



Philosophy and Gender

Gender Identity without Gender Prescriptions: Dealing with Essentialism and Constructionism in Feminist Politics

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ABSTRACT: The feminist philosopher Susan Bordo suggests that the dilemma of twentieth-century feminism is the tension between a gender identity that both mobilizes a liberatory politics on behalf of women and that results in gender prescriptions which excludes many women. This tension seems especially acute in feminist debates about essentialism/deconstructionism. Concentrating on the shared sex of women may run the risk of embracing an essentialism that ignores the differences among women, whereas emphasizing the constructed natures of sex and gender categories seems to threaten the very project of a feminist politics. I will analyze the possibility of dismantling gender prescriptions while retaining a gender identity that can be the beginning for an emancipatory politics. Perhaps feminists need not rely on a reified essentialism that elides the differences of race, class, etc., if we begin with our social practices of classification rather than with a priori generalizations about the nature of women.

Perhaps it is easiest to begin with that which seems self-evident: we categorize people according to sex. Therefore, it also seems self-evident that women form a (natural) group based on a shared sex, resulting in a common gender identity. Historically, feminism politics have relied on this assumed sameness among all women. Feminism can represent the interests of all women because, after all, women are all alike in being women. Of course, women differ with regard to race, class, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and so on. But these differences have been seen as less basic than the shared similarity of sex and gender.

Recently, however, more and more feminists have protested that these differences matter just as much to one's identity as one's sex. They argue that privileging the purportedly shared sex of women is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the identities of actual women. Women are not all the same and their differences are not merely insignificant accidents but are in fact inextricably intertwined with their identities as women. So despite the self-evident fact that we categorize some humans as women, the category of woman seems to presuppose a unity of identity that is, according to many women themselves, empirically implausible. As important as a shared sex might be, many feminists are now arguing that things like race, class, and sexual orientation make the notion of a common gender identity problematic.

The subject of feminist politics, to the extent that it is assumed to be representative of womenkind, is a paradigmatic gender identity in which all women are united. However, to the extent that this subject does not represent all women, it also functions as a gender prescription that legislates an essential gender identity and excludes those women who do not have the 'correct' gender identity. In her essay "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism", Susan Bordo suggests-citing Nancy Cotts-that the dilemma of twentieth-century feminism is "the tension between the preservation of gender consciousness and identity (as a source of political unity and alternative vision) and the destruction of 'gender prescriptions' ... which limit human choice and possibility". (1) Feminism betrays its own ideals when it excludes any woman. However, in an effort to represent all women and not just paradigmatic women, feminists find themselves in another quandary: if the category of women is problematized, on what can we base a feminist politics? And if we give up gender identity, how can we mobilize a liberatory politics on behalf of women? The question really is how to view sameness and difference.

In this paper, I shall first examine one possible feminist response, influenced by what are broadly called postmodern theories, which tries to deconstruct the notion of 'woman' in order to rectify the historical exclusion of some women. Then I shall analyse another possible response, one that takes account of the insights of postmodern-influenced feminism but tries to retain some form of gender identity for political purposes.

Since we do categorize people according to sex, it has often been assumed that women share a common essence. And historically, feminism has often used a form of essentialism-this belief in a shared essence-to justify political activity on behalf of women. Elizabeth Grosz explains essentialism in the following way:

Essentialism ... refers to the attribution of a fixed essence to women.... Essentialism entails the belief that those characteristics defined as women's essence are shared in common by all women at all times Essentialism thus refers to the existence of fixed characteristics, given attributes, and ahistorical functions... (2)

There have been a plethora of disagreements as to what characteristics, attributes, and functions constitute this defining essence of women. It would seem that an essentialist understanding of the sameness among women begets the exclusion of many women. That is, we have yet to propose anything essential that includes many people who are classified as women. Feminist scholarship is replete with gender identities assumed to be common that are in fact the universalization of experience of one particular group of women. As long as we universalize some characteristic or attributes or functions as the paradigm which represents all women regardless of race, class, and so on, it seems that we will exclude and alienate the actual women who differ from this paradigm. (3)

In the recent intersection with what is generally called postmodern theories, feminism has been accused of engaging in totalizing discourses by assuming, and hence imposing, the same gender identity on all women. (4) Judith Butler, for example, criticises contemporary feminist politics because "the identity categories often presumed to be foundational to feminist politics, that is, deemed necessary in order to mobilize feminism as an identity politics, simultaneously work to limit and constrain in advance the very cultural possibilities that feminism is supposed to open up". (5) For such women, the problem with current feminist politics is that it is based on a shared gender identity between all women that is in fact not universally shared. They point to the differences among women and argue that the political emphasis on sameness has suppressed difference and has excluded some women by maintaining that differences among women such as race, class, and sexual orientation are appurtenant to the more essential identity of gender. (6) Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson give a very clear statement of the problem of exclusion within feminist theory:

While gender identity gives substance to the idea of sisterhood, it does so at the cost of repressing differences among sisters. Although ... [feminist] theory allows for some differences among women of different classes, races, sexual orientations, and ethnic groups, it construes these as subsidiary to more basic similarities. But it is precisely as a consequence of the request to understand such differences as secondary that many women have denied an allegiance to feminism. (7)

In other words, many women see their race, class, or sexual orientation as more or at least as basic to their identity as their sex. And we can understand neither sex nor gender independently of things like race and class. Elizabeth Spelman, for example, argues that "though all women are women, no woman is only a woman". (8) A feminist politics based on an essential similarity among women cannot represent all women because we have yet to be able to specify some essence that is genuinely common to all women.

Moreover, feminists have long since argued that the content of gender is a complex and continuously shifting category. (9) Femininity does not always have the same meaning for all women in all cultures at all times. The historical undecidability of femininity belies the assumption that gender is a stable category. Sex might be ontologically determined but gender is a social, historical construction of the meaning of sex and hence, susceptible to change. So gender coherence itself can be seen as a regulatory fiction designed to keep women (and men) in their place: women must always be feminine (and men must always be masculine). In fact, some feminists point out that if gender is a socially and historically constructed category, then there are more than two possible genders and gender does not necessarily follow from sex; for example, there are more possibilities than femininity and masculinity and not all males are masculine nor are all females feminine. (10) In other words, sex does not determine gender. (11) Sex might be a given but we do not have access to sex apart from gender. In any case, since sex does not exist independently of gender and apparently not all women share the same gender, mere physical similarity appears to be a poor candidate on which to base a womanly essence.

These feminists continue to pay attention to gender but they do not think that it can be generalized across cultures, races, historical periods and so on. Nor can we assume that there is gender sameness among women. Fraser and Nicholson, for example, criticise "the category of gender identity" as essentialist and ahistorical; they assert that "the idea of a cross-cultural, deep sense of self, specified differently for women and men, becomes problematic when given any specific content". (12) All identity is constantly being negotiated. For example, given that Butler thinks that "the feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation", she argues that "a new sort of feminist politics is now desirable to contest the very reifications of gender and identity, one that will take the variable construction of identity as both a methodological and normative prerequisite, if not a political goal". (13) It is a mistake to view gender as a natural result of biology. The contingency of gender can be used to emphasize the difference rather than an essential sameness between women. (14)

This response to the criticism that feminism is exclusionary involves negotiating political alliances between women built, not on a sameness, but around and through differences. (15) According to Fraser and Nicholson, a "postmodern feminist theory" should dispense with universalizing gender claims; instead, "it would replace unitary notions of woman and feminine gender identity with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among others, attending also to class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation". (16) They do not deny any similarity among women; they simply deny any *essential* similarity. Difference in general is privileged over sameness. Emphasizing sameness threatens to minimize or even ignore the diverse identities of women whereas attending to difference exposes universal essences as oppressive and totalizing fictions.

We need to face the problem of exclusion within feminism. However, efforts to avoid the exclusion that is occasioned by universalizing the experience of one particular group of women need to also avoid saddling us with another problem. Historically, feminism has been based on the assumption that it represents the interests of women but if gender coherence is a regulatory fiction, it can no longer be the starting point for an emancipatory politics and the very project of feminist politics is seriously undermined. (17) Even if it is true that gender is a socially and historically constructed category, it is also true that we categorize some people as 'women'. I am suspicious of a political theory that prematurely ignores the material disadvantages of women in favour of challenging gender identity (Fraser and Nicholson) or challenging gender categories (Butler). If we can no longer speak about women *qua* women, then we can no longer recognise that women are systematically oppressed on the basis of sex/gender. If there is no such group as women, then anti-feminists can argue that there is no such thing as sexism. If we expose the category of women as a fiction without acknowledging that women nevertheless are oppressed on the basis of an allegedly similar gender, we reinscribe oppression. (18) Unfortunately, it seems that while this response to exclusion may liberate us from the oppression of false universals and totalizing discourses, it also undermines attempts to free us from sex-based oppression through feminist political action. (19)

Insofar as sameness among women is taken in an essentialist way, the previous solution to exclusion seems warranted. How can we benefit from these insights about how to avoid exclusion by dismantling gender prescriptions but maintain some gender identity for political purposes? How can we acknowledge both sameness and difference among women? It seems we are faced with a choice: either we can resist gender prescriptions at the cost of dissolving gender identity or we can maintain gender identity at the cost of perpetrating gender prescriptions. Is this really the choice we must make?

Even if it true that gender identities are lived out in various ways by different women, it is still true that women are categorized as women. Many feminists argue that this categorization is built on a naive essentialism, that the category of women is notoriously fickle and inconstant. (20) Nevertheless, being categorized according to sex seems to be a genuinely constant feature of human experience. Perhaps this is the beginning of a solution to our dilemma: we can begin with our social practices of classification rather than with a priori generalizations about the nature of women.

In order to acknowledge the categorization of women without reifying it, we might take up Diana Fuss' suggestion "to distinguish between *kinds* of essentialisms, as John Locke has done with theory of 'real' versus 'nominal' essences". (21) Real essences refer to the fixed properties of things; nominal essences refer to the way we categorize and label things. (22) Without jumping to conclusions about why some people are classified as women, we can recognise that some humans have been assigned a nominal or socially constructed essence as women; that is, women are the same to the extent that they are treated as the same. Women share a common categorization whether or not this is the result of a real essence. By seeing the commonality that women share as a socially constructed essence, we can account for women as a category without suppressing difference: sameness is the result of a socially constructed essence but because it is imposed by social relations, it is not necessarily an ontological sameness.

The question of the real essence of women is the location of hotly contested debates among feminists. But there is a widespread recognition that women are assigned an essence. Most notably, feminist standpoint theorist Sandra Harding argues that:

Women are, indeed, like each other by virtue of their sex and also by virtue of the otherness that men assign to women. Of course, they differ by race, class, culture, and other important social features; in important respects, they are more like men in their own class, race, culture

than like women in other races, and so on. But ... [feminist] theory does not require any kind of feminine essentialism.... It *analyzes* the essentialism that androcentrism assigns to women, locates its historical conditions, and proposes ways to counter it.... [We] constantly call for more vigorous feminist analysis of and politics against these forms of oppression. (23)

While acknowledging diversity, Harding explains the apparent sameness among women as the "otherness" that has been assigned to them. By beginning with our social practice of categorization, we can begin to analyse the essence attributed to women without begging the question by assuming that the essence attributed by sexism is an essence attributed to women by nature.

Of course, different content has historically been given to the various essentialisms assigned by androcentrism; just think of the historical variations in pronouncements about women ("women are emotional" or "illogical" or "passive" and so on). Despite these variations, however, they are all used to perpetrate and justify the oppression of women. It is important for a feminist politics that we note that women do not only share a common categorization but also that the essentialism that androcentrism ascribes to women results in the marginalization of women, regardless of the content given to the essentialism.

Women occupy socially marginalized positions that are justified by appeals to their sex, regardless of the multiple forms this marginalization takes. According to feminists as diverse as Sandra Harding, Alison Wylie, and Susan Bordo, marginalization on the basis of sex and gender is one thing that all women *qua* women share even though some women might also be marginalized, or might even be privileged, with respect to race or class. (24) Of course, the objection can be made that marginalization is not what makes women women. But that is exactly the point: women are indeed a marginalized group but it is social conditions, and not nature, that marginalize them. In other words, marginalization is not the ontological essence of women. Rather, it is a socially constructed, and hence, contingent essence.

We need to be able to acknowledge that androcentrism assigns an essence to women while denying that this is a real essence; we also need to acknowledge that marginality is a real commonality among women while denying that marginality is the real essence of women. Androcentrism naturalizes the essentialism it assigns women by positing it as a real essence but feminist theory enables us to see that this essentialism is assigned and hence, nominal. The consequent marginalization is quite real but it is not the essence of women nor is the gender essentialism that marginalizes women based on a real essence. Women are indeed a marginalized group but it is not nature that marginalizes them; androcentric social conditions make them a marginalized group. There is nothing ontologically essential to women that will necessarily result in our marginalization. If we believed otherwise, what hope could we have to fight against our oppression? Since marginalization is a contingent similarity among women, we can acknowledge it without naturalizing it or without dismissing as unimportant other differences among us. What women are apart from this socially constructed essence assigned by androcentrism remains an open question. I find marginalization a particularly powerful term because it describes not only sexism which affects all women, but other forms of oppression and exclusion that some women suffer as well. In other words, we will have a better chance of understanding the oppression of women in its "endless variety and monotonous similarity", to use Gayle Rubin's well-known phrase, if we acknowledge the ubiquity of marginalization without absolutizing any of the forms it historically or currently takes. Politically, we can do justice to the similarity of women (i.e. the experience of sexism) without riding roughshod over their differences (i.e. the experiences of other forms of oppression and privilege).

We need to preserve our gender identities "as a source of political unity and alternative vision"; (25) indeed, considering the society in which we live, it is impossible not to be

conscious of gender. But this does not preclude the destruction of gender prescriptions. In fact, perhaps we need to confess that we too often make careless generalizations based on the categories we use. We should not make a priori, arrogant decisions regarding gender differences and similarities. We must remain vigilant about the need to listen to others and to become aware of our own biases, prejudices, and ignorance. (26) Our commitment has to be to doing justice. With this commitment in mind, we will pay attention to difference or sameness when it brings about justice. Marginalization is not an inevitable commonality among women; indeed, the political hope is that some day it will not be common to women at all. But, in the meantime, feminists need not rely on a reified essentialism that elides the differences of race, class, and so on. While we cannot predict in advance what future gender identities will look like, we can, to paraphrase Harding, analyse these essentialisms, locate their historical conditions, and propose ways to counter them.

Notes

(1) "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism", as found in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson New York: Routledge, 1990, 153.

(2) Elizabeth Grosz, "Sexual Difference and the Problem of Essentialism", as found in *The Essential Difference* (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1994), 84.

(3) The first rumblings of discontent with this emphasis on a common essence came from African-American women who charged feminist politics with excluding the concerns of women of colour. Their analyses demonstrated that feminist theory tended to represent the interests of white women. The subject of feminist theory is supposedly universal; thus, race shouldn't make a difference. But that is exactly what African-American feminists have shown: that understanding women in an essentialist way functions to exclude women who are not white; hence, race does matter. See for example, bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston: South End P, 1984); *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (Watertown, MA: Persephone P, 1981); Patricia Hill Collins,

(4) For example, Judith Butler argues that "by conforming to a requirement of representational politics that feminism articulate a stable subject, feminism thus opens itself to charges of gross misrepresentation" (*Gender Trouble*, New York: Routledge, 1990, 5).

(5) *Gender Trouble*, 147.

(6) Butler argues that "if one *is* a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered *person* transcends the specific paraphernalia of gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out *gender* from the political and cultural intersection in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (*Gender Trouble*, 3).

(7) "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism" as found in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, 31.

(8) *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*, (Boston: Beacon P, 1988), 187.

(9) See for example, Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Denise Riley's *Am I That Name?: Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988), and

Spelman's *Inessential Woman*.

(10) For example, Butler argues that "even if the sexes appear to be unproblematically binary in their morphology and constitution (which will become a question), there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two" and hence, "*man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily a female one" (*Gender Trouble*, 6).

(11) Indeed, Butler, for example, goes so far as to argue that "if the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all", *Gender Trouble*, 7.

(12) *Feminism/Postmodernism*, 30, 31-5 especially.

(13) *Gender Trouble*, 5.

(14) Butler criticises feminist theory that uses the contingency of gender to appeal to an "essential humanness": "only when the mechanism of gender construction implies the *contingency* of that construction does *constructedness per se* prove useful to the political project to enlarge the scope of possible gender configurations. If, however, it is a life of the body beyond the law or a recovery of the body before the law which then emerges as the normative goal of feminist theory, such a norm effectively takes the focus of feminist theory away from the concrete terms of contemporary cultural struggle" (*Gender Trouble*, 38).

(15) Fraser and Nicholson assert that feminist political practice "is increasingly a matter of alliances rather than one of unity around a universally shared interest or identity. . . . Thus, the underlying premise of this practice is that, while some women share some common interests and face some common enemies, such commonalities are by no means universal; rather, they are interlaced with differences, even with conflicts. This, then, is a practice made up of a patchwork of overlapping alliances, not one circumscribable by an essential definition" *Feminism/Postmodernism*, 35. Butler also recommends a similar feminist political practice because "an open coalition . . . will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure" *Gender Trouble*, 16.

(16) *Feminism/Postmodernism*, 34-5.

(17) Butler writes that "contemporary feminist debates over the meanings of gender lead time and again to a certain sense of trouble, as if the indeterminacy of gender might eventually culminate in the failure of feminism" *Gender Trouble*, ix.

(18) Diana Fuss makes a point regarding race which might also be made regarding sex/gender: "any critical position which successfully deconstructs 'race' [or 'sex'] as an empirical fact but fails to account for its continuing political efficacy is ultimately inadequate", *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 91.

(19) Christine Di Stefano argues that "the postmodern project, if seriously adopted by feminists, would make any semblance of a feminist project impossible. To the extent that feminist politics is bound up with a specific constituency or subject, namely women, the postmodernist prohibition against subject-centered inquiry and theory undermines the legitimacy of a broad-based organized movement dedicated to articulating and

implementing the goals of such a constituency. . . . Another problem is that 'robust' solidarities of opposition [i.e. alliances or open coalitions] (rather than shared identity) may be psychologically and politically unreliable, unable to generate sufficient attachment and motivation on the part of potential activists. Can this solidarity be anything other than a local and negative solidarity or *resistance* rather than substantive *alternatives*?". Furthermore, she points out, in postmodern theory the female subject "dissolves into a perplexing plurality of differences, none of which can be theoretically privileged over the others" ("Dilemmas of Difference: Feminism, Modernity, and Postmodernism" as found in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, 76, 77).

(20) See Bulter, Riley, and Spelman.

(21) *Essentially Speaking*, 4.

(22) Fuss says "real essence connotes the Aristotlean understanding of essence as that which is most irreducible and unchanging about a thing; nominal essence signifies for Locke a view of essence as merely a linguistic convenience, a classificatory fiction we need to categorize and label", (*Essentially Speaking*, 4).

(23) "Feminism, Science, and the Anti-Enlightenment Critiques" as found in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, 98-9.

(24) Bordo asserts that "*all* of us, as women, occupy subordinate positions, positions in which we feel ignored or denigrated" and she characterizes feminism as "an 'outsider' discourse, that is, a movement born out of the experience of marginality" (*Feminism/Postmodernism*, 141). Wylie argues that "women find themselves in 'subdominant' gender-defined positions within each of these [economic, cultural, socio-political] contexts Despite considerable variability in what this means for particular women, this general feature of women's experience is sufficiently universal, by all anthropological and historical accounts, that it would seem to support at least a qualified conception of a distinctive women's standpoint, one which takes into account the fact that gender is by no means the only factor shaping women's lives" ("The Philosophy of Ambivalence: Sandra Harding on *The Science Question in Feminism* as found in *Science, Morality and Feminist Theory*" eds. Marsha Hanen and Kai Nielsen, Calgary: U of Calgary P, 1987, 68).

(25) Bordo, *Feminism/Postmodernism*, 153.

(26) To paraphrase Bordo "the chief imperative was [is] to *listen*, to become aware of one's biases, prejudices, ignorance" *Feminism/Postmodernism*, 138.