

**CLASSIFYING WOMEN: A SOLUTION TO THE FEMINIST
PROBLEM OF UNIVERSALS**

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I aim to make sense of the class of women. Gender classification is an issue that has become central to recent feminist philosophy. In particular, many feminist philosophers have begun asking, how can gender classes be made sense of for feminist political purposes. I will first show why this question is important and why feminist philosophers have come to view gender classification as problematic (chapter 1). I then consider four recent feminist responses to this issue suggested by Marilyn Frye, Iris Marion Young, Natalie Stoljar and Sally Haslanger. I argue that all four responses are inadequate in various ways (chapters 2-5). I then go on to suggest a way in which this issue can be more successfully responded to (chapter 6). In doing so, I draw from the works of G. W. F. Hegel and David Armstrong.

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“If it proves difficult [in philosophy] to give an account of some phenomenon, somebody is sure to suggest that the phenomenon does not exist.”

(Armstrong 1978: 113-4)

“Happily, to avoid the essentialist traps it is not necessary to eschew general categories or concepts ... To navigate around false generalizations we need not forgo generalization. In each case there are alternative paths to take if we choose.”

(Martin 1994: 654)

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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I argue for a way to make sense of the class of women. Consider the Queen of England and a black Sudanese Muslim mother of five fleeing violence in Darfur. As women, it seems, they should be members of the *same* class. But, what makes them members of the class of women? Is there something that the two women have in common that grounds their membership in this class? What makes them both *women*? One *prima facie* straightforward response would be to claim that the Queen and the Sudanese refugee share some physiological characteristics that make them women. Roughly, these would be characteristics female human beings possess: a particular body type and certain anatomical characteristics (having breasts, a vagina and other features that enable childbearing). In short, they have sex characteristics in common and this makes them women. By and large, feminist philosophers find this response unsatisfactory though. They take ‘woman’ to be a *gender* term and consider it to be a matter of social, not physiological and anatomical, factors (see e.g., Frye 1996, Haslanger 2000b, Spelman 1990, Stoljar 1995, Young 1997). As a result, an appeal to shared sex characteristics will not provide satisfactory answers to the questions I posed.

Since feminist philosophers take *womanness* to be a matter of social factors, it seems that a more acceptable response to the questions above would be this: the Queen and the Sudanese refugee share some social factors relevant for *womanness* that make them women. However, feminist philosophers commonly regard this response as inadequate as well because it seems

impossible to point at some particular social factors relevant for *womanness* and that all women have in common (Butler 1999, Spelman 1990). Consider the two women mentioned. The Queen is extremely privileged, wealthy and powerful and probably not subject to oppression on the basis of being a woman. The Sudanese refugee lives in desperate poverty amidst a crisis where sexual violence against women is commonplace. They come from different cultural backgrounds and being an aristocratic English woman certainly entails a very different set of expectations and accepted behaviour than being an African Muslim woman. The Queen and the Sudanese refugee are both mothers, but it appears that their experiences of mothering differ radically. The Queen need not worry about natal or post-natal medical care whereas the Sudanese woman probably finds it hard to secure even basic medical care for herself and her children. It is far from obvious which social factors the Queen and the Sudanese woman have in common *as women* or if such shared social factors exist to begin with. The situation becomes more complex still when feminist philosophers consider *all* the women in the world: their lives, experiences and social circumstances and situations differ so hugely from one another that it seems impossible to articulate some particular social factors they all share.

As a result, some have argued that there is no single feature women have in common that makes them women (e.g., Spelman 1990, Stoljar 1995, Young 1997). But if this is so, it seems hugely difficult to make sense of some class all women are members of. What makes individual women of the same sort such that they can be classified together due to their gender? And why does this matter? Being able to articulate what grounds membership in the class of

women is important because without some sense of gender classes, (the argument goes) feminist theory is left politically paralysed (Young 1997). Feminism is a political movement that aims to aid members of a particular social class: those who are women. But if such a class cannot be made sense of or spelled out, the political usefulness of feminism seems to be under threat. Without an adequate way to make sense of the class of women, it is unclear what (if anything) is left of feminism as a political movement – in this case, feminism will have no subject matter and no-one to fight for. Subsequently, a growing number of feminist philosophers now argue that the class of women must be made sense of although it is far from obvious how this is to take place.

In this thesis, I will discuss four ways in which feminist philosophers have recently argued gender classes can be made sense of. I argue that they are all inadequate in various ways and in the final chapter I go on to propose a more successful way to understand membership in the class of women. Prior to doing so, I will consider why gender classification has become a problem for feminist philosophers and which arguments have convinced them that classifying women *qua* women is not straightforward (chapter 1). I then go on to look at ways in which feminist philosophers have responded to this problem.

In chapter 2, I discuss Marilyn Frye's (1996) proposal. Frye denies that women have some single feature in common (that makes them women) but goes on to suggest that gender classes can be made sense of in terms of certain practices women engage in that make women structurally related to one another. I argue against this proposal, showing that the practices Frye takes as central to her position leave out some individuals we think of as women at the

same time including other individuals counter-intuitively as women (such as some men and certain animals).

In chapter 3, I consider Iris Marion Young's (1997) suggestion that the class of women can be made sense of because women's everyday lives are arranged in similar ways. However, this does not (Young claims) entail that women share some single feature as a result. Again I argue that this position is inadequate: it does not seem to provide a good reason to think that there is a *single* class of women that *all and only* women are members of. Some individuals might counter-intuitively be classified as women provided their lives are arranged in certain ways Young takes to be typical of women's lives.

In chapter 4, I argue against Natalie Stoljar's (1995) position. Stoljar suggests that the class of women can be made sense of in resemblance nominalist terms: in order for someone to be a member of this class, that individual must sufficiently resemble certain paradigm or exemplar women. Such a view (Stoljar argues) avoids having to rely on some single feature women share likely to be problematic and yet, we can classify women *qua* women. Nevertheless, I show that Stoljar's suggestion is inadequate because some individuals (such as George W. Bush) also sufficiently resemble the women paradigms Stoljar outlines and, as a result, would count as a woman.

In chapter 5, I consider Sally Haslanger's (2000b) position. Unlike most recent feminist accounts of gender, Haslanger thinks that there is something women have in common that makes them women: they all occupying a particular kind of subordinate social position that is sex-marked. The class of women, then, can be made sense of on the basis of this shared feature. I agree

with many of Haslanger's claims but go on to suggest that feminist philosophers should feel reluctant to endorse her position. This is because Haslanger's view of what it is to be a woman is very unintuitive and it seems unhelpful to promote a view of *womanness* few (I suspect) would be willing to endorse. Rather, gender classes should be understood in a way that coheres with our intuitions about women and men as closely as possible.

In chapter 6, I argue for a way to understand the class of women that (I think) more successfully responds to the feminist problem over gender classes. I suggest that our intuitions about gender are sufficient to ground the class of women for feminist political purposes. The key to my suggestion is that there is something women have in common: they are all women and possess the feature of *womanness*. But, instead of providing a definition of *woman* or a detailed account of what it is to be a woman, I argue that a thin notion of *womanness* is sufficient. On my view, feminist philosophers need not articulate some set of necessary and sufficient conditions of *womanness* to make sense of membership in the class of women. In doing so, I draw from the work of two philosophers: G. W. F. Hegel and David Armstrong. I argue that membership in the class of women can be made sense of, if *womanness* is understood either as a Hegelian substance-universal or as an Armstrongian substantial universal. I also argue that my proposal provides a better way to understand why the Queen and the Sudanese woman are members of the *same* class than those proposals considered earlier. Finally, my proposal can better take into account women's diverse and dissimilar experiences *as women* because I am not making claims about any features women *must* possess in order to count as women.

CHAPTER 1

FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY AND GENDER CLASSIFICATION

I

Questions concerning gender classification have become central to recent feminist philosophy. Some theorists have expressed scepticism about the *existence* of gender classes (Butler 1999, Spelman 1990). Others have argued that gender classes do exist but acknowledge that making sense of these classes is very difficult (Frye 1996, Fuss 1989, Haslanger 2000b, Nicholson 1994, Stoljar 1995, Stone 2004, Young 1997). The central question for these theorists is this: *how* can feminist philosophers make sense of gender classification?¹ One response would be to argue for some form of *gender realism*. This is the view that women have some single feature or set of features in common that makes them women. On gender realist views, this feature (or set of features) would be definitive of *womanness* and it would ground the class of women. This common feature might be (for example) a specific psychological orientation or identification with a particular gender, a particular behavioural trait or a specific experience. Generally speaking it cannot, however, be a physiological or biological feature; feminist theorists commonly distinguish one's *gender* (being a woman or a man) from one's *sex* (being female or male)

¹ For the remainder of this thesis, I take 'gender classification' as shorthand for 'gender classification of women'. Although it seems that classifying men *qua* men would encounter the same problems classifying women *qua* women does, I will concentrate on the latter problem. This is because making sense of the class of women is an issue feminist philosophers find particularly problematic due to feminism's political dimension. This will become clearer shortly.

where the latter is a matter of biological and anatomical features and the former is a matter of social factors.² Gender realist positions (by and large) accept this distinction, rejecting the view that women share some biological or anatomical features that make them women. (I will discuss this in more detail shortly.)

Much of current feminist theory, however, considers gender realism to be an anathema. Feminist philosophers commonly regard gender realist positions as counterproductive, regressive and politically insidious. Generally speaking, gender realism is considered to be something feminist philosophers should not endorse (Butler 1999, Frye 1996, Spelman 1990, Stoljar 1995, Young 1997). Many insist that this is the case because there is no single feature (or set of features) that all women have in common that makes them women. This *nominalist* view of gender is nowadays the preferred position most feminist philosophers hold; although there seems to be a range of features that are associated with being a woman or *womanness* (such as certain social roles, psychological dispositions, experiences and expectations), there is no single feature that all women have in common that is definitive of *womanness*. As a result, gender classes (many claim) cannot be made sense of by appealing to a feature that women have in common (Frye 1996, Nicholson 1994, Stoljar 1995, Stone 2004, Young 1997).

In the next five chapters, I will consider different feminist responses, both realist and nominalist, to questions concerning gender classification. But

² What the social factors definitive of gender are is one of the most controversial issues within feminist theory. There is no simple way to outline the social factors feminist theorists often have in mind when they discuss gender and there is no conclusively settled understanding of which social factors define gender. Due to this, I deliberately say very little of them in order to keep the discussion focused.

first I will map out what kinds of arguments have convinced many feminist theorists that making sense of gender classes is a difficult task. The two most prominent views that have rendered gender classification problematic are Elizabeth Spelman's (1990) *commonality problem* and Judith Butler's (1999) *normativity problem*. Butler and Spelman both argue for versions of gender nominalism that I will call *gender scepticism*. They claim (roughly) that there is no single feature women have in common that makes them women (gender nominalism). In so doing, they aim to provide good reasons for rejecting gender realism. These arguments have another task as well: to question the *viability* of conceiving women as a group or class (gender scepticism). Butler and Spelman ask whether it makes sense to think of women as members of a single class to begin with and they go on to argue that it does not; they generate scepticism about the *class* of women suggesting that such a class does not exist.

My aim in this chapter is two-fold. First, I will show that the cases Butler and Spelman make against gender realism do not in actual fact count against it. I suggest that feminist philosophers have no reason to reject gender realism *in general*; they have reason to reject only *particular* gender realist positions. Second, by questioning the viability of conceiving women as a class, Spelman and Butler illustrate that there are many difficulties with gender classification. Further, these difficulties lead them to endorse (what I call) gender scepticism. By contrast, I will argue that the problems Spelman and Butler draw attention to should not lead feminist philosophers to endorse scepticism about the class of women. I will suggest that gender scepticism is very counterproductive for feminist politics and that, as a result, feminist

theorists should feel reluctant to endorse such a view by giving up talk of women as a class that is central to feminist theory. This discussion will set the stage for the next five chapters; in what follows, I will discuss ways in which feminist theorists have attempted to make sense of gender classes following Butler's and Spelman's critiques.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. I will first make some preliminary points about the terminology that I will be using for the remainder of this thesis (section II). I then move on to outline in more detail why feminist philosophers usually argue that gender classification cannot rely on any physiological or biological features (section III). Next I will consider Spelman's and Butler's arguments against gender realism and for gender scepticism (section IV). I end with a discussion of these arguments (in section V) arguing that neither Butler nor Spelman give good reasons to reject gender realism in general and that feminist philosophers should not endorse scepticism about the class of women.

II

In the previous section, I briefly characterised two responses to the issue at the heart of my project (how to make sense of the class of women). These were *gender realism* (which holds that women have some single feature in common that grounds classification) and *gender nominalism* (which holds that gender classification must be made sense of in terms of something other than shared features since women do not appear to have any single thing in common that makes them women). However, this terminology is not usual when feminist

philosophers discuss gender classes; they more commonly discuss this issue in terms of *essentialism*. By and large, I will avoid this common feminist terminology. During the past two decades terms such as ‘essential’, ‘essentialism’ and ‘essences’ have become notoriously difficult to define within the context of feminist philosophy. As a result, I find it unhelpful to employ them. (It is worth pointing out that some feminist philosophers have recently clarified these notions in a helpful manner. See e.g., Stone 2004 and Witt 1995.) For a start, gender classification is often discussed simply as an essentialist issue. But *essentialism* can denote a number of different things: it can denote *generic essentialism* (the view that there is some feature that is necessary for *womanness* shared universally by women) or it can denote *individual essentialism* (the view that some of an individual’s features are necessary to the individual *qua* that individual). It is often unclear which form authors have in mind when they discuss essentialism in general. Further, generic essentialism is often unreflectively and confusingly coupled together with individual essentialism because feminist theorists tend to think generic and individual essentialisms go together; if some feature is necessary for *womanness*, this feature is also assumed to be essential to individual women *qua* individual women.

For instance, suppose that having the feature **F** is necessary for membership in the class of women. Many assume that **F** (as a result) will also be essential to individual members of this class *qua* individuals (e.g., Spelman 1990). So, suppose the Queen has some feature that is necessary for membership in the class of women and that the Queen, as a result, is a member

of this class. Many feminists assume this also entails that being a member of this class (or being a woman) is something that is essential to the Queen as an individual - were the Queen to lose this feature, she would no longer be a woman nor would she be the *same* individual. On the contrary, Natalie Stoljar (1995) (among others) has argued that it is a mistake to couple generic and individual essentialisms together because the former does not entail anything about the latter. Having red hair (for example) seems to be necessary for membership in the class of redheaded people. But, it seems this does not entail having red hair is essential to individuals with red hair who are members of this class. If an individual member of this class were to dye his or her hair black, this individual would no longer be a member of the class of redheaded people. But it seems that dying one's hair does not mean the individual is no longer the *same* individual and this illustrates that features which are necessary for class membership may or may not be essential to individual members of particular classes.

It is not enough though just to clarify whether one is talking about generic or individual essentialism when using the term 'essentialism'. Further clarifications must be made. Feminist philosophers commonly understand both *generic* and *individual essentialisms* in a number of different ways and this further confuses feminist discussions of gender classes. For instance, Naomi Schor distinguishes two ways in which feminist philosophers commonly understand generic essentialism. First, "[it] consists in the belief that woman has an essence, that woman can be specified by one or a number of inborn attributes which define across cultures and throughout history her unchanging

being and in the absence of which she ceases to be categorized as a woman” (Schor 1989: 40). This characterisation makes specific reference to innate or inborn attributes and features suggesting that some *biological* features are necessary for membership in the class of women. Second, feminists understand generic essentialism to be “a form of ‘false universalism’ ... By its majestic singularity woman conspires in the denial of the very real lived experiences – sexual, ethnic, racial, national, cultural, economic, generational – that divide women from each other and from themselves” (Schor 1989: 42). The idea with this characterisation is that some *social, cultural* or *psychological* factor is necessary for membership in the class of women. Experiencing oppression, occupying a particular social position or exhibiting a specific psychological disposition might count as such factors. As there are different ways of understanding generic essentialism, feminist philosophers must also be careful to characterise what they take such a view to entail - whether they take features necessary for class membership to be biological, social, cultural or psychological.

The situation is further complicated as some feminists take ‘essentialism’ (in the context of feminist theory) to imply something altogether different from *both generic and individual* essentialisms. First, being an essentialist (to some) implies that one is “complicitous with Western metaphysics ... remain[ing] a prisoner of the metaphysical with its illusions of presence, Being, stable meanings and identities” (Schor 1989: 42). Feminist theorists such as Hélène Cixous (1981) are taken to suggest that depending on whether one takes traditional metaphysics to provide useful or useless

philosophical lessons one may or may not be characterised as an essentialist. Second, feminist philosophers sometimes take essentialism to have a semantic dimension: a theory may or may not be an essentialist one (according to some) depending on its view of language. This kind of essentialism takes language to be something that merely describes and reports disinterestedly the way the world is. By contrast, Drucilla Cornell (among others) claims that language does not in any way reflect, mirror or express reality. Rather, language *constructs* reality in certain ways such that it appears *as if* language merely mirrors and reflects the way the world is (Cornell 1993; see also Weedon 1998).

Since *essentialism* in general and *generic essentialism* in particular have such diverse meanings within feminist theory I find that any talk of ‘essences’ and ‘essentialism’ confuses, rather than clarifies, the issue I am looking at. Although my focus will be roughly on the issues covered by feminist discussions of generic essentialism, I will not discuss gender classification using this term. Instead I will discuss it in terms of gender realism and gender nominalism. It seems to me that employing this terminology (instead of the one feminist philosophers more commonly use) avoids terminological difficulties with ‘essentialism’ and its cognates and, as a result, makes theoretical sense.

There are some useful preliminary points about gender realism and nominalism worth bearing in mind. The debate between gender realists and gender nominalists largely mirrors the standard debate between *metaphysical* realists and nominalists. Metaphysical realists commonly argue that all tokens (individual instances) of a certain type (sort or kind) instantiate the same

universal property that makes them tokens of that type where a *universal property* is commonly understood as something that may be shared by many individuals of some sort (Russell 1967). For instance, someone who is a metaphysical realist about colour would argue that all red tokens instantiate the universal property of *redness* that makes these entities red (or of the same type **red**). Metaphysical nominalists (of various forms) commonly explain type membership differently. They all accept that individual red entities are tokens of the type **red** but they deny that the red entities share some universal property of *redness* that makes these entities red. Rather, the predicate nominalist (for instance) argues that entities picked out by the same predicate 'red' will be members of the same type **red**. (For more on the metaphysical issues here briefly sketched out, see Armstrong 1989.)³

³ The standard metaphysical and feminist debates over realism and nominalism, nevertheless, differ in some important respects. First, some gender nominalists -- those I call gender sceptics -- hold that since women do not seem to have anything in common that makes them women, feminist philosophers cannot make sense of the class of women (Butler 1999, Spelman 1990). There simply is nothing that makes women members of the same class and this generates scepticism about the class itself: whether or not it exists. (More on this position shortly.) Metaphysical nominalism (by and large) does not generate such scepticism and metaphysical nominalists hold that type membership *can* be made sense of. They merely deny that this can be done in terms of shared *universal* features. So, although metaphysical nominalists deny that all red entities have a universal *redness* in common, they do not deny or question the existence of the class of red entities. Second, gender nominalists seem to commonly hold that women do not have any single feature in common due to their gender; there may be similarities and family resemblances amongst women, but there is no single feature definitive of *womanness* necessary and sufficient for membership in the class of women (Stoljar 1995). Metaphysical nominalists do not generally speaking deny that some single feature may be shared by tokens of some specific type. Again, they deny that all entities of a certain sort share a *universal* property or feature -- for example, a predicate nominalist (although denying that entities of some type share a universal property) would claim that entities of a certain type have in common that they are picked out by the same predicate. So, metaphysical nominalists (unlike gender nominalists) accept that entities of certain sorts have some feature in common *qua* entities of that sort.

III

Most people think, I suspect, that classifying women *qua* women is unproblematic. Over the past few decades, ‘differences between men and women’ seem to have become simply the polite and politically correct way to talk about the differences between males and females. This suggests that *femaleness* and *womanness* (and *maleness* and *manness*) are simply two ways of talking about the same thing. If so, classifying women *qua* women would simply be a matter of picking out certain physiological, biological and anatomical features shared by all female human beings. Such features would include one’s chromosomal make-up (that an individual possesses XX chromosomes), the individual’s outer sex organs (having a vagina rather than a penis), the relative size of reproductive gametes (that they are large egg cells rather than small sperm cells), the inner sex organs of the individual (such as ovaries) and other physical features (such as the amount of body hair, relative body size, body shape and so on).

As mentioned, feminist philosophers (by and large) find this unsatisfactory. They commonly classify individuals in two distinct ways: by virtue of their *sex* (*maleness* and *femaleness* that are determined by the kinds of biological and anatomical features outlined above) and by virtue of their *gender* (*manness* and *womanness*) considered to be matters of social factors with no necessary connection to one’s sex. On most feminist accounts, if individuals are classified on the basis of their biological and anatomical features, these individuals will be classified by virtue of their sex, not by virtue of their gender. Furthermore, one’s gender is not considered to be co-extensive with one’s sex.

Some individuals who (for instance) count as women, turn out not to count as female (and *vice versa*) (Haslanger 2000b, Stoljar 1995). (Some theorists have argued that sex classification is not as straightforward as I have outlined here. For an interesting discussion of the problems with sex classification, see Fausto-Sterling 1993 and 2000.)

Gender classification, then, requires a very different set of criteria from sex classification. Sally Haslanger writes,

“one is a woman, not by virtue of one’s intrinsic features (for example, a body type), but by virtue of one’s part in a system of social relations ... gender is a relational or extrinsic property of individuals, and the relations in question are social.” (1993: 88)

The idea is that the characteristics by which individuals are classified as either male or female are anatomical. By contrast, the characteristics by which individuals are classified as women and men are considered to be social.⁴ The underlying feminist motivation for making this distinction between one’s biological sex and one’s social gender was to counter *biological determinism*. This is the view that “one’s biological sex determines one’s social and cultural

⁴ Feminists also often draw a distinction between one’s *intrinsic* biological sex and one’s *extrinsic* social gender as Haslanger does in the passage quote above. Intrinsic features depend solely on the individual who possesses those features whereas extrinsic features depend on aspects external to the individual. Suppose Jack is a six feet tall uncle of Charlie. The feature of *being six feet tall* is intrinsic to Jack. He has this feature solely by virtue of himself and having this feature does not depend in any way on (for instance) how tall or short others around him are. Even if Jack were the sole entity that existed, he would still have the feature of *being six feet tall*. Then again, that Jack is the uncle of Charlie is not something that depends on Jack alone. It depends on a number of aspects external to Jack: whether Jack has any siblings, whether Jack’s siblings have children and whether one of those children Jack’s siblings have, is Charlie. If any of these fail to hold (if Jack has no siblings or if his siblings have no children or if none of these children are Charlie), Jack cannot possess the feature of *being the uncle of Charlie*. On most feminist views, *being a woman* is considered to be analogous to features such as *being the uncle of Charlie*. They are both extrinsic features distinct and independent from some intrinsic features individuals might possess, like *being female* and *being six feet tall*.

characteristics and roles” (Squires 2000: 55). Historically many social, cultural and psychological differences between men and women were taken to be manifestations of some underlying physical differences between the sexes and these physical differences were often used to justify a range of oppressive social conditions. Toril Moi characterises views that justify oppressive treatment of women in terms of physical features as committed to a “pervasive” view of sex (Moi 1999: 11). On such views, one’s biological sex (Moi claims) is regarded as something so pervasive that it defines everything about an individual including his or her social position and intellectual capacities (1999: 11). Beliefs about physiological characteristics were not only taken to define everything about individuals. They were also taken to provide general frameworks for social and political arrangements along gender lines.

Consider one way in which a position of this type has been argued for (typical of positions committed to this pervasive view of sex). In 1889, two British scientists argued (with the help of the scientific methods of their day) that *all* differences between men and women could be explained in terms of certain metabolic states. These scientists, Geddes and Thompson, argued that females are ‘anabolic’: they conserve energy. Males, on the other hand, are ‘katabolic’: they tend to expend energy since males (for some reason) tend to have surplus amounts of it. This (Geddes and Thompson argued) explains why “it is generally true that the males [of all animal species, including the human species] are more active, energetic, eager, passionate, and variable; [and that] the females [are] more passive, conservative, sluggish, and stable” (Geddes and Thompson quoted in Moi 1999: 18). They went on to argue against granting

women political, social and economic rights based on this scientific research. Geddes and Thompson suggested, “what was decided among the prehistoric Protozoa cannot be annulled by Act of Parliament” (quoted in Moi 1999: 18); since nature has constituted men and women in this manner, any legislation that guaranteed equal rights would be futile. Women’s natural constitution as passive and sluggish is inevitable and no amount of social reform will alter this. The pair went on to argue that the human species “will come to a ruinous end unless women are kept out of economic competition with men” (Moi 2000: 19).

Contra views such as those by Geddes and Thompson, feminist theorists commonly argue that it is crucially important to maintain the distinction between sex characteristics and gender characteristics. As early as the 18th century, feminists suggested that women’s inferior social, economic and intellectual positions did not reflect any biological facts about females. Rather, the features often cited as evidence of women’s unsuitability to work outside the home, partake in political decision-making or own private property (such as being passive or only interested in nurturing babies) were socially conditioned, not innate (if present at all). Feminist theorists went on to argue (and rightly so) that since this is the case, physiological differences should not be used to justify oppressive social and political arrangements (for more, see Bryson 1992). Since the 1960s (and the onslaught of the so-called modern feminist movement) *gender* has become a central notion for feminist theorists. The idea is that cashing out those social factors constitutive of one’s gender paves the way for social reform that ends women’s political and social subordination. The idea seemed to be that knowing the social conditions constitutive of gender tells

feminist theorists which social arrangements are in need of reform. During the past 40 years, feminist theorists have largely embraced this separation of sex and gender having mostly concentrated on ways to theorise the latter. In doing so, they aim to find ways to effectively reform the social and political conditions responsible for women's subordination.⁵

IV

Since gender classification (on common feminist views) is not a matter of biological features but rather it is a matter of certain social factors, what are these social factors that make women *women*? For instance, reconsider the Queen of England and the black Muslim mother of five displaced by ethnic cleansing taking place in Darfur. As outlined, the former is extremely privileged, wealthy and powerful whereas the latter lives in desperate poverty; the two women come from very different social, cultural and religious backgrounds; and their experiences *as mothers* appear to differ greatly since the Queen (unlike the Sudanese woman) need not worry about natal or post-natal

⁵ In recent years, some feminists have argued that the sex/ gender division is problematic. This is because it seems that our understandings of both *sex and gender* are shaped by social factors. For instance, what counts as sex characteristics (that determine whether one is male or female) can differ hugely; opting for one characterisation of sex over another is simply an expression of preference and bias produced by social settings in which scientists and biologists work (Butler 1993). Some feminists further argue that the supposedly disinterested and gender-neutral scientific ways in which human bodies are characterised as either male or female already contain gender stereotypic understandings of women and men. For example, descriptions of female bodies as weak (due to relative muscle mass) mirror stereotypical assumptions about women. Insofar as our understandings of both sex and gender involve numerous social presuppositions and presumptions (these feminists claim), it no longer makes sense to maintain a sharp distinction between one's biological sex and one's social gender (see e.g., Butler 1999, Gatens 1996 and Prokhovnik 1999). Although this is an interesting and worthwhile issue to consider I cannot take it up here in detail.

medical care. What, then, is the underlying shared social factor (or set of factors) that makes both the Queen and the Sudanese refugee *women* and thus, members of the *same* class?

A number of different definitions of *womanness* have been suggested over the past 40 years that might answer my question and I cannot consider them all here. One influential way to understand gender has been proposed by Nancy Chodorow (1978, 1995). Consider stereotypical gender differences. In traditional white Western societies, such differences include the following: “to be good at being a man (that is, to be masculine), one should be strong, active, independent, rational, handsome, and so on; to be good at being a woman, one should be nurturing, emotional, cooperative, pretty and so on” (Haslanger 1993: 89). Chodorow argues that the underlying factor responsible for these kinds of gender differences is that women and men come to develop different kinds of egos. She claims that a person’s gender is embedded in their psyche and that it develops as a response to a certain ‘object-relations’ that persons experience as infants. The object-relation responsible for ego (and gender) development is that which the person experiences towards his or her mother (or other female primary caretaker). Chodorow goes on to argue that infant girls and boys experience different kinds of object-relations to their mothers (or other female primary caretakers). Due to this, their egos develop in different ways where these differences are manifested in ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ behaviour, emotional responses, career choices and so on.⁶

⁶ Chodorow does not simply assume that all primary caretakers will be women. She claims that women often end up being primary caretakers because they lactate: “For convenience, and not because of biological necessity, [lactation] has usually meant that

Why do object-relations differ for infant boys and girls? In Chodorow's view, the reason is this: "we might expect that a woman's identification with a girl child might be stronger [than her identification with a boy child]; that a mother, who is, after all, a person who is a woman and not simply the performer of a formally defined role, would tend to treat infants of different sexes in different ways" (1995: 201). Her suggestion is that mothers probably identify more closely with their infant daughters (than with their infant sons) and, as a result, they tend to treat their infant daughters and sons differently. Chodorow goes on to claim:

"It seems likely that from their children's earliest childhood, mothers and women tend to identify more with daughters and to help them to differentiate less, and that processes of separation and individuation [of the self] are made more difficult for girls. On the other hand, a mother tends to identify less with her son, and to push him toward differentiation." (1995: 202)

Mothers unconsciously discourage their daughters from developing a clear sense of self at the same time encouraging their sons to do so. Until the mother actively encourages or discourages ego development (Chodorow assumes) both infant daughters and infant sons will have been equally dependent on their mothers being unable to recognise that they are distinct persons from their mothers. The mothers' encouragement or discouragement, then, results in the infant daughters and sons dissociating their egos differently from their mothers.

The mothers' tendency to push infant sons away while retaining close identification with infant daughters results in male and female egos developing differently. As boys have been pushed away and forced to dissociate their own senses of self from their mothers', boys develop well-defined and rigid ego

mothers, and females in general, tend to take all care of babies" (Chodorow 1995: 201).

boundaries. By contrast, girls will not: a mother's identification with her daughter means that the mother discourages (and to some extent prevents) the daughter from developing her own sense of self. Girls, as a result, develop blurred, fragmented and confused ego boundaries. They find differentiating their own interests from the interests of others difficult as well as finding it difficult to think about their own well-being independently from the well-being of those around them.

The kinds of gender traits men and women commonly exhibit (on Chodorow's view) can be explained as manifestations of these kinds of ego boundaries (where males have well-defined and determined ego boundaries and females have fuzzy, blurry and fragmented boundaries). For instance, consider emotional dependency. Women are stereotypically observed to be more emotional, to relate to others more closely and to be more emotionally dependent on others around them (their families, friends and colleagues). These common traits (Chodorow claims) are all manifestations of women's muddled and confused ego boundaries. Women simply are unable to differentiate their own senses of self in clear and rigid manner, they are unable to distinguish their own interests from the interests of those around them and they merge their own aims and goals with the aims and goals of those around them.

Men, on the other hand, are commonly observed to be emotionally detached and unable to relate to others around them, they are selfish in their pursuits and interests and they are ambitious preferring a career where dispassionate and distanced thinking is considered to be a virtue. These traits (Chodorow thinks) are manifestations of men's ego boundaries: since they are

clearly defined, men have no difficulties in distinguishing their own interests from the interests of their wives, children or family. Men tend to engage in more autonomous and independent pursuits since their senses of self are well defined and, as a result, men often tend to consider their individual well-being prior to the well-being of others around them.⁷

Chodorow's position appears to provide a way to make sense of gender classes: having fuzzy and blurry ego boundaries (mirrored in behaviour that is stereotypically feminine) is constitutive of *womanness* and shared by all women. This, then, provides the criterion for membership in the class of women. However, suggestions such as Chodorow's are nowadays widely considered to be unsatisfactory. During the past two decades many feminist philosophers have argued for *nominalism* about gender and gender nominalist positions are nowadays prevalent. As mentioned, Spelman (1990) and Butler (1999) have put forward perhaps the most prominent arguments for gender nominalism. They argue against a specific *metaphysical perspective*, gender realism, which positions such as Chodorow's appear to hold.⁸ As mentioned,

⁷ Chodorow thinks these differences are mutable though. If both male and female parents were equally involved in child rearing tasks, (Chodorow claims) infant girls and boys would develop similar ego boundaries and commonly observed gender differences between men and women would simply disappear: "boys need to grow up around men who take a major role in child care, and girls around women who ... have a valued role and recognized spheres of legitimate control [outside the home]. These arrangements could help to ensure that children of both sexes develop a sufficiently individuated and strong sense of self, as well as a positively valued and secure gender identity, that does not bog down either in ego-boundary confusion, low self-esteem, and overwhelming relatedness to others, or in compulsive denial of any connection to others or dependence upon them" (Chodorow 1995: 214).

⁸ There are other reasons for why one might feel reluctant to endorse Chodorow's view (apart from arguments for gender nominalism). For instance, her position seems to be empirically unverifiable: how could we ever confirm that women and men really have different kinds of ego boundaries? That Chodorow's position is empirically

gender realism is the view that women have some feature (definitive of *womanness*) in common that makes them women. (For Chodorow, this feature would be women's fuzzy and confused ego boundaries manifested in typically feminine behaviour). First and foremost, Spelman and Butler deny that there is any feature women have in common that makes them women. In doing so they also question the existence of the class of women itself arguing that there is no such class. I will argue shortly that neither of Spelman's and Butler's conclusions should be accepted: feminist theorists are mistaken to think that the cases they make against gender realism provide good reasons to reject gender realism *per se* and they should feel reluctant to endorse scepticism about the class of women. Prior to doing so, I will outline Butler's and Spelman's arguments in more detail. (My reasons for arguing that feminist philosophers should not reject gender realism will become clearer later on. In the final chapter, I argue for two ways to understand gender realism that enable feminist philosophers to make sense of gender classes and that do not have the adverse consequences Spelman and Butler think gender realist positions have.)

Spelman

Elizabeth Spelman argues famously that women's individuality and their diverse and dissimilar experiences as women count against two things; first, they count against realism about gender, and second, they count against the view that there is a *single* class of women (that individual women are members

unverifiable is enough (for some) to warrant its rejection. I will leave this worry to one side. For my purposes, it is more relevant to consider arguments feminist theorists have levelled against perspectives such as Chodorow's *in general*.

of). By contrast, Spelman argues that there are multiple gender classes that are culturally and socially specific. In her *Inessential Woman*, Spelman sets out to refute the gender realism that (she claims) many feminist theorists hold: this is the view that “underneath or beyond the differences among women there must be some shared identity – as if commonality were a metaphysical given” (1990: 13). In short, Spelman argues that the features women are presumed to have in common (*qua* women) are in fact features that only some women have in common. She goes on to claim that *womanness* is inseparable from other aspects of one’s identity (such as race and class). Following on from this, Spelman finally argues that since *womanness* is socially constructed and social construction differs from one society to the next, it turns out that *womanness* is a culturally specific feature and that only women with similar racial, cultural and social backgrounds share a *particular* gender.

Metaphysical realists (roughly) hold that particulars of certain sorts share universal features – ones that may be shared by many individuals – that make them of those sorts (Russell 1967).⁹ Consider Russell’s example of *justice* to characterise metaphysical realism in more detail:

“Let us consider, say, such a notion as *justice*. If we ask ourselves what justice is, it is natural to proceed by considering this, that, and the other just act, with a view to discovering what they have in common. They must all, in some sense,

⁹ There are a number of different metaphysical positions that may be characterised as *realist*. An important way in which these positions differ from one another is in what exactly they take universal features to be *like*: whether they are abstract, whether there is a distinct realm in which they exist and so on (for more, see Armstrong 1989). Providing a satisfactory characterisation of all of these views and the ways in which they differ from one another would be a huge task and one that I cannot undertake here. For my purposes the rough-and-ready characterisation of metaphysical realism will suffice (that particulars share a universal feature on such views). This is the common thread running through different realist positions and definitive of *metaphysical realism* regardless of how universal features are understood in detail.

partake of a common nature, which will be found in whatever is just and in nothing else. This common nature, in virtue of which they are all just, will be justice itself, the pure essence the admixture of which with facts of ordinary life produces the multiplicity of just acts ... This pure essence is what Plato calls an 'idea' or 'form'." (Russell 1967: 52)

He goes on to claim: "the word 'idea' has acquired, in the course of time, many associations which are quite misleading when applied to Plato's 'ideas'. We shall therefore use the word 'universal' ... to describe what Plato meant" where "*a universal* will be anything which may be shared by many particulars" (1967: 53).

Spelman claims that much of Western feminist theory is being done from a realist metaphysical perspective whereby it is assumed that women share a universal feature that makes them women (Spelman 1990: 2). Feminist theorists supposedly hold a view of gender parallel to the view of *justice* Russell outlines: individual women share a universal feature of *womanness* that makes them women and this feature is found in all and only women. Spelman, however, argues that no such universal exists. As this is the case, she holds that gender realism (of any kind) must be false. Spelman maintains firstly that the gender realist view, which she takes much of feminist theory to hold, has come about by white middle-class Western feminists falsely theorising gender and gender oppression from the perspective of 'white solipsism', the tendency to "think, imagine and speak as if whiteness describes the world" (Rich, quoted in Harris 1993: 356):

"If ... I believe that the woman in every woman is a woman just like me, and if I also assume that there is no difference between being white and being a woman, then seeing another woman 'as a woman' will involve seeing her as fundamentally like the woman I am. In other words, the womanness underneath the Black woman's skin is a white woman's, and deep down inside the Latina woman is an Anglo woman waiting to burst through an obscuring cultural shroud." (Spelman 1990: 13)

In Spelman's view, white Western middle-class feminists have assumed that women all share some single feature and have theorised this feature as the one *they* possess. In doing so, they inadvertently created a notion of *womanness* where women's common nature underneath the distorting cultural conditions is "white, middle-class, heterosexual, Christian, and able-bodied" (Minow 1993: 339). Furthermore, this false notion of *womanness* (Spelman claims) is "being passed off as a metaphysical truth" (1990: 186) thereby privileging some women while marginalizing others. White middle-class Western feminists simply did not understand the importance of race and class and by focusing on women merely *as women* (ignoring race and class differences) they "conflate[d] the condition of one group of women with the condition of all" (Spelman 1990: 3).

The work of Betty Friedan (1963) provides a well-known example of precisely this conflation. In her groundbreaking *The Feminine Mystique* Friedan called upon women to leave domesticity behind and find jobs outside the home in order to end women's social and political subordination. Some feminists were quick to point out that women from less privileged backgrounds (commonly poor and non-white) have held jobs and worked outside the home for decades to support their families and that Friedan's suggestion is clearly not applicable to all women: it is not applicable to those who already work outside the home. This illustrates that when Friedan called upon *women* to leave domesticity behind, she was clearly addressing only *one group* of women (white middle-class suburban housewives) falsely thinking she was addressing all women.

Spelman's discussion of white solipsism points to a further mistaken assumption (she thinks) feminist theorists hold: what makes one woman a woman is the same as what makes another woman a woman. On the contrary, she claims that "gender is constructed and defined in conjunction with elements of identity such as race, class, ethnicity and nationality" (Spelman 1990: 175). As a result, what makes it true that two women are women is not that they share something we can separate from other aspects of their identities:

"What makes it true that Angela and I are women is not some 'woman' substance that is the same in each of us and interchangeable between us. Selves are not made up of separable units of identity strung together to constitute a whole person. It is not as if there is a goddess somewhere who made lots of little identical 'woman' units and then, in order to spruce up the world a bit for herself, decided to put some of those units in black bodies, some in white bodies, some in the bodies of kitchen maids in seventeenth century France, some in the bodies of English, Israeli, and Indian prime ministers." (Spelman 1990: 158)

Spelman goes on to argue that those committed to gender realism have falsely assumed a woman's *womanness* is a neatly distinguishable part of her identity separable from all other aspects of the woman's identity (such as her racial, cultural and class identities). This is because (Spelman thinks) the realist picture of gender falsely entails that all women share the *same* feature of *womanness* regardless of any other features they might possess (such as those invoked by racial and class identities). This is because they assume a woman's *womanness* will remain unaffected by her race and class.

If gender were separable from race and class in this manner, (Spelman claims) all women would experience their *womanness* in the same way. On this view, "my being a woman means the same whether I am white or Black, rich or poor, French or Jamaican, Jewish or Muslim. As a woman, I'm like other

women” (Spelman 1990: 136). This is clearly not the case. It seems that (for example) a white female landowner in apartheid era South Africa will have a very different understanding of herself *as a woman* from a black South African woman who cleans up after her. It simply is not the case, as Spelman rightly points out, that all women experience their *womanness* in the same way. She concludes with a thought experiment to illustrate: “if it were possible to isolate a woman’s ‘womanness’ from her racial identity, then we should have no trouble imagining that had I been Black I could have had just the same understanding of myself as a woman as I in fact do ... To rehearse this imaginary situation is to expose its utter bizarreness” (1990: 135). If it were possible to separate one’s gender from one’s racial identity, it should be possible -- even easy -- to imagine that had I been of a different race, *as a woman* I would have remained the same. Nevertheless, it seems to be very difficult (if not impossible) to imagine this and Spelman suggests this counts against gender realism.

Finally, Spelman argues that women (*qua* women) do not share a single gender since a woman’s *womanness* is shaped by cultural and social backgrounds:

“Being a ‘woman’ is not the same thing as, nor reducible to, being a ‘female’. ‘Women’ are what females of the human species become, or are supposed to become, through learning how to think, act, and live in certain ways. What females in one society learn about how they are to think, act, and live, can differ enormously from what females in another society learn; in fact, as we have been reminded often, there can be very significant differences within a given society.” (1990: 134)

She claims further “if we can say with de Beauvoir that societies create women out of females (making gender out of sex) and that different societies do this

differently ... we can say in an important sense that there is a variety of genders [amongst women]" (Spelman 1990: 174-5).

What Spelman has in mind is something like this: women who come from similar social and cultural backgrounds sharing racial and class conditions are gendered similarly. They come to have a *particular* gender in common because through social construction "females become not simply women but particular kinds of women" (Spelman 1990: 113). They become white working-class women, black middle-class women, poor Jewish women, wealthy aristocratic European women and so on. Spelman's thought is that since *womanness* is constructed differently from one society to the next, it will differ from one society to the next and no single feature of *womanness* that all women cross-culturally share, exists. Rather, those individuals we think of as women exhibit a range of different genders that depend on their particular social conditions. Due to this (Spelman holds), it is not possible to classify women into a *single* class.

Butler

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (first published in 1990) aims to "trace the way in which gender fables establish and circulate the misnomer of natural facts" (1999: xxxi). Butler argues that it appears *as if* the term 'woman' has some unitary cross-cultural and trans-historical meaning and *as if* the term picks out some determinate group of people who have a feature (an identity, trait or experience) in common *qua* members of that group. Unitary gender concepts (for Butler) falsely suggest that women form a group of some kind that

functions as the foundation for feminist theory, capturing some feminist 'sisterhood' where individual group members identify with one another or have some specific trait in common.

Contra such a mistaken picture, Butler first calls into question the meaning of the term 'woman'. She argues that the concept *woman* has no stable meaning across different cultures and societies (or even within a given society). Rather, "*woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification" (Butler 1999: 43). She then goes on to claim that to assume women share something that makes them women is seriously misguided: she claims "[t]here is no [common] gender identity behind the expressions of gender" (1999: 33). For Butler, there is no determinate way of being a woman, identifying oneself as a woman or a way of thinking about one's *womanness*.¹⁰ The picture of gender Butler critiques does not in any meaningful sense describe the way the world is – rather, it is the unwitting *product* of feminist politics in its efforts to represent the interests of certain political subjects, namely women. On Butler's view, in aiming to aid women by representing their interests, feminism "constitutes the subject for whom

¹⁰ Butler is not simply rejecting the thought that women have a gender identity in common. She also thinks that the notion of *gender identity* is incoherent because *gender* (in Butler's view) is not experienced in the manner feminist theorists commonly take gender to be experienced. For Butler, genders (*manness* and *womanness*) are not manifest in any identity, sense of self or way of thinking about oneself. Rather, gender (for Butler) is something people *do*: *gender is* a set of actions that are associated with men and women such as wearing certain gender coded clothing, putting on make-up and behaving in gendered ways. Individuals (in Butler's view) do not possess a gender. Rather, gender is something that is attached to actions and behaviours individuals perform. Insofar as this is the case, any talk of gender identities seems incoherent since actions and behaviours do not have *identities* (or a sense of self) as women or men (Butler 1990).

political representation is pursued” (1999: 3). Insofar as this is the case, Butler argues any notion of *womanness* used to capture a feminist ‘sisterhood’ (or the class of women) that feminist politics can take as its subject matter is unhelpful, masking rather than disclosing *what women are like*. Holding on to a unitary sense of *womanness* (that supposedly captures a single class of women) does not yield any political gains for feminist theorists. By contrast, having a unitary sense of *womanness* generates numerous problems for feminist theory.

Butler’s thought is roughly this: in order to represent *women’s* interests, feminist theorists have assumed that feminist politics requires “a universal basis for feminism, one which must be found in an identity [of women] assumed to exist cross-culturally” (1999: 6). Achieving this universal basis (feminist theorists believed, according to Butler) was simply a descriptive matter: examine the world and the women in it with a view to defining *womanness* such that it reflects the way women *are*. Nevertheless, feminist theorists failed to realise two things: first, that there is no specific way that women are due to their gender and second, that no definition of *womanness* can ever be merely descriptive. Gender concepts are problematic because they are always *normative*: they (in Butler’s view) entail something about the ways in which individuals *should be* in order to satisfy gender concepts. They articulate a set of conditions that those hoping to satisfy the concepts must cohere and comply with creating norms that determine how one should live, act and behave. Butler writes:

“I would argue that any effort to give universal or specific content to the category of women, presuming that that guarantee of solidarity is required *in advance* [as the foundation of feminist politics], will necessarily produce factionalization ... [a 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.” (Butler 1991: 160)

Gender concepts articulated by feminist theorists turned out to articulate a set of conditions that those hoping to gain feminist political representation must satisfy thus *prescribing* a supposedly correct picture of how to be, live and behave as a woman (and to qualify for feminist political representation) (Butler 1999: 4).

Feminist theorists, Butler acknowledges, did not intentionally set out to prescribe such norms. They undertook the task of cashing out *womanness* in good faith and aimed to do so in a manner conducive to feminist political goals. Nevertheless (and as Spelman also argued), they failed to take into account women’s diverse and dissimilar experiences and traits *as women*. Butler writes, “the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women [through a unitary notion of *womanness*] has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of ‘women’ are constructed” (1999: 19-20). By assuming that all women identify with one another and that they share something *qua* women, feminist theorists in effect distorted (rather than clarified) the picture of *womanness*.

Butler’s claim (to some extent) rings true. For instance, bell hooks [sic] has famously pointed out that many women do not identify with feminist theorists or the proposed feminist goals and aims. In particular, those who come from racially, culturally or economically oppressed groups find the idea that feminism aims to better their conditions *as women* foreign to them:

“Since men are not equals in white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal class structure, which men do women want to be equal to? Do women share a

common vision of what equality means? ... women in lower class and poor groups, particularly those who are non-white, would not have defined women's liberation as women gaining social equality with men, since they are continually reminded in their everyday lives that all women do not share a common social status. Concurrently, they know that many males in their social groups are exploited and oppressed. Knowing that men in their groups do not have social, political, and economic power, they would not deem it liberatory to share their social status." (hooks 2000: 19, originally published in 1984)

hooks goes on to argue that many non-white and non-middle class women were at best suspicious of feminism and at worst disillusioned with feminist theory that seemed to aid only white middle-class women who they did not identify with and who appeared to pay little (or no) attention to the specific situations women from racially, culturally or economically oppressed groups encountered (2000: 19).

Feminist theorists failed to pay sufficient attention to women's diversity (Butler argues) because *feminist theory itself* was guided by certain norms, ideologies and principles that unwittingly reflected mainstream society and politics. Feminist theories of gender (Butler claims) were informed by white solipsism and *heterosexism*. The prevalent views of *womanness*, then, reflected these theoretical biases. The former is already familiar to us from the discussion of Spelman in the previous section: it is the tendency to treat whiteness as the norm failing to take into account ways in which racial and ethnic differences affect individuals. Heterosexism is the tendency to treat heterosexual sexual practices as the norm and to naturalise such practices. On Butler's view heterosexist norms, ideals and traditions affect our behaviour to such an extent that (by and large) men and women are encouraged and even coerced to become heterosexual (Salih 2002: 49). Butler claims that heterosexism promotes a view whereby sexual practices between men and women are treated

as natural and normal whereas homosexual sexual behaviour is considered to be deviant, marginal, unnatural and something that should be prohibited. Feminist theory not only failed to take into account racial differences but it maintained a view of gender that did not seem to take into account the possibility of other sexualities alongside heterosexuality.

Butler argues that hugely problematic consequences have followed from these factors (from ignoring women's particular traits and experiences, from assuming that there is a common identity amongst women and from failing to see ideological norms governing feminist theory). In order to satisfy some supposedly correct picture of *womanness* -- informed by white solipsism and heterosexism -- women (Butler claims) must "conform to [certain] unspoken normative requirements" constitutive of *womanness* (1999: 9). They must be white, middle-class heterosexual females. If individual women (for any reason) fail to satisfy these conditions, they risk being alienated or, worse still, explicitly excluded from feminist politics altogether. Linda Nicholson captures this thought nicely:

"The belief that 'woman' does have some common meaning serves to coerce individuals into behaviour aimed to exhibit such meaning ... the idea of 'woman' as unitary operates as a policing force which generates and legitimises certain practices, experiences, etc., and curtails and delegitimizes others." (Nicholson 1998: 293)

For Butler, the practices commonly deemed illegitimate are those of minority races, cultures, ethnicities and sexualities with the result that much of feminist politics seems to privilege white, heterosexual and Western women over other kinds of women.

Butler's aim is not, however, merely to critique prevalent feminist notions of *womanness* showing that they are exclusionary and marginalising. Her argument is meant to be stronger than this: every definition of *womanness* is always going to be normative prescribing some way that individuals ought to be in order to satisfy the concept *woman*. She continues claiming that because all such prescriptions will be exclusionary and marginalising, all attempts to define gender concepts will be politically insidious. In order to avoid excluding and marginalising some women (while privileging others), feminist theorists must give up the thought that *woman* can be defined in any unitary manner. Only then are marginalised and underrepresented women guaranteed a voice within feminist theory. Roughly, Butler's idea is that a single sense of *womanness* promotes a single women's voice (so to speak) and this prevents women, who come from numerous marginalised groups, from speaking their minds and expressing themselves within the feminist movement.

Insofar as this is the case, Butler suggests that feminist theorists should actively *resist* defining *woman*: they should *deconstruct* the term thereby "releas[ing] the term into a future of multiple significations, to emancipate it from the [oppressive and exclusionary] ontologies to which it has been restricted, and to give it play as a site where unanticipated meanings might come to bear" (Butler 1991: 160). She claims that *woman* should always be open to a multiplicity of different and non-competing definitions and that the idea that women have something in common that makes them women "ought not to be the foundation of feminist politics" since women clearly do not share any single common feature (Butler 1999: 9). On Butler's view, *woman* has no

definite meaning and, as a result, it is false to think that it picks out a class of women that feminist politics represents. Feminist philosophers (in Butler's view) must give up the class of women, not hold on to it as something that grounds feminist theory and politics.

V

Subsequent feminist philosophy has been shaped to a great extent by these arguments and they have served a valuable purpose. First and foremost, arguments such as those Spelman and Butler put forward have made feminism more inclusive as a discipline by drawing attention to many false assumptions and generalisations feminists have made. They have illustrated the need to understand that women have different and dissimilar experiences *as women* and that the interconnections between racial, cultural and sexual identities and gendered identities need to be taken more seriously. These arguments have also alerted feminist philosophers to ways in which seemingly neutral and descriptive claims about women may have normative and prescriptive force. This has reminded feminist theorists that *nobody* is beyond the reach of social forces, biases and prejudices that may influence theories and theorising.

Despite these hugely valuable contributions, I will argue first that the cases Spelman and Butler make against gender realism do not provide good reasons to reject it. Second, I argue that although Spelman and Butler point to many difficulties with gender classification these difficulties should not convince feminist theorists to endorse gender scepticism. This is because

gender scepticism has hugely adverse political consequences that feminist theorists should aim to avoid and that they should feel reluctant to accept.

White solipsism, marginalisation and the concept *woman*

Spelman claims that white middle-class Western feminists have falsely assumed all women are like them and the resulting notion of *womanness* (she claims) reflects this false assumption. This notion (Spelman rightly argues) reflects features that only *some* women have in common. Recognising that feminist theorists hold a false view of *womanness* supports Spelman's case for gender nominalism questioning commonly held gender realist views. I agree that the *assumed* notion of *womanness* (that women supposedly have in common) is clearly false and it is not something that all women possess. Nevertheless, the recognition that feminist theorists hold a *false* conception of what women (*qua* women) have in common does not give any reason to accept Spelman's conclusion: that there is no single feature (or *womanness*) that women *qua* have in common. Rather, Spelman's claim invites us to *modify* our conception of *womanness*.

Consider an analogy with the earth and its shape. Prior to Copernicus, most people believed the earth was flat: their conception of the earth's shape was mistaken. But this (then) widespread view does not give any reason to think that the earth has no shape or that the earth does not exist at all. Concluding this seems rather unjustified (not to mention false!). The claim that the earth's shape is falsely conceived as flat illustrates merely a need to modify our conception of the earth's shape. It seems similarly that although the

widespread feminist conception of what women (*qua* women) share is false, this does not give any reason to think that there is nothing women by virtue of their gender share. It merely illustrates the need to modify feminist conceptions of *womanness* and to rethink this notion such that *womanness* reflects features that are shared by *all* women (*qua* women).

If feminists were to modify their claims about what it is that women *qua* women share (and to modify them such that the shared feature is not merely common to some women, but to all), ‘white solipsism’ should no longer be a problem. This would mean that the politically adverse consequences the false view of *womanness* resulted in would be corrected. It seems though that Spelman does not allow for this, suggesting implicitly that there cannot be an adequate way to understand *womanness* along gender realist lines: gender realism always leads to adverse political consequences and, as a result, it is impossible to rethink *womanness* along realist lines in a way that could avoid these consequences. Since it seems that there is no adequate way to rethink *womanness* within the remits of gender realism such that the harmful exclusionary practices *are* avoided, rethinking *womanness* along realist lines at the same time avoiding white solipsism appears to be impossible.

If indeed adverse political consequences (such as white solipsism) necessarily followed from gender realism, this would provide a practical reason to reject it. However, it is not the case that gender realism *in general* has the bad political consequences Spelman points out – only *particular* forms of realism about gender have had such results and Spelman in her work rightly critiques these forms. But, Spelman’s argument that some forms of gender

realism have politically adverse consequences is not enough to justify the claim that gender realism *per se* has such consequences. Further, recognising that feminist gender realists have held a false view of *womanness* does not entail that there are immutable political problems with all gender realist perspectives: although some gender realist pictures of *womanness* are politically insidious, this does not provide a reason to reject gender realism *per se* as politically problematic.

Much of the same appears to be true of Butler's view that all attempts to define the concept *woman* necessarily have politically insidious consequences. It seems that although feminist philosophers have defined it in ways that have marginalised and excluded some women (while privileging others), this does not and should not suggest that *woman* cannot be defined in an unproblematic way. For instance, the work of Sally Haslanger (2000b) provides an excellent illustration of a gender realist position that provides a definition of *woman* that does not have the adverse political consequences Spelman and Butler draw attention to. (Her position will be considered in chapter 5.) *Contra* Butler, Haslanger's view illustrates that defining *woman per se* is not problematic; only particular ways of defining it are politically insidious. As a result, feminist philosophers should not abandon gender realism in general or consider it irredeemably counterproductive because *some* realist views of *womanness* have had the consequence of excluding and marginalizing certain women within feminist theory. To do so, in my view, would be a mistake. Similarly, it would be a mistake to think that there cannot be a way to define *woman* that is *not* politically insidious.

Separability

One might accept that white solipsism does not in the end count against gender realism and that Spelman was wrong to suppose it did. Nevertheless, in response one might draw attention to Spelman's second argument: because *womanness* is inseparable from other aspects of identity (such as race and class), women (*qua* women) do not have *womanness* in common. However, this argument does not give reason to reject gender realism. Firstly, Spelman's argument turns out to be invalid; secondly, the idea that gender is inseparable from race and class does not seem to be incompatible with gender realism *per se*.

Spelman claims that because gender is defined in conjunction with other aspects of identity individual women do not share a *womanness*. She presents a thought experiment that supposedly shows this: "if it were possible to isolate a woman's 'womanness' from her racial identity, then we should have no trouble imagining that had I been Black I could have had just the same understanding of myself as a woman as I in fact do ... To rehearse this imaginary situation is to expose its utter bizarreness" (Spelman 1990: 135). The idea is that because I cannot entertain this thought experiment, it must be the case that *womanness* is inseparable from other aspects of our identities and, as a result, there is no single *womanness* that all women have in common.

This argument, however, is invalid for a number of reasons. For a start, there may be reasons other than the one Spelman mentions for why rehearsing such an imaginary scenario is not possible. For example, one might come from

a cultural and social background where one has no conception of what it would be like to be of a different race. In this case, the situation is unimaginable *not* because there is something about *womanness* that prevents this. Rather, the situation cannot be entertained because the feature of *having a different race* is unimaginable. Entertaining the imaginary situation Spelman outlines may be impossible because of a whole range of imaginative limitations and not simply because the ontology of *womanness* poses such limits to our imagination. It may simply be the case that there are some serious epistemic problems in thinking about gender and its interconnections with race and class that means the thought experiment Spelman outlines and asks us to imagine cannot be entertained. In fact, I think it is very unlikely that we could entertain Spelman's thought experiment because of a whole range of imaginative limitations.

This points to another reason for why the separability objection does not provide a good reason to reject gender realism *per se*. Spelman's argument for the inseparability of gender from race and class is made in terms of women's experiences: in terms of *how* women experience their gender. Now, it seems true that women experience their gender very differently from one another and that numerous different ways to experience *womanness* exist. But this does not count against a realist view of gender for two reasons. First, even if women *qua* women have the very same feature of *womanness* in common, the claim that they experience this differently from one another could hold. The two claims - that women share the same feature of *womanness* and that they experience this feature differently from one another - are perfectly compatible.

Consider the case of perceptual experiences to illustrate. Imagine three different observers who have perceptual experiences of the same object, say, of a rectangular block. Imagine further that these observers are positioned such that they all observe the object from different angles. Now, it seems that all three observers are going to have very different perceptual experiences of the object. (They may even be positioned such that none of them perceives the object as rectangular.) Nevertheless, they all have a perceptual experience of the very same object and the fact that they have observed the object in different ways does not entail that the object in all cases was not the *same* object. To claim that the observers have a perceptual experience of the rectangular block in common and that they all perceptually experience this block differently from one another is perfectly fine: the two claims are compatible with one another. In a similar fashion, it is perfectly possible that women experience their *womanness* differently from one another although these experiences are of the same feature.

Now, another reason that differences in experiences of *womanness* may differ from one another without this counting against gender realism is this: *womanness* might not be something that could be experienced in the way Spelman's discussion seems to assume. I have in mind here positions such as the one Sally Haslanger has recently argued for. (As mentioned, Haslanger's position will be considered in chapter 5.) She argues (roughly) for a way to understand *womanness* whereby gender is not an identity of individuals that designates something about individuals' psychology or sense of self. Rather, *womanness* (for Haslanger) designates a particular social position one occupies

within broad social structures and relations where one is sex-marked for a certain sort of treatment that is oppressive or subordinating:

“Gender categories are defined in terms of how one is socially positioned ... [they] are defined hierarchically within a broader complex of oppressive relations; one group (viz., women) is socially positioned as subordinate to the other (viz., men), [and] [s]exual difference functions as the physical marker to distinguish the two groups, and is used in the justification of viewing and treating the members of each group differently.” (Haslanger 2000b: 38)

Women (and men) can experience their social positions in any number of different ways and their social positions may impact and shape their psychological orientation *as women* (or *as men*) in numerous different ways. Nonetheless, Haslanger’s position is gender realist and she maintains that women have a feature (definitive of *womanness*) in common that makes them women: they are all socially positioned as subordinate or oppressed where this social positioning is sex-marked. If the inseparability thesis is to count against gender realism, *womanness* must be conceived of as an identity or a psychological orientation of some kind. Consequently, any theory of gender that takes it to be something different (such as Haslanger’s conception of *womanness* as a social position), already avoids Spelman’s inseparability thesis. In other words, any realist theory of gender that avoids defining *womanness* as an identity or a psychological orientation avoids the separability objection.

Finally, it seems unlikely that Spelman’s separability objection could rule out gender realism simply by appealing to other aspects of women’s identities because realism in general is not ruled out by appealing to other features entities possess. Recall Russell’s description of realism and his example of *justice*: “Let us consider, say, such a notion as *justice*. If we ask ourselves what justice is, it is natural to proceed by considering this, that, and

the other just act, with a view to discovering what they have in common ... This common nature, in virtue of which they are all just, will be justice itself, the pure essence the admixture of which with facts of ordinary life produces the multiplicity of just acts" (Russell 1967: 52). On this view just acts do not simply follow from having the feature of *justice*. They must also contain other "facts of ordinary life" that are mixed and intertwined with *justice*. For instance, it seems that the justness of just acts may differ depending on the other features of such acts. Consider two intuitively just acts. Imposing parking fines on drivers who have violated parking regulations (by, for instance, parking for a longer time than allowed) is just insofar as they have broken certain transport rules and regulations. Then again, returning valuable possessions taken from Jewish households by Nazi soldiers to their rightful heirs is just insofar as the Nazi regime did not appear to have any legitimate claim to them in the first place. But, given the particular facts of these cases, it seems that the justness of these two acts differs; returning confiscated Jewish possessions seems intuitively more just than imposing parking fines. This is because the Nazi regime's claim to Jewish possessions was illegitimate to begin with and returning these possessions seems morally very significant whereas imposing parking fines (when parking regulations are violated) seems just although maybe somewhat trivial morally speaking. Now, although the justness of these two acts is inseparable from the other features of the acts this does not seem to give a reason to reject a realist conception of *justice*. This is because the other features particular to these two cases mentioned do not seem to be incompatible with a realist view of *justice*. There seems no reason to suppose,

then, that the inseparability of gender from race and class provides a reason to reject gender realism.

Particularity

My argument in the previous section might be responded to by drawing attention to Spelman's final suggestion: that gender is *socially constructed* provides a good reason to reject gender realism. Gender (feminist philosophers commonly argue) is a matter of extrinsic and relational social factors whereby "one is a woman, not by virtue of one's intrinsic features (for example, a body type), but by virtue of one's part in a system of social relations ... gender is a relational or extrinsic property of individuals, and the relations in question are social" (Haslanger 1993: 88). Social construction (in Spelman's view) strongly counts against gender realism: women do not have a single feature in common that makes them women because the extrinsic and relational features that *womanness* depends on differ from one society to the next. Rather, because *womanness* differs from one society to the next, particular kinds of women (with similar social, cultural and racial backgrounds) have a gender in common *qua* women from those particular social, cultural and racial backgrounds. So, there can only be particular and culturally specific senses of *womanness* (such as *black womanness*, *middle-class womanness*, *lesbian womanness* and *black middle-class lesbian womanness* to name but few). If this is true, it seems that there really is good reason to reject any realist views of gender since women simply do not seem to have any single feature in common.

Now, it seems to me that social construction *per se* does not provide a good reason to reject gender realism entailing that only particular and culturally specific senses of *womanness* exist. This is because social construction does not appear to be incompatible with a realist view of *womanness* and this will become clear when other socially constructed features analogous to *womanness* are looked at.

Being a wife

The feature of *being a wife* is extrinsic as it depends on external factors. In order for *x* to have this feature *x* must be a woman, the institution of *marriage* (broadly construed) must exist and *x* must be married to some other individual (or individuals). The feature is also socially constructed: it is a product of certain social practices that differ enormously from one society to the next. For example, many African tribes have traditionally engaged in the practice of *polygyny* (having multiple wives) in roughly two ways: males can take multiple (female) wives or females can take multiple (female) wives. This latter practice, *woman-marriage*, is the practice “whereby a woman could legally marry one or more women” (Greene 1998: 395). It has been documented in around 40 precolonial African societies and in some societies “has endured to the present [day]” (Greene 1998: 395). It seems fair to say that this practice of *woman-marriage* differs hugely from a traditional Christian practice of *monogamous-marriage* between a (male) husband and a (female) wife. The feature of *being a wife* in these two practices, as a result, seems to also differ greatly. Compare these two cases with a third marriage system, such as *polygamy*, and the notion

of *being a wife* becomes more diverse still. Insofar as *being a wife* is an extrinsic feature that is socially constructed and can differ significantly from one society to the next, it seems to be analogous to Spelman's notion of *womanness*.

If social construction has the consequence that only particular and culturally specific senses of *womanness* exist, it must also count against realism about wives, such that there can only be particular and culturally specific senses of *being a wife*. Individual wives (as a result) would not share some single feature by virtue of their marital status. It seems to me, however, that the claims about social construction and *being a wife* do not hold. Although there may be culturally specific senses of *being a wife* (such as *being a wife within a woman-marriage* and *being a wife within a monogamous heterosexual Christian marriage*) this does not seem to provide a good reason to reject the view that all wives have the feature of *being a wife* in common. And since social construction does not provide a good reason to reject realism about wives, I see no reason to think that it provides a good reason to reject realism about gender.

Being an artist

Consider another feature, *being an artist*, which also seems to be analogous to *being a woman*. *Being an artist* depends on external factors: whether x produces works of art that get displayed in galleries and whether x (according to, say, art critics) illustrates innovativeness and creativity. *Being an artist* seems to be socially constructed as it is a product of certain social practices and it seems highly sensitive to cultural and individual variance. *Prima facie*, someone who

paints icons or produces other kinds of religious art (*qua* artist) seems to have very little (if anything at all) in common with conceptual artists like Damien Hirst or Tracey Emin (*qua* artists).

Again, if social construction counts against gender realism, there can only be particular and culturally specific senses of *womanness*. In a similar vein, if social construction counts against realism about artists, there can only be particular and culturally specific senses of *being an artist*. It seems to me that (again) this latter claim fails to hold: the cultural and artistic variance amongst individual artists does not seem to undermine realism about artists. Just because individual artists are particular kinds of artists (religious, conceptual or whatever) it does not seem to follow that they do not share some single feature (*being an artist*) by virtue of their trade. Social construction does not seem to entail that the particularity thesis about artists must be true. Once again, it seems that since this is the case there does not seem to be any good reason to think the particularity thesis about gender would count against gender realism. An appeal to social construction *per se* does not appear to entail that one cannot be a realist about women, wives or artists.

Gender scepticism

In the previous three sections I argued that the cases Spelman and Butler make against gender realism are unsuccessful. Now, what about the claim that there is no single class of women? After all, one could agree with Spelman and Butler that gender nominalism of some kind is more plausible than gender realism. But should feminist philosophers agree with them about gender scepticism? To

recap, Spelman thinks that gender scepticism follows because there is no single feature of *womanness* that every woman possesses; by contrast, she argues that there are multiple gender classes that depend on cultural and social backgrounds. Then again, Butler holds that because the term ‘woman’ lacks definite meaning it does not pick out any such thing as the class of women. She further argues that every attempt to define *woman* such that it would pick out the class of women will be politically insidious, privileging some way of being a woman over others. For Butler, the task of feminism should be to engage in a genealogy of the class of women by deconstructing *womanness* in order to see how it has been falsely understood within feminist theory (1999: 9). Only by deconstructing gender notions will feminist theorists avoid promoting a view of *womanness* that (instead of solidifying some sense of a feminist ‘sisterhood’) “was the very source of a painful factionalization” (Butler 1991: 160).¹¹

Both positions, in effect, suggest that feminist theory must give up the view that women form a single class or group around which feminist theory and practice is organised. Either feminist theory should be organised around multiple gender classes (as Spelman claims) or, since gender terms must always remain open to redefinition according to Butler, feminist theory should not be organised around *any* gender classes. Both positions, nevertheless, result in undesirable political consequences that feminist philosophers should aim to

¹¹ Alison Stone (2004) has argued that the notion of *genealogy* Butler endorses can provide fruitful ways of understanding gender, gender classes and women. However, *contra* Butler, she argues that instead of applying genealogy to the concept *woman*, feminist philosophers should apply it to *women themselves*. This application, Stone maintains, is more beneficial as it allows feminist philosophers to trace a *common history* of women, femininity and gendered oppression providing a helpful way to think about *how* women are gendered.

avoid and, I argue, feminist philosophers should feel reluctant to endorse gender scepticism.

I am not alone in suggesting this. Some feminist philosophers and political theorists have begun questioning whether Spelman's and Butler's positions are politically useful: they both seem to entail political paralysis of some kind (see e.g. Benhabib 1992, di Stefano 1990, Hirschmann & di Stefano 1996, Martin 1994, Tanesini 1996, Young 1997). Consider Spelman's suggestion that feminist theory must be organised around multiple gender classes. How can Spelman envisage that on her view key feminist goals, such as ending *women's* oppression, could be achieved? On her view, feminist politics is only able to address injustices encountered by particular groups of women (black women, white women, Jewish women, lesbian women and black lesbian Jewish women, to name but few). But some theorists have argued (and rightly so, in my view) that feminist politics cannot effectively devise strategies to counter inequalities *particular* groups of women encounter (Young 1997). For instance, it seems extremely difficult to articulate what kinds of strategies could aid black lesbian Jewish women and counter the oppression they are subject to due to their gender (that, for Spelman, is *black, lesbian Jewish womanness*). It also seems that feminist theory would need separate strategies to counter oppression white lesbian Jewish women and black lesbian Jewish women are subject to, and given that there are so many different kinds of women, feminist theorists would have to devise numerous different strategies to help different kinds of women. And since feminist goals and ways of achieving these goals would become dispersed amongst different kinds of women, it seems feminism

in general will lose political impetus; feminist goals like aiming to end oppression women are subject to due to their gender could not be achieved.

This suggests to some theorists that, following Spelman, the political effectiveness of feminist theory would be hugely diminished since she does not allow for positive visions that could benefit *all* women. Jane Roland Martin (for instance) writes “in our determination to honor diversity among women, we told one another to restrict our ambitions, limit our sights, beat a retreat from certain topics, refrain from using a rather long list of categories or concepts, and eschew generalization. I can think of no better description for the stunting of a field of intellectual inquiry” (1994: 631). Iris Marion Young holds that “[w]ithout conceptualizing women as *a* group in some sense, it is not possible to conceptualize oppression as a systematic, structured, institutional process” (1997: 17, italics mine): losing this ability would be detrimental to feminism as a project that aims to (broadly speaking) liberate women from gender oppression.

Butler’s position is no better off; in fact, it seems even more politically paralysing than Spelman’s. This is because it does not seem to allow for any prescriptive strategies that could benefit women. For Butler, the task of feminism should be to deconstruct *womanness* with the view that there is no viable way to define it. As a result, there is no way to make sense of the class of women that feminist politics would aim to aid. *Contra* Butler, Iris Marion Young claims that if her view is endorsed, feminist politics risks becoming inefficient:

“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?" (Young 1997: 16)

Butler's view suggests to Young that feminist theorists can never make claims about how political and social structures *should* be arranged such that the subordinate positions women in general find themselves, could be altered. I agree with Young. Consider some important feminist goal such as ending sexual violence against women. If feminist theorists accept Butler's position (and accept the view that the task of feminism is to deconstruct *womanness*), this goal could not be achieved because Butler's critical orientation does not allow for (what Young calls) positive visions about the way social structures *ought* to be. Following Butler, feminist theorists would uncover numerous ways in which *womanness* has been defined and they could articulate in detail ways in which feminist theory has shaped *womanness* that have had exclusionary effects. But feminist theorists could not tackle the issue of how to end the sexual violence women encounter. For one thing, Butler does not think such a group exists and secondly, her position does not allow for ways to theorise how things *ought* to be (or how feminist goals could be achieved). If Butler's position is accepted, it is unclear what is left of feminist politics apart from critique.

Feminist theorists should, as a result, feel reluctant to accept gender scepticism (that there is no class of women); it seems that accepting this and giving up the class as that which grounds feminist politics is too high a price to pay. Although it is important to bear in mind ways in which women differ from

one another and to recognise ways in which theories of gender can have politically adverse consequences, there is no need to give up talk of *women* (in general) so that feminist theorists can pay attention to differences and be self-critical. As I will argue in chapter 6, it is not necessary to give up the class of women *nor* is it necessary to give up gender realism in order to pay sufficient attention to women's particularity and to avoid adverse political consequences.

VI

Feminist philosophers (I argue) have no reason to reject gender realism on the basis of the arguments Butler and Spelman put forward. These arguments point to difficulties with gender classification and they show that feminist philosophers should be careful when making claims about women in general. Feminist philosophers should also (I argue) feel reluctant to endorse scepticism about the class of women as Spelman and Butler do. I am not alone in suggesting this and in the next four chapters I will discuss ways in which feminist philosophers have aimed to make sense of gender classes in response to Spelman's and Butler's arguments; they all share the thought that gender classification is not straightforward but they reject the view that this entails scepticism about the class of women.¹²

¹² It might seem as if there are some important omissions in my list of chosen theoreticians that I go on to discuss next. For instance, I do not consider Butler's well-known view that gender is (what she calls) *performative*: roughly, that gender is a way of acting and behaving rather than an identity or a way of being (Butler 1990, 1999). The feminist positions and proposed ways of understanding *womanness* I discuss next have all been proposed *as responses* to the problems Butler and Spelman articulate. They all share the view that we *should* be able to make sense of gender classes (rejecting gender scepticism) at the same time maintaining that gender classification is a difficult and complex issue. By contrast, Butler's views on gender in no sense aspire

to provide a solution to feminist worries over classification or to provide a way to make sense of the class of women. Insofar as this is the case, it seems appropriate not to consider her position.

CHAPTER 2

FRYE, POSITIVE CATEGORIES AND WOMEN

I

Feminist philosophers have found it hard to point out some social factors that women have in common and that make them women. Some theorists (like Spelman and Butler) claim that, as a result, there is no single class of women that all women belong to. *Contra* such views, Marilyn Frye argues in her paper “The Necessity of Differences: Constructing a Positive Category of Women” (1996) that even though women have no single feature in common, feminist philosophers can still make sense of the class of women. This is because gender classification need not rely on shared features that are necessary and sufficient for *womanness*. Rather, by endorsing a different classificatory model, feminist theorists can classify women *qua* women at the same time taking into account their diverse and dissimilar experiences as women: something Frye thinks is crucial for any plausible account of gender. Frye further argues that such a model would take certain practices that women engage in as that which grounds classification: women would form (what she calls) a ‘positive category’.

I will argue that the alternative Frye outlines is inadequate because the criterion for picking out women is problematic. On the one hand, it appears that some individuals we think of as women (like the Queen) may fall outside the class of women on Frye’s suggestion. On the other, some individuals (like men and certain guide-dogs) counter-intuitively seem to count as women. I will first outline some background against which Frye develops her notion of *positive*

category (in section II). I then move on to outline Frye's alternative in more detail (section III) and I end with a discussion of the problems Frye's suggestion encounters and argue that it should not be endorsed (section IV).

II

Frye's suggestion, in short, is this: the class of women should be thought of as a *positive category*. It should be "self-supporting rather than dependent on negation" (Frye 1996: 998). In order to argue for her view, Frye first singles out two feminist philosophers who (she claims) have understood *womanness* incorrectly. She then goes on to develop her own position as a response to these positions. The theorists Frye argues against are Simone de Beauvoir (1953) and Luce Irigaray (1985). The reason these philosophers have theorised *womanness* incorrectly (according to Frye) this is: they define *womanness* in opposition to men and in terms of certain features women lack but men possess.

Contra de Beauvoir and Irigaray, Frye claims that the class of women should not rely on features women lack. Rather, *womanness* should be defined such that it relies solely on aspects relevant for women's lives and their experiences *as women*. Thinking about *womanness* and the class of women in this manner (Frye claims) "is a vital political function of feminist community and politics" (Frye 1996: 998). She claims further that her suggestion is compatible with women's diversity; the position Frye argues for recognises and incorporates women's diverse and dissimilar traits and experiences because it follows "a logic of category construction congenial to this project *as a practice*

of pluralism” (1996: 998). Before I go on to look at what Frye means by this, I will briefly outline the views she takes herself to argue against.

Frye claims that Beauvoir’s existentialist feminism and Irigaray’s psychoanalytic feminist theory both define *womanness* as a negation of what it is to be a man. Insofar as women are those individuals who lack qualities men possess, we can classify them on the basis of their gender. Beauvoir and Irigaray (Frye outlines) both claim that under certain oppressive social conditions *subjectivity* is coextensive with *masculinity*. As this is the case, women (on both views) turn out to lack subjectivity and it is this lack that is definitive of their gender. Beauvoir explains this in the following manner. In order to be a subject, one must live a life of *transcendence*: one must be autonomous and free to decide one’s own destiny, one must be able to freely choose one’s goals and aims and one must be able to freely pursue those goals and aims one has set for oneself. Only men (on Beauvoir’s view) live such a life. They are in a position to actively pursue their own ends and goals, to work within the wider community and to define their own destinies through self-development as they go about achieving the ends and goals they have set for themselves. Women, by contrast, are unable to freely choose their aims and goals or to freely pursue these aims and goals because their actions are constrained by their biology and bodily functions. Beauvoir seems to have in mind something like this: women’s child bearing abilities make it very hard for them to freely pursue goal and aims outside the home and outside child rearing tasks. Women who give birth find that their actions are constrained by their mothering duties and they cannot combine home life with a life where they

independently pursue personal goals in the wider society. Women, as a result, are confined to a life of *immanence*: to a life of stagnation, repetition of mundane tasks where one's potential as an active human subject cannot develop. And those who live such a life are not (and cannot become) fully fledged human subjects. (It is worth pointing out that Beauvoir's work dates from the 1940s and women's lives have changed significantly during the past 60 years. It seems fair to say, nevertheless, that during the time Beauvoir was writing her *Second Sex* the only way in which women could avoid, what she calls, the life of immanence was by avoiding pregnancy thus rejecting traditional values prevalent in French society.)

This state of affairs (Beauvoir argues) is not due to any natural order of things. Women have an equal claim to subjectivity. The reason why *subjectivity* and *masculinity* are coextensive (or are considered to be coextensive) is that in certain oppressive social conditions men confine women to the life of immanence in order to secure their own privileged position. They confine women to a state of affairs where "he is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other" (de Beauvoir 1953: 8). Beauvoir goes on to claim that "here is to be found the basic trait of woman: she is the Other" (1953: 11). Women are actively prevented from becoming fully fledged human subjects capable of realising and pursuing their own individual ends and goals and men are the ones who impose this fate on women.¹³

¹³ Beauvoir thinks women are not the only individuals unable to escape their condition as being confined to 'the life of immanence'. Working-class people along with Jewish and Black people share this condition with women. Nevertheless, working-class, Jewish and Black men and women are not equally disadvantaged. Beauvoir maintains that (for instance) working-class men confine working-class women to an even deeper

Irigaray shares this basic sentiment with de Beauvoir: *subjectivity* is coextensive with *masculinity* due to certain oppressive social conditions and women (due to these conditions) lack subjectivity. Her explanation is somewhat different though. For Irigaray, being a subject requires that an individual is a *signifier*. Roughly, ‘signifiers’ are sources of and creators of meanings, they have the power and authority to signify, to be meaningful and significant, and to speak authoritatively (Frye 1996: 994). (Irigaray’s position draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis. On both accounts, *to be a signifier* has a much more nuanced meaning than the one I have outlined here. My intention is simply to outline Irigaray’s very difficult and complex position in as simplified manner as possible.) Men (on Irigaray’s view) occupy such subject positions as signifiers because our social realities are defined in *phallogocentric* terms:

“[I]n the West, thinking and being coincide in such a way as to make consciousness coextensive with subjectivity: this is the logocentric trend. It also refers, however, to the persistent habit that consist in referring to subjectivity as to all other key attributes of the thinking subject in terms of masculinity or abstract virility (phallogocentrism).” (Braidotti 1998: 299)

Men (as signifiers) are in a position to create social meanings and to provide norms, regulations and rules that everyone must comply with, having the power and authority to do so because of the symbolic meanings their bodies are endowed with. However, women whose bodies are endowed with very different kinds of meanings do not signify because they lack the qualities needed to signify (they lack masculine attributes). Insofar as this is the case, women lack subjectivity: “any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the ‘masculine’ ... Subjectivity [is thus] denied to woman” (Irigaray 1985: 133).

condition of immanence because they “see the women as dangerous competitors” in the labour market (1953: 15).

Frye argues that both positions are unsatisfactory for the same reason. She claims that both Beauvoir and Irigaray take the view that “the subject/ man is constituted either logically (Lacan) or through existential struggle (Sartre), by opposition with its negation – not-self, not-man, the-absence-of-it ... Both are ways of constructing the social/ ontological category of men as the A side of a universal exclusive dichotomy: **A/ not-A**” (Frye 1996: 994). She goes on to claim that defining women as those who lack masculine qualities (freedom, masculine attributes and subjectivity) is highly problematic. Instead of thinking about gender relations in terms of two classes where one class is always the negation of the other (**A/ not-A**), gender should be understood in terms of two self-standing classes men and women respectively constitute: **A** and **B** (Frye 1996: 998).

Frye claims that the unsatisfying picture of gender classes that relies on negation (**A/ not-A**) has come about because feminist theorists have relied on *set theory* to make sense of gender classes. Set theory (in Frye’s view) determines membership in particular classes in terms of certain necessary and sufficient conditions individuals must possess:

“Each set has a membership of ‘individuals’, conceived as logically and ontologically independent of each other ... These individuals have properties, or predicates. Individuals that have all those properties [necessary and sufficient for membership in a set] are members; individuals that lack them are not members. Each set divides the universe (universal) into separate realms (dichotomous), excluding the possibility of any individuals that belong to neither or both realms (exclusive).” (Frye 1996: 999)¹⁴

¹⁴ Frye often couples properties and predicates together when she is talking about certain features individuals’ possess. This is, of course, a mistaken use of terminology since individuals cannot possess predicates. It seems that Frye has in mind properties or features when she uses ‘predicate’ but confusingly uses the terms ‘predicate’ and ‘property’ interchangeably. In what follows, I take it that Frye means ‘property’ when she uses the term ‘predicate’ in her text.

The idea behind this somewhat perplexing claim seems to be something like this: some features are considered to be necessary and sufficient for membership in a set where all and only those particulars that possess the necessary and sufficient conditions will count as members of that set. For example, take the set of water molecules. All and only those entities where an oxygen atom and two hydrogen atoms that are bound together in the appropriate manner are members of this set, satisfying the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a water molecule. All other entities will fall outside this set. In a sense, set theory has divided the world into two: water molecules and not-water molecules.

Frye goes on to elaborate her perplexing thought further: “the universal reach, the exhaustiveness (or totality) of the **A/ not-A** sort of category is accomplished by what has been called ‘the infinitation of the negative’” (1996: 999). ‘The infinitation of the negative’ divides the world in the following manner: “in **A/ Not-A** dichotomies only one term has positive reality; **Not-A** is only the privation or absence of **A** ... As John Dewey has written, ‘If, say, ‘virtue’ be assigned to **A** as its meaning, then **Not-A** includes not only vice, but triangles, horseraces, symphonies, and the precession of the equinoxes’” (Jay 1981: 44). Frye illustrates this thought with the help of another example:

“If, for instance, ‘vanilla’ is assigned as the **A**, then **not-A** includes not only strawberry, chocolate, and peppermint ripple but also triangles, the square root of two, the orbit of Haley’s comet, and all the shoes in the world. All these are not vanilla, and *as* not-vanilla, they are indistinguishable ... So far as the category of vanilla is concerned, the category of not-vanilla is an infinite undifferentiated plenum, unstructured, formless, a chaos undelineated by any internal boundaries ... it [set theory that results in **A/ not-A** type categories] does not construct two things.” (1996: 999)

In more standard metaphysical terms, what Frye has in mind seems to be something like this. In order for certain entities to constitute a genuine class (as opposed to a merely gerrymandered, miscellaneous and arbitrary set of things) these entities must possess certain conditions necessary and sufficient for membership in the class.¹⁵ So, the entities with two hydrogen atoms and an oxygen atom bound together by an appropriate type of bond satisfy the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a water molecule and will be members of the genuine class of water molecules. However, the class of entities that lack these necessary and sufficient conditions not only includes other kinds of molecules, like sodium chloride, but it will also include this pen, that jumper and the lamp across the room (to name but a few). That class will include every single object that is not a water molecule and insofar as this pen and a sodium chloride molecule share the feature of not being water molecules, there is nothing to distinguish the two entities from one another. So, the picture Frye is painting is this: one of the sets (for instance, the set of water molecules) will constitute a genuine class whereas the other set (the set of entities that are *not* water molecules) constitutes a thoroughly gerrymandered and miscellaneous collection of things.

Gender classifications that rely on such set theoretical approach (like those Frye takes Beauvoir and Irigaray to be committed to) have the consequence of defining *womanness* as that which does not satisfy the

¹⁵ A gerrymandered class is a random collection of particulars. For example, I can collect together any random set of objects arbitrarily (like the globe, this cup and that football). At the same time, I can classify together all red entities by virtue of their colour. This does not seem arbitrary and the set of objects so classified would not be entirely random. The red entities, metaphysician commonly hold, would constitute a genuine (rather than a gerrymandered) class.

necessary and sufficient conditions of *manness*. This results in the following state of affairs:

“When woman is defined as not-man, she is cast into the infinite undifferentiated plenum. The man/not-man dichotomy makes no distinctions on the not-man side. This helps make it so ‘natural’ to lump women indiscriminately with children in ‘women and children’ and to cast ‘nature’ (which is another name of not-man) as a woman and woman as nature. It also connects with the fact that many men can so naturally speak in parallel constructions of their cars and their women, and say things like, ‘It’s my house, my wife, and my money, and the government can’t tell me what to do about any of it’. It also illuminates the fact that women are so easily associated with disorder, chaos, irrationality, and impurity. Undifferentiated from the rest of not-man, woman is not a category. There are no categories in not-man; it is a buzzing blooming confusion. Everything is similar to everything.” (Frye 1996: 1000)

Frye’s point is this (although her empirical claims are rather contentious): if *womanness* is defined as that which does not satisfy the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a man, it seems that women cannot constitute a genuine class or (as Frye puts it) a distinguishable something. Women are simply part of a gerrymandered and miscellaneous set that also includes all other entities that do not satisfy the necessary and sufficient conditions of *manness* (such as cars, children and money). Frye goes on to claim that as long as women are defined in relation to men in this fashion feminist theory will never be able to liberate women from their social situation as those who are subordinated on the basis of their gender. In order to ‘liberate’ women, the class of women must be conceived of in a different way. How this is to be done on Frye’s view is what I turn to next.

III

So, Frye thinks that the class of women should be ‘positive’ in that it should be self-standing and not rely on features women *lack*. Saying this, she does not

want to appeal to any shared or common features: Frye seems to reject gender realism although she does not explicitly argue against it. Rather, Frye suggests that the class of women will be cashed out *in terms of* women's differences (1996: 998). As mentioned, Frye holds that this needs not entail a set theoretical approach to classification since "categories do not have to be constructed by a list of predicates and a division of the universe into individuals-with-those-predicates and everything-else" (Frye 1996: 1000). On the contrary, she offers an alternative method: that of positive categories.

Frye identifies three criteria that are analytically "required to create a category" (1996: 1000). I take it that she means this: there are three necessary features that *classes* must possess. First, individual members of a class must be related to one another in some way. They "have to become related to each other, associated with one another, in some way that distinguishes their relations with each other from the infinity of logically possible relations among all logically possible entities" (Frye 1996: 1000-1). For instance, individual atoms can be related to one another in arguably infinitely many different ways. But only when they are related to one another in specific ways, do individual atoms constitute molecules. So, two individual hydrogen atoms and an individual oxygen atom may be related to other atoms and to each other in numerous different ways. But only once the two hydrogen atoms exchange electrons with the oxygen atom (and the outer sphere of the atoms, chemists say, becomes saturated) do the three atoms form one water molecule. Only after the atoms become related to one another in a specific manner does the

collection of two hydrogen atoms and an oxygen atom *become* a water molecule (or a distinct something, as Frye would put it).

Second, these relations that determine collections of entities as distinct 'somethings' must be structured. Individuals must be related to one another through a structure: that is, through "a set of relations" where these relations "stand between differentiated individuals" (Frye 1996: 1001). In the case of the water molecule, the individual atoms stand in specific structured relations to one another. The chemical bond that exists between the two hydrogen atoms and the oxygen atom is that which makes the water molecule distinct from other molecules and objects. If the bond did not exist (or if for some reason it existed in a different and warped manner), the three atoms would not form a water molecule. Frye elaborates on this thought with two examples. She claims (firstly) that "what makes an amoeba an amoeba is not that all the molecules involved in it ... share some set of attributes; it is how they are organized" (Frye 1996: 1001). Her idea seems to be the same as my example of the water molecule: unless the constituent parts of the amoeba are organized and structured in some peculiar way, they do not constitute an amoeba. A further example Frye provides is of a club for people with red hair: "what makes the Redheads' Club a club is not that all the individuals who are members of it have red hair, or that they have identical experience, though hair colour and experience are salient; it is that individuals are involved, in various ways, in a structure" (1996: 1001).

Finally, the structure through which individuals are related to one another must be internally complex. This is because any viable and useful

“structure *requires* that the things structured are *not* all alike. At a logical minimum, they differ in their relations to each other (e.g., one is to the left of another, but the second is to the right of the first); but organic and social entities require differentiation on many vectors” (Frye 1996: 1001). The example Frye gives is that of a cat: “a cat must have some cells that are skin cells and some that are blood cells” (1996: 1001). Only such internal complexity guarantees that a cat *is* a cat. In a similar sense, social classes must be internally diverse and various. Consider the club of redheads. If all the members of this club had exactly the same attributes, experiences and features they would not form a genuine club. On Frye’s view, sameness of attributes, experiences and features is *not* what makes a social whole that which it is (a particular kind of social whole or class). Rather, “a real category ... has internal complexity and, hence, requires variation among its elements” (Frye 1996: 1001). So, the redheads’ club requires that the individual members of this club differ from one another perhaps by coming from different backgrounds, having different features and attributes as well as having different kinds of experiences as redheaded.

The three criteria mentioned (relations, structure and diversity) provide a way to make sense of distinct and self-standing classes that are, nevertheless, internally complex. Frye claims that this is what positive self-standing classes require. A positive category is “a plurality with internal structure whose elements are differentiated and differentiable and are in a significant variety of relations with each other, and that is, by virtue of this structure, coalesced as a distinguishable ‘something’” (Frye 1996: 1002). And it is in this way that the class of women should be understood: women must be related to one another in

some structured way where this structure must be internally diverse thereby incorporating women's diverse and dissimilar features and experiences.

How such a class of women is *in actual fact* constructed is not entirely clear. Frye claims: "the political strategy suggested by this categorical logic is that of actively and socially constructing a concrete and historically real positive category of women – deliberately, creatively elaborating and articulating the differences among women in, by and as a means to constructing a sociality ... a web of meanings of and among women" (1996: 1002). She goes on to claim that this manner of accounting for gender classification is not new. Rather, it "has been in practice ... in advance of its being understood" through certain practices women have been engaged in (Frye 1996: 1006). Frye lists such practices:

"I am thinking here of innumerable projects such as the women's music and arts festivals, the deliberate and the precipitate evolutions of the National Women's Studies Association in the United States, women's creative writing groups, and the interactive communities of authors, editors, and audiences of feminist publications and the collectives of women engaged in their production and circulation. Women's bookstores, and the international women's book fairs, are other sites of such practices. I refer also to caucuses, collectives, projects, conferences, and gatherings of women who share certain distinctions of race, ability, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, nationality, politics, citizenship status, and/or interests in arts, sport, adventure, entertainment, scholarship, technology, and so on." (1996: 1006)

What is significant about these practices (in Frye's view) is that if such practices are engaged in for any length of time, women will become "profoundly involved ... in articulating, elaborating, appreciating, defining, exploring, recognizing, negotiating, consolidating, and travelling differences among women ... If women were going to be together in women-focused, women-defined, and women-defining spaces and enterprises, women were going to engage in many varieties of what might be called 'the practice of

differences” (Frye 1996: 1007). The idea seems to be something like this: engaging in the kinds of practices Frye outlines will elaborate, show and illustrate that women differ from one another. Women will come to incorporate different experiences, features and attributes into their notion of *womanness* and what it is to be a woman. Recognising that they differ from one another supposedly changes the way in which women think about themselves *as women* and they will come to view *womanness* in terms of features *not* shared by all women (rather than concentrating on the features that *are* shared). This significantly (in Frye’s view) shapes women’s identities, senses of selves and self-understandings *as women*. The reason for this is that, Frye claims, being involved in a class such as that of women (supposedly by engaging in the kinds of practices Frye outlines) is “self-constructing” for the individual members (1996: 1004-5). Being involved in the kinds of practices through which the class of women is constructed has the consequence of shaping the participants identities *qua* members of that class. Furthermore, since the class itself is internally diverse, the identities women come to have *qua* women will also differ from one woman to another (Frye 1996: 1005).¹⁶

Frye acknowledges that many feminists will disagree with her proposal. This is not, however, because they might disagree with the details of how to classify women *qua* women. Rather, Frye anticipates that many will find her proposal objectionable because they agree with feminists like Spelman and

¹⁶ It is worth pointing out that it is unclear why individuals get involved in the kinds of practices Frye outlines; Frye does not address this issue. It is clear, however, that a shared *identity* does not bring individual women together and that class formation does not require that individuals who are engaged in the same or similar practices identify with one another. This is because Frye takes affinities and identities to follow from class membership and not *vice versa*.

Butler endorsing gender scepticism. Firstly, Frye responds to those feminists who think that making sense of the class of women may (or will) have politically insidious consequences (e.g., Butler 1999). She claims that this worry “rest on the assumption that such a category [of women] can be constructed only by stipulating a set of attributes shared by all and only the members of the category” (Frye 1996: 1002). But (she continues) as her alternative is not committed to any necessary and sufficient conditions of *womanness* her proposal is not politically insidious in this manner.

Secondly, Frye responds to those feminists who worry about ‘white solipsism’ (the view that feminism is done from a ‘white perspective’ where racial and cultural differences go unnoticed). If (Frye acknowledges) her position were guilty of ‘white solipsism’ it

“would require of its participants either that they leave race and culture behind as outside of significance or that they assimilate to the unacknowledged racedness and culturedness of the category ... If this were so, I would agree that the construction would be a disaster.” (Frye 1996: 1003)

But because her position does not rely on some attributes and features that are necessary for being a woman, Frye claims her position does not require that women must leave their particularity behind: “if the category of women is constructed as a positive self-supporting category ... the identity or subjectivity associated with it has no built-in exclusivity or closure against other identity categories, no analytically build-in hostility to multiple category memberships and subjectivities” (1996: 1004).

Finally, Frye considers whether her account “entails the construction of a unitary female or women’s subjectivity” (1996: 1005). This seems to denote two separate issues. First, whether women as members of the same class end up

having a subjectivity, an identity or a psychological orientation in common. Frye goes on to claim her view does not entail this because it requires that all individuals classified as women differ from one another. Second, it might be claimed that Frye's position does not allow for individual women's senses of *womanness* to change over time and that *in this sense* she is offering a unitary view of female subjectivity. Frye maintains that her view does not entail this: individual women's subjectivities and identities change over time through associating and interacting with different kinds of women. There is no stable and unchanging sense of gender individual women experience *qua* individual women. To elaborate, Frye considers colour:

“My metaphoric image here is that of colored objects. Any colored object takes on a different hue, intensity, and brightness (value) depending on the colors surrounding it. It is bluer next to yellow or orange, or grayer next to brighter colors, and so on. Without some kind of contextual framing that gives particular salience to one set of relations, no one of the-colors-it-is has any claim to be *the-color-it-is*. If what-I-am ... is constantly being coconstructed with and in relation to different others, there is no single absolute what-I-am.” (1996: 1005)

The reason many feminists have abandoned the class of women (thinking that this is the only way to secure multiplicity and plurality), Frye claims, is because they have relied on the set theoretical approach to classification. But, Frye's position does not rely on such a view and, due to this, particularity (within the remits of Frye's position) does not foreclose classification. In fact, diversity is a prerequisite for gender classification.

IV

I find Frye's suggestion that feminist philosophers can make sense of the class of women without appealing to some necessary and sufficient conditions of *womanness* plausible and correct. It seems that different ways of classifying women *qua* women are available and that not all plausible alternatives rely on necessary and sufficient conditions. (Indeed this is what I go on to argue in more detail in chapter 6.) I also find Frye's thought that a genuine class of women must be internally diverse very appealing. Nevertheless, Frye's case for (what she calls) a positive category of women seems to me less persuasive. Apart from being perplexing and at times opaque, Frye's position is implausible for two reasons. First, as an account of gender classification her proposal is inadequate failing to classify all and only women. Second, Frye's proposal is counterintuitive in that it seems to explain shared attributes in terms of class membership.

Criteria for class membership

Frye claims that bringing the class of women "into concrete social reality" is "a constantly troubled and contentious process and is not the sort of process that reaches a final conclusion, much less a conclusion characterized by unity, thoroughgoing consistence, or homogeneity" (Frye 1996: 1008). This seems correct. If gender classification were an uncontroversial and uncontentious process, (I would presume) feminist philosophers would not be as troubled by it as they currently are. But what is problematic about Frye's suggested method of

bringing gender classes into 'concrete social reality' (whatever this means) is the criterion for membership in such classes. Class membership (on Frye's view) is delimited by one's engagement in certain practices. Nonetheless, it seems that this criterion may not capture all those individuals we think of as women and it may capture some individuals counter-intuitively as women. Insofar as this is the case, the practices Frye outlines are problematic.

On Frye's view, women stand in certain relations to one another partaking in certain practices that structure women together. Frye claims such practices are:

"innumerable projects such as the women's music and arts festivals, the deliberate and the precipitate evolutions of the National Women's Studies Association in the United States, women's creative writing groups, and the interactive communities of authors, editors, and audiences of feminist publications and the collectives of women engaged in their production and circulation. Women's bookstores, and the international women's book fairs, are other sites of such practices. I refer also to caucuses, collectives, projects, conferences, and gatherings of women who share certain distinctions of race, ability, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, nationality, politics, citizenship status, and/or interests in arts, sport, adventure, entertainment, scholarship, technology, and so on." (1996: 1006)

The idea seems clear enough. When women come together and participate in these practices, they stand in certain relations to one another and a discrete structure starts to form. This discrete structure then develops into what Frye calls a positive category (or what metaphysicians more standardly would call a genuine class).

But it seems that not all women partake in various women's movements, women's groups, events organised for women or in conferences and gatherings of women. Accounting for the class of women on the basis of the practices and gatherings *Frye* has in mind may leave out vast numbers of women who do not engage in the kinds of practices she mentions. It seems that

on Frye's views those individuals would not be classified as women if indeed the class of *women* develops from the practices Frye outlines. And this seems problematic: surely women who never in their lifetimes engage in the practices Frye lists should be classified as women? For instance, consider the Queen. It seems unlikely that she regularly participates in women's bookfairs, consciousness-raising groups for women, in women's creative writing collectives or other such gatherings. Insofar as this is the case, should we not think of the Queen as a member of the class of women? On Frye's criterion this seems to follow but (I suspect) few would be willing to accept this.

Moreover, it seems that this criterion may pick out individuals counter-intuitively as women. Imagine Ted who is male and calls himself 'a man'. Ted works for a publishing company that exclusively publishes women authors. One of the publishing company's aims is to encourage women to write and in order to do this, the publishing company regularly organises various women's creative writing groups, workshops and conferences. Suppose that it is Ted's job to organise such events and Ted partakes in all the workshops and creative writing groups the publishing company organises. Ted partakes in the kinds of practices through which membership in the class of women is delimited. Does this mean that Ted is or should be a member of the class of women? It seems that on Frye's criterion the answer is: yes. But simply partaking in these practices does not seem to be sufficient to justify Ted's membership in the class of women and this suggests to me that Frye's criterion is implausible.

To avoid this problem one option would be to rethink the criteria for class membership. Frye could include other practices associated with women to

her list of practices through which women are related to one another. For instance, she could insist that cooking, cleaning, shopping, nurturing, ironing and other domestic tasks would count as practices through which women form a genuine class. Maybe then we could say that those individuals who stand in certain relations to one another by virtue of participating in these typically female practices, constitute a structure through which the class of women can be made sense of.

But, this modification does not render Frye's view unproblematic. It seems that some individuals may still counter-intuitively count as women and some individuals may still counter-intuitively be excluded from the class of women. Again, consider the Queen. It is rather unlikely that the Queen does her own dusting, cleaning, cooking and ironing given that she has an army of servants to do these tasks for her. But to claim that the Queen does not (or should not) be classified as a woman because it is unlikely that she engages in domestic tasks traditionally associated with women, does not seem sufficient to justify leaving the Queen outside the class of women. Intuitively the Queen should be a member of this class whether or not she partakes in practices women are associated with.

By contrast, consider John who is male and calls himself 'a man'. As it turns out, John likes to live in a clean and organised household. He also likes to cook and he likes his clothes to be ironed. In order to maintain such a household, John spends much of his time engaging in tasks like cleaning, ironing and cooking. In fact, John engages in most domestic tasks that an average housewife engages in. Imagine further that John is a single parent and

engages in many nurturing tasks and practices in bringing up his child. He partakes in many activities and practices where most (if not all) other participants are women such as baby-parent playgroups. If we take this extended list I have proposed as that by virtue of which individuals become related to one another and that delimits membership in the class of women, it seems that John will be classified as a woman. He will be related to other individuals in certain fashion (relevant for *womanness*) as he is engaged in many of the practices constitutive of the class of women. But it seems hugely counter-intuitive to classify John as a woman based on this criterion. That he partakes in many practices commonly associated with women does not seem to sufficiently justify the claim that John should be classified as *a woman*.

Shared attributes and class membership

The above cases point to this: the practices that supposedly ground the class of women are hugely difficult to articulate. It seems extremely difficult to discern some set of practices that capture all and only *women* at the same time excluding individuals like Ted and John. Setting this worry aside I wish to discuss another problem with Frye's position. Frye appears to assume that membership in the class of women determines or conditions shared attributes and features (and not *vice versa*). Consider Frye's example of the Redheads' Club. She claims that what makes this club *a club* is that the individual members become involved with one another despite their particular difference. They may come from different religions, cultures or just living areas, thus making the group of redheads internally diverse. Sure enough, this may qualify

calling something *a club*. But calling it a *Redheads' club* is going to require something different. In order to say why this club is a *Redheads' club*, the most obvious answer is that the individual members of the club share something: they all have red hair and *this* has brought them together.

Now, Frye's discussion of women suggests something different. She seems to think that attributions of *womanness* result from belonging to a structured collection of individuals and only after women come together to engage and partake in certain practices and activities, are they classified as women. But this is counterintuitive. Consider the redheads' club on this picture. Following Frye, the suggestion would be that because individuals have joined this club, they come to have red hair. This is clearly false and the situation seems to be precisely the opposite. Consider another example. Imagine an individual called Mary who is very active in various women's groups and collectives. She regularly attends feminist meetings and helps to organise events such as women's bookfairs and gender empowerment workshops. Mary is precisely the kind of individual Frye's structure would pick out and she would be classified as a woman on Frye's view.

Imagine further that Mary is visually impaired and has a guide-dog called Barney. Barney goes everywhere Mary goes including her women's group meetings and other feminist gatherings. But, following Frye's classificatory method it seems that Barney the guide-dog would also be picked out as a member of the class of women. Barney can be said to partake in numerous gatherings of women such as women's groups, women's bookfairs and gender empowerment workshops. Admittedly Barney is not a very active

participant in these practices but arguably this shouldn't matter. As long as Barney partakes in such activities, Barney is structured with relation to the other participants and seems to count as a woman on Frye's proposal. But this seems almost laughable – surely the class of women should not include guide-dogs on any membership criterion! The example of Barney suggests that Frye's method is unsatisfactory regardless of the details of her account (such as which practices contribute to individuals' becoming structured in ways that make them members of the class of women). Regardless of how engaged Barney were in practices that structure the class of women it still seems counter-intuitive to hold that Barney, as a result, would be a member of that class.¹⁷

Moreover, it seems that the situation is reversed: women engage in certain shared practices *because* as members of the same class they have something in common that gives them a reason to engage in these practices (and not *vice versa*). It seems counterintuitive to hold that by virtue of engaging in certain practices and events one suddenly finds oneself as a member of a specific class. As if those who attend the redheads' club suddenly find themselves as members of the class of redheaded people. Engaging in the kinds of practices Frye outlines depends on certain affinities or shared attributes

¹⁷ One might claim that Barney could not be a member of the class of women because Barney seems to be thoroughly unable to develop an identity as a woman (or, at the very least, we could never know whether Barney has developed such an identity). But this does not matter for class *formation*. What classes (or, as Frye calls them, categories) require is that individuals become involved with one another through certain category building practices. Having an identity as a member of a class and identifying with other members of the class (Frye thinks) will follow from class membership: identifying oneself as a woman is not required for membership in the class of women. So, even though Barney (it seems) will never think of itself as a woman, this does not foreclose the possibility that Barney could be a member of the class of women on Frye's view.

amongst those who engage in them, not the other way round. Women come together and partake in the kinds of practices Frye mentioned *because* they are women, not *vice versa*.

V

I have argued that classifying women in the manner Frye suggests is inadequate. First and foremost, Frye's method may not pick out all and only women. Second, Frye's position curiously seems to suggest that if one engages in certain practices and structures that pick out the class of women, one will count as a woman. But, as I argued, this would allow us to classify Barney the dog as a woman. These reasons, it seems to me, are enough to warrant the rejection of Frye's proposal.

CHAPTER 3

YOUNG, SERIAL COLLECTIVITY AND WOMEN

I

In her paper “Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective”, Iris Marion Young (1997) sets out to successfully respond to the problem that has “cast doubt on the project of conceptualising women as a group” (Young 1997: 12). This problem is by now a familiar one. It seems that women do not have any single feature (or set of features) in common that grounds membership in the class of women. And yet, feminist politics seems to require that membership in this class can be made sense of. As Young puts it, unless there is “some sense in which ‘woman’ is the name of a social collective [feminism represents], there is nothing specific to feminist politics” (1997: 13). Young goes on to suggest a way to settle this dilemma: she proposes that the class of women should be understood as *a serial collective* drawing this notion from Jean-Paul Sartre’s discussion of social classes. On Young’s view, women have no shared features that justify classification. Rather, women’s *practico-inert realities* (very roughly, the ways in which their lives and actions are organised) ground gender classification. Young suggests that her view “allows us to see [women] as a collective without identifying common attributes that all women have or implying that all women have a common identity” (1997: 13).

In what follows, I will argue against Young’s proposal. I begin by mapping out some background to her view (section II). In section III, I will outline Sartre’s notion of *serial collectivity* in detail. Next I go on to outline

Young proposal that this notion allows feminist philosophers to classify women without making claims about shared features (section IV). Finally, I argue that Young's proposal should not be endorsed (in section V). As I will show, she does not provide a plausible criterion for classifying women into a *single* class.

II

How are feminists to make sense of gender classes following Young? She suggests that this requires a pragmatic orientation to classification:

“We should take a more *pragmatic* orientation to our intellectual discourse. By being ‘pragmatic’ I mean categorizing, explaining, developing accounts and arguments that are tied to specific practical and political problems, where the purpose of this theoretical activity is clearly related to those problems.” (Young 1997: 16-17)

The specific political and practical problem feminist philosophers like Young aim to respond to, is this: to prevent feminist theory from evaporating and becoming politically ineffective by offering a way to make sense of gender classes. Young singles out two recent feminist proposals for doing this: firstly, “the attempt to theorize gender identity as multiple” and secondly, “the argument that women constitute a group only in the politicised context of feminist struggle” (Young 1997: 18). She goes on to argue that both of these proposals fail, suggesting that her own position provides a more plausible alternative.

Spelman (1990) endorses the former, so-called, ‘multiple genders approach’. Instead of assuming that there is a single class of women that all women are members of, women's particularity suggests (to Spelman) that particular kinds of women form different gender classes depending on their

social, cultural and economic backgrounds. There is no single class of women; rather, there are numerous different classes. These include the class of black women, the class of working-class women, the class of lesbian women, the class of black lesbian women, the class of Jewish women and the class of working-class Jewish women (to name but a few). In Young's view, Spelman's approach has two significant advantages. First and foremost, it highlights the fact that not all women are equally oppressed. By and large, those who are members of the class of white women are more privileged than those who are members of the class of Black women. In doing so, this kind of position does not commit one to the seemingly false and unlikely view that *all* women are equally disadvantaged *as women*. Spelman's position (Young claims) also highlights the fact that in order to properly understand what gender is and how it affects our lives, race and class identities cannot be ignored.

Despite these benefits, Young finds certain aspects of Spelman's position objectionable. For instance, Spelman assumes "a stability and unity to the categories of race, class, religion, ethnicity, [and so on]" (Young 1997: 20). She simply seems to think that all black women share something *qua* black women, all Jewish women share something *qua* Jewish women, all black lesbian women share something *qua* black lesbian women and so on. Elsewhere (and independently of Young) Uma Narayan (1998) has argued against views that assume racial and cultural categories are homogenous. Narayan argues:

"The project of attending to differences among women across a variety of national and cultural contexts then becomes a project that endorses and replicates problematic and colonialist assumptions about the cultural differences between 'Western culture' and 'Non-Western cultures' and the women who inhabit them. Seemingly universal essentialist generalisations about 'all women' are replaced by *culture-specific* essentialist generalizations

that depend on totalising categories such as 'Western culture', 'Non-western cultures', 'Western women', 'Third World women' and so forth." (Narayan 1998: 87)

It simply is false to think that all women from a particular race, religion or culture share something *qua* women from that particular race, religion or culture. After all, particular racial, cultural or religious groups are themselves internally diverse.

Young goes on to claim that subsequently "[Spelman's] strategy can generate an infinite regress that dissolves groups into individuals" (1997: 20). Just like Narayan, Young rejects the idea that there is a specific Western women's gender identity or a specific Jewish women's gender identity: "why claim that black women, for example, have a distinct and unified gender identity? Black women are American, Haitian, Jamaican, African, Northern, Southern, poor, working class, lesbian, or old" (1997: 20). Take Condoleezza Rice and the Sudanese refugee. *Prima facie* they differ greatly from one another and it seems hard to point out what they share *qua* black women (apart from having similar skin tones). According to Young, the upshot of this is that Spelman's view dissolves groups into individuals and (following Spelman) feminist theorists can legitimately only talk of individual women and their individual experiences: after all, if there is no single feature all black lesbian women share *qua* black lesbian women, it is not legitimate for feminist theorists to make generalisations about this particular group of women. They can only talk of traits possessed and experiences encountered by *individual* black lesbian women. Spelman herself does not recognise that her position might have the consequence of dissolving groups into individuals. But, Young goes on to claim

that insofar as it does, Spelman's approach "does not resolve the dilemma I have posed" (Young 1997: 20).

Insofar as we accept Young's conclusion that Spelman's views mean feminist theorists can only legitimately speak of individuals, her critique is justified and well placed. Nevertheless, Young's conclusion, that due to this Spelman's position cannot provide a framework for understanding the class of women, is somewhat less justified. It seems to me that although Spelman's position appears to have the consequence of dissolving groups into individuals, it seems unjustified to claim that a *problem* with Spelman's position is that it fails to classify women together. This is because Spelman is not trying to make sense of a single class of women. Rather, Spelman is trying to argue for precisely the opposite view: that there is no such class since women do not share anything that makes them women. As this is the case, it seems rather unsurprising that Spelman fails to unify the class of women: she is not aiming to do this.

The second alternative Young discusses, that (according to her) aims to classify women *qua* women, holds that there is "an identity 'woman' that unites subjects into a group [where this identity] is not a natural or social given, but rather the fluid construct of a political movement, feminism" (1997: 20). This rather enigmatic thought is further elaborated: "feminist politics itself creates an identity 'woman' out of a coalition of diverse female persons dispersed across the world" (Young 1997: 20). Young attributes such a view to Diana Fuss (1989). Fuss has proposed (roughly) that the class of women arises out of certain social positions individuals take up with respect to feminist political

goals. She contrasts her own proposal (which will become clearer shortly) with a suggestion put forward by Donna Haraway who claims that a distinct sense of feminist politics arises from certain affinities women have towards each other (Haraway 1985). These affinities then give rise to political coalitions and a distinct feminist politics. Now, Fuss writes,

“[w]hereas Haraway posits a coalition of women as the basis of a possible feminist socialist politics, I see politics as the basis of a possible coalition of women. For Haraway, it is affinity which grounds politics; for me, it is politics which grounds affinity ... [Political c]oalition precedes class and determines its limits and boundaries; we cannot identify a group of women until various social, historical, political coalitions construct the conditions and possibilities for membership.” (Fuss 1989: 36)

Fuss' idea seems to be something like this: instead of thinking that a distinctly feminist politics arises out of some unified class of women, the situation is reversed. Feminist politics enables the formation of certain *political* affinities that in turn give rise to a unified class of women. Presumably this takes place since women are organised around and aim to fight for the same political goal.

Such a position (Young claims) encounters two problems. Firstly, Butler's normativity problem (discussed in chapter 1) may not be avoided. Regardless of whether a shared identity is a product of feminist politics or that which grounds feminist politics, such identities (Butler claims) are prescriptive and exclusionary: they create norms that dictate what women *should* be like. Those women who fail to satisfy the norms (or, as Butler would say, fail to cohere with them) will effectively be ostracised or excluded from the scope of *womanness* and alienated from feminist politics. As all exclusionary consequences of this kind are problematic and harmful any position that seems to entail them should be rejected (Butler 1999).

The second problem with Fuss' position (according to Young) is with the thought that the class of women arises from feminist politics: "Some women just choose to come together in a political movement and form themselves as a group of mutually identifying agents. But on the basis of what do they come together? What are the social conditions that have motivated the politics? ... [Moreover] do feminist politics not refer to women who do not identify as feminists?" (Young 1997: 21). Young's thought is that feminist politics cannot ground the class of women. This is because those women who are not members of feminist political coalitions are left outside of the class and ignored. By contrast, feminist politics should address all women, even those who are not explicitly feminist, who do not identify themselves as feminists and who do not partake in feminist political coalitions. Insofar as Fuss' position seems to ignore those women, it should be rejected.

III

As a response to these positions outlined, Young suggests that the way to make sense of the class of women is by means of *seriality* proposed by Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1976). According to Young, "we [should] understand gender as referring to a social series, a specific kind of social collectivity that Sartre distinguishes from groups" (1997: 22). This way of thinking about gender does not "requir[e] that all women have common attributes or a common situation" that grounds classification (Young 1997: 22). A crucial aspect of Sartre's (and Young's) position is the distinction between *groups* and *series*. The idea is that women constitute the latter (a series) but not

the former (a group). Group membership requires that individual members share some experiences, traits or features and that they, as a result, have a particular identity as members of a group in common. Such an identity (for Young) expresses a “self-ascription as belonging to a group with others who similarly identify, who affirm together or are committed together to a set of values, practices, meanings, and so on” (Young 1997: 33). Young seems to think that previous feminist efforts to classify women encountered precisely the problems they did because they attempted to make sense of the class of women as *a group* with common features, attributes or experiences that give rise to a common sense of gender. Insofar as no such common sense of gender exists, it seems that any account of gender that appeals to such an identity is going to be unsatisfactory. Young further argues that if the class of women is understood as a *series*, many problems previous feminist proposals encountered will be avoided. This is because series membership does not require that there are some shared features, attributes or experiences amongst individual members of a series. (It is worth pointing out that many feminist attempts to classify women do not rely on shared features or experiences that supposedly give rise to a distinct sense of *womanness* shared by all women. Young seems to think that the *only* ways in which feminists can make sense of the class of women are either in terms of groups – with a shared sense of gender – or in terms of series. She is, of course, wrong in thinking that these are the only possible alternatives. This will become clearer still during the course of this thesis.)

Consider the distinction between groups and series that Young endorses more closely. According to Sartre, there are a number of different kinds of

collections of individuals, some of which are groups and others that are series. (On Sartre's view, other kinds of collections exist apart from these two. However, Young notes "for the purposes of addressing the problem of thinking about women as a social collective, the important distinction is between a group and a series" [Young 1997: 23]. Her reasons for thinking this are, nevertheless, unclear.) Sartrean groups have four features: (i) they are collections "of persons that recognize themselves and one another as in a unified relation with one another", (ii) group members "mutually acknowledge that together they undertake a common project", (iii) they are "united by *action* that they undertake together" and (iv) "in acknowledging himself or herself as a member of the group, an individual acknowledges himself or herself as oriented towards the same goals as the others" (Young 1997: 23). Philosophy lecturers employed by the University of Sheffield seem to constitute a group on this description. They recognise themselves and other faculty members as being in a unified relation with one another (being members of the same department). They seem to acknowledge that they undertake a common project (educating students about philosophy and discovering truths). Philosophy lecturers seem to be united by action: they teach, conduct research and engage in administrative tasks. Finally, it seems that members of the Sheffield philosophy department acknowledge that their actions are oriented towards the same goal of educating students about philosophy and discovering truths.

A series, then again, importantly lacks the feature of being unified by common goals and pursuits. Rather, it is

"a social collective whose members are unified passively by the objects their actions are oriented around and/or by the objectified results of the material

effects of the actions of the others ... The unity of the series derives from the way that individuals pursue their own individual ends in respect to the same objects conditioned by a continuous material environment, in response to structures that have been created by the unintended collective result of past actions." (Young 1997: 23-4)

Individual members of a series do not aim to accomplish any shared goals. They pursue their own individual goals and aims. In doing so, individuals unwittingly constitute a series as the "objects and practices through which they aim to accomplish their individual purposes" are (in a sense) similar (Young 1997: 24). They, nevertheless, lack a shared group identity since they do not mutually acknowledge having goals and aims in common.

It is not clear why Young thinks that an appeal to certain *objects* (that individual action is oriented around and towards) provides a plausible way to understand social classes. Why should we think that a view of social collectives that are organised around everyday *objects* is plausible (and should be endorsed)? Young does not address these questions. Sartre's existentialist philosophy may provide some motivation for this view of social classes. Sartre claims that human freedom depends on being able to act and perform actions of certain kinds (Sartre 1958). Recall de Beauvoir's feminist appropriation of Sartre's existentialism discussed in the previous chapter. She claimed that women are not fully fledged human subjects because they are unable to perform certain kinds of actions: women are unable to formulate their own ends and goals, determine their own destinies and pursue projects they have set for themselves. Women are confined to a life of repetition of mundane tasks through which they cannot realise their human potential whereas men (by and

large) are free to set and pursue their own individual goals and be the authors of their own destinies.

Sartre not only thinks that human action is a prerequisite for freedom but he also acknowledges that different *kinds* of actions exist. For example, there is action that is organised around shared goals and aims (like the storming of the Bastille) and there is action that is organised around everyday life, habit and routine (like doing one's weekly shopping). In both cases, certain *objects* bring the individuals together to form collectives. Those storming the Bastille are brought together by Bastille. Those doing their weekly shopping in (for example) Sheffield's largest *Tesco* are brought together by the *Tesco* store they shop in. These collections of people (those storming the Bastille and those doing their weekly shopping in *Tesco*) differ because the objects around which people's actions are organised differ. These collectives also differ from one another because in the former case the object around which the collective is formed (the Bastille) provides the members of the collective with a shared goal: storming the Bastille.

However, some classes (like the working class) are *not* organised around shared goals and aims. The objects around which the working class forms do not provide an impetus to pursue shared goal. And yet, it seems that working class people constitute a social collective of *some* kind. This suggests to Sartre (paraphrased by Young) that "most of the time what it means to be a member of the working class or the capitalist class is to live in series [where action is organised around everyday habit and routine] with others in that class through a complex, interlocking set of objects, structures, and practices in

relation to work, exchange, and consumption” (Young 1997: 26). In a similar way, it seems that women do not have some specific goals and aims in common. And yet, women appear to constitute a social collective *in some sense*. This suggests (to Young) that women constitute a social class in a similar way to working class people. Women’s lives are unified together on the level of similar everyday habits and routine, not on the level of shared goals and action. (I will discuss Young’s application of *seriality* to gender in the next section.)

In order to illustrate his view, Sartre describes people waiting for a bus as an example of a series:

“[People waiting for a bus] are a collective, insofar as they minimally relate to one another and follow the rules of bus waiting. As a collective they are brought together by their relations to a material object, the bus, and the social practice of public transportation. Their actions and goals may be different: they have nothing necessarily in common in their histories, experiences, or identity. They are united only by their desire to ride on that route.” (Young 1997: 24)

The people waiting for a bus constitute a series insofar as their action (of waiting for a bus) is organised around the same object (the bus) and around the same practice (public transportation). The people waiting for a bus do not aim to accomplish any shared goals. They simply want to ride on the bus in order to accomplish their individual goals. Some have the goal of getting to work, some of running errands or going shopping, others may simply like the scenery from the bus window and ride for pleasure.

Objects, like the bus around which the series of people at the bus stop is organised, are *practico-inert*: “[a] series is structured by actions linked to practico-inert objects. Social objects and their effects are the results of human action, they are *practical*. But as material they also constitute constraints on and resistance to action, which make them experienced as *inert*” (Young 1997: 25).

Young is not particularly clear in her characterisation of *practico-inert objects* and it seems she uses 'inert' in a rather odd fashion here. The idea seems to be something like this: in our everyday lives human action is constantly constrained by material objects and their effects. For instance, if the bus fails to come, this constrains the actions of the people at the bus stop. They are unable to get to work, run their errands and so on. Such practico-inert objects are everywhere: "all of the products of human decision and action, daily used by and dwelt in by people, the streets and buildings are inert" (Young 1997: 25). It seems that what Young (drawing on Sartre) has in mind is that everyday common objects prevent human agents from performing certain actions and obstruct human action. Insofar as they do so, such objects are practico-inert. (It seems that most, if not all, material objects fit this description. As a result, it is unclear whether there is a difference between objects in general and practico-inert objects in particular.)

Apart from certain kinds of objects, it seems that other people and actions of other people also contribute to our practico-inert realities (although, of course, human agents are not usually thought of as inert):

"A market [place] is paradigmatic of such structured relations of alienation and anonymity [that constitute practico-inert realities and] that are felt as constraints on everyone. I take my corn to market in hopes of getting a good price, knowing that some people are trading on its price in a future market, and that other farmers bring their corn as well. We know that by bringing our large quantity of corn we contribute to a fall in its price, and we might each play the futures market ourselves. But we are all equally as individuals unable to alter the collective results of these individual choices, choices which themselves have been made partly because of our expectations of what is happening to market prices." (Young 1997: 25-6)

Young's thought is that the practico-inert realities of someone selling their corn at the market place are not merely determined by practico-inert objects like

corn: they are also determined by other traders of corn and those buying the corn at the market place.

It is then in response to such practico-inert realities (material objects and actions of other people) that individuals constitute series. Those who are faced with the same or similar practico-inert realities constitute a particular series (like the people at the bus stop or corn sellers at the market place). Being a member of a series, in a sense defines an individual: “one ‘is’ a farmer, or a commuter, or a radio listener, and so on, together in series with others similarly positioned” (Young 1997: 26). But this identification is of very different kind from that experienced by members of groups. To say ‘I am a farmer’ does not describe one’s *identity* as a farmer that one has in common with other farmers. Rather, saying ‘I am a farmer’ tells us something “about the material conditions of one’s life” (Young 1997: 26). It indicates membership in a series of farmers that describes the social position, situation and the material conditions of my life. It indicates that I organise and orient my actions around and towards certain material conditions of farming (such as cultivating land, producing edible goods and employing particular kinds of machines in order to do so). In order to be a member of a series (like the series of farmers), “no specific set of attributes that form the sufficient conditions for membership” must be had (Young 1997: 26). In Young’s view:

“To be said to be part of the same series it is not necessary to identify a set of common attributes that every member has, because their membership is defined not by something they are, but rather by the fact that in their diverse existences and actions they are oriented around the same objects or practico-inert structures. Membership in the series does not define one’s identity ... there is no concept of the series within attributes that clearly demarcate what about individuals makes them belong. The series is a blurry, shifting unity, an amorphous collective.” (1997: 27)

As mentioned, the most crucial difference between series and groups is that members of the former (unlike those of the latter) do not organise themselves according to shared goals and action. A series is not a self-conscious collective of individuals with a common collective identity. Consider the people waiting for a bus. *Prima facie* they do not constitute a group since they have no goals and aims in common nor do they identify with one another *qua* people waiting for a bus. But this series can *become* a group:

“The latent potential of this series to organize itself as a group will become manifest ... if the bus fails to come; [the members of a series] will complain to one another about the lousy bus service, share horror stories of lateness and breakdowns, perhaps assign one of their number to call the company, or discuss sharing a taxi.” (Young 1997: 24)

The members of a series have organised themselves: they have a shared self-conscious goal and they identify with one another. Thus, the *series* of people waiting for a bus has been transformed into *a group* of people waiting for a bus. Each person at the bus stop identifies with one another and they all have some attribute in common by virtue of which they are members of the same group. However, if the bus suddenly arrives this group will once again disperse into a series – people will simply get on the bus and go about their own individual lives no longer identifying with the other passengers.

IV

Young suggests that “applying the concept of seriality to gender ... makes theoretical sense out of saying that ‘women’ is a reasonable social category, expressing a certain kind of social unity” without relying on shared features or experiences (1997: 27). Moreover, Young maintains that her position avoids the

problems Spelman's and Fuss' positions encountered (outlined in section II).

On Young's view, the class of women should be thought of as a series where this series is

“the name of a structural relation to [practico-inert] material objects as they have been produced and organized by a prior history ... Gender, like class, is a vast, multifaceted, layered, complex, and overlapping set of structures and objects. *Women* are the individuals who are positioned as feminine by these activities.” (1997: 28)

Those individuals gendered as women stand in certain relations to particular practico-inert material objects and realities that position them *as women*. To put this in another way, certain practico-inert realities gender individuals. The ways in which these realities gender individuals is determined by the totality of the practico-inert realities: by the set of practico-inert objects and structures that individual's actions are oriented towards along with the actions of other human agents. If the class of women were thought of as a group (on Young's view) classification would require that women share some goals and aims thereby (presumably) sharing features, attributes, experiences and a group identity *as women*. Saying this, however, seems hugely problematic since women simply do not seem to share any single feature or a specific gender identity as women.

So, what are the practico-inert objects and realities that govern gender and provide a way to classify women *qua* women? First and foremost, Young thinks these include female bodies:

“Clearly female bodies have something to do with the constitution of the series ‘women’, but it is not merely the physical facts of these female bodies themselves – attributes of breasts, vaginas, clitorises, and so on – that construct female gender. Social objects are not merely physical but also inscribed by and the products of past *practices*. The female body as a *practico-inert* object toward which action is oriented is a rule-bound body, a body with understood meanings and possibilities. Menstruation, for example, is a regular biological event occurring in most female bodies within a certain age range. It is not this biological process alone, however, that locates individuals in the series

'women'. Rather, the social rules of menstruation, along with the material objects associated with menstrual practices, constitute the activity within which women live as serialized. One can say the same about biological events like pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation." (Young 1997: 28)

Young claims that female bodies along with other objects and events associated with them are rendered practico-inert by the structures of enforced heterosexuality: "the assumptions and practices of heterosexuality define the meaning of bodies – vaginas, clitorises, penises – not as mere physical objects but as practico-inert" (Young 1997: 28).

She does not, unfortunately, elaborate much on this thought. Young notes that structures of enforced heterosexuality "serialize women as objects of exchange and appropriation by men, with the consequent repression of autonomous active female desire" (1997: 28). It seems that she has in mind something like this: female bodies are endowed with certain kinds of meanings since we live within the remits of compulsory and enforced heterosexuality (cf. Butler in chapter 1). Women do not create these meanings; rather, men create and impose them on women thereby conditioning authentic female desire. This supposedly renders female bodies as practico-inert.

Women are not serialised exclusively because of their female bodies and the meanings these bodies are endowed with. Young claims a huge array of other objects that condition gender and determine "women's lives as gendered" exist (1997: 29). These include

"pronouns [that] locate individual people, along with animals and other objects, in a gender system. Verbal and visual representations more generally create and reproduce gender meanings that condition a person's action and her interpretation of the actions of others. A multitude of artifacts and social spaces in which people act are flooded with gender codes. Clothes are the primary example, but there are also cosmetics, tools, even in some case furniture and spaces that materially inscribe the norms of gender. I may

discover myself 'as a woman' by being on the 'wrong' dorm floor." (Young 1997: 29)

These practico-inert objects are not conditioned by enforced heterosexuality though. Rather, the sexual division of labour conditions these latter kinds of practico-inert objects. Not only does it commonly result in women caring for babies and engaging in housework, but division of labour also renders the use of certain kind of language, clothing and work 'natural' to women. As a result, it (for instance) appears natural for women to work in offices wearing skirts and make-up. To sum up, Young maintains:

"Bodies and objects constitute the gendered series women through structures like enforced heterosexuality and the sexual division of labor ... Individuals move and act in relation to practico-inert objects that position them as 'women'. The practico-inert structures that generate the milieu of gendered serialized existence both enable and constrain action, but they do not determine or define it. The individuals pursue their own ends; they get a living for themselves in order to have some pleasures of eating and relaxation ... The gender structures are not defining attributes of individuals, but material social facts that each individual must deal with and relate to." (1997: 29-30)

It is important to remember that individuals positioned as women through these structures need not have an identity *as women* in common. Rather, these structures provide a background for such an identity (Young 1997: 30).

Thinking about gender in this way (Young believes) is politically useful in that it allows us to talk of women in general without implying that women share attributes, features, experiences or a gender identity. Each woman will have her own particular way of responding to the practico-inert structures that gender her and, as a result, women will "have differing experiences and perceptions from those differently situated" (Young 1997: 31). *Contra* Spelman and Fuss, Young claims her position allows that

"there is a unity to the series 'women', but it is a passive unity, not one that arises from the individuals called women, but rather that positions them

through the material organization of social relations as enabled and constrained by the structural relations I have called enforced heterosexuality and the sexual division of labor ... Saying that a person is a woman may predict something about the general constraints and expectations she must deal with. But it predicts nothing in particular about who she is, what she does, or how she takes up her social positioning." (1997: 32)

Her position, Young maintains, does not dissolve the class of women into individuals (as Spelman's position did). It also provides a way to make sense of the class of women that exists "prior to the formation of self-conscious feminist politics" (Young 1997: 22) - something Fuss' suggestion did not allow for.

Of course, as already mentioned, serial collectives can become groups on Young's view. In fact, "groups, as self-conscious collectives of persons with a common objective that they pursue together, often, if not always, arise on the basis of and in response to a serialized condition" (Young 1997: 34). Our social reality (Young maintains) consists of "constant ebbs and flows of groupings out of series" (1997: 34) and the same is also true of the series of women: women often form groups with common purposes and shared goals although for the most part they are merely a serialised collection of individuals. When faced with certain undesirable or oppressive serial conditions (for instance), the serial collective of women (Young thinks) has the potential to transform itself into a group. As an example of such a situation, Young describes a scene from a novel by Meredith Tax. In this novel Tax portrays the lives of Russian Jewish immigrants living on the Lower East Side of Manhattan at the turn of the century:

"In one episode of the novel some women in the neighborhood discover that the local merchant has manipulated the chicken market in order to get more profits ... They talk with one another with anger and then go about their business. One of them, however, thinks a bit more in her anger and decides to act. She calls her three or four women friends together and tells them that they should boycott the butcher. The women organise a boycott by going from

apartment to apartment talking to women. Gradually these neighborhood women, formerly serialised only as shoppers, come to understand themselves as a group, with some shared experiences and the power of collective action.” (Young 1997: 34)

In Tax’s novel, women (who are always serialised) sometimes form groups to fight their own corner. Young thinks that even if women never form groups with shared goals and aims, they would still be more than mere individuals insofar as they are serialised together. She concludes:

“This is how I propose that using the concept of seriality and its distinction from the concept of group can help solve the conundrums about talking about women as a group in which feminist theory has recently found itself. *Woman* is a serial collective defined neither by any common identity nor by a common set of attributes that all the individuals in the series share, but rather names a set of structural constraints and relations to practico-inert objects that condition action and its meaning. I am inclined to say that the series includes all female human beings in the world, and also others of the past.” (1997: 36)

V

I will now argue that Young’s proposal outlined above is implausible and should not be endorsed. First, Young’s criterion for being a member of the series of women does not seem to provide a good reason to classify women from different backgrounds into the *same* series. It is far from obvious why the criterion for membership in the series of women results in only a *single* series (rather than many different series of women). In order to make it clearer that women are members of the same series, Young would need to say something more specific about the practico-inert realities that govern gender - she would have to tighten the criteria for series membership. I go on to suggest two ways in which this might be done: by appealing to some rather invariable physical features or by appealing to stricter social criteria for series membership. But, I argue, this modification does not render Young’s position unproblematic

although it may *prima facie* avoid the first problem I drew attention to. The modification one is required to make in order to show that women are members of the same series creates another set of problems since such a modification is likely to result in false (or, at least, implausible) claims about women in general.¹⁸

Criterion for series membership

How does Young suggest women can be classified together? Firstly, she maintains that being a member of a series does not entail (or require) that one has anything at all in common with other members of the series. This is beneficial; even though it seems that women *qua* women do not share any single feature (or set of features), they can still be classified together. However, in doing so, Young also aims to avoid Spelman's conclusion: that there are multiple female genders. She clearly wants to make sense of *a* series of women, not of many. Second, Young claims that women are serialised by virtue of their actions: women's actions are oriented towards and organised around certain practico-inert realities and objects that "construct gender" marking those

¹⁸ These do not appear to be the only problems with Young's position. Stone has argued that Young's proposal is problematic because it "tacitly reinscribes the descriptive essentialism from which she [Young] distances herself" (2004: 145). Stone argues that although Young claims to classify women *qua* women without appealing to shared features or experiences, Young does precisely this. Women's actions (that govern their gender) are oriented towards and organised around the *same* or *similar* practico-inert objects and realities. Insofar as Young claims this to be the case, her position relies on a universally shared feature women have in common and that makes them women. Although Stone is correct in her analysis of Young, I find that her objection is not sufficient to render Young's position implausible. This is because (in my view) claiming commonalities between women exist is not *prima facie* problematic. Claiming women have something in common can become problematic depending on *what* women supposedly share and depending on *how* this claim is used in our philosophical endeavours.

individuals as 'feminine' (Young 1997: 28). These realities and objects (Young claims) mark individuals in this way because of enforced heterosexuality and the division of labour whereby certain bodily features and processes associated with them are endowed with feminine meanings. Finally, Young maintains that numerous different practico-inert objects construct gender (ranging from tampons to pronouns) and that individuals respond to these objects (and to their social series as women) in many different ways:

"In a heterosexist society, for example, every [woman] must deal with and act in relation to structures of enforced heterosexuality. But there are many attitudes a particular individual can take toward that necessity: she can internalise norms of feminine masochism, she can try to avoid sexual interaction, she can affirmatively take up her sexual role as a tool for her own ends, and she can reject heterosexual requirements and love other women, to name just a few." (1997: 30)

In Young's view, the practico-inert realities of women can be experienced and responded to in numerous different ways. Nonetheless, these realities position individuals in feminine ways and serialise them as women.

Now, why do the practico-inert realities, which themselves differ considerably from one another and that can be responded to in numerous different ways, constitute a *single* series of women? Consider Young's characterisation of female bodies that are practico-inert:

"the female body as a *practico-inert* object towards which action is oriented is a rule-bound body ... Menstruation, for example, is a regular biological event occurring in most female bodies within a certain age range ... the social rules of menstruation, along with the material objects associated with menstrual practices, constitute the activity within which the women live as serialized." (1997: 28)

Now, it seems fair to say that the social rules of menstruation and the material objects of menstrual practices differ greatly from one woman to another. Prior to the invention of modern sanitary towels (in the 1920s), females had to wear

garments similar to babies' diapers that they washed and reused (Delaney, Lupton and Toth 1988: 58). Many females who come from less affluent parts of the world still wear garments similar to these rags. In contrast to such practices, females from affluent (mostly, Western) countries need not engage in this unhygienic and rather unpleasant sounding activity. They have access to disposable sanitary towels and have a choice from a range of manufacturers, sizes and shapes.

Bearing in mind further many taboos and menstruation rites different cultures have exercised (and still exercise), the social rules of menstruation become more diverse still. A relatively moderate practice followed by Orthodox Jewish women is to refrain from sexual intercourse until seven days after their menstruation has ended and only after they have immersed themselves in a ritual bath or *mikveh* (Delaney et al: 39). Other more extreme culturally specific practices and rules of menstruation have been observed. For example, "the Kolosh Indians of Alaska confined pubescent girls in a tiny hut, completely blocked except for one small airhole, for one year, during which time they were allowed no fire, no exercise, no company" (Delaney et al: 29). This rite marks the passage from childhood to adulthood after which females were usually considered to be marriageable. A Brazilian tribe, Uaupés, have exercised even more extreme menstrual rites to make their daughters marriageable:

"At her menarche, a girl is confined to her house for a month, with only a little bread and water for nourishment. When her seclusion is complete, she is brought out naked to be beaten with sticks by her relatives and friends of her parents until she falls senseless or dead. Hutton Webster notes [in his *Taboo: A Sociological Study*]: 'If she recovers, the flagellation is repeated four times, at intervals of six hours, and it is considered an offense to the parents not to strike hard. Finally the sticks are dipped into pots of meat and fat and given to the

girl to lick. She is now considered a marriageable woman'." (Delaney et al: 32; see also, Webster 1942: 90-1)

The practico-inert objects and realities a Kolosh Indian woman's actions are oriented towards and organised around (the tiny hut, for instance) seem to differ hugely from those practico-inert realities of Western menstruating women who can choose their sanitary towels from a range of different and competing brands. Bearing in mind examples like those of the Brazilian Uaupés, the differences between different women's practico-inert realities become more diverse still. It seems very different to endure a 24-hour beating from one's relatives (that may result in the girl's death) than it is to have a cleansing bath or to simply stop at the local pharmacy to buy some tampons. In thinking about these different cases, it does not seem immediately obvious to me why the women mentioned are members of the *same* series and apparently so on the *same* criterion since menstrual practices can differ so radically.

Consider another case. Young claims that pregnancy, childbirth and lactation also play a significant part in the practico-inert realities that position individuals in feminine ways (constructing their gender as women). But clearly not every woman's actions are oriented towards *these* practico-inert realities. Imagine Anna who is a 40-year old mother of 15. In certain parts of rural Finland women like Anna are not uncommon. In many villages in the north of the country a particular form of Christianity (called 'Lestadiolaisuus') that bans contraception and TVs and demands procreation from its members is prevalent. Most families in many of the villages in this area are members of this religious sect. (In fact, women who give birth to less than 10 children are considered anomalous and the *only* grounds for divorce allowed is if the wife fails in her

duty to procreate sufficiently.) It seems clear that Anna's life is largely organised around and oriented towards practico-inert realities of childbirth, pregnancy, lactation and so on. Now, contrast Anna's practico-inert realities with those of Condoleezza Rice. She has no children and her actions are clearly not oriented around the same practico-inert realities Anna's actions are (like pregnancy and lactation). She is also a hugely powerful and influential politician and many of her actions (it seems fair to say) are oriented towards and organised around practico-inert realities and objects characterised as 'masculine' given her political position.

So, it seems that Anna and Condoleezza Rice are serialised very differently *as women*. Would it not then be more appropriate to consider them as members of *different* series of women? Why does it not follow that depending on the *nature* of the practico-inert objects different series of women form? It seems that the practico-inert objects around which Condoleezza Rice orients her actions are very different from the practico-inert objects around which Anna orients hers. Bearing in mind further that when *all* females are considered the range of practico-inert realities and objects women's actions will be oriented towards and organised around is going to be huge. How can Young's proposal, then, provide a reasonable way to make sense of a single series of women? It is hard to see what would unify the series of women enough to avoid this unity collapsing or dissolving into specific sub-series of women who come from similar social and cultural backgrounds.

Another issue that Young (in my view) addresses inadequately is this: how much of an individual's life and actions must revolve around *feminine*

practico-inert realities to render that individual a member of the series of *women*? After all, being a woman (for Young) is “an anonymous fact [about an individual] ... It means that I check one box rather than another on my driver’s license application, that I use maxipads, wear pumps, and sometimes find myself in situations when I anticipate deprecation or humiliation from a man” (Young 1997: 30). Again, consider Condoleezza Rice. She holds a hugely influential political position and, given her current social situation, she seems very privileged. Many of the tasks and activities Condoleezza Rice engages in are not traditionally associated with women. She is not a homemaker or a carer but in charge of the foreign policy of (arguably) the most powerful nation on earth. Now, she does appear feminine in that she wears suits designed for women and make-up. She also has female physical features and clearly possesses a female body. But is this *enough* to gender her as a woman? Why is she not serialised as a man because many of her actions are oriented towards and organised around practico-inert realities that appear traditionally masculine (like being involved in politics)?

Consider a different example. Imagine an individual called ‘Sandy’ who has male sex characteristics, a male body and who calls himself ‘a man’. Imagine further that Sandy is a single parent and Sandy’s actions are largely oriented towards and organised around traditionally feminine practico-inert realities: Sandy is the primary caretaker, he cooks, cleans and nurtures engaging in many tasks Young claims are ‘naturally’ associated with women (Young 1997: 29). Now, imagine Sandy also organises and orients his actions around and towards practico-inert realities that traditionally gender individuals as men.

(Although Young does not discuss what such realities would amount to, it seems fair to assume that they would be largely parallel to those that gender women.) Presumably enforced heterosexuality would endow male bodies with certain kinds of meanings whereas the sexual division of labour would render certain activities and tasks as naturally falling in men's domain. So, imagine that apart from being the primary caretaker, Sandy works as a builder. He is engaged in physical labour and his actions are organised around numerous objects that inscribe a masculine gender (such as clothing typically associated with men and hard physical labour). Since Sandy's actions seem to be organised around and oriented towards both feminine and masculine practico-inert realities, which series is Sandy a member of? How do we decide which gender inscriptions are overriding? How many of Sandy's actions must be organised around and oriented towards those practico-inert realities that position individuals as men in order for Sandy to be a member of the series of men? Or, is Sandy's social positioning enough to gender him as a woman? All of these questions are left unanswered by Young.

In response, Young might simply claim that the issues I draw attention to above are non-problematic for her. This is because she aims to provide a pragmatic response to the problems of gender classification and she does not aim "to provide an entire social theory" (Young 1997: 17). Recall what Young means by this: "By being 'pragmatic' I mean categorizing, explaining, developing accounts and arguments that are tied to specific practical and political problems, where the purpose of this theoretical activity is clearly related to those problems" (1997: 17). She contrasts her pragmatic approach

with a *theoretical* stance that “aims to be comprehensive, to give a systematic account and explanation of social relations as a whole ... [and] tells the way things are in some universal sense. From it one can derive particular instances, or at least one can apply the theoretical propositions to particular facts, which the theory’s generalities are supposed to ‘cover’” (1997: 16). Had Young been concerned to provide a theory in this sense, the issues I draw attention to would be problematic. But since she is only providing a pragmatic account of gender, the problems I mentioned are simply not relevant: Young’s proposal is not designed to provide answers to the worries I raised because it is not aiming to provide a systematic theory of gender *as a whole*.

This response does not, however, succeed. Young’s pragmatic orientation does not, however, mean that she need not provide a *general theory*: in order to make sense of gender classes, Young (or any other theorist) must provide a general framework in order to settle various problems with gender classification. In order to make sense of the class of women, Young must provide some criterion for *womanness* from which individual instances may be derived. And for such general criterion to be plausible and persuasive, she will have to respond to the challenges I raised. Without a general theory, Young cannot achieve her goal: to settle the issue of gender classification.

Rethinking the criteria for series membership

What if Young’s criteria for membership in the series of women were understood in the theoretical (rather than pragmatic) sense? Will her proposal work then? In my view: it does not. There is still a problem with Young’s

criteria for series membership. It remains unclear why (on Young's view) there would be a single series of women, rather than many. Young does not address this worry. Nonetheless, if I am right in claiming that her criterion for membership in the series of women is not sufficient to unify women together, Young faces a serious problem. She clearly wants to avoid the series of women simply dissolving into different sub-series of women and her argument against Spelman's 'multiple genders approach' illustrates this. Young claims that feminism cannot in any politically effective manner speak for or in the name of *particular* women and this is why she finds Spelman's position problematic. But, (as I argued) it is not clear how Young avoids this consequence since she does not offer a good reason to suppose that women on her view will form a *single* series. I argued further that Young's position does not account for why (for example) Condoleezza Rice should be a member of the series of *women* given that she seems to orient her actions and organise her life around many practico-inert realities that are traditionally thought of as masculine.

One way in which Young's position might be rendered more plausible is by tightening the criteria for series membership thereby making it clearer to us why Anna, Condoleezza Rice, the Brazilian Uaupés girls beaten at their menarche and the women who buy *Tampax* tampons are all members of the *same* series. In other words, Young would need to say something stronger and more specific about the practico-inert realities that gender individuals as women. She could, for example, concentrate on some rather invariable physical features to ground membership in the series of women (such as having a female body type or sex characteristics). These features could even be connected to

some rather invariable phenomena like menstruation *without* connecting menstruation further to any socially specific and culturally variable rules of menstruation or objects of menstrual practices. With this modification, series membership would depend on certain practico-inert realities that are closely related to female bodies and only those individuals whose actions are oriented towards and organised around these practico-inert realities would be members of the series of women.

This strategy seems to explain why Condoleezza Rice (for example) is a member of the series of women. Regardless of her political and social positions, it seems fair to assume that her actions are largely oriented towards and organised around her female body. For instance, she wears clothing that fits her body shape, her life (presumably) is organised around some biological processes that take place due to her femaleness and she does (I would imagine) use certain sex-coded facilities, like female toilets. Further, it seems that appealing to physical phenomena that are relatively invariable could provide a better way to justify why there is a *single* series of women: series membership would depend on practico-inert realities governed by female bodies and since these are relatively similar in all females, it does not encounter the same problems hugely variable cultural rules of menstruation (for instance) encountered.

I would suspect, however, that many feminists would be unwilling to accept such a tight connection between female bodies and *womanness* since being a woman does not seem to be reducible to certain bodily features. If this were the case, it seems feminist theorists would not have such a hard time

pointing out exactly what *womanness* amounts to: they could simply appeal to some physical features all women (*qua* women) share. Curiously, Young's own position on whether sex and gender are coextensive is rather unclear. When setting up her position, Young claims that she takes the series of women to include "all female human beings in the world, and also others of the past" (1997: 36). Insofar as this is so, it is not obvious why Young does not simply appeal to *femaleness* as the criterion for membership in the series of women to begin with. However, I suspect that Young would be reluctant to endorse the view that sex characteristics ground gender classification. After all, if she did endorse this view, appealing to the practico-inert realities that position individuals in feminine ways would be thoroughly unnecessary. I take it then that although the series of women might include all the female human beings in the world, Young would also want to include some individuals who are not biologically female in the series of women.

To avoid the tight connection between *womanness* and *femaleness* at the same time providing stricter criteria for membership in the series of women, Young might appeal instead to some specific social factors, roles, or experiences endowed with feminine meanings and commonly associated with women. These would then amount to the practico-inert realities that serialise and gender individuals as women. The kinds of factors, experiences and roles I have in mind are, for example, the following: experiences of gendered inequalities or oppression (whether at home, in the workplace or in society at large); roles typically associated with women (such as being a homemaker or a carer); being seen as the one who does and should do most of the cooking,

cleaning and laundry; and having certain ostensible features associated with women (such as wearing make-up, having a certain hairstyle and dressing in typically female clothing). With this modification, only those individuals whose actions are oriented towards and organised around these practico-inert realities would be positioned as feminine and gendered as women.

But this strategy is not unproblematic either: how can we say *these* factors gender women without making false claims about *all* women? If Young appeals to some particular social phenomenon (or set of phenomena) to make sense of the class of women, it is very likely she will end up saying something false about women in general. After all, if some single feature, trait, attribute, role or experience existed that all women organised their actions around, it seems gender classification would be non-problematic. It is precisely because the strict criteria that Young's position seems to require is so very difficult to point out, that feminist philosophers have gone as far as to doubt the existence of the class of women. Since it seems impossible to point at some social aspect that is relatively invariable amongst women and that could ground the series of women, Young fails to provide a way to make sense of (what she calls) a reasonable social collective of women.

VI

As I have argued, Young's suggested way of making sense of the class of women is unsuccessful. First, she does not provide a good reason to think her position captures a single series of women. In order to avoid this problem, I suggested that Young would have to tighten her criteria for membership in the

series of women so that it becomes clearer why women form a single series despite their particular differences. But such a modification turned out to be problematic since it seemed to require that Young would have to make generalisations about all women likely to be false. The position Young argues for does not seem to be able to successfully make sense of gender classes and, as this is so, I recommend that her position be rejected.

CHAPTER 4

STOLJAR, RESEMBLANCE NOMINALISM AND WOMEN

I

As we have seen in the previous chapters, gender classification is not a straightforward matter. It seems (for instance) that the Queen and the Sudanese woman do not have any single feature in common that makes them members of the same class. And yet, feminist theory appears to require some way of making sense of the class of women such that these two women are both members of it. Natalie Stoljar (1995) has argued that *resemblance nominalism* provides a good way of doing this in her “Essence, Identity and the Concept of Woman”. Resemblance nominalism is (roughly) the view that entities can be classified together on the basis of a certain kind of resemblance relation that holds between the entities (see Armstrong 1989: chapter 3). On Stoljar’s view, women are members of the same resemblance structure and this allows us to classify them together. She goes on to claim that her position does not rely on any shared features likely to be problematic at the same time offering a “justification for feminist action on behalf of women” (Stoljar 1995: 282).

I will argue that classifying women in resemblance nominalist terms should not be endorsed. *Contra* Stoljar, I argue that the resemblance structure she makes the case for and that allows us to classify the Queen and the Sudanese woman together also allows us to classify, for instance, George W. Bush as a member of the class of women. The resemblance structure used to make sense of gender classification has the consequence of dissolving the

distinction between men and women to a large extent: a highly undesirable consequence, given Stoljar's political goals. I begin by first outlining Stoljar's case against gender realism (section II). I then go on to map out Stoljar's case for resemblance nominalism (in section III) and I end with a discussion of why her position is inadequate (in section IV).

II

Stoljar seems to accept Spelman's particularity argument. She claims "there are many significant differences among members of the category 'woman', differences in race, class, culture, as well as more fine-grained differences in individual experience and role. Individual women are *particular*, not the same" (1995: 262). In doing so, she also rejects realism about gender. Her paper aims to show (among other things) that "there is [no] universal 'woman'" (Stoljar 1995: 263) and that there is no single feature women (*qua* women) have in common that makes them women.

Why does Stoljar reject gender realism? She takes such a view to entail the following: women share a *universal* feature that is identical in all women and that is necessary and sufficient for *womanness*. Only those individuals who possess this feature will count as women (Stoljar 1995: 263). She goes on to suggest, however, that no such feature exists and, as this is the case, gender realism does not seem promising. In order to illustrate her view, Stoljar outlines three ways of characterizing gender realism (or, as she calls it, essentialism) (1995: 267). According to these characterisations, women have *womanness* in common where this feature can be understood in one of three ways: *either* as a

biologically essential feature, as a *biologically accidental* feature or as a *socially essential* feature. Stoljar, nevertheless, goes on to reject all three characterisations. Apart from her arguments against these three specific gender realist (or, as she terms them, essentialist) views, Stoljar also appears to reject the *possibility* of a plausible gender realist position appealing to Spelman's argument.¹⁹

Womanness as biologically essential

First, Stoljar considers whether a gender realist view committed to an Aristotelian picture of kinds and species could provide a plausible way to classify women. On (what Stoljar takes to be) the Aristotelian picture, individual entities of a particular kind or species share a species-essence (*kind-essentialism*). Membership in a particular kind or sort, then, is delimited by the possession of this species-essence: those who possess it will be members of the kind whereas those who lack this essence will fall outside the kind. On the Aristotelian view, the species-essence not only delimits kind membership. The species-essence will also be essential to the individual members of a species *qua* individuals (*individual essentialism*):

“[S]uppose human beings constitute a species and that the species-essence is rationality: That is, it is a necessary and sufficient condition of being a human being that an individual has rationality. On the Aristotelian notion of species-essence, it is also necessary that an individual human being have rationality to be the individual that it is: If an individual human being were to lose

¹⁹ It is not clear why Stoljar feels the need to discuss these particular gender realist positions given that she thinks Spelman's arguments provide good reasons to reject gender realism *in general*. As I see it, providing arguments against these particular gender realist positions appears to be a sort of a safety net: in case someone is not convinced by Spelman's case against gender realism, Stoljar argues against (what she takes to be) the *only* gender realist positions that *might* work. In so doing, she supposedly illustrates that all gender realist positions worth considering are untenable.

rationality, it would not only cease to be a human being, it would cease to be the individual that it is and hence cease to exist.” (Stoljar 1995: 267)

On this view, the class of women would be understood in the following manner. Women would constitute a species where their species-essence would be something like the feature of *womanness* (Stoljar 1995: 268). This feature would be necessary and sufficient for membership in the kind **woman** and all members of the kind (or all women) would share this feature. *Womanness* would also be essential to individual women in that were they to lose this feature, they would no longer remain the *same individuals*. On the Aristotelian picture, if the Queen were to lose her *womanness*, she would no longer be a member of the kind **women** nor would she persist as the same individual.

As the Aristotelian view considers species-essences to be biological or natural, the species-essence of women would also have to be cashed out in biological or natural terms (Stoljar 1995: 268). Stoljar suggests that the only plausible way to cash out *womanness* in this fashion is to hold that it is coextensive with *being a female human being* (1995: 268). Her reasons for thinking this are somewhat elusive. She seems to think that *being a female human being* is the only biological feature that individual women could not sustain the loss of and because of this *being a female human being* is the only plausible candidate for women’s *biological* species-essence. Some other features like *being emotional* or *being caring* are not good candidates for women’s species-essence as “[*being caring*] does not seem necessary to an individual’s identity; for example, the same individual would persist even after the loss of the capacity for caring” (Stoljar 1995: 268).

Stoljar goes on to claim (and rightly so, in my view) that this Aristotelian way of understanding gender classes is implausible. Roughly, this is because females (or women, the two being coextensive) do not constitute a distinct *species*. Stoljar offers three arguments for this. Firstly, she considers Anne Fausto-Sterling's suggestion that properly speaking human beings can be classified in five different ways depending on their sex characteristics. Apart from and in addition to the usual classifications (male and female) individuals can be classified as 'intersexed' in three different ways: there are 'herms' or hermaphrodites, who possess one testis and one ovary; there are 'merms' or male pseudohermaphrodites, who possess testes, some aspects of female genitalia but no ovaries; and there are 'ferms' or female pseudohermaphrodites, who have ovaries, some aspects of male genitalia but no testes (Fausto-Sterling 1993: 21).

According to Stoljar, Fausto-Sterling's claim that there are five sexes could be dealt with in two ways within the Aristotelian picture (1995: 269). She goes on to claim, however, that both of these ways to accommodate Fausto-Sterling's suggestion are problematic. As a result, (Stoljar claims) the empirical considerations Fausto-Sterling draws attention to count against the Aristotelian view of gender. On the one hand, proponents of the Aristotelian view could maintain that sex classification takes place on a continuous plateau from male to female with various intersexes in between with no precise boundaries between the sexes. But if this is so, (Stoljar claims) the Aristotelian view can no longer hold on to the thought that females constitute a separate species from males, herms, merms and ferms. On the other hand, those who hold the

Aristotelian picture could maintain that all five sexes should be thought of as distinct species. In this case, however, one could no longer hold that *womanness* is coextensive with *being a human being* – an assumption Stoljar thinks is necessary for the Aristotelian view. She claims that if all five sexes were thought of as separate species, “it would then become implausible and ad hoc to propose that *women* are all and only female human beings, as many hermaphrodites (i.e., those brought up as girls) have most of the features we associate with women” (Stoljar 1995: 269). In this case, *womanness* would also pick out individuals who are not females (like some hermaphrodites). Fausto-Sterling’s ‘five sexes’ view counts against the Aristotelian picture because it undermines the thought that *womanness* is coextensive with *femaleness*.

Second, Stoljar argues against the Aristotelian picture by appealing to our intuitions about logical possibility: the claim that females constitute a distinct species conflicts with these intuitions. Stoljar writes:

“If women [or females] constitute a species, it would be logically impossible for particular men to be women in the same way that it is logically impossible for particular men to be insects or eagles. Yet there is a qualitative difference between the claim that, for example, Michelangelo could have been an insect and the claim that he could have been a woman.” (1995: 269-0)

The difference is (according to Stoljar) that we cannot conceive of Michelangelo’s mother giving birth to an insect (instead of Michelangelo) but we can conceive of Michelangelo’s mother giving birth to a baby *girl* (instead of a baby boy). Our intuitions about these two claims differ. But, if females form a distinct species from males, our intuitions about logical possibility should be the same when considering these two propositions: ‘Michelangelo’s mother gave birth to an insect’ and ‘Michelangelo’s mother gave birth to a baby

girl'. Since our intuitions about these propositions differ, Stoljar takes this to be evidence of the fact that females do not constitute a distinct species.

Finally, Stoljar appeals to evolutionary theory to establish that females are not a distinct species. On this view, "membership in a species is delimited through the capacity of members for interbreeding" (Stoljar 1995: 271). Stoljar argues evolutionary theory seriously counts against conceiving females as a species due to procreative considerations. Individuals of a particular species (the evolutionary argument goes) cannot breed with members of another species: if females constitute a separate and distinct species from males, they should not be able to procreate with males any more than they are able to procreate with camels. But, of course, this is not the case. In fact, females can only procreate with males and this suggests to Stoljar that males and females are members of the same species. As a result, the Aristotelian picture is implausible and one that feminist philosophers should not endorse.

Stoljar goes on to claim that feminist philosophers commonly think arguments like Spelman's count against the Aristotelian view. Contrary to this (in Stoljar's view) common belief, she suggests, "the Aristotelian essentialist position that all women have the same essential womanness – a position which has been the target of so much feminist criticism – will fail for reasons which are quite independent of the feminist arguments" as the discussion above shows (1995: 272). However, it seems to me that Stoljar is falsely attributing to Spelman the view that her arguments are aimed against the Aristotelian picture. After all, Spelman is not arguing against the view that women constitute a species or that women share some essential *biological* feature like a species-

essence. As this is the case, it is not surprising that Spelman's appeal to diversity does not count against an Aristotelian conception of gender.

Womanness as an accidental biological feature

The view discussed above took certain biological features as essential to individuals. The idea was that if an individual lost its species-essence, not only would the individual cease to be of that species but the individual would also cease to be *that* individual. If Aristotle were to lose his species-essence or *humanness*, he would not only cease to be a human being but he would cease to be the same individual. Contrary to this view, Stoljar's second candidate for a feature that women *qua* women might share (and that would ground gender classification) is a *non-necessary* biological feature (1995: 272). On this view, "[womanness] will be characterized as an intrinsic, natural, yet accidental property of individual women" (Stoljar 1995: 272).²⁰ Insofar as this non-necessary feature is natural, Stoljar claims, features of this kind are "'fixed and unchanging' ... in the sense of being unable to be revised through social reform" (1995: 272). *Whiteness* (the colour) is an example of such a feature: "even if ... whiteness is a universal [and something all white entities share], it does not follow that whiteness is an essential property of individual white things" (Stoljar 1995: 272). Stoljar's thought is that even though it seems all white cars (for instance) share the property of *whiteness*, possessing this

²⁰ Stoljar's terminology here is potentially confusing. Occasionally she describes features of this kind as 'non-necessary'. She clearly equates non-necessary and accidental features indicating that 'non-necessary' features are not essential to the individuals' possessing such features: non-necessary features are not essential to an individual *qua* that individual. Nonetheless, Stoljar holds that such properties *are* necessary features for membership in a particular type.

property is clearly not essential to the individual white cars *qua* cars. If a white car were painted blue, the entity would not cease to be *a car* (although, of course, it would cease to be *a white car*).

Other examples of accidental (or non-necessary) biological features Stoljar mentions are having a certain facial structure or skin colour: “Individuals having the same facial structure or skin color have an intrinsic, natural feature in common which can be characterized as a universal without implying that facial structure or skin color is an essential feature of the individuals instantiating the universal” (Stoljar 1995: 272). The idea is that having a tall forehead, for example, is not an essential feature of individuals with tall foreheads. If they were to undergo surgery to reduce the sizes of their foreheads, they would still remain the same individuals. Nonetheless, *having a tall forehead* is a biological feature all tall foreheaded individuals have in common (it is universal amongst them).

On this view, being a woman would be analogous to having a tall forehead. All women (*qua* women) would share *womanness* where this feature would, in some sense, be understood as a natural feature. But *womanness* would not be essential to individual women. So, if the Queen were to lose her *womanness*, she would still remain the same individual. She would, however, no longer count as a member of the class of women. As *womanness* on this view would be a natural feature (just as in the Aristotelian picture) it would have to be cashed out in terms of some biological characteristics. Stoljar again suggests that the most plausible way to do this is to claim that *being a woman* is coextensive with *being a female human being* (1995: 273). (Her reasons for this

are unclear but they seem to be the same as those outlined in the previous section: *being a female human being* appears to be the only biological feature that can plausibly be thought of as coextensive with *womanness*.) On this view, the class of women would be the same as the class of females but *femaleness* would be thought of as accidental to particular individuals.

Stoljar goes on to argue (and correctly so) that this view is implausible since *being a female human being* is not coextensive with *being a woman* (1995: 273). She suggests that our language use illustrates this: “the concept woman does not apply to all and only female humans ... If the concept ‘woman’ does not apply to all and only female human beings, it follows that the type ‘woman’ is not the same as the type ‘female human being’” (Stoljar 1995: 273). The idea is that if *being a female human being* were coextensive with *being a woman*, the concept *woman* would pick out individuals that were all both females *and* women. But, this is not the case. Our concept *woman* seems to pick out individuals who are not female such as male-to-female transvestites and “sexually indeterminate people” (Stoljar 1995: 273). Consider male-to-female transvestites who arguably have many features associated with women, but who are biologically male. That the concept *woman* picks out such individuals suggests that *woman* does not pick out individuals on the basis of their physical and biological features. Stoljar takes this to entail that “there is more to the concept ‘woman’ than having an XX chromosome and related sex characteristics. At most, [this entails] that female sex is not necessary for being a woman” (1995: 274). In short, our use of the concept *woman* seems to count

against the view that *being a female human being* is coextensive with *being a woman*.

Womanness as an essential social feature

Having rejected the view that women all share some biological feature (either essential or accidental), Stoljar goes on to consider whether a plausible gender realist view could be cashed out in terms of shared *social* factors. Feminists inspired by Lockean nominal essentialism (Stoljar claims) hold such a gender realist view. Lockean nominal essences are “set[s] of characteristics that we associate with individual members of a species, not their internal constitution or real essence” (1995: 275). They are used as “pragmatic device[s] introduced by us to classify a vague natural world” (Stoljar 1995: 277).²¹ Consider, for example, gold. On the Lockean view, we would classify entities *as gold* on the basis of some overtly perceived features (such as gold’s yellowness, shining colour and malleability) – not on the basis of some internal constitution of gold (like its chemical composition). On a Lockean inspired feminist view, women would be classified as women on the basis of some overtly perceived features: for example, because women are subordinated due to their gender.

Stoljar goes on to claim that Lockean inspired views of gender are unacceptable:

²¹ Although this position is called ‘nominal essentialism’ it is important to bear in mind that the feminist views inspired by the Lockean position are not standard *gender nominalist* positions. On the standard view, women have no single feature (or set of features) in common that makes them women. On the Lockean view, women do: they all share a nominal essence (a set of characteristics associated with *womanness*). As a result, nominal essentialism about gender is a form of gender realism.

“If ‘woman’ is defined by a certain social relation, e.g., being subordinated on the basis of having a female sex, then, on Locke’s view, the real essence of womanness is precisely the relation of being sexually subordinated. In order for an individual to be a woman, it is necessary and sufficient for that individual to be in a relation of sexual subordination.” (1995: 278)

The social relation mentioned would ground gender classification being necessary and sufficient for *womanness*. For Stoljar, however, this warrants the rejection of all Lockean inspired feminist positions: they rely on “a single property or set of properties constituting [and being necessary and sufficient for] womanness” (Stoljar 1995: 275) and all position that rely on necessary and sufficient conditions should be rejected because they cannot cope with Spelman’s commonality problem.

To illustrate, Stoljar considers Catharine MacKinnon’s position on gender claiming that it is an example of a nominal essentialist position. (It is worth pointing out that MacKinnon herself does not characterise her view as nominal essentialist.) MacKinnon takes gender to be *the social position* one inhabits in certain social relations where these relations are *sexual* in nature (MacKinnon 1989b: 127). Roughly, one’s gender (on MacKinnon’s view) depends on whether one is positioned as sexually subordinate or sexually dominant. Those individuals who occupy sexually dominant positions count as men (sexualized dominance being definitive of *manness*); those who occupy sexually submissive positions count as women (sexualized submissiveness being definitive of *womanness*). In MacKinnon’s words, “to be *rapable*, a position which is social, not biological, defines what a woman *is*” (MacKinnon 1989a: 66). On MacKinnon’s view, it seems that being sexually submissive is

necessary for *womanness* and something that all women *qua* women have in common.

So, the nominal essence of women that MacKinnon seems to endorse is *being sexually subordinate*. This means that

“[o]n [MacKinnon’s] view, it is both necessary and sufficient in order to be a woman that an individual either be in a relation of sexual subordination or experience sexual subordination because of cultural conceptions of sex. Thus, *womanness* is literally the same relation or experience in all individuals who are women – that is, it is a universal.” (Stoljar 1995: 279)

MacKinnon’s position (Stoljar claims) cannot cope with Spelman’s commonality problem because MacKinnon defines what it means to be a woman using “a single relation: there is a unitary role or social experience [being positioned as sexually subordinate] which is necessary and sufficient for being a woman” (Stoljar 1995: 280). Insofar as MacKinnon endorses such a unitary definition of *womanness*, Stoljar thinks MacKinnon fails to take into account the diverse and dissimilar ways of being a woman across various cultures and societies.

Stoljar concedes that MacKinnon’s positions could be rescued if it

“could be reconciled with the evident diversity of roles and experiences within even western industrialized culture by claiming that difference is a *difference in manifestation* of the same relation or experience of sexual subordination. For example, subordination on the basis of cultural conceptions of sex could be manifested differently among Hispanic women than among black women, etc., while still remaining, at a general level of description, subordination on the basis of cultural conceptions of sex.” (1995: 280)

If MacKinnon argued that sexual subordination could take many forms and guises and that it can be experienced differently by different kinds of women, her position would be more plausible. In such a case, MacKinnon could hold on to the thought that sexual subordination is crucial for *womanness* without making the implausible claim that all women experience sexual subordination

in the same way. MacKinnon does, in actual fact, seem to claim this thereby taking into account that subordination can be sexualised in diverse and dissimilar ways. She writes “[m]ale dominance appears to exist cross-culturally, if in locally particular forms. Across cultures ... whatever defines women as ‘different’ [is] the same as whatever defines women as ‘inferior’ [and] the same as whatever defines women’s ‘sexuality’ [as subordinated]” (MacKinnon 1989b: 130-1). MacKinnon also claims that sexual subordination of women takes many different forms: “Pressure, gender socialization, withholding benefits, extending indulgences, the how-to books, the sex therapy are the soft ends; the fuck, the fist, the street, the chains, the poverty are the hard end” (MacKinnon 1989b: 136). Stoljar does not acknowledge this though. She goes on to argue that this alternative (that MacKinnon’s view may be rescued, if she allows for culturally specific forms of sexualised submission) is “unconvincing”:

“The greater the difference in manifestation, the less plausible will be the claim that those manifestations are of a *single* role or experience ... If the evidence shows an enormous range of experiences and roles of women, it will be ad hoc to label them manifestations of the same thing.” (1995: 280)

The suggested way to rescue MacKinnon’s position, Stoljar claims, is not open to MacKinnon. As a result (Stoljar claims), MacKinnon’s analysis of gender does not adequately take diversity into account and MacKinnon’s (supposedly) Lockean inspired analysis of gender fails.

Diversity

Stoljar’s three arguments outlined above do not, of course, show that gender realism *per se* should be rejected: there could be alternative ways of conceiving

what women share that are plausible. (And as I claim in the final chapter of this thesis, there are). Nevertheless, it seems that Stoljar aims to reject even the *possibility* of a gender realist position by endorsing Spelman's argument. Stoljar holds that given how greatly women differ from one another, it seems implausible to think that they might have something in common that makes them women. In short, Stoljar agrees with Spelman's thought that women's diverse and dissimilar traits and experiences count against gender realism (1995: 266). But, as I showed in chapter 1, the recognition of diversity amongst women *per se* does not give good reason to reject gender realism. As this is so, Stoljar does not make a good case against gender realism in general nor does she provide arguments that show all gender realist positions to be untenable.

III

Having argued that gender realism is untenable, Stoljar moves on to "develop a nominalist account of the type 'woman'" (1995: 263; see also, Stoljar 2000). Unlike Spelman and Butler who argue for gender scepticism, Stoljar thinks that a single class of women can be made sense of. Of course, she does not think gender realism provides a way to do this. Rather, she claims to make sense of gender classes "in some other way" (Stoljar 1995: 263), namely by appealing to *resemblance nominalism*. Roughly, Stoljar's idea is that women form a resemblance class that grounds gender classification. Before I outline Stoljar's resemblance nominalist alternative in detail I will briefly look at why she rejects other nominalist alternatives open to her.

Predicate nominalism

Metaphysicians standardly claim that there are six different versions of nominalism (Armstrong 1989). In order to cash out how women constitute a genuine class (and not merely a gerrymandered collection of entities)²², Stoljar thinks only two forms of nominalism are promising: *predicate* and *resemblance nominalism*. (Why she holds this view is unclear and Stoljar does not justify her choice of nominalisms that she takes to be relevant for gender classification.) According to predicate nominalists those entities that are picked out by the same word or predicate will be classified together (Armstrong 1989: 6). Resemblance nominalists, on the contrary, hold that those entities that are members of the same resemblance structure will be classified together (Stoljar 1995: 263): if they resemble one another in some appropriate manner, they will be members of the same class. (This will be considered in more detail shortly.)

Stoljar goes on to claim that although *prima facie* predicate nominalism provides a promising way to classify women *qua* women, such a position turns out to be implausible. She takes Spelman's 'multiple genders approach' to entail predicate nominalism and uses it to illustrate why predicate nominalism is implausible. Stoljar takes Spelman to endorse this view because Spelman claims: "to know what 'woman' means is to know that it applies to me and Angela Davis, and doesn't apply to my brother Jon or to James Baldwin" (Spelman 1990: 158). However (Stoljar claims), the predicate nominalism Spelman endorses does not provide "principled reasons for collecting women

²² Recall that a gerrymandered class is a random collection of individual entities (such as the globe, this cup and that football) whereas a genuine class (like the class of red entities) is not a thoroughly arbitrary set of entities classified together at random.

into a type, and hence cannot provide justification for feminist action on behalf of women, nor an explanation of the similarities among individual members of the type” (Stoljar 1995: 282). This is because women on the predicate nominalist view are classified together “simply in virtue of the arbitrary designation of the word ‘woman’”, not “on the basis of shared experiences, political goals, and similar behaviour and bodily features” (Stoljar 1995: 282). Stoljar thinks that Spelman forgets such similarities and she goes on to claim: “just as it fails to be explanatory to ignore *differences* among individual women, it also fails to be explanatory to ignore *similarities*” (1995: 282). Because Spelman ignores what women have in common, she fails to give a plausible account of gender classification.

However, this charge against Spelman does not seem wholly justified. After all, Spelman is not in the business of unifying women together, she is precisely trying to argue the opposite. She is arguing for the view that to assume *womanness* is a feature shared by all women is to grossly misunderstand the role that other features (like race and class) play in women’s *womanness*. Spelman is arguing for the view that since (for instance) the lives of the Queen and the Sudanese woman are so very different, we seem to be more justified in claiming that the former has more in common with English aristocratic men than with the Sudanese refugee (although they are both women). So, given that Spelman’s task is precisely to show that no single class of women exists, Stoljar’s critique seems rather misplaced. It seems unsurprising that Spelman fails to provide a principled reason for classifying women *qua* women given that she is not aiming to provide such a reason.

Resemblance nominalism

Stoljar takes her discussion of Spelman to show that predicate nominalism is not a plausible option when feminist philosophers aim to make sense of the class of women. She goes on to make the case for her own preferred nominalist version, resemblance nominalism. Certain semantic considerations, Stoljar argues, suggest that such a view should be endorsed when classifying women. Again, consider the comparison between the Queen and the Sudanese woman. It appears that the two women have no single feature in common, but we, nevertheless, attribute *womanness* to them both. As it seems hard to point at something shared on the basis of which *womanness* is attributed, it seems that *womanness* must be extended on the basis of some features the Queen and the Sudanese woman *individually* possess. This suggests the following: “when we attribute womanness, we are using a complex ‘cluster’ concept that picks out different arrangements of features in different individuals” (Stoljar 2000: 27). The term ‘woman’ seems to be like the term ‘game’ Wittgenstein famously discusses: if we look at all the various entities called ‘games’, we “will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them” (Wittgenstein 1997: 31e). Some games are played in a group, some alone; some are played by skill, others depend on luck; some games involve winning, others not (and so on). Our use of the term ‘game’ seems to

capture a cluster of different features commonly associated with games, not some single feature shared by all games.²³

The term 'woman' (like the term 'game') does not seem to pick out entities that share some single feature. Rather, it seems that different uses of the term capture features from some (or all) of the following clusters of features that are commonly associated with women:

- (a) Female sex – the characteristics of a human female (XX chromosome, sex characteristics and general morphology) and “having other bodily characteristics such as gait or voice quality” (Stoljar 1995: 283);
- (b) Phenomenological features “or aspects of what it *feels* like to be a woman” (Ibid.: 283) – “like having menstrual cramps, and female sexual experience, and the ‘lived experience’ of child-birth, breast-feeding, or at least the potential to have such lived experience ... [it] also includes feelings which are the product of social factors, like fear of walking on the streets at night or fear of rape”;
- (c) Certain roles – wearing typically female clothing, being oppressed on the basis of one’s sex or undertaking ‘private’ child-care responsibilities “rather than ‘public’ responsibilities in the wider community”;
- (d) Self-attribution and the attribution of womanness by others – “calling oneself a woman, being called a woman.” (Stoljar 1995: 284)

Thinking of the term 'woman' in this Wittgensteinian manner explains why *womanness* is attributed to both the Queen and the Sudanese refugee: in both cases, the term 'woman' applies due to some features that are *particular* to the individuals in question.

Stoljar takes the semantics of 'woman' to *entail* that resemblance nominalism should be endorsed (Stoljar 2000: 28). Presumably this is because the term seems to pick out individuals that resemble one another, rather than

²³ Stoljar is not alone in suggesting that *woman* is a cluster concept and that the class of women can be made sense using Wittgenstein’s notion of *family resemblances*. See also Green & Radford Curry (1991) and Nicholson (1994). These theorists do not, however, provide full arguments for their views and, as a result, I will not discuss them in detail here.

individuals who all share some single feature. Resemblance nominalists commonly hold that entities are classified together on the basis of a resemblance relation that holds between these entities. Some claim that this relation is egalitarian whereby x is a member of some class or type **F** by virtue of resembling *all other* entities that are **F** (Rodriguez-Pereyra 2002). Others claim the resemblance relation is aristocratic whereby x is a member of **F** by virtue of resembling some *paradigm or exemplar* of **F** (Price 1953). On this latter view, paradigms are necessary for cashing out resemblance classes and these “standard objects or exemplars” hold a resemblance class together (Price 1953: 20). Stoljar herself endorses the aristocratic resemblance relation. She claims that entities count as women by virtue of resembling an exemplar of the type, a **woman-paradigm**, sufficiently closely (Stoljar 1995: 284). These entities (that resemble certain **woman-paradigms**) are then classified together as women.

The **woman-paradigms** (on Stoljar’s view) are picked out using the four clusters of features associated with women (female sex, female phenomenology, certain roles associated with women and attribution of womanness). These paradigms must possess features from “at least three” of the four clusters of features mentioned (although Stoljar admits that this is not uncontroversial) (Stoljar 1995: 284). She then goes on to outline four **woman-paradigms** claiming “the following group could constitute the exemplars of the type”, not that these are the only possible exemplars (1995: 284):

- (i) “An Afro-American who has an XX chromosome and female sex characteristics, a characteristic female gait, attributes womanness to herself, and is oppressed on the basis of sex;

- (ii) an Asian-American transsexual who attributes womanness to herself and dresses as a female, has female secondary sex characteristics, and has many of the elements of female phenomenology though she lacks an XX chromosome;
- (iii) a white European hermaphrodite who has been brought up 'as a girl' and as a result satisfies typical female roles, has many aspects of female phenomenology, and dresses and lives as a female though she lacks female sex characteristics;
- (iv) a Papua New Guinean with an XX chromosome and female sex characteristics who calls herself a woman and is called a woman, and has responsibility for child-rearing and other family oriented tasks." (Stoljar 1995: 284)

Stoljar concludes: "any individual resembling any of the paradigms sufficiently closely (on Price's account, as closely as they resemble each other) will be a member of the resemblance class 'woman'" (1995: 284). So, if an individual resembles a **woman**-paradigm sufficiently closely (to the same degree to which that paradigm resembles other **woman**-paradigms), the individual will count as a member of the class of women.

This appears to solve feminist worries over classification. Again, consider the Queen and the Sudanese refugee. The Queen differs hugely from the **woman**-paradigms outlined due to her social position, but she seems to resemble the third paradigm in that they both come from similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds both having being brought up as girls in Europe. They also have similar phenomenological experiences and roles (like wearing typically female clothing). The Sudanese refugee also differs from these paradigms, but she seems to resemble them by virtue of many phenomenological features and in her experiences as a woman. She also resembles the paradigms by virtue of the tasks and responsibilities she is endowed with as a woman (such as child-care). Although the two women differ greatly from one another, resemblance nominalism enables us to say that they are both members of the *same* class of

women. At the same time, no claims are made about features all women (*qua* women) must share that are likely to be problematic.

IV

Despite being able to classify women *qua* women in a seemingly plausible manner, Stoljar's resemblance nominalism is not unproblematic and I argue, it should not be endorsed. I will show this with the following two problems.

Criteria for type membership

Stoljar's notion of *sufficient resemblance* seems to be the same as Price's (Stoljar 1995: 284). Price claims that "anything which has a sufficient degree of resemblance to [certain paradigms] is thereby a member of the class; and 'resembling them sufficiently' means 'resembling them as closely as they resemble each other'" (Price 1953: 22). On this view, the degree to which *x* must resemble the F-paradigms (in order to count as F) should be the same degree to which the F-paradigms *themselves* resemble one another. If the paradigms for the type **red** were *a* (an entity that is red, square and hot), *b* (an entity that is red, round and cold) and *c* (an entity that is red, triangular and tepid), it is clear that the paradigms resemble one another in only one respect. This would then be the degree to which any particular must resemble the **red**-paradigms in order to count as red.

But, it turns out that Stoljar's notion of *sufficient resemblance* is not so clear after all. This is because the **woman**-paradigms do not resemble one

another to any single degree. Recall Stoljar’s **woman**-paradigms. (For quick reference, these paradigms are also expressed in a table below.)

- (i) “An Afro-American who has an XX chromosome and female sex characteristics, a characteristic female gait, attributes womanness to herself, and is oppressed on the basis of sex;
- (ii) an Asian-American transsexual who attributes womanness to herself and dresses as a female, has female secondary sex characteristics, and has many of the elements of female phenomenology though she lacks an XX chromosome;
- (iii) a white European hermaphrodite who has been brought up ‘as a girl’ and as a result satisfies typical female roles, has many aspects of female phenomenology, and dresses and lives as a female though she lacks female sex characteristics;
- (iv) a Papua New Guinean with an XX chromosome and female sex characteristics who calls herself a woman and is called a woman, and has responsibility for child-rearing and other family oriented tasks.” (Stoljar 1995: 284)

Paradigm	S (female sex)	P (phenomenology)	R (roles)	A (attribution)
(i)	S	(unclear)	R	A
(ii)	S	P	R	A
(iii)	Not-S	P	R	A
(iv)	S	(unclear)	R	A

Paradigm (i) resembles paradigm (iii) in only two respects but it resembles paradigms (ii) and (iv) in three. Paradigm (iv) resembles paradigm (iii) in only two respects but it resembles paradigms (i) and (ii) in three (and so on). As the paradigms themselves resemble one another in either two or three respects it seems unclear whether a particular should resemble a **woman**-paradigm in two or three respects in order to count as a woman. In fact, this may prove crucial. Imagine a black African male-to-female transvestite who has been brought up ‘as a boy’ but has always felt uncomfortable of his/her gender. S/he has decided to embrace many roles typically associated with women (like wearing women’s

clothing) and subsequently attributes womanness to herself (thus possessing features R and A). Whether this individual should resemble a **woman**-paradigm in two or three respects, in order to count as a woman, is crucial. If it is the former, the black African transvestite will count as a woman (as s/he resembles all the **woman**-paradigms in two respects). But if the degree sufficient for classification is the latter, s/he will not (as this individual will not resemble any of the **woman**-paradigms in three respects).

Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra has argued that faced with such problems “the sensible thing [for a Pricean resemblance nominalist] to do would be to require that ... particulars resemble each paradigm at least as closely as the least resembling of the paradigms resemble each other” (2002: 129). In order for an entity to count as **F**, it should resemble the **F**-paradigms (at least) to the same degree the least resembling **F**-paradigms resemble one another. To illustrate, Rodriguez-Pereyra goes on to outline the following table of **red**-paradigms that aims to capture the class of red entities (2002: 129). (For simplicity he assumes that these paradigms can only have three properties: colour, shape and temperature.)

	Colour	Shape	Temperature
<i>a</i>	Red	Square	Hot
<i>b</i>	Red	Square	Cold
<i>c</i>	Red	Round	Hot
<i>d</i>	Red	Round	Cold

These **red**-paradigms do not resemble one another to any single degree: *a* resembles *b* and *c* in two respects but resembles *d* in only one whereas *b* resembles *a* and *d* in two respects but resembles *c* in only one. Again, whether a

particular has to resemble the paradigms in one or two respects may prove crucial. Imagine *e* that is red, square and cold. If *e* has to resemble the paradigms in only one respect, it will count as red (since it resembles the paradigms in one respect). But if *e* has to resemble the paradigms in two respects, it will not count as red: *e* does not resemble *c* in two respects and the **red**-paradigms fail to capture the class of all and only red entities.

With his modification (that sufficient resemblance should be understood as that between the least resembling paradigms, not all), Rodriguez-Pereyra goes on to show that the Pricean **red**-paradigm mentioned appear to successfully pick out the class of red entities. The least resembling **red**-paradigms are *b* and *c* as well as *a* and *d*. They resemble each other in only one respect: *a* and *b* resemble in the respects of *being red* and *being square*, *b* and *c* in the respect of *being red*, *c* and *d* in the respects of *being red* and *being round*, *a* and *d* in the respect of *being red*, *a* and *c* in the respects of *being red* and *being hot* and finally, *b* and *d* in the respects of *being red* and *being cold*. As a result, to sufficiently resemble the **red**-paradigms (and to count as red), an entity has to resemble the **red**-paradigms in only one respect (regardless of what that respect is). To test whether these paradigms now capture the class of red entities, reconsider *e* that was red, square and cold (and that earlier may or may not have counted as red). This particular now needs to resemble the **red**-paradigms in only one respect to count as red and it does: it resembles all of them in one respect, that of *being red*. Imagine another entity *y* that is blue, square and cold. Again, this particular needs to resemble the **red**-paradigms in only one respect to count as red. But we see it does not and (correctly so) will

not count as red: *y* resembles *a* in *being square*, *b* in *being cold* and *being square* and *d* in *being cold* but there is no respect in which *y* resembles paradigm *c*. The Pricean **red**-paradigms seem to successfully pick out entities that are red on this modified view.

As Stoljar is committed to a Pricean resemblance relation it seems that Rodriguez-Pereyra’s modification should also be applied to Stoljar’s **woman**-paradigms in order to clarify her notion of *sufficient resemblance*. So, on the modified understanding of *sufficient resemblance* any individual that resembles a **woman**-paradigm to (at least) the same degree that the least resembling **woman**-paradigms resemble one another will count as a woman. The least resembling **woman**-paradigms turn out to be (i) and (iii) and (iii) and (iv).

Paradigm	S (female sex)	P (phenomenology)	R (roles)	A (attribution)
(i)	S	(unclear)	R	A
(ii)	S	P	R	A
(iii)	Not-S	P	R	A
(iv)	S	(unclear)	R	A

The above table of **woman**-paradigms shows (ii) and (iii) resemble one another in three respects (P, R and A). Paradigms (iv) and (i), (i) and (ii) as well as (ii) and (iv) also resemble one another in three, albeit different, respects (S, R and A). But paradigms (i) and (iii) and (iii) and (iv) only resemble one another in two respects (R and A). So, in order for a particular to count as a woman, this particular needs to resemble a **woman**-paradigm in (at least) two respects (regardless of what those respects are). With this in mind, we can see whether the black African transvestite mentioned counts as a woman or not. On the

modified understanding of *sufficient resemblance* s/he does: s/he resembles all of the **woman**-paradigms sufficiently (in two respects, R and A). I suspect Stoljar would be happy with this result and it seems Rodriguez-Pereyra's modification has clarified Stoljar's notion of *sufficient resemblance* in a desirable manner.

This clarification does not, however, render Stoljar's position unproblematic. Unlike Price, who maintained that an entity must resemble *all* F-paradigms in order to count as F, Stoljar maintains that resembling only *one* paradigm is sufficient for classification (Stoljar 1995: 284). For Stoljar, in order to count as a woman an individual only needs to resemble *one* **woman**-paradigm sufficiently closely (as closely as the least resembling **woman**-paradigms resemble one another). This has detrimental consequences, however, as the criterion for membership in the class of women becomes too loose. Imagine an elderly Scotsman who stays home caring for his sick wife and fears walking in the streets at night dreading, perhaps, that he might be attacked. This individual will, on Stoljar's criterion, count as a woman because he resembles paradigms (ii) and (iii) sufficiently (in two respects): in the respect of having certain phenomenological features associated with women (P) due to his fear of walking in the streets at night and in the respect of engaging in typically female roles (R) since he stays home taking care of his spouse. The elderly Scotsman will count as a woman because he sufficiently resembles an Asian-American transsexual and a white European hermaphrodite. But claiming that this individual is a woman on any grounds (let alone on the ones Stoljar's view entails) simply seems counter-intuitive and a case of mistaken classification.

Take another individual, for instance, George W. Bush. He is male and he undertakes highly 'public' responsibilities as he is a very well-known politician (rather than undertaking typically female "'private' responsibilities" [Stoljar 1995: 284]). Given George W. Bush's high profile job, he is unlikely to feel safe going for a stroll alone at night in the streets of Washington DC; even during daytime he is surrounded by numerous bodyguards when appearing in public. On Stoljar's model, George W. Bush would also count as a woman since he resembles paradigm (iii), a white European hermaphrodite, in (at least) two respects: in the respect of lacking female sex characteristics (not-S) and in the respect of having some aspects of female phenomenology (P) as it is unlikely that George W. Bush feels safe walking in the streets alone at night. Yet few (if any) think that he *should* be classified as a woman. Given that the elderly Scot and the current occupant of the White House counter-intuitively and falsely count as women, the **woman**-paradigms clearly fail to collect all and only women.

Prima facie Stoljar has an easy way out. Following Price, she could insist that entities should resemble *all* the **woman**-paradigms in order to count as women. But it seems very unlikely she could commit herself to this. In order to count as a **woman**-paradigm, an individual must exhibit features from (at least) three of the four clusters of features that pick our paradigms (female sex, certain phenomenological features, typical female roles and attribution of *womanness*). Now, it seems to me that numerous individuals would count as **woman**-paradigms with the result that Stoljar's class of **woman**-paradigms would be huge. And to insist that one must sufficiently resemble *all* of these

woman-paradigms (in order to count as a woman) no longer seems sensible; in fact, it looks quite improbable that any individual *could* resemble all the numerous **woman**-paradigms. It also seems Stoljar herself thinks this is improbable. Time and again she acknowledges the numerous and diverse ways in which women differ and it is precisely for this reason that she argues for resemblance nominalism.

As a response to what I have argued, it might be claimed that George W. Bush does not resemble paradigm (iii) *in such a way* that I can claim he counts as a woman. This is because one of the two respects in which he resembles the white European hermaphrodite is not relevant for being a woman: one of the respects in which he resembles the paradigm is by *not* having female sex characteristics and as this is something we do not commonly think of as relevant for womanhood, George W. Bush does not count as a woman. However, this response does not succeed. On Stoljar's position all that is needed for George W. Bush to count as a woman is that he resembles a **woman**-paradigm sufficiently closely regardless of which features are responsible for this. Of course, in order for an entity to be a **woman**-paradigm, possession of certain features indicative of womanhood are relevant and when constructing the class of **woman**-paradigms, possessing female sex characteristics is a relevant feature. But in order to be classified as a woman (on this view), there are no relevant features that must be had apart from the feature of *sufficiently resembling a paradigm*. Being classified as a woman does not depend on sufficient resemblance in *some relevant respects* – it depends on sufficiently resembling a **woman**-paradigm regardless of what the respects are

with which this takes place and regardless of whether we commonly regard those respects as relevant for womanhood. Moreover, resemblance to a paradigm is crucial for Stoljar. If being a member of the class of women were merely a matter of possessing some relevant features, **woman**-paradigms would be unnecessary; individuals would be members of this class simply by virtue of possessing those relevant features. But this is something Stoljar explicitly rejects (1995: 283).

My presentation of Stoljar's view might be further objected to by claiming that the criterion for classification is stricter than I allowed. On this suggestion, *sufficient resemblance* should not be understood in two, but rather, three respects. Although Stoljar is not explicit about paradigms (i) and (iv) having any female phenomenological features, it seems implicitly that they do. This is because (at least some of) the phenomenological features outlined seem to causally follow from a female sex. For instance, having female reproductive organs seems to provide at least a *potential* for childbirth (something Stoljar includes in her list of phenomenological features). As this is so, the least resembling **woman**-paradigms would be (i) and (iii), (ii) and (iii) as well as (iii) and (iv) resembling one another in three respects (P, R and A). The criterion for classification would then be stricter and in order to count as a woman, one would have to resemble a **woman**-paradigm in three (rather than two) respects.

However, the criterion for membership in the class of women would still be too loose. The elderly Scotsman described above would still qualify for membership in the class as he resembles the white European hermaphrodite sufficiently closely (in three respects): lacking female sex characteristics (not-

S), having certain phenomenological features (P) and engaging in typically female tasks and roles (R). Even though some individuals that earlier counted as women would no longer do so (like George W. Bush), numerous others would still counter-intuitively count as women. For example, every male prisoner who fears rape and has been selected to engage in so-called 'domestic tasks' usually associated with women (like cooking, cleaning, laundry and so on) would count as a woman. After all, they sufficiently resemble paradigm (iii), the white European hermaphrodite, in three respects: lacking female sex characteristics, having certain phenomenological features associated with women (fear of rape) and engaging in typically feminine domestic tasks. This consequence is, however, clearly absurd.

Criteria for being a paradigm

As I argued above, the criterion for being classified as a woman seems too loose and many individuals counter-intuitively count as women. This was because the notion of *sufficient resemblance* was problematic. But classifying women (*qua* women) in the manner Stoljar suggests is problematic for another reason as well. The classes (or types) **man** and **woman** turn out to overlap to a large extent due to the criterion for being a **woman-** or **man-**paradigm. Stoljar maintains that any individual will be a **woman-**paradigm as long as that individual possesses some features from three of the four clusters of features mentioned (sex, phenomenology, roles and attribution) (Stoljar 1995: 284). Furthermore, it seems one only needs to possess a single aspect listed under a specific feature in order to possess the feature or, in Stoljar's words, "to satisfy"

a feature (1995: 282). For example, the list of phenomenological features (P) includes a whole host of different phenomena ranging from physical features (like female sexual experiences and childbirth) to social factors (such as the fear of rape). Now, it seems that only one aspect listed under the heading of 'phenomenological features' needs to be possessed in order for an individual to possess the feature of *female phenomenology*.

Stoljar is not explicit about this. But, I argue, this is so. For example, paradigm (i) is clearly taken to satisfy certain roles associated with women (R) but in her description of (i), Stoljar only mentions one aspect listed under this feature: that (i) is oppressed on the basis of her sex. Unless (i) satisfied the feature (R) on the basis of this single aspect mentioned (sex-based oppression), (i) would not satisfy the criterion for being a **woman-paradigm** since she would possess features from only two of the four clusters mentioned. It seems then that one only needs to possess a single aspect listed under a feature in order to possess that feature (in order to possess S, P, R or A).

Stoljar goes on to claim that one of the main advantages of her approach is that individuals like the male-to-female transvestite character Dil in the movie *Crying Game* count as women because Dil resembles sufficiently a **woman-paradigm**. She "dresses as a woman, has the gait and bearing of a woman and hence has womanness attributed to her by others, [Dil] also has many aspects of female phenomenology" (Stoljar 1995: 285). As a result, Dil counts as a woman resembling paradigms (ii) and (iii) in (at least) three respects: with respect to phenomenology, roles and attribution of *womanness*. Now, I am happy to classify Dil is as a woman. However, following Stoljar Dil

would not only count as a woman; she would also count as a **woman**-paradigm by possessing features from (at least) three of the four clusters of features that pick out **woman**-paradigms. And *this* in my view generates a serious worry.

To spell out this worry more clearly, consider how men in Stoljar's account would be classified together. Different uses of the term 'man' would capture a cluster of features commonly associated with men and it seems fair to assume that these would be largely parallel to those captured by 'woman': male sex, male phenomenological experiences, male roles and attributions of *manness*. Certain **man**-paradigms could then be picked out and in order to count as a man, one must sufficiently resemble such a paradigm. It also seems fair to assume that the criterion for being a **man**-paradigm would be parallel to the criterion for being a **woman**-paradigm: one has to possess features from three of the four clusters of features mentioned that our use of 'man' captures.

Now, Stoljar claims that Dil (who, she earlier argued, counts as a woman) also "satisfies many of the features of the concept 'man' and in principle could be a member of the type 'man'" (1995: 285). Dil has human male sex characteristics, Dil can be said to have a range of male phenomenological features (like male sexual experiences), Dil engages occasionally in typically male roles (like wearing male clothing) and Dil has maleness attributed to him when his sex characteristics are revealed (Dil is called 'a man'). Possessing these features means that Dil would be classified as a man as he (supposedly) resembles some **man**-paradigm sufficiently closely. However, it seems to me that Dil would also count as a **man**-paradigm possessing features from (at least) three of the four clusters of features that pick

out **man**-paradigms. Dil not only counts as both a man and a woman. Dil, in fact, counts as *both* a **woman**-paradigm *and* a **man**-paradigm.²⁴

Due to this, the criterion for being a paradigm (woman or man) is problematic. As Dil can be a paradigm for two classes, any individual that sufficiently resembles Dil will count as a member of both classes. In other words, if x is both an **F**-paradigm and a **G**-paradigm, any other particular that sufficiently resembles x will count as both **F** and **G**. The upshot of this is that any particular that sufficiently resembles Dil (and individuals like Dil) will count as both a woman and a man. The two classes (**man** and **woman**) end up picking out many of the same individuals as their members and, as a result, the distinction between women and men largely dissolves.

Again consider the Queen. She has female sex characteristics, attributes womanness to herself, dresses as a woman and has female phenomenological experiences (such as having experienced childbirth). Insofar as the Queen resembles Dil sufficiently closely (in that they both attribute womanness to themselves, they both exhibit certain roles associated with women and they both have certain phenomenological features) the Queen counts as a woman. But because the Queen resembles *Dil* sufficiently closely, she will also count as a man. It seems that the same would also be true of the Sudanese refugee and Princess Royal. Then again, take our old friend George W. Bush. He has male sex characteristics, attributes manness to himself and he seems to experience

²⁴ Possessing certain features that pick out paradigms seems to be context-dependent. For example, only after Dil reveals his sex characteristics in the film *Crying Game*, is *manness* attributed to him. Given that this is the case, it is not problematic to claim Dil possesses features associated with both being a woman and being a man.

many phenomenological features associated with men. George W. Bush resembles Dil in three respects (with respect to male sex, attribution of maleness and male phenomenological features such as male sexual experience). As a result, George W. Bush counts as a man. The film actor John Wayne and the philosopher Immanuel Kant also seem to count as men on this criterion. But they not only count as men, they also count as women as they resemble *Dil* sufficiently closely. As it turns out both types **man** and **woman** pick out the Queen, her daughter, George W. Bush, John Wayne, the Sudanese woman displaced by ethnic cleansing and the philosopher Immanuel Kant (to name but few).

Not only is this absurd and counter-intuitive: it is also false. Moreover, Stoljar argues for resemblance nominalism in order to make sense of the class of women for feminist political purposes. On her view, however, this class includes individuals who we think of as men. Given Stoljar's political goals, this is highly undesirable: clearly the manner in which the class of women on this view is made sense of cannot ground feminist politics that aims to work on *women's* behalf only. Following Stoljar, the class of women would include not only a woman who is a victim of sexual abuse, but it would also include George W. Bush and Immanuel Kant: two individuals who hardly need or should receive feminist political representation.²⁵

²⁵ These are not the only problems with Stoljar's position. Consider an objection Russell levels against resemblance nominalism in general. He claims that "[i]f we wish to avoid the universals *whiteness* and *triangularity*, we shall choose some particular patch of white or some particular triangle, and say that anything is white or triangle if it has the right sort of resemblance to our chosen particular. But then the resemblance required will have to be a universal. Since there are many white things, the resemblance must hold between many pairs of particular white things; and this is the

V

Stoljar's manner of classifying women, I argued, is not plausible and should not be endorsed. For a start, the criterion for membership in the class of women is too loose, being unable to capture all and *only* women. Then again, the criterion for being a **woman**-paradigm was problematic since it allowed for some individuals to count as paradigms for both *womanness* and *manness*. As I argued above, this has the consequence of dissolving the distinction between men and women to a large extent. As it turns out, Stoljar fails to make sense of the class of women that would justify feminist action on behalf of *women*.

characteristic of a universal" (Russell 1967: 55). Russell's idea is that in order to account for *resemblance* or a *resemblance structure*, some reference to a feature shared by all entities of a particular sort will have to be made. Pricean resemblance nominalists will have to admit that all white entities (for example) will share the feature of *sufficiently resembling a white-paradigm*. This would be a feature all white entities have in common and it would be necessary and sufficient for *whiteness*. It seems that Stoljar endorses precisely such a view and that women on her account share something that is necessary and sufficient for *womanness*: they all resemble a **woman**-paradigm sufficiently closely. As it turns out, women would be classified together on the basis of this shared feature. Stoljar seems to do just the thing she wanted to avoid: she provides an account of gender that relies on a feature necessary and sufficient for *womanness* that women have in common.

CHAPTER 5
HASLANGER, OPPRESSION AND WOMEN

I

In the three previous chapters, I have argued against certain gender nominalist ways to make sense of the class of women. *Contra* such views, Sally Haslanger has argued for a gender realist position in her paper “Gender and Race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be?” (2000b; see also Haslanger 2005). Haslanger’s views are strikingly different from those commonly held by feminist theorists and from those considered previously. She writes: “In the context of feminist theory, *realism* about both kinds and types ... is generally assumed not to be an option. Forms of scepticism and nominalism are by far the preferred positions. This, I think, is a mistake” (Haslanger 2000a: 117). Haslanger argues further that women *do* share something that grounds classification and that makes them women: they all occupy sex-marked socially subordinate positions. Understanding *womanness* in this way (Haslanger goes on to suggest) enables feminist theorists to employ gender concepts *man* and *woman* as tools with which to fight against sexist injustices (Haslanger 2000b: 36).²⁶

Although I find Haslanger’s position refreshing and she makes many (in my view) correct observations about recent gender nominalist accounts, I will argue that her position is also unsatisfying. Despite thinking that she is right to insist that women have something in common *qua* women, I will, nevertheless,

²⁶ In her paper, Haslanger also argues for racial concepts with which racist injustices can be fought. However, I will not discuss her position on race here.

argue that the feature Haslanger thinks women share generates problems for her position. First, Haslanger's position ends up having politically undesirable consequences and, second, it ends up providing a rather unintuitive view of *womanness* that many (I suspect) would find foreign. I go on to argue, *contra* Haslanger, that a more intuitive picture of *womanness* would be better suited for feminist political endeavours. To begin with I will map out some background to Haslanger's position (in section II). In section III, I will outline her definitions of *woman* and *man* in more detail. Next I consider how Haslanger's position responds to worries raised by Spelman and Butler (in section IV). I end with a discussion of the shortcomings of her position (in section V).

II

How does Haslanger propose we can make sense of the class of women? How do the Queen and the Sudanese refugee on this view both count *as women*? Haslanger's reply is straightforward. The two have something in common that makes them women: they both occupy sexually marked subordinate social positions. (This answer may surprise many since the Queen does not appear to be particularly disadvantaged due to her social position. In fact, it may turn out that following Haslanger's definition of *woman*, the Queen will not count as a woman although she does count as a female human being. I will return to this shortly.) In order to argue for her view, Haslanger begins by outlining an

approach that she believes feminist philosophers should endorse when defining gender concepts. Haslanger calls this *an analytical approach*²⁷:

“On this approach the task is not to explicate our ordinary concepts; nor is it to investigate the kind that we may or may not be tracking with our everyday conceptual apparatus; instead we begin by considering more fully the pragmatics of our talk employing the terms in question. What is the point of having these concepts? What cognitive or practical task do they (or should they) enable us to accomplish? Are they effective tools to accomplish our (legitimate) purposes; if not, what concepts would serve these purposes better?” (Haslanger 2000b: 33)

Haslanger contrasts the analytical approach with two other (on her view) unsatisfying approaches. First, she contrasts it with a *conceptual* inquiry that “seeks an articulation of our [ordinary] *concepts*” and second, with a *descriptive* inquiry that focuses on the extension of our everyday concepts in order to determine whether natural or social kinds **man** and **woman** exist that our use of the concepts *man* and *woman* tracks (Haslanger 2000b: 33).

Haslanger’s reasons for rejecting these two approaches and for endorsing the analytical (or ameliorative) inquiry are pragmatic. She claims not to be interested in capturing the nuances of our ordinary concepts *woman* and *man* but rather she wants to examine and revise those concepts for certain theoretical and political purposes. The analytical (or ameliorative) project will not merely aim to define the terms in question; it also aims to show *why* we need gender concepts and *what purposes* do they serve. Haslanger writes:

“The responsibility is ours to define them [*man* and *woman*] for our purposes. In doing so we will want to be responsive to some aspects of ordinary usage (and to aspects of both the connotation and extension of the terms). However, neither ordinary usage nor empirical investigation is overriding, for there is a stipulative element to the project: *this* is the phenomenon we need to be thinking about. Let the term in question refer to it. On this [analytical]

²⁷ In her recent work, Haslanger calls this approach *ameliorative*, not *analytical* (Haslanger 2005).

approach, the world by itself can't tell us what gender is ... it is up to us to decide what in the world, if anything, [it is]." (2000b: 34)

As mentioned, Haslanger holds that gender concepts are needed to "fight against [sexist] injustice" (2000b: 36). This in mind, she claims that a viable concept of *woman* (with which sexist injustices can be fought) must be responsive to four concerns: the concept must be able to be used to identify persistent gender inequalities; it must be such that various differences amongst women can be recognised; *woman* must be such that we can use it to examine whether disciplines that appear to be gender neutral are in fact gender biased; and finally, *woman* must be such that it can help feminists to "develop an understanding of agency that will aid feminist ... efforts to empower critical social agents" (Haslanger 2000b: 36).

The analytical approach Haslanger endorses is further informed by *material feminism* that takes the material realities of women's lives as crucial for a proper understanding of gender. This strategy provides an analysis of gender that "defines [it], in the primary sense, as a social class" (Haslanger 2000b: 37). It "undertakes to explain a variety of connected phenomena in terms of their relations to one that is theorized as the central or core phenomenon" (Haslanger 2000b: 37). Defining *woman* in this manner means that we theorize a particular phenomenon of women's lives as central to all other phenomena women encounter and explain the latter in terms of the central or core phenomenon.

What is the core phenomenon central to women's lives on Haslanger's analytical approach? Haslanger thinks that this is social subordination: "males and females not only differ physically, but [they] also systematically differ in

their social positions” (2000b: 38). Generally speaking, societies are structured such that those individuals with male bodies are privileged whereas those with female bodies are subordinate. This leads Haslanger to conclude:

“The core phenomenon to be addressed is the pattern of social relations that constitute the social classes of men as dominant and women as subordinate; norms, symbols, and identities are gendered in relation to the social relations that constitute gender.” (2000b: 37)

For Haslanger, gender is not a set of psychological dispositions or an identity, a set of attributes that denote ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ or certain way of adhering to gender norms that define certain gender roles. For her, *gender* denotes a social class that people belong to by virtue of occupying sex-marked social positions as either subordinate or dominant.

III

Examining women’s lives illustrates that more often than not, women occupy subordinate social positions whereas men occupy dominant positions. As this is so, *woman* is to be defined “in terms of women’s subordinate position in systems of male dominance” (Haslanger 2000b: 38). Haslanger summarises this view in the following manner:

“Gender categories are defined in terms of how one is socially positioned ... [they] are defined hierarchically within a broader complex of oppressive relations; one group (viz., women) is socially positioned as subordinate to the other (viz., men), [where] [s]exual difference functions as the physical marker to distinguish the two groups, and is used in the justification of viewing and treating the members of each group differently.” (2000b: 38)

She goes on to provide a tentative definition of *woman*:

“S is a woman iff S is systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is ‘marked’ as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female’s biological role in reproduction.” (Haslanger 2000b: 39)

This definition requires some clarification. Firstly, what counts as evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction? Haslanger is not explicit about this. However, she seems to think that such a role is not coextensive with sex characteristics:

"These analyses [of gender] allow that there isn't a common understanding of 'sex' across time and place. On my account, gendered social positions are those marked by reference to features that are generally assumed *in the context in question* to either explain or provide evidence of reproductive role, whether or not these are features that *we* consider 'sex'." (Haslanger 2000b: 53)

It seems to me that perhaps certain features we commonly take to enable child bearing and lactation would be the kind of evidence Haslanger has in mind. Probably the most obvious cues of childbearing capabilities are features such as breasts, a certain body shape and wide curvy hips. It seems that other cues not directly relevant to reproduction might also count as evidence of this sort. I have in mind features such as having a certain hairstyle associated with women, wearing make-up and dressing in clothing typically associated with women.

Saying this, the sort of evidence Haslanger has in mind seems to depend largely on the context in which an individual exhibits these features. For instance, if George W. Bush addressed the American people wearing a dress, I suspect nobody would think this is evidence of George W. Bush's *female* role in reproduction. This is because he is a familiar figure and wearing a dress in this context is out of the ordinary. However, think back to the previous chapter and the character of Dil in the movie *Crying Game*. The cues (wearing female clothing, make-up and appearing to have a female body) are sufficient to suggest that Dil has features indicative of a female role in reproduction. This is because within the context of the movie, these cues do not seem out of place.

The second issue in need of clarification is this: what is it to be systematically subordinated (or oppressed) by virtue of certain bodily features indicative of *femaleness*? Haslanger elaborates on this drawing from Marilyn Frye (1983) and Iris Marion Young (1990). First, she takes *oppression* (or *subordination* which Haslanger uses interchangeably with *oppression*) as “a structural phenomenon that positions certain groups as disadvantaged and others as advantaged or privileged in relation to them” (Haslanger 2000b: 39).

Oppression

“refers to the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms - in short, [oppression happens during] the normal processes of everyday life.” (Young 1990: 41)

Oppression of this sort commonly takes five forms: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and (systematic) violence (Young 1990: 40).²⁸ Haslanger points out further that not only can oppression take many different forms but it can also be extended along different dimensions of social life. One might be extremely privileged on some aspect (for instance, one’s economic position) and yet be hugely disadvantaged on another (for instance, on racial grounds). It may even be that “one might be

²⁸ Young’s theory of oppression is formulated from a Marxist perspective with the emphasis on exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence due to people’s *economic* classes. Much of her discussion deals with how the economic structures of production position individuals as subordinate given their race, gender or age. Such a heavy reliance on Marxist theory of production and class struggle ill fits Haslanger’s aim. After all, women seem to be oppressed on numerous grounds and a theory of gender that takes oppression as central must recognise this. Haslanger appears to agree with this and intends Young’s theory of oppression to capture exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence *in general*.

systematically subordinated along some social axis, and yet be tremendously privileged in one's *overall* social position" (Haslanger 2000b: 40).

Then again, what does 'being oppressed *as a woman*' mean? Haslanger explains this quoting Frye: being oppressed *as a woman* means that having a female body is "significantly attached to whatever disadvantages and deprivations she suffers, be they great or small ... [In contrast,] [b]eing male is something [a man] has going *for* him, even if race or class or age or disability is going against him" (Frye 1983: 16). Frye's thought (which Haslanger endorses) is that having a certain kind of body marks an individual and justifies the individual's position in oppressive social relations. In particular,

"[i]n the case of women, the idea is that societies are guided by representations that link being female with other facts that have implications for how one should be viewed and treated; insofar as we structure our social life to accommodate the cultural meanings of the female (and male) body, females occupy an oppressed social position." (Haslanger 2000b: 40)

That having certain bodily features is linked to an oppressed (or subordinated) social position is the result of certain cultural norms that create meanings imposed on sexed bodies. Haslanger argues that the reason having a female body significantly disadvantages individuals is because of certain norms, beliefs, ideologies and myths about sex that are dominant within our particular social structures and where the "dominant ideologies and dominant social structures ... work together to bias the micro-level interactions ... so that for the most part males are privileged and females are disadvantaged" (Haslanger 2000b: 41).

Having clarified her position, Haslanger modifies the tentative definition of *woman*. She writes:

“S is a woman iff

- (i) S is regularly and for the most part observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female’s biological role in reproduction;
- (ii) that S has these features marks S within the dominant ideology of S’s society as someone who ought to occupy certain kinds of social position that are in fact subordinate (and so motivates and justifies S’s occupying such a position); and
- (iii) the fact that S satisfies (i) and (ii) plays a role in S’s systematic subordination, i.e., *along some dimension*, S’s social position is oppressive, and S’s satisfying (i) and (ii) plays a role in that dimension of subordination.” (Haslanger 2000b: 42)

She goes on to offer a complementary definition of *man*:

“S is a man iff

- (i) S is regularly and for the most part observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed to be evidence of a male’s biological role in reproduction;
- (ii) that S has these features marks S within the dominant ideology of S’s society as someone who ought to occupy certain kinds of social position that are in fact privileged (and so motivates and justifies S’s occupying such a position); and
- (iii) the fact that S satisfies (i) and (ii) plays a role in S’s systematic privilege, i.e., *along some dimension*, S’s social position is privileged, and S’s satisfying (i) and (ii) plays a role in that dimension of privilege.” (2000b: 42)

Haslanger’s point is that anyone who is judged to possess certain bodily features indicative of a female reproductive role is positioned such that they occupy a subordinate social position and thus, will count as a woman. Women (*qua* women) occupy subordinate social positions due to certain meanings given to their sexed bodies and occupying such positions is definitive of *womanness*: *being a woman* means that one is subject to sex-marked oppressive sort of treatment. Then again, anyone who is judged to possess certain bodily features indicative of a male reproductive role is positioned in a privileged manner and will count as a man.

Haslanger is cautious (and rightly so) about what occupying these kinds of social positions entails. She suggests that on her account a Chinese woman

of the 1790s, a Brazilian woman of the 1890s and an American woman of the 1990s all count as women “insofar as their subordinate positions are marked and justified by reference to (female) sex” (Haslanger 2000b: 39). But clearly the subordinate positions these three women occupy are very different from one another:

“For example, a privileged White woman and a Black woman of the underclass will both be women insofar as their social positions are affected by the social meanings of being female; and yet the social implications of being female vary for each because sexism is intertwined with race and class oppression.” (Haslanger 2000b: 39)

She goes on to acknowledge that of course sexism is not the only source of oppression:

“For example, in the contemporary US, there are contexts in which being Black *and male* marks one as a target for certain forms of systematic violence (e.g., by the police). In those contexts, contrary to Frye’s suggestion, *being male* is not something that a man ‘has going *for* him’; though there are other contexts (also in the contemporary US) in which Black males benefit from being male. In examples of this sort, the systematic violence against males *as males* is emasculating ... but there are important differences between an emasculated man and a woman. On the sort of view we’re considering, a woman is someone whose subordinated status is marked by reference to (assumed) *female* anatomy; someone marked for subordination by reference to (assumed) *male* anatomy does not qualify as a woman, but also, *in the particular context*, is not socially positioned as a man.” (2000b: 41)

Haslanger’s point is that even though it seems a black man (by virtue of having features indicative of a male role in reproduction) is positioned as privileged in comparison to women, his skin colour will position him as subordinate in societies where racism is commonplace.

In order to accommodate differences in social contexts, Haslanger distinguishes between *having a gender* and *functioning as that gender*. She claims that “a woman may not always function socially as a woman; a man may not always function socially as a man” (Haslanger 2000b: 42). The black male

who occupies a privileged social position due to certain meanings his maleness is endowed with will not always function as a man because certain racist meanings his skin colour is endowed with position him as oppressed. Consider, for instance, Nelson Mandela. On Haslanger's view, certain sex-marked features position Nelson Mandela as privileged in comparison to black South African women. Insofar as this is the case, Nelson Mandela satisfies the concept *man*. But his skin colour positions Nelson Mandela in certain contexts as oppressed and in those contexts he does not *function* as a man. Although Nelson Mandela seems to satisfy the concept *man*, it seems that he does not always function *as if* he satisfied that concept (since, in certain contexts, his skin colour positions him as oppressed although he is a man).

Haslanger defines *to function as a woman* in specific contexts in the following manner:

"S *functions as a woman* in context C iff

- (i) S is observed or imagined in C to have certain bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction;
- (ii) that S has these features marks S within the background ideology of C as someone who ought to occupy certain kinds of social positions that are in fact subordinate (and so motivates and justifies S's occupying such a position); and
- (iii) the fact that S satisfies (i) and (ii) plays a role in S's systematic subordination in C, i.e., *along some dimension*, S's social position in C is oppressive, and S's satisfying (i) and (ii) plays a role in that dimension of subordination." (2000b: 42-3)

Haslanger notes that although someone who counts as a woman on this view may not always socially function as a woman, this does not suggest that the individual has functioned or counted as a man. So, even though Nelson Mandela did not *function* as a man during the years he spend imprisoned by South African government, this does not mean that during this time he functioned as a woman or that he ceased to be a man.

IV

Haslanger recognises that her position is controversial. She also recognises that in order for her position to get off the ground, she must be able to adequately respond to the challenges set by Butler and Spelman (cf. chapter 1). To recap, Spelman (1990) questions whether women *qua* women share anything that makes them women whereas Butler (1999) “raises the concern that any definition of ‘what woman is’ is value-laden, and will marginalize certain females, privilege others, and reinforce current gender norms” (Haslanger 2000b: 37). Haslanger’s response to these feminist philosophers is novel amongst recent feminist philosophy. Even though she takes both Spelman and Butler to raise questions that sorely needed answering, Haslanger goes on to claim that what Spelman and Butler argue for do not threaten her position.

Consider commonality. Haslanger remarks that “[o]n my analysis women are those who occupy a particular *kind* of social position, viz., one of sexually-marked subordinate. So women have in common that their (assumed) sex has socially disadvantaged them” (2000b: 45). This (she claims) is not problematic though. As being subordinate depends on numerous culturally variable social meanings imposed on sexed bodies, sexually marked subordination takes numerous different and culturally specific forms. This is evident in Haslanger’s example described above. The American woman of the 1990s will count as a woman on the basis of the same general criterion as the Brazilian woman living in the 1890’s did in that they are both subject to sexually marked subordination. But the *nature* of this sexually marked

subordination differs as different societies and time periods endow sexed bodies with different meanings. As this is so, Haslanger claims her position is not refuted by an appeal to women's particularity since what Haslanger takes women to share *qua* women does not have a culturally uniform and trans-historical form.

Then again, consider Butler's normativity problem. Butler argued that all definitions of *woman* are politically insidious marginalizing some females while privileging others. As a result, all views that offer a uniform definition of *woman* should be rejected (Butler 1999). Now Haslanger does indeed offer a uniform definition of *woman*. She also offers a view whereby some females are excluded and marginalised: those who are not subject to any form of sexually marked subordination. Non-oppressed females will simply not count as women and they will be excluded from feminist politics on the view Haslanger is putting forward. However, Haslanger does not see the exclusionary and marginalising effects of her view as problematic. In fact, she holds that achieving a state of affairs where lots of females are excluded from feminist politics would be highly desirable as it would mean that feminists are achieving their goal: the end of women's oppression. Haslanger writes:

"On the account I've offered, it is true that certain females don't count as 'real' women; and it is true that I've privileged certain facts of women's lives as definitive ... it may be that non-oppressed females are marginalized within my account, but that is because for the broader purposes at hand – relative to the feminist and antiracist values guiding our project – they are not the ones who matter." (2000b: 46)

She goes on to claim: "I believe it is part of the project of feminism to bring about a day when there are no more women (though, of course, we should not aim to do away with females!)" (Haslanger 2000b: 46). That certain females are

excluded and marginalized (Haslanger thinks) is hugely desirable from a feminist perspective because it means they are not oppressed on any sex-marked grounds.

V

I find many of Haslanger's suggestions appealing. I agree with her that the class of women must be made sense of. I also agree that in doing so we should not assume gender nominalism is the only (or the best) option. Despite this, I disagree with certain aspects of her suggestion. In particular, it seems to me that Haslanger's way of defining *womanness* does not deliver the political benefits Haslanger *thinks* it does. First, it seems her suggestion suffers because the notion of *oppression* Haslanger endorses is inadequate. Second, Haslanger's position (I argue) is unintuitive. It does not cohere well with common intuitions about women and *womanness*: something that (it seems to me) is important for any plausible feminist theory of gender. As this is the case, Haslanger's suggestion is unsatisfying and, I suggest, feminist philosophers should feel reluctant to endorse it. Saying this, it is not my intention to show that there is something unreparably wrong in Haslanger's way of defining gender. Rather, my point is this: a satisfying way to make sense of gender classes should cohere well with our *intuitions* about gender. Haslanger's definition of *woman*, however, does not appear to do so.

Before I go on to show that Haslanger's notion of *oppression* is inadequate and to suggest that perhaps a position that cohered better with our intuitions would be more desirable, I will briefly discuss the role *femaleness*

plays in Haslanger's proposal. As it stands, the role that sexed bodies play in Haslanger's definition of *woman* is somewhat puzzling and her definition turns out to have some problematic results: it ends up excluding certain individuals from the scope of feminist politics for seemingly wrong reasons. I then suggest a modification to Haslanger's definition of *woman* that avoids this result.

Definition of *woman* and being female

Haslanger offers an account of *womanness* that (she claims) depends on certain *social* factors: being subject to sexually marked subordination due to social meanings sexed bodies are endowed with. Haslanger is explicit and clear about this. She claims: "gender [on my view] is not defined in terms of an individual's intrinsic physical or psychological features" (Haslanger 2000b: 38). Rather, certain social meanings individuals' sexed bodies are endowed with determine one's social position and gender. Haslanger claims further that, as a result, some individuals can count as women even though they lack female bodies. As gender depends on the dominant beliefs, norms and ideologies, rather than on some intrinsic physical features males and females possess, sex and gender are not coextensive: "once we focus our attention on gender as social position, we must allow that one can be a woman without ever (in the ordinary sense) 'acting like a woman', 'feeling like a woman', or even having a female body" (Haslanger 2000b: 38).

However, if we look at Haslanger's definition of *woman* more closely it seems that this does not hold. Rather, Haslanger's definition of *gender* appears to depend precisely on certain intrinsic physical features and one cannot satisfy

the concept *woman* without being female or without having a female body.

Reconsider Haslanger's definition of *woman*:

"S is a woman iff

- (i) S is regularly and for the most part observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction;
- (ii) that S has these features marks S within the dominant ideology of S's society as someone who ought to occupy certain kinds of social position that are in fact subordinate (and so motivates and justifies S's occupying such a position); and
- (iii) the fact that S satisfies (i) and (ii) plays a role in S's systematic subordination, i.e., *along some dimension*, S's social position is oppressive, and S's satisfying (i) and (ii) plays a role in that dimension of subordination." (2000b: 42)

In premise (i) Haslanger claims S has to be generally speaking *observed or imagined* to have certain physical features that suggest S has bodily features provide evidence of female reproductive functions. (I suggested earlier that such features would be, for example, having breasts and relatively wide hips.) According to premise (i), whether or not S really has these features is irrelevant to S's being a woman. But, in premise (ii) S's being a woman actually depends on S having those physical features: "that S *has* these features marks S" for certain sort of treatment (Haslanger 2000b: 42, italics mine). It appears that Haslanger holds the following. S is not marked for certain oppressive sort of treatment because it is assumed or imagined that S's physical features indicate a female reproductive role. S is marked for this sort of treatment because S *in actual fact* has those features. If this is Haslanger's view, then it is necessary that S has a female body in order for S to count as a woman. *Womanness* seems to depend on certain bodily features relevant for female reproductive functions and Haslanger's thought that one can be a woman without "even having a female body" (2000b: 38) does not seem to be possible. If one does not have

features that indicate female reproductive functions, one cannot satisfy the definition of *woman*.

Prima facie this may appear trivial. After all, it seems that (by and large) *being a woman* and *being female* go together; Haslanger is unwittingly pointing to a very common phenomenon. Nonetheless, if we accept this, Haslanger's definition (as it stands) has some very problematic consequences. It seems that if we accept this definition some individuals who should (it appears) be classified as women, will not be so classified. In particular, I have in mind male-to-female transvestites and transsexuals who live their lives as women but who lack the features female role in reproduction requires. These individuals would not count as women and would fall outside the scope of feminist politics.

Reconsider Dil from the movie *Crying Game* discussed in the previous chapter (chapter 4). Dil lives as a woman, is treated as a woman and is taken to be a woman by those around her. Only after Dil's sex characteristics are revealed (two-thirds of the way into the film), is Dil treated differently: Dil is called a 'man' and treated as a man. Intuitively it seems that Dil should count as a woman and most viewers (and characters in the film) treated and considered Dil to be a woman. But, if Haslanger's definition of *woman* were accepted as it stands, Dil would not count as a woman. She would be an individual that, following Haslanger's definition, simply does not matter for feminist politics. Imagine the following scenario. Dil works in a hairdressing salon in the movie. Suppose a male client refuses to have his hair cut by Dil because he believes that women are predisposed to be bad hairdressers. Due to this, he never allows women to cut his hair. This customer judges Dil to possess a female body and

the beliefs he holds about female bodies appear to disadvantage Dil. Now, Dil seems to be precisely the kind of individual feminist politics should aim to aid because she seems to be subject to sex-marked subordination. But because Dil does not *have* a female body she fails to satisfy the concept *woman* and will fall outside the scope of feminist politics.

Consider another case with similar results. Imagine Brenda who is a 40-year old male-to-female transsexual. Brenda was born male (and lived the first 20 years of her life as Brendon) but has undergone an extensive sex-change operation 20 years ago. Brenda feels like a woman and has (for the past two decades) lived as a female. Now, it seems Brenda should count as a woman on Haslanger's definition because Brenda (unlike Dil) actually possesses a female body. But, it could be claimed that the bodily features Brenda possesses are not 'real' since they have been surgically created: breasts of a transsexual are not *really* breasts, they are just lumps of tissue, fat and silicone made to look like breasts. This type of thinking seems very common. People commonly think that (for example) fake fur is not *really* fur - it is just a chemically produced fur-like substance that resembles fur in many ways. Fool's gold is not *really* gold - it is just a substance that closely resembles gold in appearance. Fake snow is not *really* snow - it simply appears to be similar to snow in some respects. Most people, I suspect, would maintain that unless one has seen, experienced or touched *real* snow (and not just the fake stuff), one has not seen, experienced or touched *snow*. So, Brenda's artificially created breasts are not *really* breasts, they are simply some material stuff that has been made to look like breasts. This suggests that the female bodily features male-to-female transsexuals

possess are not *really* evidence of a female role in reproduction: they simply *appear* as if they were.

Now imagine further that Brenda is subject to sex-discrimination at her workplace. It is very likely that she receives lower pay than her male co-workers. She might even be subject to serious and damaging sexual harassment by her male colleagues. It seems that Brenda should fall right within the scope of feminist politics and that feminist politics should precisely aim to aid people like her: Brenda appears to be subject to sex-marked oppression. But on Haslanger's definition (as it stands) Brenda may not satisfy the criterion for being a woman if her bodily features are judged to be simply *appearances* of female bodily features. As a result, Brenda might not satisfy the concept *woman* and if so, she also would fall outside the scope of feminist politics.

I suspect Haslanger would not be happy with this and that she would not want to exclude either Dil or Brenda. And yet, her definition of *woman* as it stands does precisely this. The examples of Dil and Brenda demonstrate that individuals might fail to satisfy the concept *woman* for the wrong reasons. They do not fail to satisfy it because they live in a utopian society where females are not subject to sex-marked subordination. Rather, they fail to satisfy *woman* because they lack 'real' female bodily features. Now, Haslanger intended her position to exclude only non-oppressed females. In order to achieve this, her definition of *woman* must be modified. In particular, Haslanger's second premise ('that S *has* certain features marks S for oppressive sort of treatment') must be rewritten to read the following: 'that S has (*or is imagined to have*) certain features marks S for oppressive sort of treatment'. If Dil and Brenda are

both *imagined* to possess 'real' female bodily features that mark them for subordinate sort of treatment, the consequences I outlined above are avoided. As *actual* possession of female bodily features is no longer required, Dil and Brenda will both count as women and they will fall within the scope of feminist politics. This alteration seems to modify Haslanger's position in a desirable manner.

Oppression

Modifying Haslanger's definition of *woman* such that premise (ii) reads 'that S has (*or is imagined to have*) features evidence of a female role in reproduction...' has the consequence of no longer excluding individuals like Dil and Brenda from the scope of feminist politics. As mentioned, Haslanger would probably be happy with this modification. Nonetheless, I will argue next that her position is still problematic. This is because the notion of *oppression* she takes as central to *womanness* results in individuals counting as women on possibly very trivial grounds. Although Haslanger avoids the consequence that certain individuals (like George W. Bush) counter-intuitively and falsely count as women, I argue that her position classifies women together on too trivial grounds as those individuals who are subject to sex-marked subordination. I go on to claim that we should ground the class of women on something other than *oppression* or that, at least, we should not ground it on the notion of *oppression* Haslanger *currently* makes use of. The notion of *oppression* Haslanger *currently* relies on in fact prevents, rather than facilitates, a change in the *status quo* along the lines feminist theorists (including Haslanger) want.

Haslanger claims to define *woman* in terms of sex-marked subordination in order to provide a negative ideal that women will stand up against. She writes:

“The question remains whether my definition of woman helps sustain gender hierarchy by implicitly offering a normative ideal of woman. Given that women on my definition are an oppressed group, I certainly hope not! Instead, the definition is more likely to offer a negative ideal that challenges male dominance.” (2000b: 46)

She goes on to suggest:

“By offering these analyses of our ordinary terms, I call upon us to reject what seemed to be positive social identities. I’m suggesting that we should work to undermine those forces that make being a man, [or] a woman ... possible; we should refuse to be gendered man or woman ... I’m asking us to understand ourselves and those around us as deeply molded by injustice and to draw the appropriate prescriptive inference.” (Haslanger 2000b: 48)

Haslanger’s idea seems to be something like this. By providing a negative ideal of what a woman is, she is hoping to empower (and, I suppose, enrage) female social agents to stand up and work against their subordination by challenging current beliefs, norms and ideologies. To put this rather bluntly, by portraying women as victims Haslanger hopes that women will stand up against their victimisation. In so doing, she aims to “contribute to empowering critical social agents” (2000b: 48) and to ultimately bring about the day when there are no more women (or oppressed females) by undermining “the structures of sexual oppression” (2000b: 37).

Nevertheless, the notion of *oppression* Haslanger is working with makes the criterion for *womanness* problematic in that the kind of social change Haslanger is after simply cannot be achieved: the criterion for *being subject to sex-marked subordination* is too loose and it appears women would be unable to challenge their social positions *as oppressed*. And this seems hugely

undesirable given Haslanger's goals and broad feminist political concerns. Consider Young's definition of *oppression* that Haslanger endorses. Oppression, Young argues, "is something that happens to [groups of] people" (Young 1990: 40) where these people are subject to one or more of the following oppressive phenomena: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism or violence. But, as I argue, endorsing *this* conception of *oppression* generates problems for Haslanger. *Being oppressed as a woman* turns out to capture numerous different phenomena and, as a result, it seems unhelpful to endorse Young's notion of *oppression* when defining the concept *woman*. This is because even some trivial phenomena can count as sex-marked oppression and (Haslanger maintains) as long as females are subject to *any* sexually marked oppressive phenomenon, they will count as women.

Consider bow ties. Wearing a bow tie is traditionally associated with men (and typically with certain stereotypic views about particular *kinds* of men). Generally speaking, it is considered very odd for a woman to wear one. Certain cultural and social norms about clothing, feminine and masculine dress codes and feminine appearances dictate that this is the case. By virtue of these norms and codes, it is traditionally not considered appropriate for women to wear bow ties and it seems that this is largely due to certain understandings about what individuals with certain physical features should and should not wear. The beliefs and ideologies that govern culturally defined clothing norms deem those individuals who have features indicative of female reproductive roles as individuals who should not wear bow ties. It seems that females in being considered to be individuals who should not wear bow ties are

marginalized due to certain socially defined meanings their sexed bodies are endowed with. Females are marginalized (or excluded) from the activity of wearing bow ties and this marginalization is clearly sex-marked. Now, as this would be an instance of sex-marked subordination or oppression, any female who is considered to be an individual who should not wear bow ties, will count as a woman. After all, an individual's overall social position does not matter: for as long as she is oppressed *at least* on one aspect of social life, she will count as a woman (Haslanger 2000b: 42).

Of course, many individuals who satisfy the concept *man* seem marginalized with respect to bow ties since dress codes depend on other issues as well and these may not be sex-marked. For instance, if a man wants to avoid looking like a young Republican or a 'Tory boy', he is marginalised with respect to bow ties because wearing a bow tie typically carries stereotypical images of precisely such people. It seems likely that Tony Blair does not want to dress in ways that conjure up stereotypical images of Tory politicians. Insofar as this is the case, he seems to be marginalised with respect to bow ties. What makes this type of marginalisation different though, is that men who wish to avoid certain cultural stereotypes are not subject to *sex-marked* marginalisation. Being marginalised with respect to bow ties because one does not wish to appear as a particular kind of a man (a young Republican or Tory boy) does not amount to oppression. Only when marginalisation is sex-marked will an individual subject to it count as oppressed. So, although certain men are marginalised with respect to bow ties, this does not mean they are *oppressed*.

This is because they are not excluded from the scope of bow tie wearers for sex-marked reasons.

It appears rather easy to satisfy the definition of *woman*: for example, being marginalised with respect to bow ties makes one a woman provided that this marginalisation is sex-marked. Now, contrast this with the definition of *man*. On Haslanger's view, an individual will count as a man provided that the individual is subject to sex-marked privileging due to observed or imagined physical features evidence of a male reproductive role. Again, the individual may be hugely disadvantaged in his overall social position but as long as he is privileged on some aspect due to his physical features, the individual will count as a man. Haslanger does not elaborate on what *being privileged* amounts to but her endorsement of Frye suggests that being privileged as a man means that *being male* is something an individual has going for himself (Frye 1983: 16). It seems fair to say that *being privileged as a man* involves numerous different things such as gaining certain benefits due to observed bodily features and in general having the society structured in ways that benefit those with male bodies. It seems to involve this rather blunt idea: if you have (or are imagined to have) features that indicate a male reproductive role, then 'the world is your oyster'.

Feminists commonly argue that societies tend to be structured in ways that make it easier for males to attain certain social, political and economic gains (in comparison to females). Historically, numerous examples come to mind. For instance, until relatively recently property rights were solely granted for males. Politics is another familiar arena where males have traditionally been

privileged. Workplace practices also tend to privilege men and inadequate childcare provisions or the lack of affordable childcare facilities means that many women still find it hard to combine work and family life. (For other examples and an excellent discussion, see Saul 2003.) Examples such as these suggest that men find themselves privileged on numerous different grounds (though, of course, not on *all* grounds). In fact, it seems that even if a man tried *not* to be subject to sex-marked privileging in order to refuse his gender, the mere fact that males by and large earn more than their female counterparts, prevents this. In order to alter one's gender as a man, it seems that one will have to take some very radical steps. For example, men would need to refuse to be paid wages that are higher than their female co-workers'. However, even if one succeeded in not being privileged on *some* social dimensions, as long as one is subject to sex-marked privileging on *any* single social dimension this will be sufficient for *manness*. And considering how many aspects of our social dimensions are structured to benefit those observed to have (or imagined to have) bodily features evidence of a male role in reproduction, it seems very unlikely a man could refuse his gender given our current social structures.

What the above examples suggest to me is that Haslanger's call for people to refuse their gender is not achievable due to the notion of *oppression* she is working with. First, it allows that individuals can occupy sex-marked subordinate social positions (and count as women) on fairly trivial grounds as the bow ties example illustrated. It seems to be rather easy to satisfy the concept *woman* and to count as oppressed. Due to this, it seems unclear how women ever could alter the *status quo* such that they become non-oppressed females.

However much one tries to refuse one's gender as a woman, as long as that individual is subject to sex-marked oppression on any single social dimension, even on very trivial grounds, the individual will count as a woman. The same appears to be true of men: they simply cannot refuse to be gender men. As long as male individuals are privileged on any single social dimension where this is sex-marked, men cannot alter or refuse their gender. And considering that our social structures in general privilege those with male bodies, it seems impossible to refuse to be gendered a man.

This suggests to me that (on Haslanger's view) women cannot but be oppressed and men cannot but be privileged. The *status quo* perpetuating women's subordination cannot be altered since neither gender can refuse to be so gendered. This seems to seriously undermine the political force of Haslanger's position since her definitions of *woman* and *man* simply cannot do the work she designed them to do: they cannot be employed to facilitate social and political *change*. Change that will bring about the end of women's oppression can only come about if females are no longer subject to sex-marked oppression of any kind and males are no longer subject to sex-marked privilege of any kind. But, as I have shown, this is not achievable and the emancipatory potential of Haslanger's position does not get off ground. Although Haslanger provides a way to make sense of a unified class of women, her manner of doing this is not in my view acceptable. The class of women feminist politics is organised around should not be such that feminists end up fighting for women who are oppressed because they are marginalised with respect to bow ties. Such marginalisation does not appear to be particularly pressing or significant from a

political point of view nor is it something that feminist theorists should spend time trying to alter.

Intuitions

Haslanger admits that “there are of course unresolved difficulties in working out a satisfactory theory of oppression; I’m afraid I can’t take on that further task here, so I can only invoke the rough outlines of the background view with the hope that an adequate account can at some point be supplied” (2000b: 39). I sympathise with Haslanger that much of feminist work has to be done without an adequate conceptual scheme. Nevertheless, (as I argued above) I also feel that Haslanger’s definition of *woman* is problematic *as it stands* precisely because a satisfactory notion of *oppression* is not available. Saying this, it seems that the problems I pointed out in the previous section could be responded to provided Haslanger modified the notion of *oppression* she takes to be central to gender concepts. It seems perfectly reasonable to think that *oppression could* be described as a structural phenomenon that does not have the consequence I draw attention to above. If *oppression* were redefined in a way that avoids the problems I discussed above, Haslanger’s position would work on its own terms. It provides a definition of *woman* and an account of gender classes that is not refuted by Spelman’s and Butler’s arguments. Further, Haslanger recognises that there are many different kinds of women and her definition accommodates these differences avoiding problematic and false claims about women *in general*.

Despite this, I argue next that feminist theorists should feel reluctant to endorse Haslanger's position because it does not cohere well with common intuitions about women and *womanness*. Haslanger's gender classes work *within* the context of feminist philosophy but I doubt many outside this discipline would find her arguments persuasive. Were I to introduce Haslanger's definition of *woman* to a non-academic group of people, I suspect many would find it foreign and strange. I find this particularly unsatisfying: adequate gender concepts should be such that both feminist philosophers and those outside feminist philosophy will find them persuasive. This suggests that *womanness* should be defined in a more intuitive manner than Haslanger does.

It is worth clarifying what I take *intuitive* to mean: intuitions are non-inferential beliefs about the world and they are, to an extent, governed by social codes and practices. By and large, intuitively held beliefs are not arrived at through reflection; rather, they are like commonsense beliefs and gut-feelings. (For more on different ways to understand *intuition*, see Sosa 1998.) I take it that most people have intuitions and intuitively held beliefs about gender that include beliefs such as which individuals are men and which are women. For example, if asked whether the Queen is a woman or not, most people (I suspect) would say that she is. They would probably not be able to articulate their reasons for thinking so and few would begin considering arguments for and against the Queen being a woman. It seems to me that the same would also be true of Condoleezza Rice and the Sudanese refugee fleeing violence in Darfur. I would expect most people to hold an intuitive belief (a non-inferential gut-

feeling) that the Queen, Condoleezza Rice and the Sudanese refugee are all women.

Now, it may turn out that on Haslanger's view only the Sudanese refugee satisfies the concept *woman*. This is because the Queen and Condoleezza Rice may not count as oppressed females given their social positions (provided trivial phenomena do not count as oppressive). The Queen certainly does not appear to be oppressed on sex-marked social and political grounds, she does not appear to be economically disadvantaged nor does the Queen appear to be culturally disadvantaged due to certain physical features she is presumed to possess. Much of the same appears to be true of Condoleezza Rice: she is wealthy and privileged in many respects occupying one of the most powerful political offices in the US (and perhaps in the world). If it turns out that the Queen and Condoleezza Rice are non-oppressed females, following Haslanger this means that they are not women.

This appears to generate a clash between philosophical theory and common intuitions about gender. Imagine telling an unsuspecting member of the public that contrary to what they thought, the Queen is not a woman (because the Queen is not sex-marked for oppression). It seems to me that many would find this odd and that many would dispute my claim. What philosophers often do when philosophical theory and intuitive beliefs clash is to employ the method of *reflective equilibrium*: philosophers either modify their philosophical theories to fit with intuitions or they try to show that commonly held intuitions are false (and that their philosophical theory is correct). In short, philosophers aim to achieve a state of affairs where common intuitions and philosophical

theory match as closely as possible. (For more on reflective equilibrium, see Cummins 1998.)

So, when our intuitions about *womanness* and philosophical theory of gender clash, feminist philosophers have two options: they can either try to show that commonly held intuitions about gender are false or they can modify the philosophical theory of gender such that it will correspond better with our intuitions about *womanness*. In this case, I suggest that feminist philosophers should choose the latter course of action and, as a result, they should feel reluctant to endorse Haslanger's position. First, the former option seems hugely difficult and time consuming. Many people (I suspect) do not think that *womanness* depends on sex-marked subordination as Haslanger suggests and altering our intuitions about gender to cohere with Haslanger's suggestion would require a major shift in the way people commonly think of gender. In order to achieve this, feminist theorists would probably have to work hard on changing people's beliefs perhaps at the expense of other worthwhile feminist projects and this does not seem particularly feasible. Moreover, many feminist philosophers probably find Haslanger's proposal hard to stomach and, as a result, would feel reluctant to embark on a mission to change people's intuitions about gender. This is because Haslanger is asking that feminist theory and politics be geared towards abolishing gender and *womanness* – something many feminist theorists feel is crucial to feminist theory and that which gives feminism its political direction (see e.g., Young 1997). It seems, then, that modifying the theory of gender such that it coheres better with common intuitions should be the way to proceed.

Second, it seems important that our gender concepts match with intuitive beliefs about gender as closely as possible. For one thing, it seems more people are more likely to accept a theory if it maps onto their intuitions about the phenomenon being theorised: if intuitions and philosophical theory match, this makes the latter more persuasive. Consider a hypothetical analogy from moral philosophy. Imagine one was to suggest a definition of *morally sound character* whereby an agent satisfies this definition provided that the agent commits *at least* one morally praiseworthy act a day. Even though the agent may commit numerous morally reproachable deeds every day, as long as that agent commits at least one praiseworthy deed, the agent is of morally good character. So, imagine someone orders a mass killing of certain people (perhaps due to these people's race or ethnicity) and directly after giving orders to kill these people helps an old lady across the street. This person would, as a result, satisfy the hypothetical definition of *morally good character*: s/he has committed (at least) one morally praiseworthy deed that day and since this is sufficient for having morally good character, the person satisfies that notion. Even though the person has ordered a mass killing of people on (what seem to be) thoroughly unjustifiable grounds, this does not matter. What matters is that s/he has helped an old lady across the street.

Now, I suspect few would agree that this person actually is of morally good character. Many would also dispute the definition of *morally good character* because it seems to go against our ideas about what morally good agents are like. The proposed hypothetical definition is not persuasive: it goes against commonly held beliefs and intuitions about moral agency and morally

good character. In order to make this definition more acceptable, we would have to alter it such that it would cohere better with what we intuitively think morally good character entails. In a similar sense, it seems that philosophical theories of gender should cohere with our intuitions about women and men in order to make them more persuasive. And this seems to be a good reason to favour a notion of *womanness* that coheres as closely as possible with our intuitions about gender.

Intuitions matter for another reason as well: it seems important to have an intuitive view of gender because feminist theory is very closely connected with feminist politics and practice. Promoting an unintuitive theory of gender that feminist politics should make use of seems practically counterproductive. Hoping to provide a way to achieve tangible political changes and to devise effective political strategies that aid women using a notion of *womanness* that many (I would think) find unintuitive sounds to me an unsatisfying way to proceed. Promoting an unintuitive theory of gender does not appear to be conducive to feminist political goals as many who are fighting for these goals (it seems) would be unwilling to endorse such a theory. Providing a way to make sense of gender classes such that they cohere as closely as possible with our commonsense intuitions about women and men seems to be politically more desirable than providing philosophically complicated and unintuitive definitions of commonly observed social phenomenon like gender.

It seems that such unintuitive and complicated definitions of gender are also practically unnecessary. We have intuitions about gender, gender classes and who counts as a man and a woman. In many cases these intuitions have

been sufficient and feminist activists have found them useful when conducting their political campaigns. For instance, campaigners for women's suffrage in the early 1900s were not stifled in their political efforts due to insufficient conceptual precision. On the contrary, many (I suspect) would have found Haslanger's definition of *woman* unnecessary for their political struggle and achieving feminist political goals in no sense hangs on such complicated philosophical theories of gender. In my view, this also gives good reason to prefer an intuitively appealing view of gender.

VI

Prima facie Haslanger's position offers a clear and concise principle with which we can classify women (*qua* women): in order to be a woman, one must be subject to sexually marked subordination. Being subject to such subordination is what all women have in common and that which makes them women. Haslanger appears to offer the means with which feminist worries over gender classification are resolved and the threat to feminism's political vigour is avoided. Nevertheless, I have argued that Haslanger's notion of *oppression* that is central to gender classes creates problems. If Haslanger's suggestion is accepted and endorsed *as it stands*, it seems that feminist philosophers would be unable to alter the *status quo* that perpetuates women's oppression: something feminist theorists in general think of as a key feminist goal. I went on to claim that this problem is, nevertheless, reparable: what Haslanger needs is a better definition of *oppression*. Although Haslanger has a way out of the problems I pointed out, I still go on to suggest that feminist theorists should feel

reluctant to accept her position because it does not cohere well with our intuitions about gender. It seems to me that arguing for an account of gender that is more intuitive would be an advantage and, in the next chapter, I go on to do precisely this.

CHAPTER 6

HEGEL, ARMSTRONG AND GENDER CLASSIFICATION

I

How can feminist philosophers make sense of the class of women? One response is to argue that women all share something that makes them women. Feminist philosophers commonly assume this entails one of the following: either women share some physical and anatomical features that make them women or there is some social factor women have in common that is definitive of *womanness*. As I outlined in chapter 1, feminist philosophers commonly reject both formulations. They argue that there is no physical feature uniformly shared by all women and that there are no cross-cultural and trans-historical social factors that make women *women*:

“An essentialist [or a realist] approach to conceiving women as a social collective treats women as a substance, a kind of entity in which some specific attributes inhere. One classifies a person as a woman according to whether that person has the essential attributes all women share: something about their bodies, their behaviour or dispositions as persons, their experience or oppression. The problem with this approach to conceptualizing women as a collective is that any effort to locate those essential attributes has one of two consequences. Either it empties the category *woman* of social meaning by reducing it to the attributes of biological female, or in the effort to locate essential social attributes it founders on the variability and diversity of women’s actual lives. The effort to locate particular social attributes that all women share is likely to leave out some persons called women, or to distort their lives to fit the categories.” (Young 1997: 32)

Feminist philosophers hoping to make sense of gender classes commonly hold that women do not share anything that makes them women and that the class of women *must* be made sense of without appealing to common features.

In chapters 2-5, I considered four recent feminist responses to gender classification arguing that they are all inadequate in various ways. First, the

way to make sense of gender classification suggested by Frye (chapter 2) failed to pick out *women* because the criterion for *womanness* seemed to capture a number of individuals we wouldn't commonly think of as women. Young (chapter 3) suggested women form a series (a particular kind of social collective) because their actions are organised around similar objects. But (as I argued) these objects were so broadly defined that it seemed impossible to make sense of a *single* class of women on this criteria. Thirdly, Stoljar's resemblance nominalist suggestion was inadequate: it failed to pick out *only* women as members of the class that (in Stoljar's view) is crucial for feminist politics (chapter 4). Finally, Haslanger's proposal was (I argued) inadequate because it seemed to go against our intuitions about women and *womanness* (chapter 5). Although this is an issue that Haslanger herself would find unproblematic, I argued that gender *should* be understood more intuitively than she does.

In what follows, I will argue for a way to make sense of the class of women that is more successful than these four accounts I considered in the previous chapters. In doing so, I suggest a different way of understanding *what* it is that women might share that makes them women. I propose that we can make sense of the class of women on the basis of *a common feature*: members of this class all share the feature of *being a woman* or *womanness* that makes them women. My suggestion is gender realist. Nevertheless, I do not reduce *womanness* to biological features nor is my proposal incompatible with the view that women have different and dissimilar features, traits and experiences *qua* women. *Contra* commonly held beliefs about gender realist positions, I will

show that the recognition of differences amongst women does not count against my proposal.

The key to my position is what I take *womanness* to be. In short, I take it as a rather thin notion that merely aims to provide a way to pick out certain individuals (namely, those who are women). But in doing so I will not tackle the question, what is it to be a woman. This requires that I keep distinct what Charlotte Witt calls in a different context, the ‘population question’ and the ‘definitional question’: “which things or entities are *x*’s?” and “what it is to be an *x*?” respectively (Witt 1989: 194). I will provide a way to respond to the former question (and a way to pick out women) without answering the latter question (what it is to be a woman). I want to stress that my aim is *not* to answer queries about the nature of *womanness* so that feminist philosophers can say something substantial and true about all women (above and beyond that they all *are* women). This is because for the purposes of making sense of the class of women *only* the population question *must* be responded to. Classification *at its minimum* does not depend on knowing something *substantial* about the entities being classified - it depends on being able to *recognise* entities of certain sort so that they can be classified. Most everyday classifications (it seems) do not require that the definitional question is or can be successfully answered. For instance, I cannot say what it is to be a cat; and yet, I can tell which animals are cats. If I see a cat crossing the street, I need not rely on some necessary and sufficient conditions of *catness* to recognise that the animal in question is a cat. One of the reasons why gender classification has become so very difficult is because feminist theorists have assumed that it

requires substantial knowledge about all women, like knowing the necessary and sufficient conditions of *womanness*. As they could not articulate or point out such conditions making sense of gender classes seemed hugely problematic and some argued, impossible. As I will show, gender classification does not require that these conditions are, or that they even can be, articulated.

As mentioned, I will argue for a realist way to understand gender classes. On my view, there is a feature women have in common that makes them women: *being a woman* or *womanness*. In the previous chapters, I have outlined just how unpopular gender realist positions are within current feminist philosophy. In chapter 1, I argued that the commonly accepted arguments by Spelman and Butler against gender realism do not give good reason to reject it *in general*. In this chapter, I will expand on this thought and argue for *two* gender realist views that do not have the adverse political consequences feminist philosophers commonly think gender realism has. My aim in doing so is not merely to settle the issue of gender classification; my aim is also to show how tenable realist ways of thinking about women are and to convince feminist philosophers that gender realism can offer fruitful ways to think about gender classes.

I draw on the works of two philosophers, G. W. F. Hegel (1969, 1991) and David Armstrong (1978b), to argue for my gender realist positions. Hegel's notion of *substance-universals* and Armstrong's notion of *substantial universals* are particularly useful for my purposes. As I will argue, if *womanness* is understood either as a Hegelian substance-universal or as an Armstrongian substantial universal, gender classes can successfully be made

sense of. Saying this, I am not aiming to provide wholeheartedly Hegelian or Armstrongian theories of gender. For a start, neither philosopher (I suspect) would agree with my appropriation of their positions. Second, when arguing for Hegelian or Armstrongian *womanness* I am very selective with the material that I find useful. The manner in which feminist philosophers often appropriate works of non-feminist philosophers has been described by Linda Singer as that of a feminist ‘Bandita’; in the words of Iris Marion Young, a feminist Bandita is someone who “raids the texts of male philosophers and steals from them what she finds pretty or useful, leaving the rest behind” (Young 1997: 22). My appropriation of Hegel and Armstrong is largely of this kind: I appropriate *parts* of their work for my own theoretical purposes leaving out parts that, *I find*, are less useful. Finally, it is worth pointing out that I am not concerned with what Hegel and Armstrong claim about gender and *womanness* in particular. Rather, I make use of their metaphysical writings.

I begin by outlining Hegel’s position in general and then go on to suggest how it may help feminist philosophers hoping to make sense of gender classes. In doing so, I offer a Hegelian understanding of *womanness* (section II). Next, I will outline Armstrong’s view and sketch out an Armstrongian way to understand *womanness* (section III). I end with a discussion of the benefits of understanding *womanness* in these ways (section IV).

II

Overview of the Hegelian position

Hegel's notion of *substance-universals* aims to explain (among other things) how we classify and categorise entities of certain sorts. In doing so, he is proposing an alternative to *Platonism* that took entities of a certain sort to be of that sort because they partake in or instantiate the same *Form*: "there exist certain Forms of which these other things come to partake and so to be called after their names; by coming to partake of Likeness or Largeness or Beauty or Justice, they become like or large or beautiful or just" (Plato, quoted in Loux 2002: 21-2). Russell (endorsing a more modern version of Platonism, Transcendent Realism) claims that instead of talking about Forms, philosophers should be talking about *universal properties* where "a *universal* will be anything which may be shared by many particulars" (1967: 53). Recall his realist view of *justice*:

"If we ask ourselves what justice is, it is natural to proceed by considering this, that, and the other just act, with a view to discovering what they have in common. They must all, in some sense, partake of a common nature, which will be found in whatever is just and in nothing else. This common nature, in virtue of which they are all just, will be justice itself, the pure essence the admixture of which with facts of ordinary life produces the multiplicity of just acts." (Russell 1967: 52)

Further, Plato and Russell took universals (like *justice* and *beauty*) to be abstract and transcendent. They are said to subsist independently of the particular entities that partake in or instantiate them, particulars somehow interacting with universals such that we can attribute (for instance) *redness* to individual red things, *horseness* to particular horses and *triangularity* to triangles. This view presupposes a two-tier view of reality: there are two

separate and distinct ontological realms, one with all the abstract entities (universals) and the other with all the concrete entities (particulars).

Hegel differs from Russell and Plato firstly, in his views on which universals count as ontologically fundamental. Many of the universals mentioned above are not ontologically fundamental on Hegel's view: these include *justice*, *beauty* and *redness*. Hegel takes the Platonist universals to be 'abstract'. By contrast, those universals Hegel takes as ontologically fundamental must be (in his terms) 'concrete': they must be substance-universals. The common mistake leading to the incorrect picture of universality, which the Platonist holds, is this: if a philosopher aims to account for *redness* or *justice*, they proceed by abstracting from the particular features of all red entities or all just acts with the view of discovering what is their common nature *responsible* for their redness or justness. When people ordinarily (in Hegel's view) "speak in this way of the 'concept' of colour, or of a plant, or of an animal, and so on ... these concepts are supposed to arise by omitting the particularities through which the various colours, plants, animals, etc., are distinguished from one another, and holding fast to what they have in common" (*Enc.*§163A1).²⁹ Hegel, nevertheless, maintains that this does not yield the kinds of universals that are fundamental: "We can, indeed, abstract from the

²⁹ The quotes from Hegel's *Encyclopaedia Logic* will be denoted with *Enc.* Next is the number of the section the quote is in and whether the quote is in the remark (R) or in the addition (A) to that section. If it is in the main body of the section, no indication is given. If a section has more than one addition, I will indicate which addition is in question. For example, *Enc.*§166A1 denotes that the quote comes from the first addition to section 166. Hegel's *Science of Logic* will be denoted with *SL* and *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* with *LA*. References for quotes from these works follow a different convention indicating a page number to a relevant translation and edition to be found in the bibliography.

content: but in that case we do not obtain the [truly] universal ... [we obtain] only the *abstract* universal, which is an isolated, imperfect moment of the Notion and has no truth" (SL, 603-4).

Contra Platonism, Hegel argues the universals that are fundamental *individuate* entities thereby endowing entities with a foundation such that they can be further characterised with attributes like *redness* and *squareness*. For Hegel, ontologically fundamental universals do not exist separated from and "opposed to the particular and the individual" (SL, 602). By contrast, the ontologically fundamental universals should be understood to depend upon their individual instances and to exist indistinguishably from them.³⁰ These kinds of universals answer the question 'what sort of an entity is *x*?' and (in Hegel's view) include features such as *humanness* and *animality*:

"[Such a] universal is the ground and soil, the root and substance of the single instance. For instance, if we consider Caius, Titus, Sempronius, together with all the other inhabitants of a city or country, the fact that they are all men is not something that they simply have in common; on the contrary, it is what is *universal* in them, it is their *kind*, and none of them would be what he is at all without this kind. The situation is quite different in the case of the superficial, merely so-called 'universality', whose status is in fact merely that it pertains to all the single instances in question, and is what they have in common. It has been noticed that one thing that men have in common, as distinct from animals, is that they are furnished with earlobes. But it is obvious that if perhaps someone or other were not to have earlobes, this would not affect the rest of his being, his character, his capacities, etc., whereas it would not make sense to assume that Caius might perhaps be brave, learned, etc., and yet not be a man. The single human is what he is in particular, only insofar as he is, first of all, human as such, and within the universal; and this universal is not just something over and above other abstract qualities or mere determinations of reflection, but it is rather what permeates all the particulars and embraces them within itself." (Enc. §175A)

³⁰ Hegel writes "universality and singularity [or individuality] distinguish themselves [from each other] within [each judgement], but at the same time they are identical" (Enc. §167).

Hegel's thought is that we can distinguish between universals that denote the underlying *being* of entities and universals that are merely qualities and attributes that *characterise* those entities. The Platonist appeared to take both kinds of universals as ontologically fundamental without distinguishing their metaphysical importance in any way. Hegel, on the contrary, thinks *only* the former are ontologically fundamental whereas the latter (qualities and attributes) simply abstractly characterise the world and, as he puts it, have no metaphysical truth (*SL*, 603-4). Hegel does not deny that there are qualities and attributes that characterise individuals. He merely denies that such properties amount to fundamental universals philosophers should concern themselves (as Plato and Russell did). In Hegel's terminology, qualities and attributes that characterise individuals of a particular sort (such as the ones he mentions above) are called *particulars*.³¹

Hegel holds that in order to characterise individuals in any way, they must already exemplify some substance-universal. We could not characterise Caius any further (claiming that he was brave, learned and so on), if Caius did not already exemplify a universal *being a human being* that picked him out as an individual human being:

“[E]ach human being though infinitely unique is so primarily because he is a *man*, and each individual animal is such [an] individual primarily because it is an animal: if this is true, then it would be impossible to say what such an individual could still be if this foundation were removed, no matter how richly endowed the individual might be with other predicates, if, that is, this foundation can equally be called a predicate like the others.” (*SL*, 36-7)

³¹ For Hegel, 'individuality' denotes what metaphysicians commonly call 'particularity'. Throughout this thesis when I have talked of women's particularity, Hegel would have talked of women's individuality. Hegel's notion of *particularity* (in German *Besonderheit*) denotes distinctiveness, specialness and peculiarity. In common metaphysical sense, 'particularity' doesn't have such connotation: it commonly denotes singular entities ('this particular cup' or 'that particular horse').

Roughly, Hegel's view presupposes a substance-attribute view: there is an underlying foundational substance (like *humanness*) to which qualities (like *bravery*) are attributed. In order to attribute these qualities, the foundational substance must be in place; it would not make sense to attribute these qualities to something that lacked the underlying foundation. Features such as *bravery* can be predicated only if an entity exemplifies some substance-universal to begin with (like *humanness*). Saying this, Hegel's view is unlike the traditional substance-attribute view in that neither the substance nor its attributes exist independently from one another. Rather, they ontologically dependent upon one another.

As mentioned, Hegelian substance-universals individuate their instances. They make individual entities of some sort or kind: “[w]hat is universal about the concept is indeed not just something common against which the particular stands on its own; instead the universal is what particularises (specifies) itself, remaining at home with itself in its other, in unclouded clarity” (*Enc.*§163A1). Hegelian substance-universals appear to be *sortal universals*: “[a] sortal universal supplies a principle for distinguishing and counting particulars which it collects. It presupposes no antecedent principle, or method, of individuating the particulars it collects” (Strawson 1959: 168). Further, “sortal universals [are those] of which basic particulars are more characteristically instances (e.g. man, mountains, apples, cats, trees)” (Strawson 1959: 205). A sortal concept (that corresponds to a sortal universal) provides an answer to the question ‘what sort of an entity is x ?’ – if x falls under a sortal universal F that picks out entities of some sort (f), then x is of that sort.

Sortal universals individuate in (roughly) two ways: they pick out instances of certain sorts such that being of this sort is *either* essential to the individual instances (*qua* individuals) *or* it is not. In other words, suppose a sortal universal **F** picks out entities *x*, *y* and *z* as members of some sort (*f*). Being of this sort may or may not be essential to *x*, *y* and *z* *qua* individuals. If it is essential, *x*, *y* and *z* would not survive losing **F**. They would no longer remain the *same* individuals. This distinction (broadly speaking) maps onto a distinction between ultimate and phase sortals (Wiggins 2001). Ultimate sortals “[apply] present-tensedly ... to an individual *x* at every moment throughout *x*’s existence, e.g. *human being*” (Wiggins 2001: 30; see also, Robinson 2004: 20) whereas phase sortals apply to individuals only at certain times of their existences, such as *boy* and *cabinet minister* (Wiggins 2001: 30). The latter “denote part of the life history of something, which, as a whole, is denoted by another sortal. So, *child* is a phase sortal which applies to a phase of the things fully designated by [the ultimate sortal] *human being*” (Robinson 2004: 21).

It seems that Hegelian substance-universals are similar to ultimate sortals. They appear to tell us something about an individual that remains the same throughout the individual’s existence. Hegel writes: “[t]he *universal* ... is posited as the *essential being* of its determinations, as the latter’s *own positive nature*” (*SL*, 603).³² Now, it is less clear whether (at least) some Hegelian

³² This quote might be seen as suggesting that Hegel thought the substance-universals constitute some core essence of individuals that is more significant than the particular features of individual entities. This is not quite what Hegel had in mind though. For Hegel, substance-universals are not somehow above and beyond their individual instances being more important or significant: “the universal is ... the *substance* of its determinations; but in such wise that what was a *contingency* for [traditional views of] substance, is the Notion’s own self-mediation ... this mediation ... raises contingency

substance-universals could be understood as phase-sortals. I suggest, however, that they can and should be so understood in particular contexts. This would yield certain important theoretical advantages. Take (for example) Aristotle who is singled out by the ultimate sortal *human being* that tells us what sort of an entity Aristotle is throughout his existence. Many phase sortals also apply to Aristotle at certain times of his existence: these include *child*, *boy*, *man* and *philosopher*. These phase-sortals do not entail anything essential about Aristotle *qua* an individual. If they did, it seems that (for instance) *being a child* would be essential to Aristotle such that as Aristotle grows older (no longer being a child), he would cease to be the *same* individual. If *child* individuates Aristotle in some essential manner, the thirty-year old Aristotle would not be the *same* individual as the ten-year old Aristotle. This, however, seems counterintuitive and understanding *child* as a phase sortal avoids this problem. It is this idea that phase sortals are non-necessary to individuals that I find particularly appealing. I also find this very useful when discussing *womanness*: being able to think of Hegelian *womanness* as a phase sortal can plausibly account for changes of gender. (I will return to this shortly.) I take it, then, that Hegelian substance-universals can individuate in the manner of ultimate *and* phase sortals.

to necessity ... the Notion is not the abyss of formless substance, or necessity as the *inner* identity of things or states distinct from, and limiting one another" (*SL*, 603). What Hegel seems to have in mind is this: in traditional substance-attribute views, what is essential to an individual is its substance (or kind) whereas all other attributes and qualities are merely contingent to the individual *qua* an individual of this kind. For Hegel, this is not so. The substance-universal is ontologically dependent upon the particular qualities attributed to the individual. Particular qualities are not something contingent to individuals of certain sort; rather, they are necessary aspects of substance-universals that pick out these sorts. Hegel did not think that the substance-universals determine some essential core distinct and independent of particular qualities of individuals. Rather, what may be thought of as the essential core (the substance-universal) is shaped by the particular qualities of individuals that exemplify it.

Now, Hegel differs from Plato (and Russell) on what sorts of universals are ontologically fundamental. He considered abstract qualities (*roundness* and *redness*) as ontologically less important than substance-universals (*humanness* and *animality*). This is not the only difference though. Hegelian universals differ from the Platonic universals also in their *mode of existence*. The Platonist thinks universals are *transcendent*: they subsist wholly separated and distinct from individual entities said to instantiate them. The Hegelian substance-universals, by contrast, are *immanent*: their existence depends upon individual entities that are said to exemplify them and they are ontologically dependent upon them. Hegel writes,

“in speaking of a definite animal, we say that it is [an] ‘animal’. ‘Animal as such’ cannot be pointed out; only a definite animal can ever be pointed at. ‘The animal’ does not exist; on the contrary, this expression refers to the universal nature of single animals, and each existing animal is something that is much more concretely determinate, something particularised. But ‘to be animal’, the kind considered as the universal, pertains to the determinate animal and constitutes its determinate essentiality. If we were to deprive a dog of its animality we could not say what it is.” (*Enc. §24A1*)³³

³³ Which universals count as Hegelian substance-universals is somewhat confusing. Hegel is explicit that *humanness* and *animality* are substance-universals. He also claims that “[b]eing a metal ... constitutes the substantial nature of gold, without which whatever else there may be in it ... could not subsist” (*Enc. §177A*). This seems to suggest that particular species of animals (*dogness* or *horseness*) and particular metals (*being gold*) are *not* substance-universals. It seems to me, however, that *dogness*, *horseness* and *goldness* should all count as substance-universals on Hegel’s own view. First, Hegelian substance-universals individuate aiming to answer the question ‘what sort of an entity is *x*?’. Although *being an animal* and *being a metal* provide some understanding of the sorts of entities at hand, it seems that *being a dog*, *being a horse* and *being a lump of gold* also tell us what sort of an entity something is: if we deprived the dog of its *dogness* we could not say what sort of an entity it is anymore than we could say what sort of an entity a dog was if we deprived it of its animality. Second, Hegel seems to think that certain normative consequences follow from individuals exemplifying particular substance-universals. He seems to think that certain paradigmatic ways of exemplifying a substance-universal exist that provide a basis for our judgements about entities: “[t]ruth, on the contrary, consist in the agreement of the object with itself, i.e., with its concept. It may certainly be correct that someone is ill, or has stolen something; but a content like this is not ‘true’, for an ill body is not in agreement with the concept of life, and similarly theft is an action that does not correspond to the concept of human action” (*Enc. §172A*). It seems that Hegel though

Later on in his *Encyclopaedia* Hegel makes similar commitments: “[w]hen we say, ‘This rose *is* red’, or ‘This picture *is* beautiful’, what the assertion expresses is that it is not just *we* who, from outside, dress the rose in red, or the picture in beauty, but, rather, that these are the objects’ own characteristics” (*Enc.*§166A).³⁴

The interdependence of universality and individuality (Hegel claims) also has an epistemic dimension and this is manifested in the way we comprehend the world around us:

“Each of them, the universal and individual, is the totality, each contains within itself the determination of the other and therefore these totalities are *one* and one only, just as this unity is the differentiation of itself into the free *illusion* of this duality – of a duality which, in the difference of the individual and the universal, appears as a complete opposition, yet an opposition which is so entirely *illusory* that in thinking and enunciating the one, the other also is immediately thought and enunciated.” (*SL*, 582)

Hegel’s idea seems to be something like this. *Prima facie*, it appears that we can think about (for instance) the universal *human being* independently of thinking about individual human beings (and *vice versa*). It also seems that in

that there is some ideal way in which human bodies should be (which an ill body does not correspond to) and that there is some ideal way in which humans should act (which theft does not correspond to). In other words, there are some paradigmatic ways of being a human body and a human action. This would suggest that there are some paradigmatic ways in which an entity is an animal or a metal and that we can judge whether something that exemplifies the universals *animality* and *being a metal* correspond to these paradigms well or badly. Nevertheless, it seems that it is not enough that an entity may correspond well to the paradigm way of being an animal. For instance, it is perfectly conceivable that an individual dog may be a good specimen of animality but that it is bad specimen of *dogness* (it may, for example, behave in the manner cats paradigmatically do). In order to judge whether this dog corresponds well to an ideal of *dogness* it seems that *dogness* must also be a substance-universal. After all, *animality* of a dog does not tell us much about the entity *qua* a dog nor does it provide sufficient grounds for making normative claims about whether it is a good or bad specimen of its kind.

³⁴ See also Hegel’s *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* where he asserts that universality, particularity and individuality “have no independent existence ... such separated bodies are in themselves defective and abstract existents” (*LA*, 116).

doing so we can comprehend something about the universal independently of comprehending something about individual human beings (and *vice versa*). This is because universality and individuality appear to be constitutively independent from one another (though, of course, they are not thought of as being unrelated). Hegel claims that this turns out to be false. If we try to think about *human beingness* (or *humanness*) in order to comprehend what it is to be a human being *independently* of thinking about individual human beings, we don't get very far. Conversely, if we try to comprehend something about individual human beings *qua* individual human beings independently of their underlying *humanness*, the end result will be the same. This suggests (to Hegel) that we simply cannot comprehend anything about the universal *human being* or individual human beings separately from one another and that a sharp distinction between universals and individuals rests on a mistake. *Humanness as such* (as Hegel puts it) does not exist; only particular human beings exist. Nevertheless, in order to say that Caius and Titus are individual human beings, the universal *humanness* must already underlie the being of Caius and Titus – in making that judgement, we already know that they exemplify the universal *humanness* without which no other qualities could be assigned to them.³⁵

³⁵ Hegel expresses this interconnectedness of universality and individuality in a number of different places. When he is discussing (what he deems to be) judgements of the highest kind -- necessary judgements -- Hegel claims: “[s]ubject and predicate [in judgements of the type *a* is *F*] correspond to each other and have the same content, and this *content* is itself the posited *concrete universality*; it contains, namely, the two moments, the objective universal or the *genus* [*F*], and the *individualized* universal [*a*]. Here, therefore, we have the universal which is *itself* and continues itself through *its opposite* and is a universal only as *unity* with this opposite” (*SL*, 662). Elsewhere Hegel argues: “[i]n the abstract judgement: ‘*The singular is the universal*’, the subject ... is immediately *concrete*; the predicate, on the contrary, is what is *abstract* or undetermined – it is the *universal*. But since they are connected by ‘*is*’, the predicate, too, must contain within its universality the determinacy of the subject; hence this

Finally, Hegel's position differs from the Platonist picture with respect to diversity. Hegel claims that there are no two roses, or two horses or two human beings that are exactly alike but his explanation for this differs from the Platonist explanation. Roughly, on the Platonist view all roses (for instance) instantiate the same universal *roseness* that makes them roses. Differences amongst individual roses depend on the other universals they instantiate: a red rose and a pink rose both instantiate the same *roseness* but because the former instantiates *redness* whereas the latter instantiates *pinkness*, they differ from one another. Diversity (amongst entities of certain sort) comes from outside the universal feature that makes these entities of the same sort.

However, for Hegel diversity and multiplicity inhere in the nature of universals. Insofar as universal features inhere in their (infinitely variable) instances, the Hegelian universals are differently realised in each individual as every individual has a particular way of exemplifying a universal. Diversity is *embedded* in the nature of Hegelian substance-universals: "the true, infinite universal ... [in itself] is as much particularity as individuality ... It *determines* itself freely; ... [and] it differentiates itself internally" (*SL*, 605). Elsewhere Hegel argues the following:

"That everything is different from everything else is a very superfluous proposition, for things in the plural immediately involve manyness and wholly indeterminate diversity. But the proposition that no two things are completely like each other, expresses more, namely, *determinate* difference. Two things are not merely two ... but they are different *through a determination*. Ordinary thinking is struck by the proposition that no two things are like each other – as

determinacy is *particularity*, and this particularity is the *posited identity* of the subject and the predicate" (*Enc.*§169). In other words, in judgements of the kind 'a is F', the subject and predicate cannot be considered in abstraction from one another. The judgement 'Caius is a human being' determines something about Caius (namely, that he is a human being) and it determines something about the universal *being a human being* (namely, that Caius exemplifies this universal).

in the story of how Leibniz propounded it at court and caused the ladies to look at the leaves of trees to see whether they could find two alike. Happy times for metaphysics when it was the occupation of courtiers and the testing of its propositions called for no more exertion than to compare leaves! ... The law of diversity ... asserts that things are different from one another through unlikeness, that the determination of unlikeness belongs to them just as much as that of likeness, for determine difference is constituted only by both together.” (SL, 422-3)

This is perhaps the most interesting aspect of Hegelian substance-universals. As universality inheres in individual entities of particular sorts and the individual entities all differ from one another, the underlying substance-universal that provides an answer to the question ‘what sort of an entity is *x*?’ is differently realised in each individual: it is *differently exemplified* in each individual of a certain sort and every individual has its own particular way of exemplifying a universal and being the sort of entity that it is. Take the case of roses. Every individual rose exemplifies the substance-universal *rose* without which we could not say what those individuals are. Nevertheless, each individual rose has features *particular* to that rose. Some roses are red, others white, others pink and still others blue. They vary in length, width, in the number of thorns and so on. But these differences are not contingent to or distinct from their *roseness*. Rather, all these differences are integral to the substance-universal *rose*. That individual roses exemplify this substance-universal in different ways is in the *nature* of the universal *rose* itself and the universal *rose* is differently realised in each rose. In short, every individual rose has its own unique way of being a rose. For Hegel, “determinateness, therefore, is not introduced from outside when we speak of it in connexion with the universal” as is the case with Platonic universals (SL, 603). Rather, the universal “differentiates itself internally” (SL, 605). Substance-universals

individuate entities thus revealing their kind or sort but, in doing so, “we cannot speak of the universal apart from the determinateness which to be more precise is particularity and individuality, for the universal ... contains determinateness in and for itself” (*SL*, 603). The nature of universals is such that they contain “*within [themselves]* difference and determinateness in the highest degree” (*SL*, 601) where this difference is not only quantitative, but it is also qualitative: the “nature [of universals] is completely misunderstood when ... the *wider extent* of the universal is taken to mean that it is something *more* or greater *quantum* than the particular and the individual. As absolute ground, it is the *possibility* of *quantity*, but equally so of *quality*, that is, its determinations are just as much qualitatively distinct” (*SL*, 617). Because substance-universals inhere in unique individuals, substance-universals *contain* the criteria for distinctness and diversity both quantitatively and qualitatively.

I have outlined above that Hegelian substance-universals individuate (they make entities of some sort or kind), that they are immanent (rather than transcendent), and that they are differently realised in each individual entity of a particular sort or kind. This leaves some questions unanswered though. What do we know about individuals that exemplify the same substance-universal *qua* individuals of that sort (apart from knowing that they exemplify the same universal)? What do individuals of certain sorts tell us about the nature of the substance-universals they exemplify? The answer is: nothing. Hegel seems to think that we do not know anything about individuals of some kind or sort above and beyond that they all exemplify the *same* substance-universal, because substance-universals are inexplicable:

“As *universality* is the utterly *simple* determination, it does not seem capable of any explanation; for an explanation must concern itself with definitions and distinctions and must apply predicates to its objects, and to do this to what is simple, would alter rather than explain it. But the simplicity which constitutes the very nature of the universal is such that ... it contains *within itself* difference and determinateness in the highest degree ... The *universal* ... is that simplicity which ... no less possesses *within itself* the *richest content*.” (SL, 601-2)

It is not entire clear what Hegel means by this. On the one hand, he seems to hold that universals are simple in that they are bare and have no content. If so, Hegel seems to hold that universality *should* not be explained because all explanations will involve applying predicates to what is being explained and this will alter (and distort) universality supposedly by endowing it with content. At the same time, he maintains that substance-universals possess incredibly *rich* content *even though* they are simple. Later on Hegel claims that ontologically fundamental universality “far from being empty, ... has through its Notion a *content*, and a content in which it not only maintains itself but one which is its own and immanent in it ” (SL, 604). This seems to go against the thought that Hegelian substance-universals are bare lacking in content (and in this sense simple).

In order to make sense of Hegel’s claims I suggest his notion of *simplicity* should be understood as an epistemic notion. It seems that substance-universals are epistemically simple in that we may be unable to reductively explain a given substance-universal or break it down to some component parts (such as necessary and sufficient conditions). Nevertheless, this does not suggest the universal *has no* component parts; it’s just that we cannot tell what those parts are. The reason our explanatory efforts are frustrated might be precisely because the universal contains “*within itself* difference and

determinateness in the highest degree” (SL, 601) – because there simply are so many different ways of exemplifying a universal that a fully reductive explanation seems improbable (if not impossible). Nonetheless, we can say individual entities are of some sort or kind (and that they exemplify a particular substance-universal) even though we cannot say anything substantial about the substance-universal or the individuals exemplifying it as a result.

Hegelian *womanness*

I will claim next that if *womanness* is understood along the lines of Hegelian substance-universals we can make sense of the class of women in a gender realist way. I will also claim that this does not reduce *womanness* to biological features or ignore women’s diversity and dissimilarity. What would be the characteristics of *womanness* understood in the Hegelian manner? First and foremost, *womanness* would provide an answer to the question ‘what sort of an entity is *x*?’ by individuating its instances. Of course, *womanness* would not be the only individuating universal picking out women: obviously, the universal *being a human being* would also pick out women. It seems that both features individuate in that they both provide answers to the question ‘what sort of an entity is *x*?’ and both of them appear to provide a foundation needed in order to characterise entities further. For instance, it would not make sense to say the Queen is learned or wise and to say she is not a human being (according to Hegel). At the same time, it seems that characterising the Queen as a mother or a sister entails that she is already singled out as a woman. Insofar as this is the

case, *womanness* and *being a human being* both appears to individuate in the manner Hegelian substance-universals do.

How should we understand the relationship between these two individuating universals? They, I suggest, should be understood as two mutually compatible types of sortal universals: as ultimate and phase sortals (outlined above). My thought is that *being a human being* applies to the Queen throughout her existence (being an ultimate sortal) whereas *womanness* applies only at certain times (being a phase sortal). For instance, *womanness* does not pick out the Queen at two-years of age but it does at the age of 32. Understanding *womanness* in this fashion allows for changes of gender without entailing anything about supposedly essential features of individuals. It seems that someone may lose or gain *womanness* at different times during their existence and this may provide a useful way to think about transsexual, transgendered and intersexed people. *Womanness* (as a phase sortal) is not considered to be something essential to individual entities - it merely picks out its instances. Insofar as this is the case, changes of gender need not entail any fundamental or essential changes to individuals *qua* those individuals. It allows us to think that an individual may change one's gender without this suggesting that the individual has ceased to be the *same* individual. Of course, the foundation on which further characterisations rely will change. If the Queen lost her *womanness* and gained, say, *manness*, it would no longer make sense to characterise her as a mother or a sister. The Queen (it appears) would more readily be characterised as a father or a brother.

There are some difficult epistemic questions though: how is *womanness* (understood in a Hegelian manner) lost or gained and how does it pick out individual women? I have no clear-cut answers to these questions. However, these difficulties may not be as problematic as it first appears. For instance, consider a different example: when does a child or an adolescent gain adulthood? Roughly, at which point does *child* cease to pick out an individual and *adult* begin to pick the individual out? It seems hugely difficult to say and it seems impossible to point at some specific event or instance when this happens. It also seems impossible to explain how a child lost one's *childhood* and gained *adulthood* such that this will be true of everyone. But, generally speaking, this uncertainty does not appear to be particularly worrying nor does it seem that certain grey-areas pose a significant problem. It seems that we can (by and large) distinguish between children and adults although we cannot say how *childhood* is lost and *adulthood* gained. It also seems that although we might find it hard to say whether 15 to 17 year-olds count as adults or not, this grey area do not seem to threaten the *distinction* between children and adults. Insofar as this is the case with the distinction between adults and children, I see no reason to think that epistemic difficulties with changes of gender should generate scepticism about gender distinctions *per se*. It seems that (by and large) we can divide the world into women and men although we could not say in the case of transgendered individuals at which point exactly they ceased to be of one gender and became another (or how they lost a gender and gained another one). Further, it seems that there are epistemic difficulties at pointing out exactly when a girl becomes a woman or a boy becomes a man. How did

the Queen lose *girlhood* and gain *womanness*? It seems impossible to pin point a precise instance or event (apart from one that seems thoroughly arbitrary). Nevertheless, for the most part we can distinguish girls from women and grey areas themselves do not seem to threaten gender distinctions.

On the Hegelian picture, substance-universals are immanent inhering in their particular instances that, as Hegel time and again reminds us, are all distinct from one another. As this is the case, a substance-universal is differently realised in each individual exemplifying the universal. Consider *womanness* in this light. In order to fit the Hegelian picture, it should inhere in individual women who all have their particular ways of being women. Taking *womanness* as immanent is not uncontroversial and I will consider this in more detail shortly. However, the idea that individual women have their own unique ways of being women seems true. There are many different kinds of women and women differ from one another, not simply with respect to trivial features (such as their hair colour, height and the width of their palms), but also with respect to factors traditionally associated with *womanness*. I have in mind here factors such as women's social positions and situations in various cultural, ethnic and racial arrangements; their roles and responsibilities at home and in the work place; and their physical features, appearances and what is expected of them *as women*.

Again, the contrast between the Queen and the Sudanese refugee is fitting. These individuals appear to differ greatly from one another but at the same time, it seems that there is something they have in common: they are both women. Thinking about *womanness* as a Hegelian substance-universal provides

a way to reconcile these two aspects (that *womanness* is something the two share but that it is also experienced, felt and manifested in different ways). Every woman (arguably) has her own way of being a woman. But as Hegelian substance-universals are ontologically dependent upon the individuals exemplifying them (and *vice versa*), the substance-universal *womanness* contains within itself particular and dissimilar ways of being a woman. Diversity is not something contingent to *womanness*. Rather, on the Hegelian inspired view, it is integral to it and part of the universal *qua* a substance-universal. If *womanness* were not differently realised by each individual woman, it could not count as a Hegelian substance-universal. At the same time, the Hegelian view allows for a common thread that runs through all women *qua* women: they all exemplify the same substance-universal that makes them women. This provides a way to understand women as members of the same class at the same time maintaining that they differ from one another.

Roughly, the picture put forward here is this. Individuals of some kind or sort are of this kind or sort because they share something: they all exemplify the same substance-universal that provides an answer the question 'what sort of an entity is *x*?'. The picture of *womanness* I am proposing suggests that women are of the same sort because they have something in common: they all exemplify the substance-universal *woman*. Now, Hegel goes on to claim that substance-universals provide a foundation that enables us to characterise entities of particular kinds further. This suggests that the Hegelian account of gender takes *womanness* to be the underlying foundation common to all women (*qua* women). However, many feminist philosophers (I suspect) would not be

happy with this perhaps because it sounds as if I am proposing that there is some essential nature women have in common that causes women's characteristic behaviour, traits and such like. I want to stress that this is *not* what I am proposing. My proposal (that there is some underlying thread women have in common) need not commit me to any heavy-duty metaphysics about essential features or specific characteristics women *must have* because they exemplify the same substance-universal. On the Hegelian picture, I need not and cannot tackle the issue of what *womanness* is or amounts to because substance-universals (Hegel holds) are inexplicable. They are not somehow mysterious and, due to this, unknowable. Rather, they are inexplicable since there are so many different ways of exemplifying a substance-universal. The nature of the substance-universal *woman is* to be diverse and because of this, it seems impossible to provide a fully reductive account of it. To put this in Hegelian terms, because *womanness* contains diversity and difference (both quantitative and qualitative) it cannot be reductively account for or explained. The Hegelian picture allows me to make sense of the class of women on the basis of a shared feature (*womanness*) without having to explain what being a woman amounts to and without having to characterise this feature above and beyond pointing at particular instances of it. In Hegel's terminology, *womanness* as such cannot be pointed out – only particular women can. And yet *that* we can point out particular women is enough to enable us to make sense of the class of women.

III

As I mentioned to begin with, the Hegelian scheme is not the only realist metaphysical position that may help feminist philosophers hoping to make sense of gender classes: David Armstrong (1978b) argues for a different view that (I suggest) is also helpful for feminist philosophers. Armstrong identifies certain universals as particularising whereby they divide their instances into distinct entities. He terms such individuating universals *substantival*. *Contra* Platonism and Transcendent Realism, these universals are immanent inhering in their particular instances. (Armstrong employs the currently standard sense of ‘particular’ where the term denotes individual instances.) Armstrong’s substantival universals are particularly useful for my purposes and I will argue shortly that the class of women can be successfully made sense of if *womanness* is understood as such a universal. Before that, I will outline Armstrong’s view in more detail. It is worth noting that I am not arguing for a wholeheartedly Armstrongian view of gender. Rather, I find that Armstrong’s account of substantival universals is useful because, first, it illustrates that one can hold a realist view of universals and, in doing so, *not* have to rely on necessary and sufficient conditions. In addition, Armstrong illustrates that one can be a realist without ignoring the ways in which entities of certain sorts differ from one another. As I will shortly argue, both of these aspects are crucially important for a plausible feminist conception of *womanness* and, as a result, Armstrong’s general picture is useful when making sense of *womanness*.

Armstrong's position in detail

Armstrong summarises his position in the following manner:

"[I argue] that there are universals, both monadic and polyadic, that is, properties and relations, which exist independently of the classifying mind [being objective] ... Second, it is argued that no monadic universal is found except as a property of some particular [entity], and no polyadic universal except as a relation holding between particulars. Transcendent or Platonic Realism is thus rejected. Third, it is argued that what universals there are is not to be determined simply by considering what predicates can be applied to particulars. Instead, it is the task of total science ... to determine what universals there are." (1978a: xiii)³⁶

Armstrong appears to reject Platonism for (roughly) the same reason Hegel did: the idea that universals exist above and beyond their particular instances seems implausible. For instance, take *redness*. For the Platonist, it exists in abstract form in a realm wholly distinct and separate from individual red entities. Now, Armstrong thinks this picture is hugely implausible. For a start, where is this abstract *redness* that exists wholly separated from individual red things? What reasons are there for thinking that it *really* exists? Even if philosophers grant that abstract universals *could* exist, how can we understand their interaction with particular entities such that this interaction *makes* particular entities red,

³⁶ Armstrong advocates a *a posteriori* scientific realism whereby it is the task of natural sciences (and, in particular, physics) to determine what universals there are and what are the fundamental building blocks of reality. What makes Armstrong's position somewhat complicated is that he refuses to list and give examples of such fundamental universals claiming that it is not part of his project to do so: *this* is a matter for natural and empirical sciences. His task is merely to philosophically set the stage for discovering such universals. Now, it seems fair to assume that *womanness* would not figure in the list of fundamental Armstrongian universals discovered by physics and, as a result, Armstrong's position may not seem very apt for my purposes. Despite his appeal to scientific realism that tells us what the precise set of fundamental universals will be, I find Armstrong's *general* framework useful in many respects and it appears that feminist philosophers hoping to make sense of the class of women will benefit from it. (I will discuss this more shortly.) Further, the framework itself does not appear to entail that one must endorse scientific realism as Armstrong did. Of course, if one were to provide a wholeheartedly Armstrongian position of gender, one would not be able to ignore scientific realism. But, as I not aiming to do so I do not find Armstrong's endorsement of it particularly problematic nor do I see it as something that renders my appropriation of Armstrong out of place.

square or round? These questions raise serious problems for the Platonist and Armstrong thinks the Platonist cannot adequately respond to them. Due to this, he holds that it is more plausible to think of *redness* (for example) as something that *inheres* in the individual red entities themselves. For Armstrong, the Platonist's insistence on keeping particulars and universals apart (with the two-tier view of reality) is seriously misguided because "[u]niversals are nothing without particulars [and p]articulars are nothing without universals" (1978a: 113).

Why does Armstrong think there are universals to begin with? Why doesn't he simply agree with the nominalist that no universals exist in any shape or form? Armstrong argues that only metaphysical realism can account for certain phenomena to any plausible degree. These include resemblances between entities and changes of character in a given entity. For example, consider a pot of water that changes its temperature from cold to hot. Armstrong holds that the nominalist cannot plausibly account for the change in the water's temperature: an adequate account of *change* requires that philosophers recognise that there are some mind-independent features that are *responsible* for the water turning from cold to hot. Armstrong also holds that these features must inhere in the entity that is changing in order to make sense of *change*. And, he goes on to suggest, universals are the only way to make sense of such mind-independent features to any plausible degree. As a result, Armstrong thinks "we must admit objective universals which ... cannot exist independently of particulars ... The conclusion drawn [from this] is that

particularity and universality, [although being] irreducible to each other, are both involved in all existence” (1978a: xiv).

So, Armstrong holds that there are objective universals but rejects the Platonist claim that these universals are transcendent. Rather, he takes an immanent view of universals: universals inhere in their particular instances. Armstrong further holds that there are three sorts of universals: property universals, relation universals and substantival universals. The first sort includes features such as *redness* and *hardness*, the second features such as *being to the North of* and *being the brother of*, and the third features such as *being gold* and *being an electron*.³⁷ (It is very likely that none of the universals mentioned above would be ones that *Armstrong* would include in his list of fundamental universals because of scientific realism. For more, see footnote 36.)

Substantival universals are “associated with the ‘whole nature’ of kinds of stuff (e.g. gold) or kinds of things (e.g. electron)” (Armstrong 1978b: 176). I find these kinds of universals particularly useful for my purposes. Now, it is worth pointing out that it seems Armstrong’s list of ontologically fundamental universals will include only property and relation universals (Armstrong 1997: 67). Unlike Hegel, Armstrong appears to think substantival universals are not

³⁷ These different sorts of universals are not unrelated or mutually exclusive. For instance, if we try to make sense of the relation universal *being to the North of* some reference to property universals must be made. Consider London and Edinburgh. This relation seems to hold between the two cities: they stand in certain spatial relations to one another such that Edinburgh is to the North of London. As a result, the relation universal *being to the North of* holds between London and Edinburgh. Nevertheless, in order to make sense of or analyse this relation it seems that one has to make reference to some property universals that London and Edinburgh both possess such that this relation will hold between the two entities. Such a property might be (for instance) *having a determinate spatial location*.

ontologically on a par with property and relation universals because of the following: if substantival universals (like *being an electron*) can be analysed and broken down to other more basic constituent parts (or if they can, at least, *in theory* be so reduced), then substantival universals are not ontologically fundamental. This is because substantival universals can (at least in principle) be accounted for in terms of other more primitive properties (Armstrong 1978b: 63).³⁸

Substantival universals (like Hegel's substance-universals) individuate their instances. Armstrong endorses the following *Principle of Particularization*:

“For each particular, there exists at least one ... universal which makes that particular just one, and not more than one, instance of a certain sort. Such a

³⁸ How substantival universals correspond to classes of entities is not entirely clear (e.g., how the universal *being an electron* corresponds to the class of electrons). Armstrong holds that classes must be made sense of in terms of universals. He also holds that there will be different *kinds* of classes depending on the ways in which these classes correspond to universals (that supposedly make sense of those classes). Armstrong outlines four different kinds of classes:

- a) The class of **Fs** involves (or corresponds to) a single universal **F-ness** (e.g. the class of **weighs one kilogram exactly** involves the universal *weighs one kilogram exactly*).
- b) The class of **Fs** involves (or corresponds to) a closely-knit resembling set of universals (e.g. the class of **shades of red** involves closely resembling universals such as *carmillion, pink* and so on).
- c) The class of **Fs** involves (or corresponds to) universals that do not resemble one another very closely (e.g. the class of **games** that involves a family resemblance relation amongst different games).
- d) The class of **Fs** involves (or corresponds to) a thoroughly heterogeneous set of universals (e.g., the class of entities that are *not* all shades of blue involves universals such as *redness, whiteness, coldness* and so on). (Armstrong 1978b: 49)

Prima facie, it seems that substantival universals pick out the first sorts of classes where the classes correspond to a single universal (for instance where the class of human beings corresponds to *being a human being*). But Armstrong's discussion elsewhere suggests that this is not so. Armstrong instead seems to suggest that many classes that initially appear to correspond to a substantival universal (like the class of human beings) in fact turn out to be classes of either the second or third kind. This will be discussed more shortly.

universal will be a 'particularizing' universal, making that particular *one* of a kind. Without such a universal, the particular is not restricted to certain definite bounds, it is not 'signed a certain quantity', we do not have a 'substance', we do not have *a* particular." (1978b: 64)

The idea is that substantival universals make entities of a certain sort and no other. Such universals provide an answer to the question 'what sort of an entity is *x*?'. If an entity were not of *any* sort, we would not be able to say *what it is*. However, Armstrong explicitly rejects the view that individuation entails anything essential about individual entities claiming "I reject ... the doctrine of irreducibly substantival universals which determine the true essence of certain particulars" (Armstrong 1978b: 75n; see also 1978b: 64). On this view, substantival universals pick out entities of certain sort but this does not entail that being an entity of this sort is essential to the individual *qua* individual.

As mentioned, Armstrong thinks these universals are not ontologically fundamental because they can be analysed in terms of other more basic constituent parts. Substantival universals are *complex*: they are composed of other simpler property and/ or relation universals (Armstrong 1978b: 67). Armstrong goes on to suggest that many philosophers assume that if some features are complex, they must be such that we can reductively analyse them and point out some ultimate constituent parts that make up the complex (like necessary and sufficient conditions). If some property cannot be broken down into its constituent parts, (the assumption goes) this property must be primitive and simple. Armstrong, however, holds that these assumptions are misguided and that assuming all complex properties can be broken down into simple parts is asking too much of metaphysics. It may turn out that some universals are infinitely complex and can never be broken down to their ultimate constituent

parts: the complex universal may either have infinitely many constituent parts or the constituent parts of the complex universal may themselves be so complex that no ultimate constituents can be discovered (Armstrong 1978b: 67). In both cases, philosophers are unable to analyse the universal exhaustively (if at all).

Armstrong's argument goes as follows. Even though it may initially appear *as if* complex features can be analysed, it may turn out that they cannot:

“Suppose that a certain universal is complex [being composed of parts]. It might, for instance, be a conjunctive universal. Suppose, further, that human beings notice that certain particulars fall under this universal and that they correlate a predicate with it. Suppose, however, that this complex universal is apprehended in a totalistic or *gestaltist* way so that users of the predicate are unable to resolve this universal in any way. For them, the universal is unanalysable. It is epistemologically simple for them. Such a predicate [that is correlated with a complex universal] will be called a ‘naming’ predicate ... Where a predicate is a naming predicate, the way it is correlated with its universal or range of universals is obviously not the way in which a proper name is correlated with the thing it names. But there is a clear analogy. In both cases the word is functioning as a tag or label.” (1978b: 53)

He further continues claiming:

“In the case specified the universal is complex but it is not apprehended as complex. Some philosophers seem to find such a situation difficult to understand. They would probably concede that we sometimes have the capacity to recognize a property or a relation while lacking any very clear idea of the exact structure of the universal in question. But they seem to cling to the notion that in such cases we still have *some* grasp of the structure ... Now it is true that in many cases we do have a vague grasp of the nature of complex universals, or disjunctive ranges of universals, although [we are] unable to make clear to ourselves the exact nature of the complexity involved ... But ... this is [not] *necessary*. It is perfectly possible that (a) a universal is complex; (b) particulars falling under this universal act (in virtue of this universal) upon our sense-organs in an all-or-nothing way. We might register the presence of particulars falling under this universal without being able to analyse the universal in any way ... We would then have ‘simple idea’ of a complex universal.” (1978b: 54)

Armstrong is suggesting that some features may be unanalysable, not because they are primitive, but because they are complex. They possess numerous constituent parts (maybe infinitely many) that make it extremely difficult, if not

impossible, to reductively analyse them by breaking them down into necessary and sufficient conditions.

It seems to me that *being a human being* is a reasonable example of an Armstrongian substantival universal that cannot be analysed reductively due to its complexity. Certain particulars clearly fall under this universal and there is a predicate ('human being') that corresponds to this universal. It also seems that we can apprehend something very basic about this universal (namely, which entities fall under it) that allows us to classify entities into human beings with relative ease. Nevertheless, if one were to try to analyse and reductively account for this universal (aiming to articulate the necessary and sufficient conditions for counting as a human being), I suspect one would find this task near impossible. Even though it seems easy to judge who counts as a human being, it is much harder to say what *being a human being* amounts to or to say much about humans that would be true of *all* those entities called 'human beings'. Insofar as this is the case, it seems we can pick out human beings *qua* human beings without being able to say anything about conditions necessary and sufficient for being a human being. Human beings, as a result, would have the feature of *being a human being* in common (*qua* human beings) although this feature eludes precise analysis. Understanding *being a human being* in this way provides a realist picture of human beings without insisting that philosophers need to point out some specific features (definitive of *being a human being*) that all human beings have in common.

Admittedly it seems that Armstrong would not be happy with my thought (that *being a human being* is an example of a substantival universal).

Consider the following passage from Armstrong:

“In turning away from Nominalism it is all too easy to assume that, wherever tokens are of the same type, then there must be something identical in virtue of which the tokens are of the same type. The Nominalist can then counter-attack, asking to be shown this identity in specific cases. Take the class of human beings. Is there really something which all human beings have in common in virtue of which they are human beings? Consider men, women, children, geniuses, Mongols, the decorticated, mutations, quadruple amputees and so on. Is there really a one thing which holds together the many? ... It is not clear that there is. The Absolute Idealist response to this difficulty was to speak of identity-in-difference. This is as much as to say, identity without identity, which is incoherent ... Transcendent universals may be seen as another way of reacting to the same problem. If universals stand apart from particulars, then the latter may participate in or imitate the former to a greater or lesser degree ... There is, however, a much simpler solution to the difficulty than the desperate expedients of Absolute Idealism or transcendent universals. It is a solution already hinted at by the Resemblance Nominalist, but barred to him by his Nominalism. The solution consists in taking an immanent view of universals, but denying any *simple* identification of sorts, kinds and types with universals. An account of sorts, kinds and types must be given in terms of universals. It must be given in terms of the properties and/ or relations of the tokens said to be all of one type. But the properties and/ or relations which make different particulars to be of a certain sort, kind or type need not be identical in the different particulars.” (1978a: 75-6)

Armstrong’s point seems to be something like this: an account of the kind **human being** must be made in terms of ranges of universals, not in terms of a single universal *being a human being* that all humans possess. As it turns out, *being a human being* does not appear to be a universal of any kind for Armstrong.³⁹ Following this passage, why do I insist on arguing for *womanness* understood as an Armstrongian substantival universal?

³⁹ As a result, it seems that the class of human beings would be like the class of games (see footnote 38). Contrary to initial appearances, it would not be a class of the first kind (where a single universal corresponds to a class of entities, like the universal *weighs one kilogram exactly*). Rather, the class of human beings would have to be made sense of in terms of a range of universals and it seems that a family resemblance relation would hold between individual human beings.

My reason is this. The general framework of substantival universals is helpful and worth considering because it allows for a realist understanding of individuating universals where no necessary and sufficient conditions must be articulated and where the universal is understood (and it manifests itself) as complex. Further, substantival universals do not entail anything essential about individual entities of certain sorts illustrating that metaphysical realism *per se* does not entail essentialism of any kind. Applying this general framework to *womanness* is particularly helpful and worth considering because it allows for a gender realist view that does not rely on necessary and sufficient conditions, where *womanness* is not essential to individual women and where *womanness* can be understood as structurally complex phenomenon that cannot be reductively analysed. Applying this general framework to gender illustrates that it is possible to make sense of gender classes in a realist manner and that, in doing so, feminist philosophers need not lose sight of women's particularity, diversity and the complexity of gender. Now, the details of Armstrong's position ill fit *womanness*. But this is not a problem because I am not aiming to provide a wholeheartedly Armstrongian view of gender.

Armstrongian *womanness*

What would *womanness* understood as an Armstrongian substantival universal look like? How can this view help feminist philosophers to make sense of the class of women? For a start, *womanness* would be immanent and inhere only in its particular instances rather than being abstract and existing above and beyond individual women. Second, *womanness* would be an objective and mind-

independent feature of the world: our ascriptions of *womanness* would not depend on the classifying minds and whether or not *we* judge an individual to be a woman. Rather, there would be something about those individuals that fall under *womanness* and, as a result of this, we judge them to be women. The situation would be analogous to square entities. They are not square because we judge them to be square; they are judged to be square because there is something about square entities that give rise to our judgements that the entities are square.

Gender (following Armstrong) would be objective and mind-independent in that it could not be thought out of existence. Saying this, I am not suggesting that it would depend on some immutable biological features; mind-independent (and in *that* sense objective) features are not by definition antithetical to social construction. Sally Haslanger's (1995) work provides an extremely helpful clarification of this commonly held (and yet false) view. Feminist philosophers often seem to assume that if gender is an objective feature of the world and in this sense mind-independent, then it must (in some sense) be thought of as a natural and inevitable feature (see e.g., MacKinnon 1989b). If *womanness* is thought of as mind-independent, (the assumption goes) feminist theorists must give up the thought that gender is a matter of mutable social factors. Haslanger argues, *contra* this common view, that socially constructed features can also be thought of as mind-independent and objective because mind-independence is compatible with (at least some senses of) social construction. One such sense, (which Haslanger terms) "causal construction" is understood in the following manner: "[s]omething is causally constructed iff

social factors play a causal role in bringing it into existence or, to some substantial extent, in its way of being the way it is” (Haslanger 1995: 98). She goes on to argue that this type of social construction is perfectly compatible with mind-independence:

“For example, opinions about what is appropriate for humans to eat and so about what counts as ‘food’ have had a huge causal impact on the size, distribution, and behaviour of animal populations. We may even want to say that in the causal sense, domesticated cows and chickens are socially constructed. But the deer in the woods, and the chickens in the barnyard (or more commonly, on the factory farm) are, nonetheless, independently real. Whatever might be at stake in claiming that there is an ‘independent reality’, the concern is not to insist upon a reality untouched by the actions of human beings ... even if the case could be made that reality (as a whole) were causally constructed, this reality might nonetheless be independent of us, for in general, claiming that something is causally constructed does not challenge its independent reality.” (Haslanger 1995: 104-5)

Now, standard feminist understandings of *womanness* seem to fit the description of causally constructed features well: it is thought of as something that social factors have played a causal role in bringing into existence or, at least, have done so to a substantial extent. Televisions (and most artefacts, it seems) also fit the description of causally constructed features: social factors have played a causal role in bringing them into existence to a large extent (if not entirely). But it would seem odd to claim that women or televisions existed *mind-dependently* because they are products (to some extent) of social factors. Our *understandings* of them and the *values* we assign to (for example) women and televisions may be mind-dependent but their *existence* surely is not. Even if *womanness* is sensitive to social forces and construction, it may still be thought of as a mind-independent and objective feature.

Although it seems plausible to think that *womanness* is a mind-independent feature (in the sense I have suggested above), why should we think

that it is *immanent*? Why hold that *womanness* inheres in its individual instances? It seems to me that *womanness* must be immanent because its metaphysical counterpart, the thought that *womanness* is transcendent, is hugely implausible. To think that some abstract entity or Platonic form of *womanness* exists that individual women somehow partake in seems very unlikely. For a start, where is this *womanness* that individual women supposedly partake in or instantiate and how do women instantiate this abstract *womanness*? It seems much more plausible to hold that *womanness* inheres in individual women and, as far as I can tell, there are no good reasons to suppose that *womanness* is transcendent. And if we reject the thought that *womanness* is a transcendent universal, it seems that we must accept the view that it is an immanent universal.

Womanness thought of as a substantival universal would pick out certain individuals without entailing anything essential about the individuals it picks out. Armstrongian *womanness* would be much like phase sortals *child* and *adult* in this respect: they both pick out individuals providing an answer the question ‘what sort of an entity is *x*?’ without suggesting that being an entity of this sort is essential to the individuals. It is true that on the Armstrongian view we may not be able to say much about women *qua* women. If *womanness* turns out to be complex and unanalysable, it seems that we may not be able to answer the definitional question ‘what it is to be a woman?’. In fact, given how complex *womanness* appears to be, it seems very unlikely that this question could be successfully answered. For Armstrong though, this is not a problem. He holds that many universals appear initially analysable but, on closer

inspection, turn out to elude precise analysis due to their complexity. Philosophers simply are not in a position to provide reductive accounts of numerous common features, such as *being a human being*. Nevertheless, we can perfectly well divide the world into human beings and other sorts of entities even though we cannot articulate any necessary and sufficient conditions of *humanness*.

Womanness seems to be analogous to *being a human being* in this sense. It is clearly a very complex phenomenon and providing a reductive account of *being a woman* seems hugely difficult (if not impossible). It seems impossible to articulate necessary and sufficient conditions of *womanness*. But on this gender realist view, our inability to do so is not a problem. It simply suggests that *womanness* is a complex universal. Being complex, it is likely that *womanness* could not be reductively analysed and many epistemic problems feminist philosophers have encountered when aiming to analyse *womanness* could be explained due to its complexity. The reason for its complexity is that individual women differ from one another in numerous ways: they have diverse and dissimilar experiences and traits *as women* and it is precisely this that makes *womanness* such a complicated phenomenon. Feminist philosophers commonly assume that gender realist views must always articulate some set of necessary and sufficient conditions of *womanness*. But, since articulating such conditions has proved to be extremely difficult some have argued that gender realism must be false and that gender nominalism should be preferred (e.g., Stoljar 1995). However, the Armstrongian view of *womanness* does not require that any necessary and sufficient conditions of *womanness* are pointed out and

so the inability to do so does not provide a reason to reject a realist view of gender. Women (on this view) simply have an extremely complex and, perhaps, unanalysable feature in common that makes them women. Complexity *per se* does not entail that feminist philosophers must give up gender realism or that *womanness* must be deemed irreducibly problematic.

Following Armstrong, complexity entails that we cannot analyse or articulate some features constitutive of *womanness*. But this does not entail nor suggest that we cannot tell who the women are; on this Armstrongian inspired view recognising entities of certain sorts does not require a reductive account of the *constitution* of these entities *qua* entities of certain sorts. It seems that even though *womanness* cannot be broken down into necessary and sufficient conditions, this does not entail or suggest that we cannot pick out women. In a similar way, I cannot say anything substantial about human beings, cats or mussels (such as their necessary and sufficient conditions) but I can, nevertheless, classify entities *as* human beings, cats and mussels. *How* this is possible, is another issue much too extensive to be considered in detail here. I will, however, argue shortly that our intuitions sufficiently guide gender classification in a manner that will be conducive to various feminist goals.

IV

Why should my position be considered more plausible than those I considered earlier? What are the benefits of understanding *womanness* in these ways I propose? How does my proposal make sense of the class of women? First, my proposal (on both formulations) seems to make sense of the class of women in a

more intuitive way. *Contra* Haslanger, my proposal provides a more intuitive sense of *who* belongs to the class of women since it does not leave out individuals like the Queen. On Haslanger's account this exclusion was in some sense non-problematic; she defined *womanness* in terms of being subject to sex-marked oppression and as the Queen (at least arguably) is not subject to such oppression, she failed to satisfy the concept *woman*. The Queen is not a counterexample to Haslanger's position. However, she does (in my view) illustrate how unintuitive Haslanger's definition of *woman* is. My sense is that the class of women should be more responsive to our intuitions about *who and which individuals* count as women. (I argued for this in chapter 5.) It *should* include the Queen regardless of the fact that she appears to be extremely privileged and not subject to sex-marked oppression. On my proposal, no single feature (or set of features) is put forward as definitive of *womanness*. Instead I want to suggest that our common intuitions about gender are sufficient to enable us to pick out women and to delimit membership in the class of women.

There is, one might argue, a worry here. It is possible (and quite likely) that intuitions about *womanness* vary. What should feminist theorists do when intuitions about *womanness* clash with each other? Are there some facts of the matter that can resolve such situations and if so, what are they? Then again, if there are no facts of the matter, how are feminist philosophers to decide upon the so-called hard cases? I have in mind here transsexuals, transvestites and people who are intersexed: how does the position I put forward deal with these individuals given that so much weight is placed on people's intuitions?

It seems that there must be *some* facts of the matter that guide gender classification since we can pick out women and quite effortlessly distinguish them from other entities. Nonetheless, that we can pick out women with relative ease does not entail that we can or that we need to *articulate* what the facts of the matter *responsible for this* are. It certainly seems that we cannot articulate some set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions of *womanness* that could settle the hard cases mentioned. But this does not make my suggestion implausible or problematic. Simply because our intuitions about some hard cases may differ, we should not think intuitions about gender *per se* are useless and unhelpful or that making sense of the class of women such that it coheres with our intuitions is an unsatisfying way to proceed.

Think back to the example of childhood and adulthood. Although we seem to be able to divide the world into children and adults with relative ease, it seems, nevertheless, that we cannot articulate some necessary and sufficient conditions that would settle which individuals are children and which are adults. (Or, at least, these conditions would appear to be thoroughly arbitrary.) Our intuitions about whether those individuals who fall within the age group of 15 to 17 count as children or as adults may differ hugely. Despite this and despite our inability to say exactly when someone ceases to be a child and becomes an adult, the *distinction* between children and adults does not seem incoherent. Even though our intuitions about certain hard cases may clash, the idea that there are two distinct classes -- children and adults -- is not under threat. The fact that some cases pose problems for our classificatory efforts should not be taken to suggest that our classificatory efforts themselves are

futile. It seems then that even though there are hard cases and grey areas with respect to gender, *gender classes* themselves are not under threat due to these grey areas. On my account, we cannot and need not articulate some conditions that would rigidly mark class boundaries; the class of women will have flexible boundaries. This does not, however, suggest that the class cannot be made sense of.

It seems that my proposal is more intuitive in another respect as well which makes it more plausible than the three nominalist positions considered earlier. Think back to the different gender nominalist positions argued for by Frye, Young and Stoljar. They all had to rely on something external to women to provide the criterion for classification because they held that there is no single feature that women *qua* women share. For example, Stoljar (chapter 4) claims that this external criterion is a certain resemblance relation that holds between an individual and a **woman**-paradigm. Similarly, Young (discussed in chapter 3) argues that the class of women must be made sense of in terms of a certain relation that holds between women and (what she calls) 'practico-inert objects'. There is a strange schizophrenia in these views. On the one hand, the task is to explain why women should be thought of as members of the same class. But at the same time, this task must be achieved by appealing to factors external to women (like resemblance or certain kinds of objects). Contrary to these views, I hold that membership in the class of women depends on something about *women themselves*, not on factors external to women. In general, it seems that features *immanent* to objects determine their class memberships and insofar as this is the case, it seems counterintuitive to appeal

to external relations to ground membership in certain classes. My position, as a result, provides a better and more intuitive view of gender classification because I hold that there is something *about* women themselves that grounds membership in the class of women: their *womanness*.

Saying this, I do not attempt to provide a very substantial or thick notion of *womanness*. Because I am not aiming to provide a definition or a reductive account of it, recognition of women's diverse and dissimilar experiences as women does not count against my suggestion. What I have suggested fits many feminist insights about gender and diversity. Consider for instance Dil, the Queen and the Sudanese refugee. On my view, they all count as women since they all exemplify the same substance-universal or since they are all picked out by the same ontologically complex substantival universal (*womanness*). Nevertheless, sharing this feature (in whichever sense it is understood) does not rule out individual differences. Further, my proposal does not entail that individual differences are ignored. I am not making claims about any necessary and sufficient conditions that must be had; rather, I have argued that *womanness* may be realised differently by different individual women. For instance, because *womanness* is differently realised by individual women, Dil count as a woman although she lacks a female body: not having a female body is simply part of the way in which Dil exemplifies *womanness*.

One might argue that my proposal tells feminist philosophers nothing about *womanness*, thus being empty and uninformative. It is true that I say very little about the nature of *womanness*. If one hopes to find out what it is to be a woman or what *womanness* amounts to, my proposal is unhelpful. However, it

is not my intention to say what *womanness* amounts to. I am providing a way to make sense of the class of women without relying on a detailed account of *womanness* likely to be problematic and likely to result in false claims about women in general. My proposal aims to classify women without appealing to *specific* features women have in common and, in so doing, it aims to provide a better response to worries over gender classification than those responses looked at earlier. I admit that as a definition or explanation of *womanness*, my position is disappointing. But this is not a problem; rather, it is an advantage of my view that we can talk about the class of women without having to say something substantial about women first (such as articulate what the necessary and sufficient conditions of *womanness* are).

One might further hold that a definition of *woman* (or a more substantial picture of gender) is needed for feminist politics. This, in my view, is a mistake. Having a thin notion of *womanness* does not suggest that feminist politics is impossible and that a more substantial notion is needed. If anything, my proposal provides a way out of the theoretical impasse that feminist worries over gender classes seem to have generated. It illustrates that feminist theorists need not articulate any necessary and sufficient conditions of *womanness* in order to talk about women in general and in order to do feminist politics. Feminist theorists should not think that being unable to define *woman* in some sense jeopardises their political programme. What feminist politics minimally requires is a way to make sense of the class of women such that feminist politics can be organised around aiding the members of this class. In order to do this, there is no need to articulate any necessary and sufficient conditions of

womanness. Commonly held intuitions are sufficient to make sense of membership in the class of women - the class that feminist politics aims to aid. In order to formulate effective political strategies with which common feminist goals can be achieved, it is unnecessary to endorse a thick notion of *womanness*. A thin notion (along the lines I have argued for) is sufficient for this.

Consider a common feminist goal, ending women's discrimination at the workplace. Now, in order to formulate effective political and social strategies that aim to end women's discrimination at the workplace, it is crucial that feminist theorists can identify two things: the sort of treatment that is discriminatory in this context and those individuals who are subject to this discrimination. But in order to do the latter, it seems thoroughly unnecessary to employ a rich notion of *womanness* (that relies on some necessary and sufficient conditions). First, it seems feminist theorists need not check each employee against some conditions to see whether they are women or men (whether or not they satisfy the notion). I would suspect that a thin notion of *woman* that relies on our intuitions about gender classes is sufficient and can be successfully employed to identify women in this context. Second, having a rich notion of *womanness* adds very little (if anything at all) to the ways in which feminist theorists might tackle gendered workplace inequalities. By contrast, employing a rich notion of *woman* in this context may create problems for feminist politics: before feminist theorists can begin to think about how to end workplace discrimination, they must first come up with a rich notion of *woman* that all and only women satisfy so that they can determine who the women are.

This, however, seems to divert valuable resources away from trying to devise effective strategies that help women. The point I am making here is similar to that I made in the end of chapter 5: intuitive gender notions seem to be sufficient for feminist politics. And insofar as this is the case, it makes theoretical sense to endorse my proposal.

V

I have suggested that if *womanness* is understood in either the Hegelian or the Armstrongian manner, the class of women can be more readily made sense of. These two formulations show that, first, a plausible gender realist position need not entail anything *essential* about women *qua* individuals. Second, they illustrate that gender realism does not commit one to any form of biological determinism, thus reducing *womanness* to some physical features. Third, I have shown that gender realism *per se* is not incompatible with women's diverse traits and dissimilar experiences. Thinking that women share something (that makes them women) need not prevent feminist philosophers from recognising women's individual differences and experiences. Finally, I have provided two gender realist frameworks with which feminist theorists can talk of women in general *at the same time* avoiding having to articulate some necessary and sufficient conditions of *womanness*. A thin notion of *womanness*, I argue, can be employed more readily by feminist theorists hoping to achieve commonly held feminist goals and endorsing my view, as a result, makes theoretical sense. In arguing for the two realist ways to understand *womanness* I aimed to show further that gender realist positions are not *prima facie* philosophically useless

and untenable as feminist philosophers commonly think: the class of women can be made sense of in gender realist terms without this resulting in the harmful and counterproductive consequences feminist theorists commonly fear.

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