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CHAPTER 26

ESSENCES, INTERSECTIONS, AND AMERICAN FEMINISM

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In order to capture some of what is interesting and influential in contemporary North American feminist philosophy, I pursue two strategies. In the first half of the essay I offer a very brief historical sketch and characterization of a few fields of feminist philosophy. In the second half, I focus in more detail on a cluster of feminist issues in metaphysics concerning 'essentialism' and 'intersectionality'.

A Little Recent History

Contemporary North American feminist philosophy began to flourish in the 1970s.[1] Its political and intellectual roots were in the 'second wave' of feminist

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[1] Three clarifications: (a) by 'North American feminist philosophy' I mean to include feminist philosophers writing in English in North America from the 1970s onward regardless of their birth

activism that started in the 1960s; but its practitioners also had roots in the various philosophical traditions found in mid-twentieth-century graduate philosophy departments. Philosophers were among the feminists who began to teach, write, and speak about feminist theory at the same time as they were engaged in feminist activism both inside and outside the academy. They were among the creators of Women's Studies programs and were enriched by the interdisciplinary work that occurred there. Across the academic disciplines, as well as outside the academy, the common bond among feminists was not a universally adopted definition, method, or doctrine of feminism, but a shared commitment to end women's oppression and to make the world a better place for all women. Feminist philosophy grew up whenever and wherever feminists needed to make philosophical sense of issues arising in the world, a world that included their classrooms, offices, personal relationships, and even theorizing itself. It was not a simple matter of applying the 'tools of one's philosophical trade' to a new set of issues. The tools themselves needed to be examined for biases and limitations.

Feminist philosophers came to appreciate the extent to which philosophy as a discipline was itself a part of the world that needed changing. Philosophy has traditionally both influenced and reflected the fundamental values of the societies in which it exists; it is one of the cluster of cultural institutions in which human beings live, understand their lives, and, in only some cases, flourish. Neither philosophy nor other cultural institutions such as organized religion, law, and the family have fostered women's flourishing. Feminist philosophers hoped that their work would not only reveal the sexism, androcentrism, and other forms of male bias and misogyny in philosophy, but also produce new philosophy that would encourage women's full personhood and participation in all spheres of life. This is not to say that feminist philosophers agreed on the details, only that they shared the same cluster of motivations.[2]

nation. Most of these women are teaching in the United States and Canada, although there are some Mexican feminists such as María Pía Lara who should be included. (b) By 'feminist philosophers' I refer most frequently to those trained in academic philosophy. However, theorists in other disciplines contribute as well. One of the most influential feminist theorists/philosophers, Catharine MacKinnon, has a background in law and political theory; Patricia Hill Collins is a sociologist; and Carol Gilligan is a psychologist. (c) Although I often refer to feminist philosophers as women (and most are), there are some men who do feminist philosophy. Collections of essays that include a number of male philosophers are May, Strikwerda, and Hopkins (1996) and Digby (1998).

[2] For readers unfamiliar with feminist philosophy, let me note how important it is to take seriously the extent and depth of feminists' philosophical disagreements. For example, debate begins even as one tries to name the field and describe its scope: is it 'feminist philosophy', 'feminism in philosophy',

Traditional philosophers in North America and elsewhere tended to be (at best) somewhat mystified by the need for and nature of feminist philosophy. In spite of all the deep disagreement among traditional philosophers, many believed that philosophy was supposed to be abstract, objective, detached from politics, and concerned with universal human truths, principles, and assumptions. In North America this was most notably exemplified by analytic philosophers. Feminist philosophers, on the other hand, held political values that guided their choice of philosophical topics, theories, and critiques, believed that 'universal' or 'generic' theories were often covertly androcentric or male-biased, found that attention to women's bodies and concrete experiences were worthy of philosophical consideration in ethics and epistemology. Some even thought that philosophy should discuss (gasp!) rape and pornography. Such discussions did not sound like philosophy to many feminists' male colleagues or professors. Feminists, on the other hand, believed that their traditional male professors and colleagues were fleeing as fast as they possibly could from an examination of one of the most important facets of our lives—gender. This was especially shocking, since the 'examined life' is allegedly close to the heart of the profession itself.

I want to take 1975 as a snapshot of what the field of feminist philosophy looked like in North America in the 'early days'. Women philosophers had been writing and teaching feminist material for several years, but little academic feminist philosophy had been published since Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* in 1949. One could read every published work of feminist philosophy—popular or academic—and have plenty of time left over. By popular feminist philosophy I am thinking of works such as Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970), Ti-Grace Atkinson's *Amazon Odyssey* (1974), and Mary Daly's early books on religion and philosophy (1968, 1973). Academic feminist philosophy was far less available. Two special issues of journals on feminist philosophy had appeared, *The Monist* (Mothersill 1973) and *The Philosophical Forum* (Gould and Wartofsky 1973–4); and rare individual articles appeared in philosophical journals: for example, those of Christine Garside in *Dialogue* (1971), Judith

'philosophical feminism', or 'doing philosophy as a feminist'? There is also disagreement about the appropriate way to couch fundamental values: should feminists seek to end oppression, end subordination, or seek a more affirmatively stated goal? Since it would be too disruptive to continue to note this at every turn, just keep in mind that feminist philosophers, on almost every point, are as likely to disagree with each other as are other types of philosophers. Readers should not be misled by the even-handed tone I have attempted to use; this essay represents my 'take' on the field.

Thomson in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (1971), Alison Jaggar (1974) and Joyce Trebilcot (1975) in *Ethics*, and Susan Haack (1974) and Trudy Govier (1974) in *Philosophy*. Many of the early essays seem very 'tame' by today's standards. Anthologies helped feminism make its way into the classroom. Christine Pierce had an essay in an interdisciplinary anthology (Gornick and Moran 1971). Two anthologies on moral issues edited by pro-feminist men contained several feminist essays (Wasserstrom 1975 and Baker and Elliston 1975). A few anthologies of essays in feminist philosophy were in the pipeline, but none was published until 1977 (English 1977 and Vetterling-Braggin *et al.* 1977).

It was unusual to find feminist papers presented on the programs of the American Philosophical Association or Canadian Philosophical Association. Alison Jaggar (APA, 1972) and Susan Sherwin (CPA, 1975) were, to my knowledge, the first. However, the gates of the primary professional associations were not immediately opened wide. Instead, in the United States feminist talks and papers were given at meetings of the Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP) at various locations around the country as well as in conjunction with APA meetings. Canadian SWIP was founded in 1976. The vast majority of colleges and universities as yet had no separate feminist philosophy course. If there were any at all, it was literally one course.[3]

Contemporary Concerns of North American Feminist Philosophy

More than three decades later, one short bookshelf of feminist philosophy has turned into rows and rows of library stacks. At most one meager feminist philosophy course on a campus has become a philosophical specialty in which dissertations are written, colleagues are appointed, and courses taught at all levels. Yet to call it a 'specialty' can be misleading. It is more useful to think of feminist philosophy as a set of *approaches* to philosophical questions rather than to consider it a field such as philosophy of language or philosophy of

[3] The first course I taught, in spring 1975 at California State University, Los Angeles, included Harriet Taylor Mill and John Stuart Mill, Simone de Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone, and some essays from the *Philosophical Forum* special feminist issue. Fourteen students enrolled. Today at CSULA, more than 600 students each year enroll in sections of a comparable course.

mind. Feminist philosophers concern themselves with almost every field of philosophy and reshape each field as they reconceptualize its issues.[4] They also use—and transform—a variety of philosophical methods. In North America this includes the typical range of Western philosophical methods: analytic philosophy, pragmatism, phenomenology, critical theory, hermeneutics, and poststructuralism. Although my focus here pays less attention to feminists of either a pragmatic or a continental bent, this is simply a matter of space. All of the methods listed have been influential.[5]

During the decades in which feminist philosophers have been developing their views and engaging with various philosophical traditions, the traditions themselves have changed as well. Today many North American philosophers, both traditional and feminist, find themselves wanting to balance several competing factors in their thinking. On the one hand, they are doing *philosophy*, a normative enterprise, not merely a descriptive one. On the other hand, many are pulled to 'naturalize' philosophy—not to replace philosophy with empirical work, but to recognize the relevance of empirical factors and research in the ways they frame questions as well as determine what counts as a plausible philosophical view. Still others are pulled by the 'postmodern' to examine very closely the deepest traditional philosophical assumptions about the possibility of objective knowledge or of unified selves capable of being stable moral agents and knowers, and so forth.

Feminist philosophers' desires to steer some kind of balanced course are deeply influenced by the factors just mentioned, but also by political and moral motivations. Feminist philosophy, directly or indirectly, supports or contributes to ending the oppression of all women. This is not just a negative task of rooting out sexism, androcentrism, and other forms of male bias in philosophy, but also a positive task of constructing philosophical theories that will support the flourishing of all women as full-fledged human beings. Thus feminists' 'normative' requirements include, for example, a sufficiently

[4] Only philosophy of mathematics has to date escaped feminist intervention. A number of anthologies organized by philosophical field give a sense of the range of feminist philosophical fields: e.g. Fricker and Hornsby (2000); Pearsall (1999); Kourany (1998); Jaggar and Young (1998); and Garry and Pearsall (1996). The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu>, also has excellent feminist essays covering a very wide range of topics. Since feminist treatments of logic tend to be omitted from the preceding sources, see Nye (1990) and Falmagne and Hass (2002).

[5] See, e.g., pragmatists Charlene Haddock Seigfried (1993, 1996); Shannon Sullivan (2001); and Sharyn Clough (2003). A wide range of continentally influenced feminists include Sandra Bartky (1990); Iris Marion Young (1990*a*, *b*); Judith Butler (1993, 1999); Nancy Fraser (1989); and Kelly Oliver (1998). Similar authors are collected in Allen and Young (1989); Nicholson (1990); and Cahill and Hansen (2003).

substantive theory of justice to argue against oppression, epistemological theories that can unearth and correct biased empirical studies, androcentric metaphysical claims, and so on. Although normativity is required, feminist philosophy almost always also needs to be 'naturalized' in order for gender, something social, to find a way into the philosophical discussion at all. There is no space for consideration of gender when issues are analyzed solely in abstract and universal terms (e.g., a traditional analysis of "s knows that p").

At the same time as feminist philosophers are motivated to pursue normative, substantive theories, they are also pulled by other forces to be very wary of their dangers. This is not simply because this is 'a postmodern era' full of competing sets of values and standards; it is also a result of various controversies among feminists. From the start of academic feminism in the last third of the twentieth century, and continuing to the present day, there have been controversies among groups of feminists: between lesbians and heterosexual women, among women from dominant white groups and other ethnicities/races, among women of different classes, between able-bodied and less able-bodied women, between transgendered women and nontranswomen, between Western and non-Western women, between women of the developed 'north' and from the less developed 'south', and so on. Women on the less powerful sides of the controversies have objected to the kinds of privileged status given to the more powerful groups' experiences and characteristics and to the overgeneralizing claims that women in the powerful groups make. These kinds of controversies came to be known for a time, collectively and unfortunately, as 'the problem of difference'; however, what is at stake in each controversy varies. I will attend to some of these stakes later in the discussion of essentialism and intersectionality. Feminist philosophers have learned a tremendous amount from these controversies, both philosophically and in terms of politics and morality. Today, even feminist philosophers who are not otherwise inclined toward pluralistic theories or postmodern approaches nevertheless tend to be pluralists, because they recognize the great diversity among women, their experiences, their values, and so on. For the vast majority of feminist philosophers, pluralism does not mean relativism—the need for normative standards precludes a move to relativism. So feminist philosophers wanting to balance normativity and diversity must steer their courses carefully.

In order to get a sense of what concerns feminist philosophers in North America today, I briefly characterize feminist issues in two broad areas of philosophy: (1) ethics, philosophy of law, and social and political philosophy; and (2) epistemology and philosophy of science. I then turn to a more detailed discussion of one topic in feminist metaphysics. I make no attempt to draw a general contrast between North American feminist philosophy and feminist philosophy in other parts of the world. It would be particularly hard to do this for English-speaking philosophical communities. The important disagreements among feminist philosophers tend not to break out along national or continental lines—as was suggested in the preceding paragraph. This is not to say that national context is trivial, but that it is only one among many factors that go into the concrete location of feminist voices. Nevertheless, in choosing a metaphysical topic to treat in more detail, I settled on essentialism and intersectionality because this cluster of issues illustrates some of the impact that the pluralistic ethnic context of North America has had on feminist philosophy.

Ethics, Philosophy of Law, and Social and Political Philosophy

The fields I want to treat together in this brief section cover an enormous range of issues, but share common features. I find Alison Jaggar's strategy for thinking about feminist approaches to ethics very helpful, and believe that it can be applied to the other fields that explicitly deal with values as well. Jaggar points out that in order to act on a commitment to correct male biases in traditional ethics,

> Feminist ethics . . . begins from the convictions that the subordination of women is morally wrong and that the moral experience of women is as worthy of respect as that of men. On the practical level, then, the goals of feminist ethics are the following: first, to articulate moral critiques of actions and practices that perpetuate women's subordination; second, to prescribe morally justifiable ways of resisting such actions and practices; and, third, to envision morally desirable alternatives that will promote women's emancipation. On a theoretical level, the goal of feminist ethics is to develop philosophical accounts of the nature of morality and of the central moral concepts that treat women's moral experience respectfully, though never uncritically. (Jaggar 2001: 538)

I believe that with the appropriate substitutions of 'legal', 'political', or 'social' for 'moral', Jaggar gives us a useful and open-ended way to think about the concerns of feminist philosophers in these fields. This does not mean that

there is a separate sphere for feminist ethics or political philosophy, or that men and women should develop different kinds of moral or social theories. Instead it means that we should assume that any moral, social, or political issue will be a feminist issue in some respect unless we can determine that it has no gendered dimensions.

Moral, political, social, and legal philosophy were among the earliest fields to engage feminist philosophers. Although sometimes people focus on feminists in the 1970s and early 1980s who were hoping to explain the root causes of women's oppression, there was always a rich variety of feminist work being done. Below I list a few of the issues, giving references that merely scratch the surface of the body of feminist literature. Feminist philosophers have

- Critiqued canonical philosophers' views about women, especially their 'virtues', 'character', and 'nature' that rationalized women's subordination (Clark and Lange 1979; Okin 1992).[6]
- Offered analyses and revisions of the cluster of concepts used in these fields: equality, justice, autonomy, oppression, exploitation, freedom, coercion, power, privacy, rights, responsibilities, and so on (A. Allen 1988, 2003; MacKinnon 1989; Young 1990*a*). For example, autonomy can be thought to be relational or social, not only a characteristic of an isolated individual (Meyers 1989; Friedman 2003).
- Developed proposals and analyses concerning 'applied' issues such as abortion, affirmative action, pornography, sexual assault, marriage, pregnancy discrimination, heterosexism, health care, and atrocity/evil that reflected sophisticated appraisals of both overt and covert sexism and androcentrism in our thinking, our institutions, and our practices (MacKinnon 1987; Sherwin 1992; Calhoun 2000; Brison 2002; Card 2002; Shrage 2003).
- Focused on ways in which women's moral experiences and moral emotions have been overlooked or devalued, and strategies for rectifying this. The most well-known examples here are analyses focusing on an ethics of care or maternal ethics (e.g.,Gilligan 1982, 1988; Ruddick 1995; Held 2006), but work has been done from other traditions including lesbian ethics (Hoagland 1988; Card 1995).

[6] For detailed work see the volumes in the Pennsylvania State University Press series *Re-reading the Canon*. Individual volumes are entitled *Feminist Interpretations of [Philosopher]*. Philosophers range from Plato to contemporary figures. See, e.g., Freeland (1998) and Lange (2002).

- Called attention to the variety of kinds of moral relationships that people have with each other, including friendship and asymmetrical relations of dependency (Lugones and Spelman 1983; Friedman 1993; Kittay 1999).
- Focused on gendered facets of global issues and the complexities of transnational feminism (Narayan 1997; Jaggar 1998; Schutte 1998; Okin *et al.* 1999; Narayan and Harding 2000; Nussbaum 2000, 2004; Donchin 2004).
- Analyzed a number of methodological issues—e.g. the role of narratives in ethics (Lara 1998; H. L. Nelson 2001; Brison 2002; Walker 2007)—and the biases implicit in various methods of moral justification and the concepts on which they rely—e.g. moral rationality and objectivity, and proposed alternatives to them (Walker 2007, several summarized well in Jaggar 2000).

Feminist philosophers are pursuing a number of paths to do these kinds of work, some of which are not compatible with each other. One cannot identify 'feminist ethics' with any single approach to moral theories or issues, an error sometimes made by identifying feminist ethics with the 'ethics of care'.[7] There is room for multiple approaches. One approach that I would encourage is for feminists to put forth sets of standards or conditions of adequacy that any moral or political theory must meet. In that way we can be sure that such theories are applicable to all human beings and respectful of all individuals' lives and experiences.[8]

[7] Nel Noddings used 'feminine' in her title *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics* (1984). The distinction between 'feminine' and 'feminist' ethics has been used to understand differences in focus—e.g., by Alison Jaggar (1989 and later) and Rosemarie Tong (1993).

[8] I have focused more on ethics than on political or legal philosophy in this section. There have been influential (incompatible) theories in the latter fields that I must mention briefly. In political philosophy, feminist theories have sometimes been labeled in terms of the traditional discourses from which they arose: liberal, radical, Marxist, and socialist feminists (socialists do not subsume gender oppression under economic oppression) (Jaggar 1983). Radical feminists are hard to characterize. Loosely speaking, early radical feminists such as Firestone (1970), rooted gender oppression in biology, whereas recent radicals such as MacKinnon root women's oppression in the construction of their sexuality and in the depth and pervasiveness of sexual violence against women. We should note that MacKinnon herself rejects the term 'radical feminism' in favor of 'feminism unmodified' (1987). Women of color have sometimes objected to the widespread and hegemonic use of these categories (see Sandoval 1991, 2000).

Theories in feminist philosophy of law tend to be labeled by whether they propose ideals and remedies in terms of 'sameness' (advocating gender neutrality wherever possible) or 'difference' (advocating various ways in which law can take into account men's and women's different situations) or propose to reject that dichotomy and make the central focus ending male dominance by means of law (respectively, Williams 1982; Littleton 1987; and MacKinnon 1987, 1989). Of course, there are other variations such as pragmatism and intersectional analyses. More attention will be given to the legal theory of intersectionality later (Crenshaw 1989).

Epistemology and Philosophy of Science

Feminist philosophers write prolifically in epistemology and philosophy of science. Feminist epistemological concerns were initially developed in the context of philosophy of science and the practices of science; through the decades the fields have shared a set of core concepts and continued to be intertwined. Elizabeth Anderson (2003) characterizes feminist epistemology and philosophy of science as fields that study

> the ways in which gender does and ought to influence our conceptions of knowledge, the knowing subject, and practices of inquiry and justification. It identifies ways in which dominant conceptions and practices of knowledge attribution, acquisition, and justification systematically disadvantage women and other subordinated groups, and strives to reform these conceptions and practices so that they serve the interests of these groups.

The kinds of topics that feminist philosophers address in these areas range from the ways in which gendered inequities have worked to harm both science and women to systematically rethinking methods and concepts of the fields. Just as in ethics and other fields that deal more explicitly and systematically with values, feminists have offered a number of strategies, not all compatible with each other, to produce philosophies of science and theories of knowledge that can promote the interests of subordinated groups and treat them as full-fledged people. These strategies—feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory, and feminist postmodernism—were distinguished by Sandra Harding (1986) and have been criticized, slightly modified, and often retained as useful, even if not altogether satisfactory. Each kind of feminist theory transforms the traditional discourse from which it grew and contains a variety of positions within it; some theories cross back and forth among the categories.

Feminist empiricists encompass two different groups: feminist philosophers who begin their work within the post-positivist Anglo-American traditions in epistemology and philosophy of science (e.g. Longino 1990; L. H. Nelson 1990) and women scientists who have been fighting to rid their disciplines of sexism and androcentrism by more strictly and carefully applying the best existing methods of their disciplines. Feminist standpoint theorists draw from Marx's notion that the standpoint of the proletariat is epistemically privileged, but have refined this kind of approach in ways that make it more plausible. Harding, for example (1991, 1993), does not automatically grant epistemic

privilege to subordinated people, but advocates starting research and other inquiries from the lives of women and members of other subordinated groups and attending to the social conditions in which knowledge is produced and authorized.[9] Feminist postmodernists use the resources of poststructuralism to critique not only the traditional institutions and concepts of science, philosophy of science, and epistemology, but also the other feminist theories in these fields (Haraway 1991, 1997; Code 2006).[10]

Below are several clusters of fruitful issues that concern feminist epistemologists and philosophers of science.

- Women have been ill served by science, philosophy of science, and epistemology in a number of ways. These fields have excluded them from inquiry, denied them epistemic authority, denigrated allegedly 'feminine' cognitive styles and approaches to research, and produced theories that disadvantaged women—either by representing them explicitly as inferior or deviant or by making women as well as power relations between genders invisible (Keller 1985, 1992; Anderson 2003). Feminists believe that as increasing numbers of women, other subordinated groups, and their political allies enter these fields, both the cognitive content of and social equity in the fields should improve greatly.
- The key concepts used in science, philosophy of science, and epistemology have been rethought: for example, knowledge, knowers, rationality, objectivity, and evidence. Some feminists advocate that knowledge itself is best understood as social, not individual (Longino 1990; L. H. Nelson 1990). Others press for an understanding of individual knowers themselves as social (Code 1995). Still others debate whether traditional ideals of objectivity have any value and delineate alternative conceptions of objectivity (Harding 1991, 1993; Antony 1995; Haslanger 1995, 2002; Lloyd 1995*b*).
- One of the more important methodological topics concerns the ways in which values and 'biases' enter scientific practice, philosophy of science,

[9] See Harding (2004) for a variety of feminist standpoint theories, written by scholars from a number of different disciplines.

[10] It is difficult to decide who is sufficiently 'postmodern' to be placed in the category; this difficulty illustrates the limitations of the categories and the ways in which individual works cross or transcend them. One can see Haraway as both a standpoint theorist and a postmodernist. Code (2006) draws from various traditions in her recent thoroughgoing reconceptualization of epistemology that rests on an ecological model. Thoroughly postmodern philosophers such as Butler (1993, 1999) would not want to have 'a theory of knowledge' at all.

and epistemology. Feminists explore the kinds of values that facilitate rather than block free inquiry, as well as critique androcentric (and hypocritical) notions of value-free inquiry (Longino 1990; Anderson 1995*b*; Lloyd 1995*a*), and explore bias as a problem, a paradox, and a resource (Antony 2002; Anderson 2003).

- Critiques have been given of particular uses of science and philosophy of science: for example, Lloyd's (2005) study of evolutionary theory's errors about female orgasm, or Fausto-Sterling's (1992, 2000) work on sexed bodies.
- Philosophers of science and, to a lesser degree, epistemologists have begun to explore the connections between feminist and post-colonial studies (Harding 1998, 2006; Duran 2001).

Metaphysics

Although metaphysics has not engaged as large a number of feminist philosophers as the other fields we have discussed, it is nevertheless important to feminists, in part because theories in other areas of philosophy as well as other disciplines rest on metaphysical assumptions. For example, what metaphysical assumptions about 'human nature' are made by theories in ethics, political philosophy, or economics? In addition, academic metaphysics is at least loosely connected to cultural 'world views' or views about reality that play influential roles in people's lives. Although postmodern feminists have sometimes criticized the enterprise of metaphysics itself—whether done by feminist or by traditional philosophers—other feminist philosophers, believing metaphysics to be important, have critiqued the frequent androcentric character and less frequent overt sexism of traditional metaphysics.[11] Sally Haslanger argues that feminists have contributions to make in all the major areas of metaphysics: studies of what is real, of the basic concepts used in understanding ourselves and the world, and of the presuppositions of inquiry (2000*a*: 108).

Although I believe that Haslanger is correct about the possible scope of feminist contributions to metaphysics, to date many of the metaphysical (and

[11] Lloyd (1995*b*), Witt (1995, 2002), Antony (1998), and Haslanger (2000*a*) favor doing metaphysics; anti-metaphysical critiques come from Fraser and Nicholson (1990) and Butler (1993, 1999).

anti-metaphysical) issues that have engaged feminists have been related in one way or another to human beings. For example, I mentioned discussions of 'human nature' and human beings above (Nussbaum 1995*a*, 2000, and Antony 1998, 2000). Feminists have contributed significantly to the discussion of the 'social construction' of 'reality', especially of the categories 'men' and 'women' (e.g. Butler 1993, 1999 and Haslanger 2000*b*, who offer very different alternatives). We can also ask in what ways feminists think differently from traditional philosophers about the self or personal identity, in particular the self's moral dimensions (Meyers 1997; Brison 2002), or about the 'mind–body' problem, the 'objects of psychology', or the 'problem of other minds' (Overall 1988; Young 1990*b*; Scheman 1993, 2000).

In order to take a more detailed look at a set of issues in feminist philosophy, I want to consider a cluster of issues that center around 'essentialism'.[12] I have chosen this set of issues in part because it illustrates the complex connections between politics and theory. What has driven the feminist controversy over 'essences' is not so much particular antecedent metaphysical commitments, but an appreciation of the implications that various metaphysical views have for feminist politics and theory as well as for moral behavior. A second factor influencing my choice is that if there is anything that can be called 'characteristically North American' in feminist philosophy/theory, it might be the particular ways in which North American theorists treat the differences among us all. As I noted in the first section of this essay, the necessity of confronting divisions along virtually every axis of privilege and subordination has had a great deal of influence on the positions that feminist philosophers take today.

Linda Martin Alcoff has recently written that the anti-essentialists have 'won the debate' with essentialists, not because essentialists have all changed their positions, but because 'they must now show that their views are not, and were never, truly essentialist' (2006: 152).[13] There is certainly at least a kernel of truth in what Alcoff says. Most feminists today who argue that there are necessary and sufficient conditions for being a woman (e.g. Haslanger 2000*b*) or who want to talk about the 'metaphysics of sex and gender'

[12] Readers hoping for a univocal, neutral definition of 'essentialism' may be disappointed. In feminist contexts someone who claims or assumes that there is either a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for being a woman or a set of experiences that women universally share is likely to be labeled an essentialist. However, this is only the beginning of the story.

[13] A number of facets of my approach in this section (thought not all) are similar to Alcoff's in Alcoff 2006: ch. 6. Because I heard earlier incarnations of her chapter as lectures, it is likely that I have been influenced by Alcoff in ways of which I am no longer aware.

(e.g. Alcoff herself, 2006) believe that their views do not fall prey to earlier 'anti-essentialist' objections. However, there are other feminist proposals that suggest that the debate is not over. Naomi Zack (2005) has proposed a new essentialist view that directly attacks certain kinds of anti-essentialism; and Martha Nussbaum's essentialism remains at the core of her ongoing projects (2000, 2004). I want to discuss these two views briefly in order to see where controversy remains, and to offer a simple way out of it.

First, let us step back to remind ourselves why feminist philosophers are bothered by essences and essentialism. To start with, there is a history of problematic essences attributed to women. It is widely known that many major Western philosophers and other intellectuals had no qualms about characterizing the nature or essence of human beings and of men and women in ways that failed to attribute to women the qualities, capacities, or virtues equal to those of men in the culture of the author. The precise terms vary by time and place, and from the start were overlaid with other hierarchies. Consider Aristotle: men, but not women, have a natural fitness to command, and only free men have a faculty of deliberation that has authority. Free women's faculty of deliberation lacks authority, and slave men and women lack the deliberative faculty itself (1941: *Politics*, 1259^{a}–1260^{b}). So free women, slave men, and slave women are hardly on a par with free men with respect to being the essential 'rational animal'. If one were citing Rousseau, Freud, or a contemporary evolutionary psychologist rather than Aristotle, the upshot would be similar. Intellectual support is being provided for cultural views that do not recognize women as full-fledged human beings on a par with men. A hierarchical power structure is left untouched and unexamined. Women's lesser position in the author's culture is justified, explained, or even seen as necessary.

It is no surprise that feminists object to such views—both for the negative content of women's 'nature' or 'essence' and for the fact that such views appear to make women's nature fixed and unchangeable. Before we look at some of the alternatives that have been considered, we should note that it is a mistake to consider all critics of universal claims about women or of women's essence as 'postmodern'. Postmodern feminists are perhaps the most radical 'anti-essentialists', in that they reject the entire way of speaking; for example, Judith Butler (1993, 1999) finds it important to destabilize the category 'woman' (and 'sex' and 'gender').

Nevertheless a variety of other positions exist, each differing somewhat from the others. A few alternatives are listed below.

On the one hand we have:	On the other hand, among the alternatives would be:
• Fixed (or natural) essence of women, often explained as necessary and sufficient conditions.	• Changing characteristics of women over time or place. • Variable characteristics among women at the same time and place, especially variations by ethnicity/race, sexuality, class, etc. • Characteristics that are not natural but are socially constructed. • Rejection of the whole way of speaking that includes essences.

A second set of contrasts focus on *experiences* rather than characteristics of women:

• Women have a set of experiences in common (in virtue of which they are women).	• Experiences of women (or of womanhood) are diverse in all the ways listed above. • Rejection of the whole way of speaking that looks for common experiences.

Although these alternatives have sometimes been merged or confused by their critics or their proponents, they differ in important ways. Consider examples in the first set of alternatives above. There might be necessary and sufficient conditions for being a woman, but they could be socially constructed rather than natural. Or there might not be necessary and sufficient conditions, but the variations among women's characteristics might be natural rather than socially constructed (though surely many would be socially constructed). And many of the alternatives listed here do not dictate any particular metaphysical view such as realism or anti-realism. Although the alternatives raise different philosophical issues and questions of fact, I suspect that anti-essentialists have sometimes merged the claims because the claims they are attacking about the 'essence of woman' or

'women's universally shared experiences' have had similar kinds of negative real-life consequences. Recall that what is at stake in these discussions is not merely theoretical, but also concerns real-life political and moral human interactions.

The 'stakes' for feminists include at least the following: (a) how best to deal with race and racism as well as heterosexism in both practice and theory; (b) how to develop theories that can accommodate the varieties of women's experiences; (c) how best to explain the grounds for rejecting traditional biological categories of sex (or gender) as inadequate to encompass the full range of women. As we discuss the stakes, it is important to keep in mind a point from the first section of the essay: feminist philosophers want to retain sufficient normativity to ground both their political and their philosophical positions.

In order to appreciate the views of philosophers who firmly believe that we need 'essences' of some kind in order to supply the normativity required to pursue feminist goals, we first need to look briefly at a few anti-essentialist arguments that focus on (a)–(c) above. The concept of 'intersectionality' considers (a) and (b).

Intersectionality is the most widely accepted way in which feminists in North America think about multiple facets of oppression and experience, though it remains controversial. Intersectional analyses hold that oppressions by race, ethnicity, gender, class, and so on, do not act independently of each other in our lives; instead, each is shaped by and works through the others. Intersectionality caught on very quickly among feminist theorists after Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) introduced it in legal contexts to explain why an analysis in terms of either race alone or sex alone (a 'single-axis' analysis) was inadequate for an explanation of the kind of discrimination that African-American women were suffering under US law. Although Crenshaw originally intended the term to apply to multiple *oppressions* and included only race and gender, because the concept resonated with so many people, it is sometimes used today more broadly to illuminate the ways in which different facets of our social situation interact with and through each other—whether they are 'axes' of privilege or of oppression. This wider kind of intersectional analysis can not only make the point that the oppression experienced by a Latina lesbian living in the USA will not be separable into three isolated oppressions, it can also illuminate the ways in which an axis of privilege would intersect with oppressions on the basis of gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation in a Latina lesbian from a wealthy family.[14] The different interpretations of intersectionality share key insights: (i) each facet of a person shapes the other facets, so individuals in the same 'social group' will have both similarities and differences with others in the group; (ii) oppression (and privilege) of members of a group will be shaped by and work though individuals' other facets.

Crenshaw (1991) uses examples of different ways in which domestic violence affects African-American women and men. So, for example, although both women and men in the African-American community rally against police mistreatment of African-American men who are batterers, this position sometimes has the negative consequence of leaving unprotected the African-American women being battered. One's interests coincide with those of other group members only up to a point, because of the other facets of oneself that are not shared; group-identity-based commonality is thus partial.

Intersectionality requires that no woman's experience is seen as 'woman's' *simpliciter*. There is no space to take one race or class of women as a paradigm from which others deviate. In this spirit María Lugones (2003) calls upon feminist theorists to be pluralistic from the start.

Although intersectional approaches can incorporate differences of sexual orientation, there are other questions concerning lesbians, intersexuals, and transgendered people that require discussion of reasons to reject a biological essence of women—that is, stake (c) above. The focus here would be not on experiences and oppressions, but on who should 'count' as women, the role of bodies in gendered identity, and the degree to which heterosexuality is central to the definition of woman. Any traditional binary designation of men and women as exhausting the complexity of sexed bodies and gendered identity cannot stand up to the complex reality of the actual bodies and subjectivities of transpeople and intersexuals. No 'biological' set of characteristics can constitute necessary and sufficient conditions for being a woman (Fausto-Sterling 1992, 2000; Hale 1996).[15]

[14] Crenshaw's original use of 'intersectionality' did not include oppression on the basis of sexual orientation, age, disability/ability status, or similar factors. However, because the spirit of the concept includes more than oppression by race, class, and gender, I speak of it as encompassing a more open-ended range of oppressions. Because the open-ended list gets shortened as one writes, some intersections are not treated in this essay: e.g., oppression on the basis of disability/gender (see, e.g., Tremain 2005).

[15] My discussion of marking boundaries between women and non-women does not address the question of whether we need to mark the boundaries at all, and if we do not (or, indeed, if we cannot), what the subject of 'feminism' might be.

The other issue in stake (c) is whether heterosexuality is crucial to being a woman. If it is, then lesbians are not women. Although many people, including feminists, have the initial response, 'If lesbians are not women, who is?', Monique Wittig (1992) and others have argued that lesbians are not women.[16] C. Jacob Hale responds to Wittig with a Wittgensteinian analysis. Hale's conclusion (1996) is that some lesbians are women, and some probably are not; but that in any case heterosexuality (or any other single property) is not a necessary condition for being a woman. There is no space to lay out their arguments here. My own view is that the most helpful model to use in thinking of gender that will enable us to deal with the issues in 'stake (c)' is to see gender as a very untidy continuum, rather than focusing on the 'poles' of the continuum as we do now. Only in this way can the realities of the lives of transpeople, intersexuals, and lesbians not be erased or distorted.

Finally, Two Essentialists

Let us now turn to two feminist philosophers who believe that anti-essentialist proposals take us down the wrong road and argue that essences are, in fact, needed for feminists to succeed at their goals.[17] Martha Nussbaum and Naomi Zack explicitly want to retain 'essences' (both claiming to avoid typical feminist objections to 'essentialism', as Alcoff leads us to expect). Both of them desire the normativity that they believe derives from universal claims about women, but their projects are different. Nussbaum's project is to ensure that women are treated as fully human. Zack's project is to create inclusive feminism.

[16] Although we cannot pursue the important controversy over the centrality of heterosexuality to the category of woman, let me note an interesting irony. In the 1970s a 'woman-identified woman' was sometimes considered the paradigm feminist (Radicalesbians 1971). Such women need not be lesbians; a 'lesbian continuum' spans lesbians who in fact desire women sexually and other women who simply give women personal and political priority in their lives (Rich 1980). So imagine the surprise of many feminists to read Wittig's (1992) claim that lesbians are not women at all.

[17] There are other feminists who have offered interesting analyses; e.g., both Sally Haslanger and Linda Alcoff claim that women are an 'objective type'. Haslanger explicitly (2000*b*) speaks of necessary and sufficient conditions for being a woman, conditions that are socially constructed. Haslanger's analysis of woman in terms of social position is similar to MacKinnon's analysis in many ways, but is couched in an analytic philosophical style that makes each facet distinct (see MacKinnon 1989). Alcoff has proposed that women and men differ 'by virtue of their different relationship of possibility to biological reproduction' (2006: 172). I have chosen to discuss Zack because, unlike Haslanger and Alcoff, she explicitly rejects intersectionality.

Nussbaum (1995*b*: 96) believes, with MacKinnon, that 'Being a woman is not yet a way of being a human being'.[18] Nussbaum acknowledges that she is both an 'essentialist' and a 'universalist' as she goes about her project to ensure justice for women. Her strategy is to focus on a common set of capacities and functions that women and men around the earth have. The approach that Amartya Sen and Nussbaum take is well known: they focus on 'central human capabilities' that are not reducible to biology, theology, or metaphysics. Nussbaum argues that her version of essentialism and universalism is compatible with an account of capabilities that is at once normative, tentative, open-ended, a 'continuous sort of experiential and historical truth', and allows that the capacities put forth are 'differently constructed by different societies' (1995*b*: 74). Nussbaum believes that her capacities can account for all the diversity that feminists need in the struggle for worldwide justice for women. Nussbaum is serious about 'essences' in at least the following respect: she takes a very minimal, 'lower-level threshold' of capabilities (such as the need for food and drink, sexual desire, the cognitive capabilities of perceiving, imagining, and thinking (including practical reasoning, humor, and play, and so on)) to be necessary for being human. Although anyone with Wittgensteinian proclivities might worry about the strictness of these conditions, Nussbaum wants to ensure that one can't help including women as human beings.

Nussbaum opposes 'anti-essentialists' who focus on differences either among women or between men and women and seek 'norms defined relatively to a local context and locally held beliefs' (1995*b*: 63). We might call these opponents 'difference' anti-essentialists and 'local norms only' relativists. Neither is a fictional opponent, but the two differ from one another. However, Nussbaum is not opposing 'social construction'. She draws no stark contrast between 'capabilities' and 'social construction'; indeed, she acknowledges that our experiences of our bodies are culturally shaped (1995*b*: 76). Her concern is that without a sharp focus on the common set of capabilities women will continue to be socially constructed right out of the category of human being.

Naomi Zack also advocates a universal characterization of women and opposes anti-essentialist views that focus on differences among women, especially intersectional analyses. Her goal is to put forth an inclusive feminism

[18] Nussbaum cites MacKinnon's quotation from Rorty 1991: 231; MacKinnon's recent book, *Are Women Human?* (2006), bears ample witness to her position that women are still not treated as human beings.

suitable for 'universal advocacy for women's interests' (Zack 2005: 1). In contrast to Nussbaum's aim to make certain that women share all the capabilities of men, Zack is trying to capture the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a woman rather than a man: woman's essence. Her most concise statement of the essence of women is this:

> All women share the nonsubstantive, relational essence of being assigned to or identifying with the historical, socially constructed, disjunctive category of female birth designees [*F*], biological mothers [*M*], or heterosexual choices of men [*P*]—category FMP. Category FMP captures what women have in common as the imagined but real group that is the logical contrary of the group of men, in human male–female, man–women gender systems. (2005: 162)[19]

Zack's view is designed to oppose feminist theories and strategies that rely on intersectionality as a way of understanding multiple oppressions as well as similarities and differences among women. Zack believes that intersectional analyses have been bad for women because they lead to fragmentation, intellectual segregation, and lack of empathy. Intersectionality is a problem theoretically because its proponents, Zack believes, maintain that women in different ethnic groups have different genders. Thus both the practical and the theoretical consequences that she believes follow from intersectionality drive Zack to a universalist normative analysis of women. She, like Nussbaum, believes that only this kind of analysis carries sufficient normative weight to deal with injustice and oppression.

Although Nussbaum and Zack share an eagerness to claim the label 'essentialist' for their views and presumably believe that they are 'good', not 'bad', essentialists, can they meet anti-essentialist objections? The answer depends on the objection. Anti-essentialism based on postmodern rejection of this kind of discourse would apply squarely to both Nussbaum and Zack. Neither of them can meet postmodern objections, but they would both consider that a badge of honor! After all, they both believe that the positions of such critics harm crucial feminist projects. To consider other anti-essentialist objections, we must treat Nussbaum and Zack separately.

Nussbaum believes that universal human capabilities allow room for extremely wide variations of experiences and ways in which the experiences are shaped by cultures, so she fights back when she is attacked by

[19] I added the letters in italics for clarification. Zack spells out their meaning as follows: F—designated female from birth; M—biological mothers; P—primary sexual choice of [heterosexual] men (Zack 2005: 8).

anti-essentialists who focus on the 'wide varieties of women's experiences'. She believes that she is not inappropriately imposing 'Western' standards and values on women around the earth. There is no meeting of minds, however, because Nussbaum believes that anti-essentialists focus too much on differences, and they believe that Nussbaum focuses on them too little. Beyond that, Nussbaum's concerns do not mesh well with the usual feminist 'stakes' of the anti-essentialism/essentialism controversies: race and racism, how to define women in contrast with men, and so on. One could interpret this either as a partial success—namely, that she has avoided the 'bad' essentialism—or as a failure to engage with central issues. In fairness, however, not all feminists must have similar projects. Having a different project need not imply a desire to escape this set of issues. In addition, recall that Nussbaum's concern is not only with universal capabilities, but also with universal moral standards; the latter are at least as important for retaining her desired level of normativity as the exact character of universal capabilities. Nevertheless, Nussbaum's insistence on claiming the label 'essentialist' is at best misleading opponents to think that she's staking a claim that directly opposes their own.

Unlike Nussbaum, Zack's focus is precisely to engage the anti-essentialists on the intersectionality turf and to ground her analysis in metaphysics. In terms of stakes (a)–(c) that I identified earlier, Zack's analysis is designed to treat all three: racism/heterosexism, the diversity of women's experiences, and the need for a ground to attack a biological essence of women. (a) Her book is clearly motivated by her desire to prevent negative consequences by race. (b) and (c) Her double-layered disjunction, 'assigned to or identifying with F or M or P', is designed to deal with diversity among women and their experiences, as well as to deny that biology is a sole determinant of women. Since Zack wants to end racism and accommodates both the socially constructed character of women and their variety of experiences, there is much agreement between Zack and the anti-essentialists she is criticizing. But methods and metaphysics matter to Zack. My suspicion is that many of Zack's opponents would at best find her 'nonsubstantive, relational' essence to be of little use, either practically or philosophically, even if they understand the motives from which it stems. Of course, Zack is intent on showing the dire political and theoretical consequences of their disregard.[20]

[20] Zack has not yet responded in print to critics of *Inclusive Feminism*, her responses to members of a SWIP-sponsored panel on the book during the American Philosophical Association's Pacific Division meeting in March 2005 revealed that she takes her metaphysics quite seriously.

To my mind, the most controversial theoretical consequence of intersectionality concerns the proliferation of genders among women. It not only is controversial in itself, but also lends support to a position that could undermine gender as an analytical category. Zack takes quite literally that intersectionality implies that women of different ethnic groups (and presumably sexual orientations) have different genders. The best-known advocates of intersectionality do not state this, though it can be found in Elizabeth Spelman's similar position.[21] However, I want to argue that intersectionality need not multiply genders for each different ethnicity/race or social class; indeed, it does not make sense for it to do so. Intersectional analyses need gender, class, race/ethnicity to do precisely that—intersect. The individual axes must have some minimal degree of stable meaning for the analysis to work. If every intersection produced a new gender or a new race (or both!), there would be no way to make sense of the ways in which ethnicity affects one's gendered experience. As we noted earlier, those who favor intersectionality tend to favor it because it illuminates the wide varieties of women's experiences across other axes of oppression and enables them to find suitable remedies for multiple oppressions. The 'gender axis' needs to be intelligible across other 'axes', or there is nothing to appeal to in the explanation or remedy. Thus, not only does intersectionality fail to entail a proliferation of genders, its proponents should fight strongly against such a move in order for the theory to retain its power of explanation.

Is there not a simpler way than Zack's to deal with diversity? Yes. Wittgenstein's family-resemblance approach is both simpler and has the virtue of being able to incorporate intersectionality. Substitute 'woman' for 'number' in Wittgenstein's passage below.

> And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the *strength of the thread* does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres. But if someone wished to say: "There is something common to all these constructions—namely the disjunction of all their common properties"—I should reply: Now you are only playing with words. One might as well say: "something runs through the whole thread—namely the continuous overlapping of those fibres". (1958: §67; [my italics])

A family-resemblance analysis of 'women' will accommodate much more simply everything that Zack incorporates into her disjunctive 'essence' of

[21] Although Spelman's influential *Inessential Woman* (1988) does not use the term 'intersectionality', her analysis is intersectional in spirit. Spelman accepts plural genders for women. María Lugones also speaks in terms of multiple genders for women (2007).

women—except, of course, her metaphysics. Let's run through it quickly. Women differ at the same time as they have similarities; however, the similarities between some women will not be the same as those between others. This is why Zack starts with a disjunction, 'F or M or P', then adds a further disjunctive layer on top of it—'assigned to *or* identifies with F or M or P'. One of the factors that has traditionally been used most forcefully to categorize human beings as women is being a mother or at least having the capacity for motherhood. Most women have similar sets of reproductive capacities and physical features. (Hale (1996) notes that the absence of a penis is deemed fairly salient.) But those who don't have these capacities/features will have something else in common with the first group of women. They very likely think of themselves and identify publicly and subjectively as women and are treated as women by others. Even if heterosexuality plays an important role in the creation and maintenance of 'women' as we know them, lesbians are still women because of other characteristics that they share with other women—physical, subjective, social, and so forth.

The next step is to determine whether a family-resemblance analysis can adequately distinguish women from men. It can. We can mark the group of women without having necessary and sufficient conditions for being a woman.[22] To do so, we ask the *purpose* for which we are trying to find boundaries for the group. If a feminist is arguing for equal pay for women or comparable pay for 'women's jobs', she need not care about chromosomes or androgen levels. On the other hand, if a clinical drug trial measures different responses of men and women to a new cholesterol-lowering drug, then hormones and other physical factors matter more than social roles. Even if a critic of a Wittgensteinian approach finds far too much reliance on 'purposes' here, this approach works at least as well as Zack's in any case. Zack, after all, would need to choose which disjunct is most important for a particular context or purpose.

The final question is whether a family-resemblance analysis is consistent with feminists' need for normativity. Again, it is at least as good as Zack's view. Normativity is not just about metaphysics; it requires a moral component as well as something to mark off the category of women. Before we leave the category of women, let us note that not only can family resemblances mark off the category, but nothing about this analysis prevents women from

[22] Cressida Heyes (2000), using a Wittgensteinian approach, maintains that feminist practices should ground our categorizations of women. See also Scheman and O'Connor (2002) for a variety of feminist Wittgensteinian analyses.

being an 'objective type'—interpreted by Haslanger (2000*b*) as a type that is not a random or arbitrary collection of things. Both Zack and Wittgenstein get us this far. Of course, neither satisfies the moral and political facets of normativity. This should not surprise us, because metaphysical claims are not usually designed to fulfill the need for moral and political normativity. Such normativity rests instead on feminists' moral and political theories carrying the force needed to argue for justice and other forms of social change.

Concluding Remarks

As we close, let's keep in mind that in spite of the disagreements among feminist philosophers—whether over the value of the concept of intersectionality or in various debates in ethics or philosophy of science—shared motivations and goals underlie their work. They philosophize in a manner that engages with the world, specifically to help improve the lives of women in a way that is anti-racist and anti-heterosexist. As philosophers and as feminists they differ over the most useful theories for doing so. Such engaged philosophy presents great challenges. At any given time one must prioritize an issue to address—whether it is close to home or, increasingly, transnational or global—will it be heterosexist marriage laws in the United States, economic exploitation of men and women in the 'global south', rape of women during civil war, or something else? Yet, while analyzing gender oppression in rape or class exploitation in the global south, one must also attend to the ways in which privilege and oppression along other axes bear on the issues. The point of taking multiple axes of oppression into account is not simply to improve our theories. It is to help improve the lives of our fellow human beings by combating racism and heterosexism, as well as sexism. Social justice and morality require us to do so.

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