

Gender as a Category of Analysis: Reconciling Feminist Theory with Feminist Methodology

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Gender theory is not exactly feminist theory, but in many ways it builds directly upon its assumptions and innovations. This essay explores the ways in which the category of analysis 'gender' reconciles its heritage of political consciousness and activism with its place in a more scientific or philosophical discourse, and attempts to demonstrate how it can remain indispensable as a political and ethical tool. To do this, it discusses and challenges competing narratives of oppression and postmodernist accounts of social reality. Through a discussion of the 'non-human person', this article concludes by questioning the value of the 'human' as a productive category of analysis, and argues that the destabilising of disciplines which the study of 'gender' provokes may also serve to unmask inherited assumptions about the analytical concept of the individual subject.

Keywords: Gender, Feminism, Animals, Persons, Oppression.

The questions an oppressed group wants answered are rarely requests for so-called pure truth. Instead, they are queries about how to change its conditions how its world is shaped by forces beyond it; how to win over, defeat or neutralise those forces arrayed against its emancipation, growth, or development; and so forth.

– Sandra Harding (1987)

The need to let suffering speak is a condition of all truth

– Theodor Adorno (1973)

Introduction

In this paper, I argue that while gender theory builds directly upon the innovations and methodological assumptions of feminist theory, it is distinct in ways which are important to our understanding of gender-based analyses. I suggest that there needs to be closer examination of the shift from the practising of 'feminist theory' to the employment of 'the analytical category of gender' within the academy. This is essentially because while the former was politically motivated, 'wrestl[ing] with

the question of how one can use the knowledge we create in the interest of social transformation' (Risman 2004, 446), it is not obvious whether the concept of 'gender' – envisioned as locating these issues more comprehensively in the relations between men and women – inherently upholds those priorities of feminist research. I therefore explore how practitioners using this category of analysis must struggle to reconcile its heritage of political consciousness and activism with its place in a more scientific or philosophical discourse. This will lead me to demonstrate how 'gender' can remain indispensable as a political and ethical tool, in the face of competing narratives of oppression and post-modernist accounts of social reality and the 'human'.

The 'first wave' of feminist academics sought to refute the concept of universal, absolute truth as naive and inevitably biased by the traditional male exclusivity of academia. This exclusivity affected the topics and categories considered worthy of academic study themselves. Resistance to the 'god-trick' (Haraway 1988) made it evident that research may be conducted differently, depending on a researcher's moral allegiances and personal feelings of responsibility (or lack thereof) towards the issue at hand. In challenging the universal masculine view of truth, feminist thinkers stressed the importance of acknowledging one's situated, and

thus limited, subjectivity when pursuing knowledge.

However, the increased intellectual authority of 'gender' in the last decades of the twentieth century (see Haig 2004) problematised this emphasis on perspective. Joan W. Scott observes that 'the use of "gender" is meant to denote the scholarly seriousness of a work, for "gender" has a more neutral and objective sound than does "women"' (Scott 1986, 1056), implying a potential methodological regression into that empiricist, dispassionate and 'implicitly value-free' role of social scientists who study gender merely to satisfy intellectual curiosity' (Risman 2004, 445). Within the discipline, I argue, gender as an analytical category, and as a potentially non-political tool, is implicitly juxtaposed with feminist theory. When used to analyse and argue a specifically feminist agenda, there are therefore latent contradictions which this article will aim to elucidate.

Gender is a category which is critically bound up with personal identity. As a result, the researcher of gender will inevitably have an emotional investment which is at odds with the intellectually neutral (if not gender-neutral), professional ideals for analysis. More perhaps than in other areas of research, tensions between one's theoretical convictions (and disciplinary training) and one's ethical convictions (and personal knowledge) make it possible to theorise contra one's

own intellectual standards in favour of another kind of methodology, or belief as to 'how research does or should proceed' (Harding 1987, 3). With this in mind, it seems clear that utilising gender as an analytical category produces certain difficulties. Whether these difficulties ought to be seen as primarily methodological or moral, however, is not so easy to ascertain. I argue that this is in part because gender scholarship is self-reflective in a way which cultivates the unmasking of disciplinary assumptions, occasioning apprehensions about the 'master's tools' (Lorde 1984) available to academics.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Gender

Despite its ubiquitous usage in an assortment of academic discourses, there is no universally shared definition of the term 'gender'. Ingrid Robeyns suggests that:

the concept of gender can be theorised in many different ways, and the usefulness of any such conceptualisation depends to some extent on which purposes one wants to use the concept for, and in which intellectual traditions one wants to introduce it (Robeyns 2007, 56).

However, this means that whichever intellectual tradition one is working in, some of its assumptions will be imported into one's

analysis, along with that tradition's own methodological disputes. In part, such imprecision results from gender's over-investment of meaning and ensuing openness to interpretation. Each permutation of its definition therefore becomes invested with diverse academic values and allegiances. Since the various academic disciplines continue to cultivate a certain degree of self-sufficiency, identifying a singular 'category' of gender seems problematic. Robeyns' description of the theorist's 'purposes' as separate from 'intellectual traditions' also raises the possibility that the conceptualisation of gender employed will not necessarily be selected for its congruity with the discipline into which it is being introduced. It follows that the two may indeed be fundamentally incompatible, even leaving open the possibility of a researcher creating this dissonance intentionally in order to devalue the argument of one (the discipline) or the other (the definition of gender).

The closest consensus as to what 'gender' means among scholars is perhaps 'something like "the social meaning given to biological differences between the sexes"' (Lawson 2007, 137). Poststructuralist writers such as Judith Butler (1990) however eschewed this definition, which she saw as heteronormative, dualistic and thus reifying conceptions of masculinity and femininity, in favour of a more subversive reimagination of gender and gendered identity as

non-coherent, unstable and malleable. (Again, both interpretations are now widely cited, with no guarantee that the term translates precisely from work to work). Yet I contend that it is problematic to use a term originally intended to describe the phallogocentric, socially constructed and hierarchical dichotomy of 'male' and 'female', in the purpose of indicating a more fluid and liberating conception of gendered identities.

The latter conception of 'gender' as a construction which can be altered and reimagined is useful, in that it allows for theoretical deconstruction and reconfiguration. Nevertheless, scholars who use it must always be limited by its theoretical nature. After all, once 'gender' ceases to have a concretely observable referent in lived reality, its *function* as an analytical category comes into question. Catherine MacKinnon reminds gender scholars that:

Gender was not created in our minds after reading philosophy books other people wrote; it was not a Truth that we set out to establish to end academic debates or to create a field or niche so we could get jobs. It was what was found there, by women, in women's lives. Piece by bloody piece [...] in trying to make women's status *be* different than it *was*, a theory of the status of women was forged, and with it a theory of the

method that could be adequate to it; *how* we had to know in order to know *this* (MacKinnon 2006, 151 (original emphasis)).

In this statement, MacKinnon ranks methodology as secondary to lived experience; it is a means towards achieving a different reality, rather than ensuring the most accurate means of uncovering the reality (or 'Truth') that is the target of epistemological objectivity. For feminist scholars, methodology should be concerned not only with what can be known or what gets to count as knowledge, but what can be done with this knowledge; there is no use establishing alternative ways of knowing reality if that imperfect reality itself is unaffected. Despite the attraction of moving beyond gender dichotomies, some scholars caution that to annihilate sexual difference before achieving equality between the sexes would be inexpedient and politically premature.

This stance, sometimes referred to as 'strategic essentialism' (see Spivak 1987), is an approach which relinquishes one's intellectually nuanced understandings of 'gender' in favour of a cruder binary definition of 'the sexes', as they exist in law and general understanding, to achieve more immediate improvements in women's lived conditions. It is seen as disingenuous to argue the finer points of a theoretical gender-free utopia when real suffering continues to exist unimpeded. In

this spirit, Barbara Risman proposes that since:

Much time and energy can be wasted trying to validate which dimension is more central to inequality or social change [...] the feminist project is better served by finding empirical answers to particular questions and by identifying how particular processes explain outcomes in need of change (Risman 2004, 435).

However, when initiating deliberately normative or essentialist definitions of gender in the spirit of activism, Michel Foucault's warning that the ramifications of power can never be anticipated or controlled may provide cause for caution. According to his account, 'liberation in the name of "truth" could only be the substitution of another system of power for this one' (Taylor 1986, 178). Knowledge is not owned by those who 'generate' it, but is instead distributed throughout complex and dynamic social networks, and is transformed in the process with unpredictable and perhaps unpalatable results. Progress can therefore bring with it new problems for feminists to grapple with, for example, 'the feminisation of poverty, sexual harassment at the workplace, and women's double day of paid and unpaid labour' (Deutsch 2007, 118), or the way that 'Margaret Sanger's birth control movement played an important and unfortunate role in

eugenics policy' (Harding 1987, 5).

Another unanticipated consequence of early feminist theory was what was *not* talked about in discussions of gender. Its emancipatory motives were undermined by its disregard for racial and class diversity among women, which meant it was seen as reproducing the hegemonic and distorting worldview which it professed to challenge. In responding to the moral and cultural imperative to expose systematic gender injustice, feminist theorists were criticised for assuming it to be the primary site of oppression, neglecting the effects of intersectionality and failing to interrogate their own complicity in perpetuating other forms of oppression. (For example the middle-class demographic of early feminist academics and writers may have contributed to displacing the effects of gender oppression disproportionately onto poorer women and women of colour). As a result, feminism became split into feminisms, and the idea that any woman could speak for the cause of all women was called into question.

Gender research today therefore takes into account the ways in which women's subordination differs within ethnic communities or is constructed within class dynamics to a far greater extent (further ensuring its interweaving with other disciplines). Nevertheless, the expectation that gender scholars should now collectively be able – through mindful self-reflectiveness and cultural

sensitivity alone – to overcome their own positionality and ethnocentrism ‘remains’, in Susan Bordo’s words, ‘animated by its own fantasies of attaining an epistemological perspective free of the locatedness and limitations of embodied existence’ (Bordo 1993, 217–8). Meanwhile, the answer to competing narratives of oppression cannot simply be to add in more and more categories, as if this were to get us closer and closer to an elusive and illusive reality. Even if a study attends dutifully to ‘the mismatched *troika* of race, class and gender’ (Fields 1989, 1), not only is there no guarantee of seriously nuanced engagement with these positions, but many other variables will continue to suffer neglect – sexuality, age, disability, nationality, religion, caste, to name only a few – and, ‘how many axes can one include and still preserve analytical focus or argument?’ (Bordo 1993, 139)

Writing Feminism in the ‘Master’s House’

The challenge raised by Bordo’s question demonstrates how those who employ the analytical category of gender may expect it to fulfil intellectual ideals of method which conflict with its methodological origins. That is to say, gender scholars continue to write syllogistic essays which must by definition identify a focus of study and ignore aspects considered irrelevant. Yet, they must at the same time avoid intellectual

practices which are hegemonic and exclusionary – Butler refers to this as the ‘internal imperative’ (1993) – or risk ‘invalidating’ their own protestations against oppression, as they would then be ‘no better’ than those whom they claim to criticise, regardless of the intellectual or emancipatory quality of their argument.

This represents an impossible double bind, which offers as its sole escape route the adoption of a different discourse (we might think of Nietzsche’s aphoristic, anti-philosophical style or Luce Irigaray’s *écriture féminine*). Yet that alternative risks the exclusion of one’s own work and voice from journals or by publishers, and the alienation of all those outside of academic circles due to its perceived abstruseness. (One might even add, outside of *feminist* academic circles, for the study of gender remains a relatively marginalised discourse in many disciplines).

I find it pertinent to return here to the point that the analytical category of gender may be brought to bear not only upon material within a discipline, but to criticise the discipline itself. Sally Haslanger, for example, writes that ‘[a]cademic feminists, for the most part, view metaphysics as a dubious intellectual project, certainly irrelevant and probably worse’ (Haslanger 2000, 107), while Irigaray calls into question the gendered (and thus restrictive) nature of language itself. I argue that such analyses are likely to trigger what

we might call methodological existential fears; however compelling the argument, the intellectual traditions which they seek to deracinate will be sites of high personal, professional, emotional, ideological – and of course, financial – investment. The category of ‘gender’ therefore signifies not only an ‘other’ way of producing knowledge but also an antagonistic one, threatening to undermine whole intellectual canons through its gaze. This ‘threat’ may be implicit, or it may be stated candidly: Cindi Katz for instance writes that her work ‘is part of a broader project to change the nature and meaning of our academic “home”’ (Katz 1996, 497).

For the practitioner of gender analysis, the hostility with which his/her work may therefore be received is complicated by the difficulty of sustaining such a fundamental destabilising of traditional discourses, while remaining intelligible and influential. Katz, elaborating on this dilemma, illustrates how the twin methodological projects of theory and activism are ultimately symbiotic:

Those working in new ways are caught in the middle – knowing, as Audre Lorde advised, that ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’, but struggling to dismantle it anyway and to rebuild an alternative with a different set of tools. All the while, the ‘master’ barely notices. Then again, if we are so right, why do

we care whether or not the master notices? Is it not alright that he trudge on in his old ways while the world passes him by? I do not think so. The theoretical twists and turns – cultural and otherwise – of the last few years are as much about power and authority as about the production of theory and the constitution of knowledge. And the stakes are not just academic (Katz 1981, 99).

Theorising with the analytical category of gender therefore involves not only highlighting issues which require political action, but a very personal vigilance against what Audre Lorde (1984) calls ‘that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within us’ (Lorde 1984, 123). The very foundations upon which language, epistemology, research practices and so on have been built can be interpreted as insidiously gendered. With these foundations being inescapably internalised to some extent by all who work with them, it becomes necessary to continuously interrogate the presuppositions of one’s work, even its most apparently emancipatory qualities.

Bordo, for instance, questions whether the ‘endless debates about method, reflections about how feminist scholarship should proceed and where it has gone astray’ which characterised the postmodern era perhaps served ‘not the empowerment of diverse cultural voices and styles, but the academic hegemony

[...] of detached, metatheoretical discourse' (Bordo 1993, 225). After all, if gender theory is conceptualised as 'analytical' work, that is, as breaking down a complex reality into more intelligible (and thus more controllable) parts, then logically the individual should be a useful site for study. However, not only does the parallel between this growing significance of individualism within the academy, and the increasing capitalist atomisation of contemporary society suggest that this poststructuralist obsession may be in thrall as much to economic as to theoretical developments, it also leaves the model of the autonomous individual itself problematically uninterrogated. Feminist moral philosophers, among other thinkers, have long questioned the validity of the very existence of a 'space between two individuals', as this presumes the possibility of defining a self-sufficient, unified and coherent subject, omitting interpersonal and internal frictions in a way which is 'at best, incomplete, and at worst, fundamentally misleading' (Meyers 1997, 2).

I want to draw out the convergences between identity politics' breakdown of oppressions into individually experienced, specific permutations of suffering and Foucault's Panopticon. In Foucault's reading (1979), each individual is imprisoned in identically designed but differently situated cells; in this isolated state no sense of shared suffering is visible, except from the position of the oppressor, seated

in the centre. Sandra Lee Bartky's comment that '[i]n the perpetual self-surveillance of the inmate lies the genesis of the celebrated "individualism" and heightened self-consciousness which are hallmarks of modern times' (Bartky 1990, 95) offers an insight into the self-defeating character of the postmodern approach taken to its logical conclusion, for to recognise that structures of power act on each of us in the most personal and unique ways is only to recognise what power is structured to do. That is, theorising in this way misdirects our energy by reproducing the disciplining barriers which make us inaccessible to one another.

Several thinkers working on gender have therefore suggested alternative challenges to essentialism which do not 'delegitimize *a priori* the exploration of experiential continuity and structural common ground among women' (Bordo 1993, 142) or among other oppressed groups. Mariana Szapuová (2001) for example proposes the articulation of a network of overlapping Wittgensteinian 'family resemblances', while Katz advocates tracing a 'counter-topography' that also allows for generalisation without total homogenisation, involving:

a particular precision and specificity that connects distant places and in so doing enables the inference of connection in uncharted places in between. As with contour lines, the measurement of

elevation at select sites enables a line to be drawn without measuring every spot on earth. (Katz 1996, 1229)

A conception of oppressions which concentrates on their commonalities would be able to appreciate their points of intersection without inter-category impugning, instead promoting an intellectual solidarity where any work directed at lessening genuine oppression would be seen as part of a collective effort rather than a competing claim. It is easy enough to note, as does Bartky,¹ that 'even though a liberatory note is sounded in Foucault's critique of power, his analysis as a whole reproduces the sexism which is endemic throughout Western political theory' (Bartky 1990, 65). Important as it is to maintain critical alertness to such pernicious reproductions, it would be perhaps more productive to place the emphasis on how every 'liberatory note' struck by fellow thinkers can be utilised in tandem with one's own liberatory objectives, particularly when one can never be sure which endemic and historically situated views one's own work is reproducing. Carol J. Adams admonishes that '[f]eminist theorists' use of language should describe and challenge oppression by recognising the extent to which these oppressions are culturally analogous and interdependent' (Adams 1990, 90).

If this is the case, challenging

any form of oppression will also serve to lessen that of others suffering under power, for this is what Karen Warren (2008) calls the 'logic of domination' which is perpetrated within each system of prejudice, be it based on categories such as gender, race, class, and so on. Surely, therefore, striking a blow at any one facet of the 'mythical norm' (Lorde 1984) will help diminish its overall power, even if the attack does not target them all simultaneously. Just as the experience of oppression builds up for a lesbian woman of colour, for example, the privileges of domination build up for a white heterosexual man, so long as each of these facets retains its cultural supremacy. We could continue the metaphor to argue that should every resistance to oppression attempt to fight simultaneously on every front, their power and momentum would be much reduced.

The Future of Gender as a Category

While the conceptions explored above offer valuable routes for potentially disenthraling feminist scholars from their troublesome poststructuralist impasse, the study of gender still needs to be reflective about its historical limits and perpetually experimental in spirit. If gender analysis seeks to uncover patterns of domination in social reality in order to change them, the goal of the analytical work is in some ways to make its own obser-

vations obsolete. Therefore it must be what MacKinnon describes as 'a constantly provisional analysis' (MacKinnon 2006, 51), for discovering timeless or essential truths about social reality is the very reverse of what it hopes to achieve. While the category of gender is, currently, vital for demonstrating the wider political implications of issues such as domestic violence, rape or femicide and their basis in hegemonic masculinity, the researchers who use it would surely be glad to see it become irrelevant. In this sense, I envisage gender scholars as needing to simultaneously and imaginatively look ahead to a social reality in which other moral concerns are pressing: concerns which today are invisible to us, or even concerns which our well-intentioned emancipatory work helps to silence.

Sometimes, this looking forward can be achieved by looking back. Lorde reminds us of a lack of consideration of past generations that might be conceived as the oppression called 'ageism'. Important as critique and revision are for identifying the blind spots or institutional prejudices of previous theories, this 'generation gap', she writes, also functions as:

an important social tool for any repressive society. If the younger members of a community view the older members as contemptible or suspect or excess [...] We find ourselves having to repeat

and relearn the same old lessons over and over that our mothers did because we do not pass on what we have learned, or because we are unable to listen (Lorde 1984, 117).

For example, the current aversion towards the perceived essentialism – 'that obscure philosophical swear word', as MacKinnon wryly calls it (MacKinnon 2006, 51) – of the previous generation of 'difference' theorists² may arise from a dread of the social construction (and degradation) of 'nature' as regressive, uncivilised and culturally insignificant. The attempt to distance women from [what are felt to be] accusations that they are in any way determined by nature may therefore be itself reproducing sexist, misrepresentative or colonising conceptions of nature. Butler (1993) notes that the 'sex/gender distinction has come under criticism in more recent years for degrading the natural as that which is "before" intelligibility, in need of the mark, if not the mar, of the social to signify, to be known, to acquire value' (Butler 1993, 4).

To recall an earlier point, we might see this as an unpredictable and unfortunate consequence of what we could call 'strategic anti-essentialism'. While necessary at a particular historical juncture to complicate a picture of gender which excluded transgender identities, differences of sexuality and bidirectional negotiations of the gender binary,

this approach may have reified an idea of 'sex' as dualistically opposed to the social, ultimately harming the larger, long-term emancipatory project. Without sufficient circumspection, sex may [have] become 'to gender what feminine is to masculine' (Butler 1993, xiv), that is, falsely constructed against a concept which we assume to be supreme.

My question at this point is: if we can understand both 'sex' and 'gender' as social meanings given to human differences, in what can be seen as problematic ways, shouldn't we interrogate their reliance on the category of 'human'? Martha Nussbaum, for example, invites us to '[b]egin with the human being' as the best hope for achieving gender equality and ethical treatment of the woman (Nussbaum 1995, 61). However, the appeal of common humanity is a notion which has been historically abused precisely in order to exclude other persons. One of the slogans of the suffragettes, for example, compared women's position in society to that of 'paupers, lunatics and criminals', not in solidarity with all those denied the vote but to strengthen their own membership of a circle of deserving citizens. As bell hooks and others have reminded us, not all members of the *homo sapiens* species have always been considered persons – indeed, this has been one of the primary ways in which oppression has been institutionalised.³ Recently, certain bio-ethical studies and pub-

lic policies have also raised issues surrounding what we consider to be the minimum requirements for human life: for instance, in problematic forms of existence where sensation and consciousness have been irretrievably lost. Such considerations prompt further questions. Is 'human' or even 'human nature' a term functioning within a (gendered) binary of opposition and dominance, and to what extent is it socially created and controlled? Is gender a 'human' construction or can we understand other species as socially interpreting their reproductive roles? Does working to end gender oppression on the grounds of 'human' rights make us complicit in other oppressions and practices of othering by making 'humanness' the normative condition?

Scholars of race and gender, Margaret Spiegel and Carol J. Adams, argue that the rights of the human cannot be upheld without seriously reconsidering the 'arbitrary' distinction between human beings and non-human beings, and confronting the tyranny of the former over the latter which this justifies and conceals. Spiegel draws parallels between the treatment of animals in captivity with the slave trade,⁴ while Adams exposes 'the absent referent' that prevents us from making these connections by creating a dialectic of absence and presence: 'what is absent refers back to one oppressed group while defining another' (Adams 1990, 55).

She therefore sees as problematic the co-opting of metaphors of animal violation (e.g. phrases such as ‘I felt like a piece of meat’ or ‘They treated us like animals’) as a means of furthering the ethical claims of women, for this constitutes a replication of exploitative structures. ‘What we require’, she writes, ‘is a theory that traces parallel trajectories: the common oppressions of women and animals’ (Adams 1990, 58).

Both theorists stress their view that the moral outrage with which we confront the systemic subjugation of persons on grounds of race and gender should be applied to the systemic subjugation and killing of animals, and argue that if we are capable of and willing to deconstruct the essentialist justifications of racist and anti-feminist beliefs, we need to apply the same heightening of consciousness to our practices of meat-eating and animal captivity. This moral claim is gaining intensity: at the 2012 annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, a group of scientists and ethicists proposed a declaration of rights for dolphins and whales, whom they deem to be sufficiently intelligent and self-aware to be classed as ‘non-human persons’ (Sample 2012). In several nations, certain primates already have legal rights on similar grounds; rights which recognise them as members of the moral community and testify to our moral obligation not to treat

them as our resources (Francione 2008).

It is nevertheless noticeable that in these cases, the emphasis is on the cognitive abilities of the animals concerned, and not the philosophy of universal respect for others’ lives. I argue that this reproduces the Cartesian privileging of mind over body, of knowing over feeling. The commercial (thus systematic) killing of cetaceans is deemed unjustifiable on the basis of their similarity to us (or what we consider makes us most human⁵) rather than on our similarity to them, our animal nature. We too are mammals: embodied, mortal, sentient, capable of experiencing pain and forming kinships. Perhaps MacKinnon would comment that these are not the grounds upon which we award rights to humans either: ‘Legally’, she writes, ‘one is less than human when one’s violations do not violate the human rights that are recognised [...] Being a woman is not yet a way of being human’ (MacKinnon 2006, 3). What sense can feminist or gender analysis make of the ‘non-human person’, or of accusations that it constitutes this living being as the abject outsider, the non-ethical subject?

The same tension remains that however intellectually or abstractly compelling these arguments are, when we return to the sphere of ‘real life’, where ‘real women’ are suffering from gender-based injustices, those other moral claims may seem to take precedence. It may be

that awarding the right of life to any being deemed sentient becomes particularly problematic for feminists (among scholars of oppression), because of the way such arguments have been used against the reproductive rights of women. In the abortion debate, the moral dilemma is often framed in terms of two competing subject's rights embodied in one individual, which in certain arguments allows for the silencing of the pregnant woman.

However, I want to recall my observation at the start of the article that one's moral investments, loyalties or conscience/consciousness may contrast prohibitively with other ethical understandings and ways of approaching knowledge. If we allow it to do its work, the analytical category of gender can help us to unmask all kinds of domination-based logic. Our current, Enlightenment-influenced imagination of physical singularity is in fact revealed to be particularly misleading by many of the concerns of gender research, not least the politics of abortion and other practices such as transsexual technologies or Assisted Reproductive Technologies, which threaten the stability of the category. In this sense, the destabilising of disciplines which the study of 'gender' provokes also challenges the concept of the individual subject. I find this to be a vital point, because many of the ways in which feminist or gender analysis can find itself unable to fulfil its own logic may be a

result of an urgent need for reformulated analytical tools of other kinds, including a 'philosophical and legal reconceptualisation of the human subject' (Browne 2007, 9) itself. In this article, I have argued that this need may be partially obscured by the inherent contradictions which scholars of gender have inherited and failed to sufficiently examine. As a result, energies are expended upon internal frustrations that might be more productively directed elsewhere.

Conclusion

Having had as its 'chief intellectual imperative' the need to '*listen... a greater humility and greater attentiveness to what one did not know*' (Bordo 1993, 220), some forty years later, when gender 'has become a growth industry in the academy' (Risman 2004, 429), how can it – as a category of analysis – reconcile what it still does not know with what it has learned? It is certainly too soon to eradicate gender from our critical and political vocabularies, and indeed, this may not even be ultimately desirable. The inevitability of some form of gender system in culture is impossible to determine *a priori*; as Marilyn Frye points out, 'No human is free of social structures, nor (perhaps) would happiness consist in such freedom' (Frye 2000, 13). Therefore, while the use of 'gender' as a category of analysis has been – and should continue to be – problematised to ensure that it

does not involuntarily perpetuate or normalise difference, its instability as a category needs to be viewed in the context of challenges to other academic concepts which are considered, erroneously, to be more sturdily established. The 'identity crisis' within feminist and gender theory thus might be seen as in need not of resolution, but wider dissemination – which, in turn, can be facilitated through a gender analysis that questions the unity of a discipline's convictions.

Endnotes

- ¹ To choose an arbitrary example.
- ² This suspicion applies also to biologists working on gender; yet, as Jude Browne (2007) notes, 'New theories from the natural sciences and the field of evolutionary psychology are emerging to confront the late twentieth-century view [...] demanding instead that we revisit the possibility that "gendered behaviour" is biologically derived' (Browne 2007, 2).
- ³ Nussbaum comments: 'Acknowledging the other person as a member of the very same kind would have generated a sense of affiliation and a set of moral and educational duties. That is why, to those bent on shoring up their own power, the stratagem of splitting the other off from one's own species seems so urgent and seductive' (Nussbaum 1995, 96).
- ⁴ Alice Walker's preface to *The Dreaded Companion: Human and Animal Slavery* (Spiegel 1996) asserts that '[t]he animals of this world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than black people were made for whites or women for men' (Walker in Spiegel 1996, 14).
- ⁵ As Bernard Williams remarks, 'If one approached without preconceptions the question of finding characteristics which

differentiate men from other animals, one could as well, on these principles, end up with a morality which exhorted men to spend as much time in making fire [...] having sexual intercourse without regard to season; or despoiling the environment and upsetting the balance of nature, or killing things for fun' (Williams 1976, 64).

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