit complex and multiply branching—history within which all women are situated. Thus, although women do not share any common characteristics, they are defined as a group by their participation in this history. This opens up various ways in which women might become motivated to engage in collective action organized coalitionally. I suggest, then, that the idea that women have a genealogy overcomes the dilemma posed by feminist critiques of essentialism, explaining how—despite their lack of common characteristics—women can still exist as a determinate group, susceptible to collective mobilization.