Purple Brains

Feminisms at the Limits of Philosophy

Edited by

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Contents

SECTION III
Thinking about Ethics, Love, and War with Arendt

Contributors

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Annemie Halsema is Socrates Professor of Philosophical Anthropology and the Foundations of Humanism at the Institute for Philosophy of Leiden University, and Associate Professor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities of the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. She has written two books on Luce Irigaray (1998 and 2010) and has published edited volumes on Judith Butler's work (2000 and 2021) and on feminism and Ricoeur (2016). She published articles in *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology, Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy, Women's Health Reports, The American Journal of Bioethics, Hypatia, Études Ricoeuriennes/Ricoeur Studies.*

Cris van der Hoek has been teaching political philosophy and media studies at Utrecht University and the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. She chairs the Society for Women in Philosophy in the Netherlands (swip) and is editor of the journal *Wijsgerig Perspectief.* She has widely published in the field of feminist philosophy and authored the monograph *Een Bewuste Paria* (Boom 2000), in which feminist philosophical dialogues with Hannah Arendt are staged and discussed.

Marli Huijer is Professor Emeritus of Public Philosophy at the Erasmus School of Philosophy, Erasmus University Rotterdam. Huijer studied Philosophy and Medicine (University of Amsterdam and Vrije Universiteit). She obtained a doctorate in philosophy in 1996, with a dissertation on "Aids and Michel Foucault's Aesthetics of Existence." Her research focuses on the public role of philosophy, order and time in human affairs (rhythm, discipline), the philosophy of science and technology, and gender and biomedical sciences. Her books include *De toekomst van het sterven* [The future of dying] (2022), *Beminnen* [To love] (2018); *Discipline* (in Dutch 2013; in German 2016), and *Ritme* (in Dutch 2011; in German 2017).

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Christina Schües is Professor of Philosophy at the Institute for the History of Medicine and Science Studies at the University of Lübeck and she is an Honorary Professor at the Institute for Philosophy and Art Sciences at Leuphana University, Lüneburg. Her research explores the intersection between phenomenology, the life sciences and the political, and theories of peace. She is known for her work on natality and her present research explores

strategies of immunization, ignorance, and indifference. Her recent publications include *Genetic Responsibility in Germany and Israel* (Colombia UP 2023), "Phenomenology and the Political – Injustice and Prejudges" (2018), "Vulnerability and Trust" (2020), and "La transcendance et les difficultés de l'ambiguïté" (2022).

Katrine Smiet is Assistant Professor at the faculty of Philosophy, Theology, and Religious Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands. Her research focuses on the history/historiography of feminist debates, intersectionality scholarship, and feminist pedagogies. She is the author of *Sojourner Truth and Intersectionality: Travelling Truths in Feminist Scholarship* (Routledge 2021) and has published in *The European Journal of Women's Studies* and *Postcolonial Studies*.

Beata Stawarska is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Oregon, USA. She engages with thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, Saussure, J. L. Austin, Beauvoir, Kristeva, Irigaray, and others. Selected publications include *Between You and I: Dialogical Phenomenology* (Ohio UP 2009) and *Saussure's Philosophy of Language as Phenomenology: Undoing the Doctrine of the Course in General Linguistics* (Oxford UP 2014). Her research focuses on embodiment, gender and sexual difference, race and anti-racism, expression and performativity, as well as on the historiography of linguistics and the making (and re-making) of an established canon of philosophy.

Silvia Stoller is Assistant Professor (Universitätsdozentin) at the Department of Philosophy at the University of Vienna, Austria, and at the Department of Educational Science at the University of Graz, Austria. She received her doctorate at the University of Vienna with a dissertation on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception (1992). She received a second PhD cum laude from Radboud University Nijmegen (the Netherlands) with a work on feminist phenomenology (2006). Her research areas include phenomenology, feminist philosophy, gender studies, feminist phenomenology, masculinity studies, and philosophical anthropology (pain, love, age, laughter, play).

Alex Thinius is a philosopher and interdisciplinary socio-cultural researcher, specializing in conceptions of sex-gender. In 2023, they are Rubicon Postdoctoral Fellow at the GenderSci Lab at Harvard University, researching "The Reconceptualization of Sexual Difference." Alex completed a PhD titled *Genders as Genres* at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis. They have since lectured at the Universiteit van Amsterdam in the departments of Literary and Cultural Analysis and Philosophy.

Anya Topolski is Associate Professor in Ethics and Political Philosophy at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands. Her current research focuses on the race-religion constellations in Europe, past and present. Related publications include: "The Race-Religion Intersection: A European Contribution to the Critical Philosophy of Race" (2018), and "Good Jew, Bad Jew... 'Managing' Europe's Others" (2017). Her most recent books are: *Arendt, Levinas and a Politics of Relationality* (Rowman and Littlefield 2015) and *Is There a Judeo-Christian Tradition? A European Perspective* (De Gruyter 2016). Her areas of expertise are racism, political philosophy, ethics, European identity and exclusion, antisemitism and Islamophobia, political theology, Jewish thought, Arendt, Levinas, and the myth of Judeo-Christianity.

Rose Trappes is a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Exeter, UK. Rose works in the philosophy of science and feminist philosophy. Broadly situated in the ontology and epistemology of biology, Rose's work covers topics such as individuality and individualized research methods, ecological niches, sex differences and sex-based explanations, data-intensive ecology, and open science. Some of her recent publications are "Defining the Niche for Niche Construction: Evolutionary and Ecological Niches" (2021), "Individual Differences, Uniqueness, and Individuality in Behavioural Ecology" (2022), and "How Tracking Technology is Transforming Animal Ecology: Epistemic Values, Interdisciplinarity, and Technology-Driven Scientific Change" (2023).

Desiree Verweij is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Ethics at the Netherlands Defense Academy and the Centre for International Conflict Analysis and Management at the Radboud University Nijmegen. Her research is on both fundamental and applied ethics and concerns themes like "moral judgment", "responsibility", "human rights", and the Just War tradition. Some of her recent publications are: "On 'Caritas' and the

Promise of 'Right Intent.' Back to the Roots of Justice in War" (2019),
"Mores Fare and the Resilience Paradox. Ethics as the Terra Incognita of
Hybrid Warfare," In *Violence in Extreme Conditions: Ethical Challenges in
Military Practice*, edited by E. Kramer and T. Molendijk. Springer 2023
(published on the occasion of her retirement as Professor of Philosophy
and Ethics). The last book she co-edited and contributed to was *Ethics
and Military Practice*, published in both Dutch (Boom 2020) and English
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Philosophy as Passion: The Thinking of Simone de Beauvoir (Indiana UP
1996), *Feminism and the Final Foucault* (edited by D. Taylor and K. Vintges,
University of Illinois Press 2004), *A New Dawn for the Second Sex: Women's
Freedom Practices in World Perspective* (Amsterdam UP 2017), *Beauvoir and
Politics: A Toolkit* (edited by L. Schoonheim and K. Vintges. Routledge 2024).

Introduction

ANNABELLE DUFOURCQ, ANNEMIE HALSEMA,
KATRINE SMIET, KAREN VINTGES

*P*urple Brains, the surreal connotations of this title are not lost on us. It saved us from the first title that popped up during a casual brainstorming: "Pink critical brains." Feminists today are engaging with contemporary prominent investigations into "brains" and "evolutionary structures", demanding both attention to new relevant material *and* critical caution. Both imperatives are exemplified in the contributions of our colleague Veronica Vasterling, who recently retired and to whom this volume is dedicated. Veronica worked in the philosophy department at Radboud University Nijmegen, for over a quarter of a century, most of the time being the only female academic staff member. Over the years, she has inspired many colleagues with her style of thinking, but also a large number of Bachelor, Master, and PhD students, some of whom also contributed to this volume.

Veronica's work is broad in character, encompassing not only the exploration of neuropsychology through a feminist lens but also extending into domains like the critical phenomenology of gender and race, critical hermeneutics,[1] and subjects including sexual difference, the philosophical oeuvre of Hannah Arendt,[2] and that of Judith Butler.[3] In her 1993 dissertation on Heidegger's critique of metaphysics, titled *Truth and Time in Heidegger's Thought*,[4] Vasterling posited that, with Heidegger, being emerges not as absolute essence but rather, as time, a perspective that involves the contingency of all things, including truth. Her subsequent work in the field of philosophical anthropology has remained profoundly influenced by this outlook, consistently maintaining a strong linkage with political philosophy. As one of the pioneering women philosophers active in Dutch academia since the mid-1980s, she explicitly expanded her outlook to encompass feminist themes and authors.

Over the past four decades, and particularly from the 1990s onwards, an increasing number of women have entered the realm of academic philosophy – a domain hitherto predominantly inhabited by white males. It

is no coincidence that since that time situatedness, body, emotion, and the link with literature as a source for hermeneutic and practical philosophy became important themes. Other ways women philosophers influenced the discipline was by introducing authors, such as Arendt and Beauvoir, into the philosophical canon, and critically rereading the canon, articulating thoughts and views of earlier philosophers that were backing their new perspectives.

Although feminist approaches found a foothold within the field, they also encountered hostility and resistance. Many feminist philosophers have reflected upon these hostilities, often characterized by a dismissal of feminist approaches as philosophy proper ("yes, that is interesting – but it is not philosophy!"). Veronica Vasterling notes: "For example, in 2000, people still thought Beauvoir was not a philosopher. Arendt was also seen as a maverick at the time because of her narrative writing style, and her use of many different sources."[5] Since then, things have slowly improved. Students became interested in the work of female and feminist philosophers, and female – and some male – philosophers started to teach on Beauvoir, Arendt, Butler, and Nussbaum.

Over the years, feminist philosophy has gained recognition as a field in its own right. But what exactly characterizes that field is not so easy to define or pin down. Feminist philosophy seems to always exceed its own limits – it is dynamic, shifting, and in dialogue with other academic disciplines. The – controversial – adjective "feminist" marks not so much a specific *subfield* of philosophy or *topic* that is studied, but instead designates a specific sensibility – an orientation or approach to practicing philosophy. A feminist lens can – and should – be brought to bear on any philosophical topic. But what this feminist lens then consists of and how it is mobilized is not self-evident or uncontested. Many may agree that it departs from a critique of hegemonic norms and oppressive power structures and aims towards changing society and creating a more just world. But what that means and how to practice it may mean something different for different people. For instance, when it comes to gender: feminist philosophers share a critique of dominant societal understandings of gender, which are often highly biologizing and essentializing (the idea of "pink brains" that the title subverts). But it is heavily contested what feminist conception of gender to put in its place. How to keep open the concept of gender and how to not fall into the trap of giving another stable definition? And how to do so in a way that remains grounded in the messy and imperfect reality?

This volume embraces cross-fertilizing approaches as a legitimate method for feminism. The key to philosophy, Veronica Vasterling emphasized more than once, is "the matter" (*de zaak*): "If the matter requires you to explore areas with which you are not yet familiar, you are to follow its lead." This dedication to the matter prioritizes experiences and issues we are struggling with, rather than fidelity to any one theoretical framework. This unsettling commitment to the matter is crucial to understanding the fate of feminist thinkers, as well as the connection shown in this volume between feminist thought, phenomenology, and hermeneutics – philosophical schools that return to the matter itself and warn against idolizing a theory. Now, what is the matter at hand in this book? We are concerned with the difficulty of finding one's place and the development of ways to understand and overcome discrimination and exclusion. Situated within a world we want to change, feminists cannot afford to reject out-of-hand unlikely interlocutors or to challenge interdisciplinary and intergenerational dialog. Such is the overarching approach that binds the 19 articles in this volume, as they engage in a dialogue with Veronica Vasterling's work.

The articles are categorized into four sections:

I

The first section, **Rethinking Feminism**, discusses some major feminist philosophers, such as Christine de Pizan, Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Angela Davis, in line with Veronica Vasterling's intense work in favor of women philosophers, their spaces, and feminist theory, among others in relation to antiracism. This section goes into the difficulties women have finding their place and explores the ways to understand and overcome women's discrimination and exclusion.

María Isabel Peña Aguado, in her article, "Room for Thought: Symbolic Space and Narrative Experience," argues for women to develop their own narrative and symbolic space, while recognizing their differences. At the dawn of the fifteenth century, Christine de Pizan dreamed about a "city of ladies." Almost five hundred years later, Virginia Woolf asserted women's right to "a room of one's own." Both authors believed that the time had come for women to have at their disposal a space of their own. Space, having a place of one's own, is not just a physical or geographical question. As the women of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective pointed out, this space must be understood in its symbolic meaning. In their testimony, it

quickly becomes obvious that the creation of such a space is essentially a question of voices, experiences, interrelations, and differences between women.

Beata Stawarska, in "Vulnerability and Violence: Transgressing the Gender Binary," discusses how the Black Lives Matter movement provided an opportunity for racial reckoning and spurred a timely debate about police abolition and/or reform. The feminist movement against gender-based violence and the feminist ethics of vulnerability are to be critically assessed from this perspective. The goal is not a dismissal of feminism *tout court,* nor does it underestimate the pandemic of interpersonal gender, sexual, and other forms of violence against women, accompanied by the potential or real threat of feminicide. Rather, the goal is a continued rapprochement between feminism and antiracism, Black empowerment, and de-policing; this integrated approach avoids the twin dangers of criminalization and carcerality and it confronts the pandemic of gender-based violence more effectively than the classical feminist approach. Stawarska follows the lead of contemporary Black feminist theory and practice, especially Beth Richie and Angela Davis, that better serve the intertwined emancipatory goals of empowering women and gender nonbinary individuals, *and* of de-policing.

In "What do Women Have to Do with It? Race, Religion, and the Witch Hunts," **Anya Topolski** argues that scholarship on the European witch-hunts, which occurred across Europe from approximately 1450-1650, exposes centuries of patriarchal violence, empowered by capitalism and colonialism. Topolski presents several race-religion constellations from the early modern period in which the newly established European Christian States sought unity and global supremacy through expulsion and colonization. She argues that this is the same historical space and place – or stage – upon which women were burned as witches. It is shown how the early modern witch hunts in Europe played a central, if often forgotten, role in this project of forming Europe as White Male and Christian. European Christianity, by way of colonialism, provides a blueprint for the exclusionary dehumanization that now serves as an epistemic and political foundation for much of the globe.

Karen Vintges, in her contribution, "Power, Sex, and Myth: Beauvoir, Paglia, and Peterson," compares the work on myths of the art historian Camille Paglia and the psychologist Jordan Peterson with Simone de Beauvoir's work, *The Second Sex*, a large part of which is on myths as well.

Whereas, according to Beauvoir, dominant myths about power, sex, and gender are historically determined, and therefore changeable, according to Paglia and Peterson, these myths are timeless and inescapable, constituting the "truth of history." Contrasting Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* with Paglia's and Peterson's approaches, Vintges evaluates to what extent this work still provides us with concepts that help us to better understand today's world. Finally, the author evaluates to what extent the work of Peterson can be seen as exemplary for current right wing populist parties and movements, showing us what their connecting principle is.

Christina Schües, in her chapter, "In Praise of Ambiguity," goes into the concept of ambiguity in the work of Simone de Beauvoir especially, building on Vasterling's work, which demonstrates that interrelating the work of Arendt, Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty enriches phenomenological and hermeneutic research. Schües argues in line with Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty that human existence is inherently ambiguous. She understands ambiguity as a non-universal ontology between self and other, deception and freedom, immanence and transcendence, and non-knowledge and knowledge. Her aim in the essay is to show that this irreducible ambiguity is also found in cases of inhibited intentionality and transgressive intentionality. The former is related by Iris Marion Young to women who have internalized the rules of not taking their space, while the latter is ascribed, for instance, to persons with dementia whose so-called "challenging" behavior may transgress their own space, intruding upon someone else's. An understanding of these different ways of embodiment and interactions with the person's environment requires a phenomenological approach that recognizes and explores the fundamental ambiguity of the human condition.

In her article, "The Gender that is None: Some Daring Reflections on the Concept of Gender in Beauvoir, Irigaray, and Butler," **Silvia Stoller** discusses three classics of feminist research. She aims to shed light on little-noticed parts of the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, and Judith Butler. Although all three are considered different theorists, they overlap at one point: one finds in their writings the idea that gender is basically not fully determinable, as in Irigaray and Butler, or that gender is basically not that important, as in Beauvoir. Whereas one expects gender theorists to foreground gender unequivocally, gender instead seems to somehow disappear, as is shown by three selected passages from their major works.

II

The second section, **Redefining Sex, Gender, and Intersectionality**, extends Veronica Vasterling's critique of the often essentializing neuro-psychological or biological approaches of current research into brains and evolutionary structures. It confronts these approaches with a perspective rooted in deconstruction, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and existentialism. From this vantage point, any reference to "sex" in terms of a different set of biological and physiological characteristics of males and females is questionable and open to discussion. Following in the footsteps of Judith Butler's theorization of gender, this section also delves into an intersectional approach to understanding gender dynamics and illustrates, among other aspects, how queer feminist philosophy and hermeneutic phenomenology can have cross-fertilizing discussions with the life sciences.

Rose Trappes, in "The Easy Difference: Sex in Behavioral Ecology," questions the way "sex" features in behavioral ecological research as a standard explanatory variable. Researchers often use sex to explain variation in a trait or phenomenon that they are studying. This practice is widespread, partly because sex is often easy to identify and often explains some variation, thus making it easier to discover and test other causal patterns of interest. Yet, sex also frequently fails to explain variation. Using a couple of recent examples, it is shown how the pervasiveness of sex as an explanatory variable is partly due to the structure of scientific research, including the use of data from large longitudinal studies, and generalization from previous studies. Researchers should more carefully assess and justify the relevance of sex to each new study, to avoid overgeneralization and the perpetuation of assumptions about sexual difference and its importance in biology.

Alex Thinius, in "Sex-Gender in Life-Science Research: Conceptual Renegotiations and an Enactivist Vision," discusses how researchers are increasingly acknowledging the urgency that the concept of "sex" be redefined. In contrast to concepts of sex-gender differences as stable and dichotomous, in current research on sex-gender, there is a growing consensus that sex is far more nuanced, variable, and interacting with gender in complex ways. The article aims to open up a research horizon for pluralist and dynamic concepts of sex, by looking at a family of theories that mediate between gender theories and the life sciences, potentially integrating complex systems theory and critical phenomenology: enactivism.

While endorsing the strength of this constructive integration, the author stresses that there is still great unexplored potential for reconceptualizing the sexes beyond grounding it on a sex/gender or male/female binary.

In her contribution "His and Hers Healthcare? (Strategic) Essentialism and Women's Health," **Annelies Kleinherenbrink** shows how mainstream policies, research, and campaigns that are focused on women's health have constructed and reified womanhood as a universal medical category, such that health disparities between women and men are assumed to be binary differences and to override, or at least precede, any other inequalities. In line with feminist theories that critique such appeals to universal womanhood, Kleinherenbrink argues that this strategy, while perhaps initially effective in creating a research agenda and gathering wide support for it, is ultimately likely to benefit only *some* (relatively privileged) women. More acknowledgement of intersectionality needs to be incorporated not as a disclaimer or future goal, but as a primary theoretical and methodological commitment.

Elaborating on Vasterling's articulation of a phenomenological notion of embodiment in Judith Butler's work, **Annemie Halsema**, in her article, "Cis- and Transgender Identities: Beyond Habituation and the Search for Social Existence," argues that Butler's theory of gender performativity is a starting point in need of supplements. One of these supplements is the phenomenological notion of bodily habit formation, another is an account of psychic gender identity. Performativity is not only linguistic but also habitual. Prior to the awareness of assuming a gender identity, the individual repeats movements and forms a bodily memory. Because habit formation allows for variance, just like performativity, gender – both in the case of cis and in the case of trans – is variant. In order to account for the experiences of transgenders, merely considering gender constitution in terms of repetition of social norms and bodily habit, however, is not sufficient. Another element needs to be taken into consideration, the "psychic" gender, which is the gender a person identifies with.

Finally, **Katrine Smiet**, in her article, "Light and Dark: Intersections of Race and Gender in Butler and Lugones," calls attention to the fact that an intersectional perspective on gender is widely supported, but often in an additive sense – looking at gender *and* race, or recognizing the different experiences of white and racialized women, for instance. While these approaches are important, actually recognizing the mutual constitution and co-construction of gender and race seems to demand a different

approach altogether. Where does this leave – or take – the theoretical apparatus developed in feminist philosophy? While race and coloniality do not feature prominently in Judith Butler's early theorizations of gender, her framework in many ways is compatible with the work of postcolonial author Maria Lugones. Butler's thinking, on the other hand, goes a step further than Lugones' in the questioning of biological essentialism.

III

For Veronica Vasterling, Arendt is "one of the most inspiring philosophers of her time, if not the very best." Her love for the work of Arendt is especially motivated by the way Arendt was able to synthesize all kinds of non-philosophical sources, including detailed historical research, into a philosophical perspective, rather than presenting an abstract or (quasi-) universalistic point of view. The third section, **Thinking about Ethics, Love and War with Arendt**, illuminates this special fecundity of Arendt's work with a particular focus on her concepts of plurality and natality.

Hannah Marije Altorf, in her contribution, "Rereading *Eichmann in Jerusalem*," tracks the dispute that emerged on Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), one of the most controversial works of the twentieth century. The focus of the dispute has changed over time, though one constant is the accuracy of the facts presented. Whereas the debate of the facts is important, it will not take away the controversy, because facts never appear in isolation, but are always part of an arrangement or larger story. What is more, such a dispute can hide some causes of the controversy. Altorf offers a reading of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* that considers two stories as pivotal, namely the stories about two Germans, Feldwebel Anton Schmidt and Probst Heinrich Grüber. The reading shows that Arendt's primary focus is on moral questions and moral collapse.

Desiree Verweij, in her chapter "'Amor Mundi' Threatened? War and the 'Darkness of the Human Heart,'" discusses what Hannah Arendt's concept of thinking means in a military context, as opposed to thoughtlessness in a military context, of which Eichmann, according to Arendt, was an infamous example. His inability to think will be contrasted with the ability to think of the – almost unknown – American soldier John Glenn Gray, as discussed in his book *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (1959), to which Arendt wrote a laudatory introduction. What did this mean in the context Gray found himself in? And what does this mean regarding Arendt's concept of "amor mundi," as the love and responsibil-

ity for a common world? Doesn't the deployment of military means, which, by definition, makes room for the destructive forces of the "homo furens", as Gray suggests, threaten this "amor mundi"?

Marli Huijer, in her article, "At Home in the World: Hannah Arendt's Transposition of Saint Augustine's Concept of Love," relates Hannah Arendt's dissertation on the work of Saint Augustine with her later works. Huijer highlights the incongruities Arendt found in Augustine's love concept, and how she developed her own thinking of love for the world in response to it. Augustine distinguishes between *cupiditas* and *caritas*, disordered love for worldly things and well-ordered love for the eternal. Arendt, however, points out that, in search for the future *summum bonum* of eternal life, we turn away from the present and become disconnected from the world in which people live together. How can a person in God's presence, and separated from the mundane world, love their neighbor? Huijer furthermore explains why Arendt, in her later works, keeps on referring to Augustine while distancing herself from his ideas, and how she reinterprets Augustine's *initium*. Huijer argues that important Arendtian notions, such as plurality and natality, find their origin in her critical reading of Augustine.

Aoife McInerney, in her article, "Feminism and Understanding: An Arendtian Account," discusses Hannah Arendt's concept of understanding in light of how it addresses experiences of being alienated from the world and helps to overcome those experiences. Understanding to Arendt is an unending activity by which we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, and try to be at home in the world. This is the existential and alienating condition of those who recognize themselves as the victims of – and even the unwitting perpetrators of – systems of oppression. Arendtian understanding means to reconcile one's self to the times in which one lives *without* having to accept them and, as such, aligns with the experiences of feminists.

IV

The articles gathered in the fourth section, **Reconsidering the Political**, continue a long tradition emphasizing the necessary intertwining of morality and politics to bring about tangible change in an age marked by ideological manipulation and the loss of political categories and moral standards – a cause to which Vasterling has made an important contribution through her research on Arendt, Beauvoir, and Fanon. This section

discusses the contours of an emancipatory and meaningful politics based on an existentialist and hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective. This section investigates imaginative political means of emancipation and shows how Arendt's work can contribute to ecological thinking today.

Marieke Borren, in her article, "From the Politics of Compassion to Imagination: Hannah Arendt on Collectivized Affect," goes into Arendt's belief that compassion is a bad counselor in political affairs, especially when it comes to refugees, the poor and low-skilled workers. Today, many theorists of affect are committed to progressive politics and do not just *analyze* the affective dimensions of collective political action, but moreover, *valorize* the "collectivization" of emotion as serving emancipatory causes. In stark contrast, affects, in Arendt's view, are a poor ground for solidarity, engagement with one's fellow citizens or human beings – who typically are "anonymous" others most of the time – and for political community. This reticence has caused many readers to accuse Arendt of either heartlessness or rationalism. However, instead of loving or pitying human beings or the Other – *amor homines* – Arendt advocates a much cooler and distant care for the *world – amor mundi*. Imagination, representative thinking and care for the world are Arendt's timely alternatives for the politics of compassion.

Cris van der Hoek, in her chapter, "From *Animal Laborans* to *Animal Agora*: Hannah Arendt and the Political Turn in Animal Ethics," goes into how Arendt's political-philosophical thinking can be a source of inspiration for the so-called "political turn" in animal ethics that is advocated by many animal activists and eco-philosophers. At first sight, such inspiration is not at all evident. In Arendt's *The Human Condition*, the animal is only addressed in relation to the (biological) activity of (reproductive) labor. Political action is the sole preserve of human beings, as the ability to act is explicitly related to plurality and the public sphere, in which humans appear to each other and disclose themselves in word and deed. In Arendt's later work, however, plurality is no longer merely conceived as a human condition. Rather, as Arendt writes, it constitutes the law of the earth itself. Reading Arendt's thinking alongside the work of Donna Haraway and Sue Donaldson, it could be deployed to enrich and deepen our thoughts concerning both the encounter between human and non-human animals and the appearance of animals in the public space.

Johanna Oksala, in her contribution, "Climate Change as an Existential Threat: Environmental Politics in the Shadow of Nihilism," argues that climate change is not only a political problem in the obvious sense that it cannot be solved without profound transformations in political and economic practices and forms of global governance, but also a political problem in a deeper, existential, and ontological sense: responding to the climate crisis adequately requires a politics that is able to confront and work through the nihilism that this crisis generates. Oksala suggests that Veronica Vasterling's reading of Arendt brings to the fore the specific meaning of "politics" at hand here. Considered through an Arendtian lens, climate change is a political problem in the sense that it fundamentally threatens current modes of life, and thus calls for the creation of new meanings which can sustain our world. Hence, environmental politics should not be reduced to pragmatic problem-solving; it should be understood as an existential project of safeguarding the stability and dignity of the common world.

    Annabelle Dufourcq, in her article, "Puppets' Uprising: Passive Active Ethics Within the Trap of Play," argues that, given the all-pervading structure of play, it is impossible to break away from play, and yet, trying to put a halt to play is actually key to morals. This is also a major political issue at a time when play has become a patent and constraining social structure: adaptability, malleability, and distance are encouraged in the covertly highly oppressive society of "coolness" (Baudrillard). How can we make room for ethics in the framework of an ontology of play? Dufourcq discusses Sartre's idea that love for (or resignation to) play is the scantiest and most ineffective response of the oppressed to oppression. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty presents irony, distance, and vulnerability as virtues and, under certain conditions, the only possible source of genuinely effective *and* meaningful actions.

Notes

1   Cf. Vasterling, V. 2003. "Postmodern Hermeneutics? Towards a Critical Herme-
    neutics." In *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer*. University Park,
    edited by L. Code, 149-80. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University
    Press.

2   Cf. Vasterling, V. 2007. "Cognitive Theory and Phenomenology in Arendt's and
    Nussbaum's Work on Narrative." *Human Studies* 30, no. 2: 79-95.

3   Cf. Vasterling, V. 1999. "Butler's Sophisticated Constructivism: A Critical
    Assessment." *Hypatia*, 14, no. 3: 17-38.

4   Vasterling, V. 1993. "Waarheid en tijd bij Heidegger," Dissertation, Vrije
    Universiteit Amsterdam. Open access: https://www.researchgate.net/publica-
    tion/241866825_Waarheid_en_tijd_bij_Heidegger

5   This quote, along with subsequent quotes, has been extracted from an inter-
    view with Veronica Vasterling d.d. 24-03-2022.

Rethinking Feminism

Room for Thought: Symbolic Space and Narrative Experience[1]

MARÍA ISABEL PEÑA AGUADO

"Los espacios, pues, cuando de la «mujer» se trata, no son lugares que toman su significación de sus proyectos como personas [...] sino que vienen pre-significados en base a su codificación por quienes los han diseñado en los pactos mismos que cobran trama en el mecanismo serial de sus autodesignaciones, autodesignaciones que por las cuales se instituyen, ante todo, en codificadores y adjudicadores de espacios [...] el patriarcado puede ser considerado como un sistema de adjudicación de espacios" – *Celia Amorós*.[2]

The experience of thinking, analysed from the perspective of intellectual women is a theme I have been working on for some time. Two issues immediately called my attention. First, the paradigmatic value which the figure of the intellectual woman represents in explaining the distinct moments in the awakening of feminist consciousness. And second, the lack of a proper space, a place in which she can develop herself both as a woman and as an intellectual.

I will approach this topic from the premise that, as long as the feminine condition lacks its own symbolic space, women's voices will not be heard. Until we have found and created this space, we will continue to be trapped in the cave of shadowy utopias and potentialities, with difficult forays into the terrain of proper reality, a reality which requires a linking and unifying of past traditions and future projections, underpinning our present day-by-day.

I will begin by discussing why the figure of the intellectual woman seems to me paradigmatic. I will continue with the question of space, using the examples of two women intellectuals: Christine de Pizan and Virginia Woolf, both of whom insisted so much on the necessity of creating a space for living and developing the feminine condition. Thirdly, I will take up the thread in the present from the hands of the women of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective who have "lived" in practice that merely the obtaining

of a proper physical space does not solve the deficiencies of the feminine condition, unless a symbolic space is gained at the same time. Yet, for the expression of such a symbolic space, we do not have an adequate translation. Given that, as the Italian women remind us, it is impossible to speak of a feminine experience if the images of the language represent an experience that is not our own. To explain this situation of "non-translatability", due to the lack of equality between discourses, I will succinctly refer to Jean-Francois Lyotard and his theory of the *differend.* Finally, I will briefly discuss the concept of *affidamento* (entrustment), utilized by the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, to describe a type of feminine relationship of support and mutual recognition. My intention is not to define or review this concept, but to explore it as one more possibility in the search for a space in which the feminine condition can develop.

Before I begin, I would like to explain briefly what I mean by the "feminine condition", an expression which still today arouses a significant amount of suspicion. It should be sufficient for me to paraphrase Hannah Arendt, who, in her book, *The Human Condition*, says: "To avoid misunderstanding: the human condition is not the same as human nature, and the sum total of human activities and capabilities which correspond to the human condition does not constitute anything like human nature" (Arendt 1998, 9-10).

In the same manner, it can be considered that to speak of the "feminine condition" does not mean to expound on the nature of the feminine, but rather to allow us, in feminist theory, to gather several experiences and activities usually considered feminine (in Western cultures at least), such as maternity, and also the way in which women are –and had been – socialized or maintain their social relationships, without this being understood as a form of essentialism. This is a fundamental and controversial question in feminist theory that would require more dedication than it can be given in this paper.

Woman and/or Intellectual

The paradigmatic value of the intellectual woman lies in her potential as an ideal figure for understanding not only discrimination in the socio-political sphere, but also the ostracism suffered by women's experiences, above all in the cultural realm, where we still find many of the venues for the transmission of ideas and experiences, and which are fundamental for

encouraging the emergence and development of what we call "tradition", closed to us. The figure of the intellectual woman is also useful in revealing a more personal type of process – albeit one very susceptible to over-generalization – in which can be traced an awakening of the feminine consciousness, the development of which coincides with that of feminism and feminist theory. This process begins with a moment of confidence and security in her own capabilities, notwithstanding a certain amount of misogyny towards other women who are less able, or who have resigned themselves. In the next stage, a certain astonishment arises – so characteristic of thinking – when the response to her intellectual desires is, on the one hand, a subtle roadblock and, on the other hand, a regression to a "feminine condition" which women thought they had escaped. Here we confront the dualism with which Western thought organizes its categories and in which the feminine appears on one side, associated with concepts such as nature, the irrational and the emotions, and overshadowed by that which is considered laudably human, i.e. reason, the life of the spirit, and so forth, which are identified with the masculine.

Uneasiness and rage accompany the demands for equality and the search for feminine models in which to find support. Disillusion is greatest when the search for tradition devolves into archaeology. It is when one looks at the landscape of a feminine tradition and discovers it discontinuous, disconnected and disjointed that the claims to difference and the critique and deconstruction of the cultural models and traditions constructed by men begin. Moreover, to vindicate the different experiences of women means to recognize that, "although the same things happen to us, we are not all the same," to paraphrase the Argentine comic strip writer, Maitena.[3] A similar process has occurred in the evolution of feminist theory, in response to the theories which propounded equality, followed by the forceful defense of differences within the feminine, at the same time provoking the need to analyze exactly what the feminine is, in order to recognize finally that there are many ways of being a woman.

Spaces

The question of space is closely linked to the figure of the intellectual woman and does not lack a certain historical tradition, as we see demonstrated in the "city of ladies" which Christine de Pizan dreamed about at

the dawn of the fifteenth century, or the right to "a room of one's own," which Virginia Woolf asserted at the beginning of the twentieth century. Almost five hundred years separate these two writers, yet the great similarities in their visions and propositions for reform continue to surprise us. Both authors justify their projects with the explanation that the time has come for women to have at their disposal a space of their own.

Christine de Pizan begins *The Book of the City of Ladies* (2018) by recounting that she is seated in her study, surrounded by books. Tired of intellectual work, she seeks distraction in a book which contains a series of platitudes about women and asks herself how it is possible for most poets, scholars, philosophers and moralists to have such a manifestly abhorrent view of women. In her despair, Christine desires to be a man. Disconsolate and head bowed, she weeps in her study. Suddenly, a light illuminates her. Before her appear three women, noble, beautiful and elegant, who calm her, encouraging her to use her critical thinking and her common sense.[4] The three women are Reason, Justice and Virtue, and they communicate to Christine that she has been chosen as the architect of a city of ladies (Pizan 2018, 119-29). In this city, all women will be able to dedicate themselves to the cultivation of their inclinations and preferences without interference, since this city will serve to protect women and provide them with a favorable environment. The raising of the citadel will begin with the gradual demolition of masculine prejudices. The consolidation of its walls will be found in the examples of women of integrity, valor, and fighting spirit, that is, by means of the memory and vindication of a feminine tradition. Once built, the city will be open to exceptional women elected to live within, who will inhabit the city for eternity and establish a new reign of women.

In *A Room of One's Own* (2015) Virginia Woolf, seated by a river, muses on the subject of women and literature. Like Christine, she reflects on how much men have written about women and the little that women have written about themselves. Feeling herself incapable of coming to any conclusion, the only possibility that occurs to her is that of attending to one particular problem, which she defines as a minor one: "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that [...] leaves the great problem of the true nature of women and the true nature of fiction unsolved" (Woolf 2015, 3).

The modesty of Woolf, when compared to Pizan, is significant and probably the fruit of a more democratic attitude since, while Pizan opens her city only to distinguished women, Woolf underscores the "insignifi-

cance" which has characterized the feminine world. This is perhaps why she insists so much on having a proper space to begin with. Fundamental as this is, it is only a beginning – if we cannot also find the possibility of our voice resonating out to others and reverberating back to us in modified sounds and with different nuances. This is precisely where the question of symbolic space becomes relevant, in very close connection with the issue of language. We, philosophers and thinkers, know the degree to which the paths of discourse lead us to the realities where we can reflect and see reflected our own experiences, as well as those of other women.

Symbolic Space

The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective has had no other experience as they describe in their book *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice* (1990), in which they claim that the '"room of one's own", as described by Virginia Woolf: "must be understood differently, then, as a symbolic placement, a space-time furnished with female-gendered references, where one goes for meaningful preparation before work, and confirmation after" (Milan Women's Bookstore Collective 1990, 26).[5]

   In their testimony – which reviews the experiences and feminist endeavours of diverse groups of women over more than twenty years – the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective recount with lived immediacy, a search for space and a symbolic order which represents women's experiences and ways of inhabiting the world.[6] It quickly becomes obvious that the creation of such a space is essentially a question of voices, experiences and interrelations. Let me explain: voices which narrate history without fear of breaking the silence so frequently counselled to women and which – and this is fundamental – put these histories at the disposal of other voices that not only repeat them, but at the same time interpret them. It is a process of thought in which lived experience – primary material, as much as the elaboration of it – has a strongly plural character, to the point that many of these texts were published under collective authorship. In their group practices, the Milan women are a good example of the Arendtian notion of power, defined not as something possessed by a single person but rather as something which emerges between human beings when they interact and which disappears when they separate (Arendt 1998, 199-202). The great importance of tradition in our socio-cultural configuration – that is, in our form of seeing

and being in the world – reveals that the power dynamics of ideas, meanings and symbols,[7] are also maintained, thanks to our participation in the linguistic exchanges we all share, or rather that all – both men and women – *ought* to share.

The lack of access to a discourse, in which is also implied the lack of space where one can be, or – what amounts to the same thing – the imposition of a discourse which cannot express or reflect other ways of being and other identities – was the first premise of the so-called "postmodern condition", which the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard diagnosed as characteristic of our time. Lyotard dedicates his book, *Le Différend* (1988), to a discussion of the insoluble conflict between the diversity of discourses, and he analyses a situation of conflict impossible to resolve due to the lack of criteria for establishing justice, in the sense of being able to chain together the different discourses, without losing any part of them. Thus, any judgment or decision will inevitably lead to the detriment of one of the parts; the only escape is silence (Lyotard 1988, 48-9).

If one reads carefully the different experiences narrated by the Milan Women, one can see that many of their "discoveries" can be described in the same manner as Lyotard – the verification of the lack of a symbolic order in which one can see oneself reflected or by means of which one can "translate" one's experiences as a woman. This "non-translatability" is a function not only of an incompatibility with the masculine social and symbolic order but also reflects the impossibility of creating symbolic connections with other women mediated as they are and, in some cases, boycotted by the masculine order (Milan Women's Bookstore Collective 1990, 127). The discovery of the differences between the women themselves reproduced the same succumbing to silence – which, as we may remember, is also a form of discourse – as the only means of expressing the lack of representation which some women continued to suffer, in spite of coming together regularly as a collective that was ready to represent their experiences in theory but not in practice. Their silence suggested a feeling of being treated unjustly.

To seek reparation and to convert this search into a political practice only leads to the awareness of a conflict, very similar to that defined by Lyotard (cf. Lyotard 1988, 30) and which is unsolvable for the same impossibility of finding a projection of this injustice in the discursive-symbolic world that fails to provide adequate relationships for recounting the experience and reality of women. As the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective says:

"We have also seen the demand for redress become a sort of female politics; in this version, on the assumption that they are all equally victimized by male society, women turn to the latter for redress. The response to such demand is usually positive; society has no problem in admitting that women are victims of a wrong, although it then reserves the right to decide according to its own criteria how they will be compensated, so the game may go on forever." (Milan Women's Bookstore Collective 1990, 128-29)

The model of political exercise and of theory followed by the Milan Women also made use of story and narrative – opening the traditional concept of theory to new forms of discourse – which can serve as reference and guidance to the real experience of women. But, in contrast to Lyotard – and this is essential – the Milan Women do not take an idea of justice as a point of departure. This is for two reasons: First, because, as I have already noted, they reject the idea that any reparation is possible, for it cannot take place in the symbolic realm, which is where a true reparation must occur. Second – and in logical consequence to the first – because the idea of justice is not the main priority in the context of women's relationship with one another:

"Justice does not come before everything else. Fidelity to what is, to what one is, comes before everything else. The practice of disparity among women is not justice or injustice, but something which comes before and concerns the interpretation of sexual difference." (Milan Women's Bookstore Collective 1990, 132)

Assuming that "sexual difference" does not indicate so much an essential trait which conditions our existence but rather a way of being in the world which accepts that "sexual difference is partiality; it is a sign of finiteness, the most powerful sign marking thought as corporeal" (Milan Women's Bookstore Collective 1990, 149). From this perspective, justice can only be understood as a consecutive moment which enables the expression of this difference in "free social forms" (132). The most pressing question, then, is to ask what kind of freedom we are talking about and what its forms of social expression are. It turns out to be extremely difficult to convey this experience of finitude and partiality without establishing a symbolic space in which this sexual difference can become an experience that can

be shared by all women in their social relationships; a symbolic space that begins with the physical place of the bookshop, passing through the encounters and conversations between them, and which ends in the recognition of a symbolic maternal order that mediates the women's relationships with each other.

The propositions of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, surprise, frighten and irritate for their radicalism, since, taken to their logical conclusions, they suppose a total reconstruction of the symbolic-social order which begins with a retrogression to a prior point of departure, including "the time when sexual difference receives its first interpretation" (144). This is essential if one keeps in mind that so-called sexual difference does not consist "in this or that content but in the references and relations inside which existence is inscribed" (31). It is crucial to rescue this previous moment in order to allow these relationships to reflect what women have lived since the beginning.

This is no other than what Reason recommends to Christine de Pizan who, before building the citadel, must begin with systematically deconstructing the masculine order (Pizan 2018, 66). Only after that can she begin to construct a new order, the new space, the new city. In the same manner, the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective asserts that, "the politics of sexual difference does not come *after* the equality of the sexes has been achieved" but rather, it is one based on and accentuating a feminine liberty won and founded on the social relations between women (Milan Women's Bookstore Collective 1990, 144-45).

The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, always attentive to the "practice of doing among women" (81), identifies a specific model of friendship among women who share mutual support as well as a recognition not only of the authority of one of them but also, and in particular, of the differences between them. The practice of this type of relationship they have named *affidamento* (entrustment), a term which implies confidence, trust, faith and fidelity, and whose theoretical meaning is difficult to understand, without the concomitant political practice, because *affidamento* names precisely the exercise (praxis) of these relationships and not the relationships themselves.

At the individual level, *affidamento* exists between two women who exercise a relationship of validation, esteem and recognition of feminine authority. It is not a question of closed relations, or dependence, but rather, "it is offering and asking from female human experience the

means of signifying its true and great existence in the world" (149). But it is at the socio-political level where the practice of *affidamento* acquires its symbolic force as reflection and transmission of women's experience, which then acquires a value that had been denied until now, thus contributing to the "foundation of a female social authority" (148).

Conclusion

In the search for a space for intellectual women, the practice of *affidamento* (entrustment) presents itself as an attractive and revolutionary path, since it is in the cultural realm where the force and support of a feminine tradition is most absent, and which would be present from the beginning if we did not have to go on reconstructing it at every turn.

This reminds me of that statement of Isaac Newton: "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants" (Turnbull 1959, 416). The metaphor is sufficiently explicit to suggest what might be the result of the lack of such giants. Many of us have experienced, at one time or another, how immensely helpful feminine support can be. Nevertheless, we still find it difficult to imagine such a practice. And the fact that it takes great effort for women to imagine this seems to corroborate the lack of a symbolic space that reflects and transcends feminine relationships, as the Milan Women emphasize.

However, it should be noted that the rules governing the male order have been established by mechanisms along the same lines as those used by the Milan Bookstore Collective. Newton has no problem in relying on his predecessors and their knowledge, experiences and mistakes to advance his own ideas. The women, however, require an effort to imagine the figure of the female mentor or tutor. More difficult still is to imagine – or even accept? – the maternal figure. Thus, the intellectual woman still finds it difficult to accept and acknowledge feminine authority. Christine de Pizan laments that it has not been possible to learn more from her father, and the women she elects to the city of women are not really maternal figures, but rather exceptional ones, whose exceptionalism manifests itself in a behavior and a set of values clearly inscribed in the masculine order.[8]

In surveying the examples with which Pizan wishes to shore up the walls of the city, what draws our attention are the acts of extraordinary heroism required of the founders, and the fact that such heroic acts are

valued and governed by a code that does not correspond to the reality of women in the early fifteenth century.

The fact that the women of the Milan Bookstore Collective recognize the difference – even the inequality – between women themselves and turn it into a form of political practice is both novel and peculiar at the same time. The proposal to regulate this difference through mediation by a "symbolic mother" which, in turn, is reflected in the practice of *affidamento,* arouses great mistrust. It has also awakened significant rejection on the part of those who consider it important to gain greater representation within the existing symbolic order, without the need to create a separate one. With reference to the image of the "symbolic mother," which the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective wishes to be the guarantor, for the continuation of women's experiences, it has been noted that this entails a certain infantile regression in some relationships, where one of the women whose authority is recognized is converted into that of a symbolic mother. There is also a certain fear of founding a parallel order and renouncing participation in the already established order, which, in the end, is the one that governs the world. These critiques are based on the prejudice that claiming certain practices and the figure of a symbolic mother would mean, once again, reducing women to women-only spaces and functions, such as motherhood. The fear is that it would be a return to an essentialist model of woman, as long promoted by patriarchy.

What these detractors do not take into account is that the Italian model promotes just the opposite – to leave behind the devaluation of women by patriarchy, to create and establish relationships between women who are disparate in their ways of life, projects, etc., and to create a symbolic order that brings together all these experiences to guide and help women in the recognition of their own desires and experiences. Far from creating a relationship of dependency, the practice of *affidamento* appeals to women's own responsibility and freedom.[9]

Indeed, we are still enlisted in the task of seeking our own representations. Within the established order we lack "languages" that signify us. The alternative to searching for these languages to express our experience results in difficulties precisely because of the lack of models which allow us to "imagine" something different (Cavarero 1995, 157-58).

The practice of *affidamento* could be one alternative, or at least it points in a stimulating direction. However, it is necessary to note that it operates from an already established model, since that is the manner in which the

present symbolic order has been maintained. That means it is a model very similar to the masculine one.

Thus, by taking it up again, we are in a way also blowing it to pieces, since we can re-signify what has hitherto been valued as "insignificant." The question which could be asked is why is there this need for signifying feminine experience, that is, if it merits the effort involved. If we go in search of other spaces, should we not also change the paradigms of value and signification? It's a difficult task. To pay attention to experience in order to guide our thinking is an important step.

However, we must remember that, in the case of the experience of women, it is necessary to sift through to arrive at what is really ours, so as to ultimately desist from employing models which, alien as they may be, are the only ones available to us. Returning to a zero point of origin appears impossible, particularly if the origin is one only. For what we call our experience equally involves those models we wish to exorcize, as was seen when discussing the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective. How to escape from this vicious cycle which threatens to asphyxiate us? As I have already stated, the key is to acknowledge our own experiences as women and, even more relevant, to be aware that we do not speak or use a neutral objective language (Cavarero 1995, 184). I suggest a strategy of *pre-vision* in the double sense of what the word means and also suggests: it expresses both an attention to what is transferred to the future but also suggests, by the constitution of the verb, being conscious to previous visions and to the origin, appearance and context of the images, ideas and symbols they carry (Peña Aguado 2021, 52).

Notes

1   I had the pleasure of meeting and working with Veronica Vasterling during the time we were together on the board of the Internationale Assoziation von Philosophinnen (IAPh, The International Association of Women Philosophers). Those were years of intense work in favor of women philosophers, their spaces and the feminist theory. The question of spaces for women is still relevant, both in the academic and social world. It is a right that continues to be challenged, either because sexual difference is questioned for the advancement of gender theories, or because attempts are made in different ways to intimidate women and to reduce their presence in public space – currently in the form of pin pricks at parties and entertainment venues.

2   "Spaces, then, when it comes to 'woman', are not places that take their significance from their projects as persons [...] but are pre-signified on the basis of their codification by those who have designed them in the very pacts that are woven into the serial mechanism of their self-designations, self-designations by which they are instituted, above all, as codifiers and adjudicators of spaces [...] patriarchy can be considered as a system of adjudication of spaces."

3   Maitena, *Mujeres alteradas*, *por fin las 5 juntas*, Madrid, Lumen, 2005.

4   Christine de Pizan was – no doubt – a woman of the Enlightenment *avant la lettre*! Cf. Bourgault and Kingston 2018, 25.

5   The original authors were Libreria delle Donne di Milano and the title of the book, *Non credere di avere dei diritti* (1987).

6   In general, and without entering into more concrete discussions about the meaning of the symbolic – I am thinking of Jacques Lacan and his well-known differentiation between the real, the imaginary and the symbolic – we can define the symbolic as the process and the way in which an individual subject participates in the procedures of signification and re-signification of an abstract, cultural reality. Already, from early childhood, we begin to develop abstract thinking through language (including mathematics), plays and culture, as well as to understand the value and meaning of representations through symbols. From its beginnings, feminist theory has denounced the extent to which this symbolic order has ignored women and their contributions to the signification of reality. Far from being recognized as subjects of these representations, they have been objects of them. But it has been the feminism of Sexual Difference, to which the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective belongs, that has insisted most on recovering and creating a feminine symbolic order that would recover the symbolic value of the mother, as well as the importance of relations between women, in order to find a new language and feminine genealogies and also to recognize the differences between women themselves, their desires and experiences. It is this search for a female symbolic order and a place for its development that I am referring to when I speak of symbolic order and symbolic space. In the book, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective does not offer a specific definition either of this symbolic space, nor of the "symbolic of women," but it is often mentioned. Creating a symbolic space for women means building a web of relationships between women who, at the same time, recognize the differences between themselves. Entrustment (*affidamento*) is the name of this form of relationships. Highly recommended and very helpful in understanding the different concepts that emerge in the feminist practice

of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective and their "symbolic revolution" is the introduction written by Teresa de Lauretis, "Sexual Difference and Feminist Thought in Italy: An Introductory Essay" (1990) that accompanies the English translation of the book.

7   I am aware of the close connection between these three concepts, but here I am interested in pointing out their differences: The concept of the "idea" is related to our own knowledge and imagination, "meaning" has more to do with the significance and definition that we share with others and "symbols" are things or objects which, by convention or association, are considered to represent an entity, an idea, a certain condition. This "representation" is relevant in this context, then women have been the object of representation but not subject of it.

8   Lauretis calls it "the paradox of woman" and underlines, among other things, the extent to which women are trapped in a world tailored to and ruled by men (Lauretis 1990, 12).

9   Lauretis has pointed to this pre-eminence of relations between women, which she describes as an "accountability to women." On their conception of women's freedom, she portrays this as "as startlingly radical a notion as any that has emerged in Western thought" (Lauretis 1990, 12). Cf. Lauretis 1989.

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Vulnerability and Violence: Transgressing the Gender Binary

BEATA STAWARSKA

The recent murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, as well as the countless other unarmed ordinary Black men and women, brought racialized police violence in the US into sharp focus. The Black Lives Matter movement that was galvanized in response provided an opportunity for racial reckoning, and it spurred a timely debate about police abolition and/or reform. As racial reckoning extends from political activism into the sphere of public education and academic scholarship, centered most notably around Critical Race Theory, I propose to critically engage with the feminist movement against gender-based violence and the feminist ethics of vulnerability. I will consider whether this influential feminist theory and practice advance the emancipatory efforts of empowering Black lives and curbing the anti-Black violence of the criminal and carceral state. My proposed critical assessment is not a dismissal of feminism *tout court,* nor does it underestimate the pandemic of interpersonal gender, sexual and other forms of violence against women, accompanied by the potential or real threat of feminicide. Rather, the goal is a continued rapprochement between feminism and antiracism, Black empowerment and de-policing; this integrated approach avoids the twin dangers of criminalization and carcerality, and it confronts the pandemic of gender-based violence more effectively than the classical feminist approach. I follow the lead of contemporary Black feminist theory and practice, especially by Beth Richie and Angela Davis, that better serve the intertwined emancipatory goals of empowering women and gender nonbinary individuals, *and* of de-policing.

Picture the following scene: a woman is overshadowed by a menacing male figure. She neither fights nor flees in response; instead, she appears to be shrinking in expectation of the blows to come. This is how the UN portrays violence against women. On the one hand, a vulnerable victim; on the other, an evil villain who has assumed a birthright to the use of force: https://interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/infographic/violence againstwomen/en/index.html

The UN infographic reflects a widespread view in contemporary white feminist literature that vulnerability is a virtue, while violence is morally condemnable. Vulnerability indicates an embodied and ethically salient aspect of human life. Foregrounding vulnerability holds the promise of liberating us from the neoliberal illusion of self-sufficient, entrepreneurial subjectivity and of exposing basic bonds that tie the self to the other. If vulnerability is a gateway to ethical coexistence, so the argument goes, then interpersonal violence poses too great of a threat to communal bonds. We can only counter violence with the force of nonviolent resistance. The feminism of vulnerability thus understands violence in the same way as the state: it is an illegitimate and dangerous force that poses a threat to the rule of law. The state thus retains a monopoly on the use of force, even when it is excessive, and the monopoly on the definition of violence as an external and eliminable threat.

Butler's *Force of Nonviolence* (2020) is a recent example of the white feminist view. To the central question guiding the analysis, namely: should those on the left engage in violence to oppose state violence (especially racist policing, prisons, and deportations), Butler replies in the negative. Violent response propagates violence; it mirrors, and does not transcend, what it opposes. Violence is an assault to our relational bonds, and even self-defense is suspect insofar as it supposes a pre-existing regime of the self. Instead, Butler champions the force of nonviolence, a "militant pacifism" (borrowing Einstein's phrase) grounded in emotional ambivalence, including rage and aggressivity, rather than the idealized virtues of "peace and love." The opposite of destructive violence is not a "useless passivity," Butler writes, but a forceful, organized, and emotionally charged resistance. One mustn't fight back, but one may, for example, enact resistance by building a human barricade. At the same time, the vulnerability advocated by Butler as an ethically salient alternative to violence is a vulnerability "to being dispossessed, abandoned, or exposed in ways that may prove unlivable," for example, by failing social institutions. Yet, it is hard to see how dispossession, abandonment, and exposure to insufferable conditions can alone provide a path of resistance in the ways Butler describes.

Throughout this critique, Butler does not provide a definition of violence – namely, of what needs to be opposed. The author emphasizes the semantic slipperiness of the term, and the propensity to use it to discredit the dissidents of state power and to abject racialized groups. Violence is

routinely projected by state actors onto the presumed "threatening Other," as routinely happens in the case of the unarmed and harmless Black men and women in the US. Butler occasionally mentions the systemic and structural violence that often remains invisible and unnamed, and which, presumably, if the view holds, will be eliminated by the force of nonviolent resistance. Yet, throughout the analysis, Butler uncritically assumes a criminalizing conception of violence that is both unequivocally harmful and ultimately eradicable. In doing so, Butler assumes the statist definitional monopoly on violence: the state has a monopoly on violence, defined as a legitimate use of force (*Gewalt*), and violence is an illegitimate activity by non-state actors.

This statist definitional monopoly was developed in detail in Walter Benjamin's *Toward the Critique of Violence* (2021) [*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*, 1921]). According to Benjamin, the state monopolized violence in the inaugural moment of founding laws and subsequently preserving them (this is, respectively, the so-called law-founding and law-preserving violence of the state). Mobilized as the engine of the rule of law, state violence was retroactively transformed into legitimate power to which the illegitimate counter-violence of the dissidents (such as the revolutionaries, and the strikers) would be opposed. On this philosophical-critical view, violence emerges as a dangerous and destructive power only from the perspective of an authorized agency that monopolizes violence *and* disguises its own violent operations as the simple enforcement of the rule of law. Since Butler uncritically assumes an unequivocally condemnatory view of violence, including the violence of self-defense, she gives permission to the state to criminalize all forms of real or projected disturbance to the rule of law.

Consistent with Butler's ethics of nonviolence, the white feminist movement against gender-based violence resorted primarily to the criminal legal system (policing and prisons) for a response. It thereby unwittingly re-entrenched the anti-Black violence of the carceral system against perpetrators, as well as survivors, of gendered violence – especially when survivors actively defend themselves against their attackers (see: "The Critical Resistance: INCITE! Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex" in Davis et al. 2022). The feminist anti-gendered violence movement has therefore been likened to a *carceral* feminism, that is, "an ideology that identifies criminalization as the most legitimate 'solution' to gender-based violence, and is then used to justify prisons, policing, and war as 'feminist' and pro-human rights institutions" (#Survived

and Punished: Survivor Defense as Abolitionist Practice, 28). Carceral feminism encourages ordinary citizens to capitulate to the sovereign authority of the administrative state in all matters of everyday interpersonal conflict. Its habitual chant is "Call the cops!"

Carceral feminism tends therefore to exacerbate the problem of anti-Black violence in the US. It capitalizes on gendered and racialized tropes assumed in the UN infographic of defenseless femininity, stereotypically white, an easy prey of gendered violence, who structurally depend upon protection by a paternalistic state and/or by male guardians. Black masculinity is seamlessly scripted into the role of an attacker, a looter, and a rapist, within a pre-existing constellation of social tropes that pit white innocence against Black criminality. The legal defense of Derek Chauvin (the white police officer who murdered George Floyd) knowingly, if unsuccessfully, exploited these social scripts; it invoked Chauvin's sentiment of fear in response to George Floyd, a Black man who is blatantly misperceived as actively resisting arrest despite being immobilized under the white policeman's knee and lying asphyxiated on the ground. To undo the social construct of a dangerous Black man – the screen of white paranoid projections and the target of deadly, state-supported, violence – feminists must actively disrupt the overarching enabling gendered and racialized worldview. The criminal Black man is a companion construct to white innocence, and the latter prominently features stereotyped white womanhood.

Carceral feminism unwittingly re-entrenches the patriarchal norms of white fragility that undergird white racial supremacy. Since white women are socialized to not fight back when placed in situations of presumed or real danger, their male "protectors" can invoke female defenselessness as a pretense to unleash deadly violence against men of color. The latter are therefore routinely exposed to the "Black rapist" or "Black peril" stereotypes that justify mob and police violence against men of color in the US and elsewhere in the world. As Angela Davis documents, the defense of white womanhood from Black men's presumed irrepressible sexual urges became the rallying cry for lynching, once the formerly invoked specter of Black political and economic supremacy lost its currency (Davis 1983, 185-86). The cry of rape made quick work of mobilizing mobs to rescue or avenge "their women." As Davis writes, "In a society where male supremacy was all-pervasive, men who were motivated by their duty to defend their women could be excused of any excess they might commit" (187). These excesses targeted especially men of color, insofar as they were a

direct expression of white gender ideology, with its binary hegemonic hierarchy of masculinity and femininity, which was pervasive, particularly in the 19th century, but legible in contemporary times. According to this ideology, men require control over women to be considered real men, while women are socially and sexually submissive (Hill Collins 2005, 192). Black masculinity was foregrounded as a manifest threat to white men's proprietary privileges, as well as to white women's historical stance of wardship. The lynching propaganda in post-Reconstruction US effectively weaponized white womanhood in the service of protecting white society from social change, and white women typically complied with a construct that offered social and economic advantages of membership status. Many white women actively participated in the lynching and socialized their children to the spectacle of Black suffering (see Davis 1983); others issued and failed to retract false accusations of sexual misbehavior by Black men.

Carolyn Bryant used fabricated accusations to unleash white male violence against Emmet Mill, a Black teenager who was brutally murdered by two white men in Mississippi on the pretense that he had whistled at her at a department store. The 1955 incident (subject to a current FBI investigation) evidences that feminine vulnerability was mobilized as white capital to justify the murder of Black men and to preserve white supremacy in the Southern states during the reconstruction period. Mill's killing belongs to a long history of "racial hoaxes" (Russell-Brown 2008) – dangerous false accusations against Black people made to the police. In May 2020, Amy Cooper proceeded to call 911 in response to a request made by a bird-watcher, Chris Cooper, to leash her dog, as per the NYC Central Park rule. She cited the familiar pretense that "there is an African-American man threatening my life," and thereby knowingly used the capital that comes with the perceived white women's vulnerability to Black men. Women who call on their protectors, who may be kin or cops, on such fabricated charges are complicit in the anti-Black violence of a majority white society deployed "on their behalf." The insistence on the inherent vulnerability of white womanhood, and the implied need for paternalistic protection, sustains the trope of racial peril in the modern age and it fails to delink feminism from anti-Black racism. Feminists need to undo the interlinked social stereotypes of endangered white femininity, predatory Black masculinity, and white male chivalry in order to end white racial supremacy.

Carceral feminism condemns all forms of violence, including the expression of physical force that may be involved in effective self-defense

in situations of mortal danger. Such a blanket condemnation problematically criminalizes the actions of women who defy the white patriarchal norm of feminine defenselessness and choose to fight back when under attack. Consider the story of Marissa Alexander, MBA, a Black woman and a self-described "empowered survivor defendant." A mother of three, she was violently attacked in 2010 in Jacksonville, Florida by her abusive, estranged husband, who tried to strangle her and prevent her from escaping her home nine days after she gave birth. When her estranged husband threatened to kill her, Alexander fired a single warning shot upwards into the wall. Even though her husband admitted to the attack, Alexander was arrested and charged with aggravated assault with a deadly weapon. She was denied the "Stand Your Ground Immunity" around the same time a jury used it to acquit George Zimmerman for murdering Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager. Tried by a jury, Alexander was sentenced to 20 years in prison. When, following a highly visible campaign, her legal team appealed the guilty verdict, the prosecutor threatened to triple the original sentence into a 60-year mandatory sentence in a new trial. Faced with this threat by the criminal legal system, Alexander was coerced into a plea deal of three years behind bars (which included the time served) and two years in house detention. She was finally freed in 2017 (#Survived and Punished: Survivor Defense as Abolitionist Practice).

Alexander describes the paradoxical condition of being a Black Woman targeted by gendered violence in the US in the following way: "If the violence is unabated, we risk losing our lives. If we defend ourselves, we risk losing our freedom" (*Ted Talk*, "Not Another Victim"). In other words, women like Alexander are faced with the choice of passive submission to domestic terror, ensuing in likely harm and death (in the US, three women die of domestic violence per day, and women of color are disproportionately affected; 137 women are killed per day around the world). Alternatively, if women like Alexander survive, they risk being exposed to cruel punishment by the state legal system that criminalizes domestic violence survivors who fight back against their abusers. Women like Alexander are presented with a forced choice between intimate victimhood and carceral bondage; both options deny them a right to a dignified life.

Feminists who unequivocally condemn violence contribute to criminalizing survivor defendants like Alexander. Their condemnatory stance fails to recognize the moral right to protect endangered life, even when the defendant deliberately avoids causing harm to the abuser (Alexander

fired a warning shot upwards into the wall). While seeking to "be better" than resorting to violence, carceral feminists advocate vulnerability as a presumed strategy of resistance. But, in the case of women like Alexander, this means to advocate a dangerous and deadly surrender to the abuser, a *necro*-vulnerability that further victimizes women targeted by gendered violence. When the state does not protect you, and home is an unsafe space, women like Alexander have the right to reject the stance of moralized victimhood and are morally empowered to fight back.

When women fight back, they do not simply save their own lives. As survivor *caregivers*, they protect vulnerable dependents against the harms of familial neglect and abandonment. In contrast to an earlier view that aligned maternal care with an aversion to violence (Ruddick 1995), women enact care in conflict situations, including military combat, by actively shielding others from harm (Scheper-Hughes 1993). Furthermore, when women assume a socially recognized capacity to use force, destructive violence directed at their social world vastly diminishes (Hollander 2009). Engaged in a *physical* feminism (McCaughey 1995), women, as a group, transcend an internalized self-perception as easy prey, a pre-victim, a dual object of paternalistic protection and abuse. Trained in self-defense, they may exude what some experts in martial arts refer to as an "aura" – a confident presence of a skilled initiate that is likely to deter an attack. Women's *honor* changes status from a by proxy virtue of chastity to an agentive moral conduct guided by self-esteem.

As Beth Richie argues, the us antiviolence movement was predicated on a white feminist analysis centered on a falsely inclusive category of "everywoman," which did not incorporate an analysis of race and class. This erasure "seriously compromised the transgressive and transformative potential of the anti-violence movement's potentially radical critique of various forms of domination. It divorced racism from sexism... and invited a discourse regarding gender violence without attention to the class dimension of patriarchy and white domination in this country" (Richie 2005, 53). The "everywoman" uncritically assumed in antiviolence theory became practically embodied by a white middle-class woman who enjoyed easy access to and could count on support from medical, counseling, and legal services. As a result, gendered violence perpetrated against non-white, low-income women was either rendered invisible to the public imaginary and mainstream media, or it became construed as something different than violence related to gender in particular. Impor-

tantly, gender is not considered "a central, defining... identity" for women and girls who may, for example, be involved in gang activity, incarcerated, using drugs, or lesbians of color. In these cases, "the master category" of race and class overshadows the analysis; the women themselves are de-gendered and denied a claim to gender oppression (ibid.).

Richie's critique of the "everywoman" construct powerfully demonstrates the pitfalls of founding antiviolence theory and practice on a socially untheorized and *de facto* assumed white, middle class, woman. As argued above, stereotyped white womanhood is complicit with state and mob violence against the criminalizing construct of a "big Black man." Following Richie, the former is also consistent with the exclusion of non-white women from varied socioeconomic backgrounds from the consideration of vulnerable status in the face of gendered violence – including institutionalized, criminal and carceral violence (see Davis 2016 on how carceral violence targets trans women in particular). This erasure of gender for the class of women who are constructed as a "special case" and not the standard norm constitutes another harmful consequence of assuming the construct of a fragile white femininity within mainstream antiviolence work. The overtly racialized but de-gendered construct of a Black woman who, like Marissa Alexander, engages in self-defensive violence, is a negative image of the stereotypically gendered, learned feminine defenselessness; a woman who actively shields herself and her dependents from an attacker fails to register as "everywoman" through a white-centric patriarchal lens. If she refuses to embody the "vulnerable woman versus violent men" binary, she is at risk of being cast as a willful perpetrator, rather than target of societal violence and may be criminalized and incarcerated as a result. That is why recovering radical feminist work is vital to inclusive and effective antiviolence efforts. Radical feminist work follows the lead of Black feminists in antiviolence theory and practice. As Richie concludes: "Feminist women of color need to step forward as never before, reclaiming our place as leaders, both in the anti-violence movement, and in the struggles for gender equality in our communities" (Richie 2005, 55). Important radical work is already underway in abolition feminism and the concerted efforts to end the carceral state (Davis et al. 2022).

Radical feminist work includes all womxn, trans and non-binary individuals who have collectively taken leave of the vulnerable woman construct that still haunts carceral feminism (note the change from "women" to "womxn" in INCITE!). It involves transgressing and transforming gen-

der ideologies beyond the twin female-male as well as, I propose, the vulnerable-violent binaries. Importantly, vulnerability does not protect women – not even the members of the white, middle-class; it consigns them to a life of internalized victimhood, a paralysis in the face of violence, and a wardship stance in the family and the state. Arguably, women who actively transgress the gender ideology of feminine defenselessness risk being punished by the family and the state; a skeptic could argue that you are damned if you do (accurately perform white standards of womanhood), and damned if you don't – so why take on a seemingly greater risk of fighting back and lose the moral advantage of perfect victimhood? Perfect victims typically don't end up in jail. However, the risks that womxn face for transgressing stereotyped womanhood expose the crucial role the latter plays in preserving the rule of white racial patriarchy in society; the gatekeepers respond with a backlash to a contestation of who has the right to enact violence and who has the duty to suffer it. If one adopts a prospective approach, beyond the immediate present response to gender transgressions, one may begin to envision a world where punishing women for failures of femininity has lost all currency, incentive, and intelligibility to everyone involved.

That is why radical feminist work involves, I propose, transgressing and transforming the received meaning of violence as a male prerogative. Another understanding, consistent with the etymological connotations between violence, life and vitality, is that of a morally cultivated bodily force – which is in agreement with Fanon's later theory (Stawarska 2020). This transgressed and transformed "violence" is nonbinary – it transgresses traditional borders of womanhood but does not succumb to a mirage of invincible, heroic virility. It is not a denial of vulnerability *per se*, but an acknowledgment that many lives are steeped in an atmosphere of everyday violence, which requires morally responsible everyday strategies of survival, beyond a cultivation of shared vulnerability. "Violence" in a new (and effectively very old sense) is a life-affirming force that protects without perpetuating danger, destruction, and death. I propose that a nonbinary understanding of violence, echoing a nonbinary understanding of gender, may be helpful in advancing radical feminist anti-racist work.

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What Do Women Have to Do with It?[1] Race, Religion, and the Witch Hunts

ANYA TOPOLSKI

In this essay, I will explore the intersection of gender, race, and religion in relation to the concept of dehumanization. Dehumanization is possible when a group with power, symbolic and material, denies the full humanity of another group, based on a constellation – i.e., a particular set, or relation – of markers of difference. With regard to antisemitism, since the long 19th century, these markers of difference have been based on biology and sought "scientific" legitimacy. Even without explicitly referring to Jews as lesser or "non-human" or Aryans as "super-humans," the Nazis – both through their words and deeds – dehumanized Jews, among other excluded groups. Most dehumanization is expressed by the exclusion of a particular group from a specific (political) community, or their subsidiary status within that community. Antisemitism and racism in general – be it cultural, biological or another expression thereof – is a form of dehumanization.

Markers of difference used to deny a group's "humanity" have varied, and continue to vary, across time and space. For example, in Europe, and prior to the 15th century, these markers of difference were based on Christian theology; non-Christians were dehumanized and excluded from the Christian political community. While many of these markers of difference to identify people as Jews or Muslims were invisible, theological laws made them visible by, for example, requiring non-Christians to wear prescribed items of clothing (as in Canon 68 of the Fourth Lateran Council, 1215). A question of great importance is what logic legitimizes the selection of these markers of difference and how has this logic changed over time and space? How does the contemporary exclusion of Jews and Muslims from the European political community differ – in terms of its "logic" – from that of the 13th century?

It is my contention that there is a logic to this global and structural exclusion which is not accidental. This, of course, does not mean that there are no differences – global and temporal. Dehumanization is a matter of degrees, which indeed leads to many forms of exclusion, ranging from othering, lesser human, sub-human, non-human and so on. I also would argue that the same hierarchy is what creates, and justifies, the logic of supremacy, by defining a particular group as superior or "super-human." In my previous research, I focused specifically on the entanglement of race and religion or, more specifically, Whiteness and Christianity, as distinct markers of supremacy/difference (Topolski 2018). In my research on race and religion, I focus specifically on how European Christianity, by way of colonialism, provides a blueprint for the exclusionary dehumanization that now serves as an epistemic and political foundation for much of the globe. This racialized Christian/non-Christian binary, which I investigate in relation to antisemitism and Islamophobia (past and present), complements and intersects with a vast body of critical scholarship on race, focusing on the racialized binary of the DuBoisian "colour line."[2]

In this essay, I highlight one particular intersection with gender by means of the European witch hunts which occurred across Europe, from approximately 1450-1650 (Larner 1986; Barstow 1994; Federici 2004). Scholarship on the "witch hunts," including much recent feminist scholarship inspired by Sylvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), is flourishing and has exposed centuries of patriarchal violence, empowered by capitalism and colonialism. Likewise, intersectional research on race and gender has blossomed in recent years, across a range of disciplines, and has shown, beyond a doubt, the structural relationship between racism and sexism (Crenshaw 1991; Belkhir and Barnett 2001; Mccall 2008). In what follows, I will only briefly be able to explore this entanglement. I begin by presenting several race-religion constellations from the early modern period, in which the newly established European Christian States sought unity and global supremacy through expulsion and colonization. This is the same historical space and place – or stage – upon which women were burned as witches. In this way, I show how the early modern witch hunts in Europe played a central, if often forgotten, role in this project of forming Europe as White, Male and Christian.

16th Century: Unifying White Christian Europe through Expulsion and Colonization

In the 16th century, the Catholic Church responded violently to challenges to its power and authority. Internal to Europe, this led to the wars of religion and a theological schism within the Church. External to Europe, there was murder, colonization, and the enslavement of the peoples of Africa and the Americas. Both were perceived to be threats to Europe's epistemic and political supremacy, justified in terms of the superiority of Whiteness and Christianity. Europe, as an idea or project, constructed itself as White and Christian in this period by means of the exclusion and elimination of those defined as "Other" (Goldberg 2006; Boyarin 2009; Topolski 2020). This served to further justify their dehumanization and the violence that enabled Europe to become as powerful – politically and financially – as it did in this period (and which continues to benefit Europe today).

Let us begin by looking at what was happening within Europe's borders. In this early modern period, by way of the Inquisition, a partnership formed between theological and secular powers as the state expelled Jews, and later Muslims, from the Iberian Peninsula, including those that had previously converted to Christianity. Materially, this was a very significant financial benefit to the Church and Crown. Epistemically, during this period the term "race" first became used in relation to "pure-blooded" "true" Christians (*limpieze de sangre*), free of either Jewish or Muslim "impurity." This is an early modern example of how race and religion form a constellation. It is also worth noting that the Inquisition served to reinforce the Protestant myth of the Black Legend, in which Catholic Spain and Portugal were characterized as "Blackened" (and thus as savage, sexualized and/or uncivilized), due to the presence of Jews, Muslims and Africans – yet another example of the race-religion constellations. Partially due to the successful propaganda of the Black Legend, and the myth (which persists today) that the most violent persecution of women, by the way of witch hunts, happened in Southern Catholic Europe, much less is known about the racial, religious, and gendered projects of Northern Christian Protestant Europe, which will be explored in the following section.

In addition to the production of "pure-blooded" states in the Iberian Peninsula, northern Europe – by means of the religious wars – also formed religiously homogenous states. While scholars continue to debate the exact numbers, between the 16th and early 18th centuries, as many as

10 million Christians died in the European wars of religion (or "true religion" wars). These wars were materially motivated but epistemically and theologically justified in relation to who possessed the "true" religion and who, therefore, would be saved. *Vera religio* ("true religion") has its theological roots in Augustine, who wrote *De vera religione* in 390 CE, in which he argues that only the truth of God can lead one to freedom. This theological position is politically instituted, via the power of the Church, in the *"extra ecclesiam nulla salus"* doctrine of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) – which meant there is no salvation outside of the Christian community. The "religious wars" were about which "Christian" community was true – and thus to be saved – and were legitimized in terms of dehumanization, based on theological salvation. For the Catholic Church, many Protestants were to be damned, and vice versa. This also led to the first refugees, Protestant Huguenots who sought refuge from Catholic France in the Netherlands. In this way, an exclusionary binary was constructed between who is saved and who is damned, thereby defining who was to be valued as fully human (and who is lesser or non-human). The exclusionary binary logic, I contend, is the basis of all forms of racism and yet another example of the race-religion constellations.

This would eventually lead to a second schism within Western Christianity and the formation of the homogenous (in terms of religion and race) state in Europe, marked by the Peace of Westphalia. The "solution" to political and physical violence in Europe was first conceived of in Augsburg, in 1555 (*cuius regio, eius religio;* "whose realm, his religion"). The first form of the nation was thus defined, according to which form of Christianity one took to be true, and which was fundamentally linked to one's soul and humanity. This political peace, which created sovereign states with distinct theological-political constellations, enabled many of the non-Catholic denominations of Christianity to be accepted, at least in theory, as forms of Christianity, which was judged the only true religion. This new paradigm of political communities was formally institutionalized at the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which led to the structuring of new states in the form of nation-states. This is the foundation and blueprint for our current "secular" (neo)liberal democracies which, while masked, are also examples of race-religion constellations.

While Christian Europe found relative peace and unity through commerce and colonialism, the religious wars led to the expulsion and murder of hundreds of thousands of non-Christians in Europe, who were not in pos-

session of either acceptable forms of true religion – in other words, for non-Christian "peoples," such as Jews or "Mohammedans."[3] The view that non-Christians were human beings to be considered as subjects in any sense "equal" to Christians was itself highly contested. Non-Christians were most often viewed as barbarians, "lesser beings," or as "non-human." The view propagated in Europe among theologians, whose political influence was still strong, was that non-Christian peoples had false "religions" making them inferior to Christians and possibly not-human. Moreover, as recent scholarship on conversions in medieval and early modern Europe demonstrates, even with conversion, non-Christians (as opposed to pagans, heathens, heretics, and so on) were never fully trusted and included in the Christian community (Tartakoff 2012; Yisraeli and Fox 2017).

This view of non-Christians also applied to those outside of Europe, with whom Europeans "interacted" within the context of colonialism, missionary work, or trade. One early link between "biological" phenotype, these "religious" categories, and colonialism was the Hamite justification for slavery. According to this theological story, Canaan's descendants are cursed because their father, Ham, sees his inebriated father, Noah, naked.[4] Their curse, which is to be the "lowest of slaves" (Genesis 9:25), was linked to the phenotype of darker skin as a sign of inferiority to the sons of Japheth (with whom Europeans identified). The "curse" of Ham, who was symbolically designated as the forefather of all Africans, was used to "justify" much of the barbarity of colonialism, especially to those who believed their mission (as Christians) was to "civilize" the continent.

While the focus of this brief essay is on Europe, it is essential to recognize how race-religion constellations traveled globally by means of the century-long partnership between White Christianity and colonization. Symbolically marked by the year 1492, this global entanglement is well documented in the 1552 Valladolid Debates (in Europe). The central concern of this theological debate, between Bartolomé de las Casas (1474-1566) and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1494-1573), organized by the Church, is about the nature of the "beings" living beyond the border of the Christian world – are they animal, human, or something else? Do these "beings" have souls and can they be "saved," or not and can they thus be enslaved and/or exterminated? This "debate" about people with "no religion" mirrors the debate within Europe about non-Christians who had a "false religion." For de las Casas, "Indians" did have a soul and could be saved, whereas for Sepúlveda, they didn't and, as such, could be both enslaved

and exterminated.[5] One thing both scholars agreed upon was how Black Africans had seen the light of Christ but had rejected it – like Jews and Muslims – and had chosen rather to continue their courtship with the devil and, for this reason, could not be saved. The conclusion of the Valladolid debates regarding Africans also affected those perceived as Arab, or Semitic Muslims, and, specifically, Black Moors in the Iberian Peninsula.[6] According to the logic of the times, Muslims in Europe, who were often phenotypically darker, had rejected Christianity, the "true" religion, serving to justify expulsion, colonization, and possibly, extermination.

En-Gendering the Race-Religion Constellation

Before considering how the witch hunts are entangled with race and religion, and because of the general silence regarding these events, some background might help. Given that the period defined as the height of the witch hunts in Europe (there were also witch hunts on other continents) ranges from 1450-1650, we cannot expect to have accurate historical records. Based on current research, we can be certain that at least 200,000 people were accused (80% of whom were women). Of those, we have at least 100,000 written documents attesting to their execution (85% of whom were women). We can thus conclude, regardless of the exact numbers, that this was a gendered genocide against primarily White European women, the vast majority of whom were identified by the Church to be Christians (at least, until they were possessed by the devil).

The race-religion constellations from the early modern period presented in the previous section demonstrate how the blueprint for peace and unity in Europe is based on the constructed epistemic superiority of White Christianity and its use to justify both political violence and ontological inferiority, expressed through colonization and racism. What wasn't explored was how this intersects with gender. To explain this, it is necessary to add herstory to history, which I will do by means of a brief analysis of the European witch hunts. The witch hunts demonstrate that Europe did not construct itself only as White and Christian, it also constructed itself as superior because of its masculinity, a superiority that both authorized and justified the dehumanization and subjugation of women. The gendered nature of the witch hunts is deeply entangled with Christianity which, in the early modern period, began to define itself

through Whiteness, specifically with notions of holiness and purity.[7] Witches were – most often through their assumed sexual contact with the devil – seen as evil, an evil associated with impurity, sexuality and race that was the justification for their dehumanization. Race here refers to both groups who were non-Christians and/or non-Whites, racializations that of course intersect, as was the case with the Black Moor.[8] With "witches," who were most often identified as "fallen" Christians, it was their gender that supposedly made them "weaker" and thus more susceptible to the devil, a weakness that implicitly made their commitment to Christianity more precarious. For Jews and Muslims, they were already explicitly associated with the devil and thus impure and hyper-sexual.

An interesting example of this intersection is to be found in the crime of *maleficium* (magical practices). This crime was codified by the Church (via the Teutonic kingdoms) in the 8th century, in response to the presence of Muslims on Christian soil (e.g., Arab conquest). Many European slaves were tempted to convert as this offered them the prospect of freedom. This crime was introduced by the elite in Europe in response to the advance of the Saracens (Chejne 1983, 115-32). In 1487, this law attracted resurged interest from the elite and the Church due to the publication of the *Malleus Meleficarum* (Hammer of Witches), written by a Catholic clergy man, which endorsed the torture and murder of witches who were a threat to Christianity due to their practice as midwives, sexual relations with the devil, and lost souls. It was the second most sold book in Europe for over 200 years; the first, of course, being the Bible. A possible reason for this was that it was filled with sexualized pictures of almost naked women. Within years, "sorcery was once again declared a form of heresy and the highest crime against God, Nature and the State" (Monter 1976, 11-17 [as quoted in Federici 2004, 163]).

Another interesting fact for theologians is that while the numbers of accused were almost as high in Lutheran/Calvinist countries as they were in Catholic countries – the number of executed witches was significantly lower. This can be partially explained in terms of different legal/secular systems, although there is more evidence to suggest that this was due to the role of the devil in Catholic vs. Protestant theology. What is clear is that "the violent breakup of the unity of Christendom led not only to a creative religious ferment within both Protestantism and Catholicism but also to massive religious confusion, anxiety, and suspicion as well; not all of this

was focused against the other faith, part being defused through witch-hunting" (Barstow 1994, 60).

The connections between the persecution of non-Christians, in particular the Jews, and witches, also played itself out in relation to sexuality. Jewish synagogues were often called "Houses of Satan," or brothels. Witches, according to the "myth," gathered on the Sabbath to engage in sexual relations with the devil, which enabled him to possess their souls by means of orgiastic practices with wild beasts and evil demons. Another connection was that of menstrual blood – it was claimed that Jewish men bled and that Jewish women gave birth to 366 children per year, according to Peter the Venerable, 11th century.[9] Prior to the 16th century, this blood was a curse but was not interpreted to be a sign of evil. When linked to witches it was taken to be the visible sign of an evil nature (perhaps due to relations with the devil). The Church's fear of magic was not new – what was new was how, in the early modern period, it became gendered, racialized and violently persecuted and, in so doing, became a shared project of Church and Crown, helping to unify them. "All these stereotypes rendered both Jews and women as less than human, thereby justifying the inhuman treatment unleashed on them. But the witches, unlike the Jews, saw themselves as Christians, as insiders in the Christian realm. In order to prosecute for witchcraft, European society had to turn against its own" (63).[10]

A pivotal political change occurred in the 16th century, in terms of the centralization of power, the period of the religious wars, in that Black magic, which was associated with witches was seen as the work of the devil and thus a direct threat to Christianity. "Satan, the ruler of the underworld, was frequently portrayed as black and bestial in Christian art and literature" (Federici 2004, 163).[11] In the case of witches, it was common belief that the devil was the source of a witches' powers, as "ordinary" women could not have any power – they were but passive vessels. Marriage thus served as a means to "protect" women from the temptation of the devil. This view is central to the *Malleus Mallificarum*, that states "all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable" (Mackay 2009, 135). Women needed men to control them, otherwise they were hyper-sexed and susceptible to the sexual appeal of the devil, which they could not resist as they were weak-willed in relation to men, who were deemed to be in control of their faculties, mental and physical. Strong, assertive, and independent women were thus clearly already possessed by the devil and the first to be burned in the witch hunts.

This demonic dehumanization led to material changes to the life of women across Europe. Federici claims that many women had more rights and social possibilities prior to the 17th century – at this time, the notions of sexuality were more and more limited, pre-marital sex was banned (138), women could no longer inherit property or be paid directly, and it was no longer socially acceptable to live alone. This made unmarried women or widows more susceptible to accusations of witchcraft – hence the trope of the old hag/spinster. While the devil discourse was more predominant in Catholic countries, the focus on controlling social reproduction seems to have been more common in Lutheran spaces – perhaps inspired by Luther's now infamous claim that, "Whatever their weaknesses, women possess one virtue that cancels them all: they have a womb and can give birth" (King 2008, 115).

Many contemporary analyses of the witch hunts focus on the role of biological reproduction – a leitmotiv that has returned with a vengeance in the world today with the "Great Replacement Theory" inspired murderers (e.g., Christchurch, Pittsburg, the 2011 Norway attacks, Buffalo, and so on) (Topolski 2023). The scholarly view is that the Church was threatened by healers' knowledge and "control" over biological reproduction at a time when bodies were necessary – both for the church and the secular/economic powers (after the plague of 1347-1352, which killed more than one third of the European population). It's the case that many women, often unmarried or widowed, were midwives – helping women both to give birth and to prevent pregnancies and serving as advisors on all matters regarding sexual and marital relations. "They cured male impotence and female infertility, performed abortions, provided contraceptives, and advised on nursing problems, thus affecting the birth rate, a power that the churches were determined to wrest from them" (Barnstow 1994, 113). Again, this leads to concrete material changes in the lives of women. Birth control and abortion in any form becomes a sin (and not a secular crime) in 1484 (Bull of Innocent VIII), which is also when witchcraft, now associated with Black magic, becomes a sin.

It is this concrete link that supports the hypothesis that the transformation of healers into witches – from heresy to witchcraft, with its gendered victims – is related to the control over biological reproduction (Yuval-Davis 1996). This control comes to a climax in the 16th and 17th centuries, at the height of the witch hunts, when the rate of infant mortality peaked due to poverty and malnutrition across Europe. Witches were, of course, the ideal

scapegoat (except in Spain/Portugal, where Jews/Muslims were still the primary scapegoats). What is clear is that the witch hunts resulted in the devaluation of women's labor – both productive and non-productive – as well as their general social status and liberty.[12] This shift from a theological crime (heresy) to witchcraft happened in (approx.) 1560, just after the treaty of Augsburg (*cuius regio, eius religio*), after which most trials occurred in the "secular" courts. The courts began to try crimes of witchcraft and perverse sexuality. What is ironic – given the importance of the notion of the soul for salvation and full personhood – is that White European women became, for the first time, legal persons as witches (i.e., they were first accorded independent legal status, in order to be prosecuted for witchcraft). According to Larner (1986), this was most apparent among the Calvinists who made women "adults," holding them "responsible for their souls while, at the same time, blaming them for using their free will to choose to practice witchcraft" (Larner 1986, 77). Thus, in addition to *Summis Desiderantes*, Innocent VIII's 1484 Bull, there was the 1532 *Constitutio Criminalis Carolina*, inspired by the Inquisitorial courts, which legalized "the 'conspiracy theory' of witchcraft, in which sorcery was seen as treason, as an attempt to overthrow state and church" (61) as well as justifying torture and making witchcraft a crime punishable by death (as well as laws against miscegenation to prevent marriage with non-Christians in Europe and the New World).

It is thus precisely at the same time as Europe was unifying itself under the banner of Whiteness and Christianity – by means of expulsion, colonization and murder – that it also legally and theologically aligned itself with a form of toxic masculinity. While the witch hunts are but one manifestation of systemic gendered violence in Europe, "it was a concerted attempt to degrade them, demonize them, and destroy their social power" (Federici 2004, 186). The view of women propagated by the Church and then embraced and promoted by the state of women as weaker, impure, sexualized, and a potential threat to the political community echoes the view of Jews and Muslims at this time. Together, and intersectionally, this served to consolidate Europe as White, Male, and Christian. This masculine power likewise served Europe and its newly forming states with material wealth, biopolitical power, and epistemic hegemony. So, to return to the question we began with, what do women have to do with the race-religion constellation – the brief version of the answer is everything.

Notes

1   In the fall of 2016, a few months after I joined the philosophy department at Radboud University, I was asked to give a faculty lecture about my research on the race-religion constellation. Dr. Veronica Vasterling had worked at this faculty for over a quarter of a century, often being the only female academic staff member. In the lowlands, where any marginal philosophy, including feminist philosophy, was rare and often disparaged, Veronica was a beacon of hope and support for many younger female/marginalized philosophers. I had had the honor of meeting Veronica several times during my PhD as we both shared a love for the work of Hannah Arendt (who, while clearly not a feminist, was also often the only female philosopher included in the philosophical canon, albeit often as a token). I had always admired Veronica's work and insights and having her in the audience during my first public faculty lecture gave me the extra confidence I needed. After my lecture, I was peppered with questions, most of which were the usual suspects when giving a talk on religion and race in a country which sees itself as the paradigm of tolerance, secular, and post-racial. What I didn't expect, and for several years, didn't appreciate, was Veronica's question. While I am sure it was phrased much more eloquently, the gist of her question was – what do women have to do with the race-religion constellation? Why are you not thinking intersectionally? She then provided several examples connecting the foundational patriarchy of Christianity to arguments I had made in my lecture. Instead of scrupulously taking note of her insights, what I remember thinking at that time was, *Why do I have to engage with questions of gender? Isn't studying racism in Europe enough?* With only a handful of female scholars in the room, I wondered to myself, *Why do women have to be feminist scholars? Shouldn't Veronica save this question for our male colleagues?* Now, years later, I am beyond grateful. Thanks to Veronica's question, I have come to understand why I was bothered by this question and have worked through some of the intellectual trauma of being isolated as a female philosopher in the lowlands. This has also helped me to really appreciate her brilliant question and to develop an entire new research interest on witches and the witch hunts and how these relate to the race-religion constellation. While this research is still in an early phase, I wish to thank Veronica – who has always been both intellectually critical and personally caring – for always asking the questions others do not ask and for saying what needs to be said.

2   In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea." (Du Bois 1994, 8)

3   Many distinct words were used to describe these non-Christian groups, such as peoples, tribes, groups, nations, etc. For example, in 1614, Edward Brerewood referred to Jews and Mohammedans as "species."

4   This relied on a popular classification of the world's peoples, based on which of Noah's children they descended from. Japheth was associated with Aryanism (which included parts of Asia) and European civilization, as the name means "to expand" or "to enlarge" – an association used to justify missionary activities and colonialism. Shem, the second son, was the father of the Semites and settled in what would today be the Middle East. Ham, the third son, cursed to slavery without salvation, was associated with Africa (Ham means 'hot') (Goldenberg 2003; 2017).

5   To be clear, both theologians embrace racist discourses (in contemporary terms) – the difference is whether racism is biologically or naturally fixed or of a changeable nature, such as in the current debates on cultural racism.

6   While the Jews had been forced to flee Spain in the 15th century, leaving behind all their property, it was only in the 16th century that converted Muslims were likewise forced to do so.

7   Given that the period defined as the height of the witch hunts in Europe ranges from 1450-1650, we cannot expect to have accurate historical records. Based on current research, we can be certain that at least 200,000 people were accused (80% of whom were women). Of those, we have at least 100,000 written documents attesting to their execution – 85% women.

8   "The black Moor is portrayed as the opposed term to the Christian religious metaphor. Like the other Moors, he is cast in the dread role of infidel, invader and defiler of Christian altars. The Moor, 'black as pitch', was not only the opposed religion; his color was the opposite of 'white', the symbol of Christianity. It is important to note two important aspects of this relation, this symbolic structure. As the writer points out, the black Moor was not 'denigrated (or feared as the case may be) because of his color, but because of his religion'. Also, the relation of the black Moor, symbolically, to the devil was a relation which sprang from a reality in which the Mohammedan was the dominant power" (Wynter 1977, 19).

9   This view of Europe's "others" as a demographic threat continues today in the form of the "Great Replacement" theory (Bracke and Hernández Aguilar 2020).

10 A third entanglement between the earlier persecution of Jews and witches is related to money (or class/finances). Federici develops this link extensively, showing how in the 12th century, with the increased commercialization of life, both Jews and women were heavily attacked by the Church and lost many

rights (for example, owning or inheriting property), which also forced both groups to move more to cities for an income. This move also further enabled both groups to be under the control of local authorities. "This new system of social control, in which centralized governments were willing to persecute on sexual and religious matters fell heaviest on the lower class, those unable to use the law to protect themselves – too uneducated to learn to use its ways, or too poor to afford it. The women who suffered from these handicaps were particularly vulnerable when the state turned its attention to witchcraft" (Barstow 1994, 40).

11   Witches and Indians were ill fated in sharing a number of characteristics in the eyes of European men: both were thought to worship "demons" and to be cannibalistic and should therefore have a war of extermination fought against them, in the name of Christianity. Both were looked down upon, like children, yet were feared.

12   "Women could not have been totally devalued as workers and deprived of autonomy with respect to men without being subjected to an intense process of social degradation; and indeed, throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, women lost ground in every area of social life" (Federici 2004, 100).

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Power, Sex, and Myth:
Beauvoir, Paglia, and Peterson

KAREN VINTGES

A few years ago, I delivered an introductory lecture on feminism, sex, and gender to approximately 150 philosophy students at the University of Amsterdam, just after the high-profile author, Jordan Peterson, had visited the university. Peterson is a Canadian psychology professor who has millions of, mostly male, followers on the Internet, including supporters of the alt-right and other right-wing populist movements. But many "ordinary" – i.e., not politically organized – young men, including philosophy students, are also interested in his ideas. The lecture was on gender theory, which is total nonsense, according to Peterson, not to mention dangerous. "Postmodern" staff members who deal with such themes are his enemy. "The gloves are off," he warned, during his presentation at the University of Amsterdam.[1] Sex differences are not socially constructed, as gender theory claims, but simply based on biology and tradition. Or, as some twenty male students told me after my lecture, "Women should go back home."

Why do Peterson's ideas appeal to these philosophy students? And why is his work so popular among supporters of the new type of right-wing political movements, such as Trumpism, in the US, or the Forum for Democracy in the Netherlands, where many followers of Peterson's work can be found? Does his work elucidate what holds together the strange mix of ideological ingredients that we find in these new right-wing movements, a mix of neoliberal – purely market-oriented – ingredients, on the one hand, and strongly conservative ingredients on the other? What is the connecting principle here?[2] Does Peterson's work give us a clue? I will try to answer these questions, taking Peterson's work as an expression of a certain worldview that is on the rise today and that we cannot afford to ignore.

I will specifically have a look at his 1999 book, *Maps of Meaning*, which forms the basis of his bestseller, *12 Rules for Life* (2018). To my surprise, Peterson's approach significantly overlaps with that of art historian

Camille Paglia in her book *Sexual Personae* (1990), who, in turn, is a great admirer of Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 work, *The Second Sex* (cf. Vintges 2013). A comparison of both Paglia's and Peterson's work, along with Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, will reveal some striking parallels, next to some major dissimilarities and characteristically different outcomes. Contrasting Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* with Paglia's and Peterson's approaches, I will evaluate to what extent this work still provides us with concepts that help us to better understand today's world. Finally, I will return to my questions surrounding the "Jordan Peterson phenomenon" of today.

The Status of Myth in *The Second Sex*

It is only fairly recently that I realized how much Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* revolves around the theme of myth (cf. Vintges 2017). The 120-page chapter "Myths," which deals with the dominant myth of the "eternal feminine" was the first she wrote and, only later, did she add chapters on biology, history, and women's lived experiences. The main thesis of the work is that women have always been held in an inferior place to men. Men in history were the superior, first sex to whom women were subordinate. The whole education and socialization of girls and women, plus the myth of "the eternal feminine," serve to perpetuate the second-class position of women throughout history. But this dominant myth of Woman is a false assumption. There is no such thing as the eternal feminine, there are only concrete women, in countless different guises, according to Beauvoir.

   As Adam Kjellgren argues, most Beauvoir scholars mistakenly conclude that myth is criticized by Beauvoir on epistemological grounds and rejected as a false, untrue representation that should be eliminated (Kjellgren 2024). But, on closer inspection, mythical thinking in *The Second Sex* comes forward as a perpetual symbolic activity, in reference to the approach of philosopher and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose work Beauvoir discussed earlier (Beauvoir 2015a).[3] According to Lévi-Strauss, mythical thought, which he also called "a wild mode of thought," or "magical" thought, is a classificatory mode of thinking, characterized by its attention to the concrete, but is as equally rigorous as science. To the 20th century philosophers, Ernst Cassirer and Susan Langer, myth is a symbolic creation of the human mind, characterized by the leading role of imagination and associative connections. According to Langer, myth is a

"dream-narrative" (Langer 1960, 144), made of "dream-material" (139) – mythical tales are "the great dreams of mankind" (159). Cassirer specifically points out that myths are characterized by a free concept of causality, in which everything, in principle, can cause everything. In his work, *The Myth of the State* (1946), Cassirer concluded that myths will keep cropping up in the political realm. To all of these authors, myth is a symbolic form that will never disappear.

In Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, we encounter this approach as well. In line with Lévi-Strauss, we find the term "mythical thinking" (Beauvoir 2010, 280) to indicate a kind of thought that produces specific systems of meaning (cf. 7, 82). She points to the "imagistic" character of myths (281) that, as collective dreams (cf. 282), "leave terrestrial truth behind" (277). The myth of the eternal feminine is a "masculine dream" (165), representing Woman as essentially flesh and nature. In Hegelian terms, she explains this by stating that women were seen and treated by men as their absolute "Other." Out of a striving for self-certainty, seeking to affirm themselves as a superior and pure consciousness, men have degraded women into an inferior consciousness bound to nature and animal life. Women became, in Hegel's terms, the "other" consciousness – i.e., the "Other." As man's inferior Other that remained bound to nature, Woman had all the contradictory feelings projected upon herself that nature evokes. She represents the magical fertility of the earth: "the fountain from which springs forth sweet water that is also mother's milk, a warm spring... rich in regenerating forces" (168). But, on the other hand, Woman reminds man of his carnal contingency and represents "murderous Nature (having) a grip on him" (169). Because of the ambivalent feelings nature inspires in man, the myth of Woman is so contradictory that its unity is not at first discerned: "Delilah and Judith, Aspasia and Lucretia, Pandora and Athena, woman is both Eve and the Virgin Mary. She is an idol, a servant, source of life, power of darkness... she is man's prey; she is his downfall" (166).

No myth yet expresses erotic symmetry, conveying that, for women, men are also "sexed and carnal," Beauvoir argues (166). However, more and more, it appears that "a woman could hold a man's office and still be desirable." Suggesting the emergence of new, more equal, erotic relations between the sexes, Beauvoir concludes that "a new form of eroticism seems to be coming about: perhaps it will produce new myths" (283). In a later essay on the French film star Brigitte Bardot, Beauvoir examines

whether this is already going on with the character Bardot in Roger Vadim's films. Bardot comes forward as a sexual agent and her love life seems to be full of mutual erotic desire and pleasure. But the film character Bardot, as a child-woman, does not escape the myth of Woman as Nature that must be tamed (Beauvoir 2015b).

We can conclude that Beauvoir was not opposing all myths, but that, as Kjellgren aptly argues, it was a specific myth that was her target, namely the dominant – static – myth of the eternal feminine (Kjellgren 2024). According to Beauvoir, this dominant, static, myth of Woman is also essential for understanding women on a subjective level, as she demonstrates in the chapters of *The Second Sex* on women's lived experiences. As men's inferior Other, women need men's support. They want to please them and choose themselves "as men dream of her" (Beauvoir 2010, 159). However, we have entered a new phase of history, in which reciprocal relationships, including those between the sexes, are possible – be it that this reciprocity requires constant moral effort, given people's tendency to dominate others. One day, perhaps, the dominant and static myth of Woman will be "phased out," Beauvoir argues: "The more women assert themselves as human beings, the more the marvelous quality of Other dies in them. But today it still exists in the hearts of all men" (166).

Camille Paglia: "Mythology's identification of woman with nature is correct"

Art historian Camille Paglia, who professes to be a great admirer of Beauvoir, similarly concentrates on the myth of Woman in her study *Sexual Personae* (1990). She argues that all great art comes down to a mythical representation of nature – in the form of sexual characters, or personae, such as the mother, the beautiful boy, and the vamp. She especially focuses on the mythological character of the Great Mother, in line with Erich Neumann's 1956 work, *Die Grosse Mutter*. Neumann was a pupil of psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung, who, in his work – contra Freud – argued that man has an innate collective unconscious, in which resides a set of mythological archetypes. Always, and in all cultures, we find the same archetypes or mythological motives, such as the father, the mother, the child, the wise old man, the hero, the ruler, the rebel, and the trickster. Neumann concentrated in his study on the archetype of what he called the "Great Mother" who is,

on the one hand, the good mother and, on the other, the terrible – devour-
ing – mother, a force of death and destruction. In his work, he systemati-
cally traces the symbolic expressions of this archetype in the human mind.

Paglia notices the ambivalence of this archetype, but especially exam-
ines the sinister aspects of the Great Mother, as symbolized and expressed
in art. She distinguishes between two principles – the Apollonian, which
stands for order, logic, and culture, and which is traditionally represented
by men, and the Dionysian principle, which stands for chaos and the dark
forces of nature. Women in myths represent the Dionysian principle: "The
blind grinding of subterranean force, the long, slow suck, the murk, and
ooze... the squalor and rot" (Paglia 1990, 6). According to Paglia, "Mytholo-
gy's identification of woman with nature is correct" (12). Women are not
only associated with nature in myths and art, they *are* nature: their body is
"a chthonian machine... it has one mission, pregnancy" (10). To Paglia, in
the end, there is "nothing beautiful in nature" (57). Scratch its surface and
"nature's daemonic ugliness will erupt" (5). Beauty is an illusion, a ner-
vous attempt to control ugliness. Nature is essentially chaos and decay,
hierarchy, violence, and aggression. Sex as nature in us is "a far darker
power" than as Rousseauist, politically correct feminism presents it (3).
Violence, date rape, pornography, and SM are the reality of sex, as author
Sade has shown us. Men see women as their prey, and women should not
be naive about this but take up their role in a "pro-sex feminism."

In summary, Paglia, like Beauvoir, focuses on the way women in
mythology are identified with nature. But, other than Beauvoir, she argues
that this is inevitably so since, through her biology, woman embodies
the principle of fertility. Apollonian man has brought us civilization,
progress, and capitalism, and we should be thankful for these male
achievements. "If civilization had been left in female hands, we would still
be living in grass huts," she concludes (38).

Jordan Peterson: "You can't change it, it's not possible"

We find remarkably similar ideas in the work of Canadian psychologist
Jordan Peterson, who is sometimes referred to as the most influential
public intellectual in the Western world today. With Peterson, too, the
work of Jung and Neumann plays a leading role. The only difference is
that Peterson does not situate Jung's universal mythological motifs in

an innate collective unconscious. The idea of "inherited memory content" – that is, "the collective unconscious" – "appears insufficiently elaborated, from the modern empirical perspective" (Peterson 1999, 92). The universal set of mythological archetypes that Jung discovered instead penetrates everyone's unconscious through ritual, drama, literature, myth, and people's embodied behavior (cf. 93-94).

Peterson links his Jungian perspective to neuropsychological research that, he argues, shows that our brains are wired to constantly seek to improve our position. "We act to transform 'where we are' into 'where we would like to be'" (19). Like lobsters, we are creatures that want to climb up in hierarchy and status. Given our constant striving to improve our position, and the fact that individuals simply differ in talent and ability, social hierarchies are inevitable, and they are desirable as well because they are based on competence (Peterson 2018a, 303).

In *Maps of Meaning*, Peterson claims to have made a great discovery, namely that the myths and archetypes of mankind comprise a universal moral system attuned to the functioning of our brains, i.e., the constant pursuit of improving our position (Peterson 1999, 99). In the continuous pursuit of goals, our brain enters known and unknown territory and creative behavior can emerge. This is reflected in the structure of mythological representations of the world, in terms of the known, the unknown, and the hero's creative action. The known stands for order, form, and culture, symbolically linked to the masculine. The unknown is chaos, substance, and nature, symbolically associated with the feminine. Chaos is origin, source, mother, matter, and order must restrain and shape that chaos. Thirdly, there is the archetypal hero, who renews the culture, in accordance with the basic principles of the transmitted moral system. The Old Testament, to Peterson, is the basic text of Western society, with its strict patriarchal "God the Father" who demands absolute obedience to moral rules. The mythical, archetypal hero par excellence is the figure of Christ – already announced in the Old Testament, and acting in line with it. Christianity contains the moral directive of the divinity of the individual who realizes themselves, but does so in compliance with the purposes of humanity. On pain of disaster, we must conform to this moral system of divine characters – of the authoritarian father, the heroic son, and Mother Mary (the representative of the positive side of the archetypal Great Mother).

That traditional myths contain a dichotomy of, and contrast between, the male and the female in terms of order versus chaos "might be seen as

unfortunate, but... you can't change it. It's not possible. This is underneath everything. If you change those basic categories, people wouldn't be human anymore" (Peterson 2018b). In non-Western cultures, we also see – in terms of yin and yang – the dichotomy of chaos and order, the unknown and the known, as respectively the feminine and the masculine. The fact that our brains have a left and a right hemisphere, each with a focus on one of these two domains, confirms all this, according to Peterson.

Gender theorists and queer movements, and especially transgender people,[4] pose an existential threat because they tamper with the foundations of human civilization. They undermine the basic principles of our moral order, which has established the traditional dichotomy of male and female in everyone's unconscious. Humanity's mythical systems of meaning have been modeled in such a way that we have been able to survive successfully. They contain the wisdom of our ancestors, in the form of universal and absolute moral rules that are attuned to the way we are wired. If we transgress this moral system, it will result in chaos and misery, society will disintegrate and the apocalypse will arrive.

The Power of Myth

Comparing the three authors discussed above shows a similar analysis that men and women are symbolized in myths as, respectively, Culture versus Nature, the Apollonian versus the Dionysian (in terms of Paglia), and Order versus Chaos (in terms of Peterson). The analysis of the dominant myth of Woman as Nature that we find in all three authors, is a useful analytical tool, for instance, to analyze the seemingly contradictory content of contemporary popular culture (cf. Paglia 1994) or of right-wing online communities, such as the "incels," who, as Felipa Melo Lopes has shown picture women, on the one hand, as stars and goddesses and, on the other, as sluts and dangerous creatures (Melo Lopes 2024).

All three authors also emphasize the omnipresence of power relations. With Beauvoir, there is – in reference to Hegel's master-servant theory and early Sartre – an ever-present tendency to dominate others; with Paglia, we are living in a Hobbesian state of nature, characterized by aggression and violence; and with Peterson, there is an unabridged human-animal continuity when it comes to nature as aggression and competition. All three authors also point to sex as a terrain of power and violence.[5]

Apart from these similarities, there are major differences between Paglia and Peterson, on the one hand, and Beauvoir on the other. The main difference is that, with Beauvoir, there is talk of history and morals – culture is a much more important factor in humans than in any other species. Culture develops, humans are beings in the making, and woman is a subject on the move. In the past, women were more controlled by nature than men because of their reproductive functions, but this has been overtaken by modern developments, such as access to contraception, education, and work. Through our moral efforts, unequal power relations between the sexes can be further transformed into reciprocal ones; the dominant myth about women will fade away, and new, more equal erotic myths will develop (Beauvoir 2010, 283; cf. Vintges 2017). To Paglia and Peterson, however, the dominant myth of woman as Nature will persist; to Paglia, this is because of the innate archetype of The Great Mother, which is based on truth since woman *is* nature; and to Peterson, because myths contain timeless motifs and moral rules tailored to the ways our brains are wired.

When people wonder why emancipation is not progressing more rapidly, or why many women are still submissive to men, I think we must take the dimension of myth very seriously. We are dealing here with deeply entrenched, persistent images and stories and, as such, with a dimension of reality that will only slowly change. When it comes to a diagnosis of the present, Beauvoir's perspective in *The Second Sex* is convincing, namely that we live in a period of transition, in which tough gender patterns and myths are still at work, but changes are also taking place that cannot be reversed. Her idea that the dominant myth of Woman will fade into the background while more reciprocal myths of eroticism emerge, is convincing as well. It seems to be confirmed today in that all kinds of smart women are more often portrayed as sexual agents in stories, films, and the media.

The Second Sex as an Analytical Toolbox

Beauvoir's study *The Second Sex*, however, needs updating from a scientific point of view when it comes to its universal claims. Beauvoir based herself on the empirical findings of Lévi-Strauss, which showed a universal pattern of an exchange of women between groups of men, whereby the woman passes over to the man's family – a pattern which, according to Lévi-Strauss, is constitutive of any social order. He saw this pattern reflected in the myths

of mankind, in which women are exchanged between men like "foodstuff."
But his thesis of the exchange of women today is refuted as a universal pat-
tern – anthropological research shows that in ancient and recent hunter-
gatherer societies not only women are transferred to the tribe of men – the
pattern of so-called "patrilocality" – but that men as well go over to the
family or tribe of women (cf. Sanday and Goodenough 1990). Recent
research, moreover, claims that generally men's and women's roles were
not so clear-cut in prehistoric times. There were more female hunters in
Paleolithic times than is usually assumed (Haas, Watson, Buonasera, et al.
2020), and overall, women had important economic and political roles in
the Paleolithic period (Cirotteau et al. 2021).[6]

The findings of the two latter studies have been contested by prehis-
toric specialists, who argue that women's secondary status in society is
observed in the vast majority of hunter-gatherer societies, be it with nota-
ble exceptions (cf. Augereau et al. 2021). More research is to be expected
but, for now, we can already conclude that, instead of adopting Beauvoir's
grand theory in *The Second Sex*, we should take up the work as an analyti-
cal toolbox, useful for analyzing dominant – rather than universal – gen-
der patterns in history. Given the perspective of change that Beauvoir
employs in *The Second Sex*, such an adjustment is possible without violat-
ing the character of the work. Her work, after all, not only discusses domi-
nant gender patterns but argues as well for more horizontal relations
between the sexes in the near future. Taking up *The Second Sex* as a toolbox
to analyze dominant gender patterns, instead of totalizing theory, also
allows other voices and socio-cultural practices to come to the fore, next to
the dominant ones (cf. Vintges 2017).

Such an adjustment is impossible, however, for the grand theories pre-
sented by Paglia and Peterson: in Paglia's case, because she bases herself
on Jung's idea of the universal collective unconscious; in Peterson's,
it's because of the downright visionary content of his theory. While he
acknowledges that Jung's concept of inherited memory content, i.e., the
universal collective unconscious, is "insufficiently elaborated from the
modern empirical perspective" (Peterson 1999, 92), his thesis that old
myths comprise a *crucial* moral system attuned to the structure of our
brains, is equally unsubstantiated. The motto of his *Maps of Meaning* is
taken from the biblical book of Matthew: "I will utter things that have
been kept secret from the foundation of the world." His apocalyptic
visionary theory does not allow for any counterexamples or other factors.

Power's Right[7]

Finally, I come back to my questions surrounding the Peterson phenomenon today. First of all, why is Peterson so popular among supporters of new right-wing movements and organizations? Does his work help us to understand these movements, revealing the ingredient that holds together the strange mix of conservative and neoliberal – market-oriented – elements they contain? How can an appreciation of the nation state, heroes, and traditions, on the one hand, and the embracing of neoliberalism on the other, coexist, while the latter is insensitive to these kinds of "identitarian" issues, so long as people function as subjects in the market?

As we have seen, to Peterson, civilization comes down to the masculine principle of order controlling the feminine domain of chaos, and always involves social hierarchies, since the most competent simply rise to the top. The core ingredient of Peterson's thinking is the premise of "power's right," i.e., the right of those in power who, in accordance with the fundamental masculine basis of human culture are, *and should be*, "strong men." As such his thought exemplifies what is the core ingredient of contemporary right-wing populism, uniting conservatism and neoliberalism: the radical endorsement of masculine competitive power.

Last, but not least, why does Peterson appeal to many "ordinary" – not politically organized – young men,[8] such as the philosophy students who argued that women should "go back home"? Peterson time and again refers to the insecurity and disorientation of his male followers. But rather than being caused by today's feminism, as is his message, these are caused by contemporary neoliberalism. For decades, neoliberalism has been eroding the social fabric, through its hyper-individualism, emphasis on tough competition, and the premise that everything in society should be run as a business. In glorifying winners – which implies humiliating those who are not – Peterson seems unable to speak a language other than that of neoliberalism, such as that of friendship and generosity, for example, and which can be found, for instance, in the Bible, a text he nevertheless makes copious use of. Similarly, he neglects biological research which reveals the moral and generous facets of human nature, underscoring our ethical motives. His voice thus only adds to the problems men face today; it is not feminism that is their enemy, it is neoliberalism.

Notes

1   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1piful6dm14

2   For a similar question – but a different answer – see Brown 2019.

3   Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* makes multiple references to the writings of Lévi-Strauss (see Beauvoir 2010, 7, 82, 83, 86n, 171n, 173).

4   Peterson gained fame in 2016 for his opposition to a Canadian bill that, in his view, would force him to use a student's preferred pronouns.

5   As Beauvoir does in her 1951 essay *Must we burn Sade?* (Beauvoir 2012).

6   I would like to express my gratitude to Veronica Vasterling for bringing to my attention the study conducted by Haas, Watson, Buonasera et al. 2020.

7   I borrow this phrase from philosopher Michel Foucault who, in his work, *Society Must Be Defended* traces the contours in the West of an "intensely mythical" political discourse. This "historico-political discourse" – as opposed to a "philosophico-juridicial" one (Foucault 2003, 57) – is a "discourse that deciphers war's permanent presence within society" (270). It is invested in "very traditional mythical forms," such as, "the lost age of great ancestors, the imminence of new times and a millenary revenge, the coming of the new kingdom that will wipe out the defeats of old" (56). The specific function of this type of discourse, "is not so much to record the past or to speak of origins as to speak of right, to speak of *power's right*" (116; emphasis added).

8   Today, former professional kickboxer and social media personality Andrew Tate appears to outshine Peterson in popularity among young men, sharing similar ideas about the erosion of masculinity and a similar call for a return to traditional values. The two are currently embroiled in an online feud.

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In Praise of Ambiguity

CHRISTINA SCHÜES

Simone de Beauvoir explains her relation to philosophy in an interview with Margaret Simons: "While I say that I'm not a philosopher in the sense that I'm not the creator of a system, I'm still a philosopher in the sense that I've studied a lot of philosophy, I have a degree in philosophy; I've taught philosophy, I'm infused with philosophy: and when I put philosophy into my books it's because that's a way for me to view the world" (Simons 1999, 93). Beauvoir had an ambiguous relation to philosophy. On the one hand, she observes that the title of philosopher is reserved for individuals who develop philosophical systems. Yet, her sources for her books and philosophical novels are manifold – personal experiences, subjective impressions, and literary or philosophical findings. Beauvoir presents people's behavior, experiences, and conditionalities in their existential reality, and even in their metaphysical dimension. A philosophy of the closed system knows no ambiguity, but the existence of human beings can only be meaningfully described in recognition of their ambiguities. Therefore, Beauvoir writes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, "[f]rom the very beginning, existentialism defined itself as a philosophy of ambiguity" (Beauvoir 2015, 8). By elevating ambiguity to the status of an ontologically basic category of existence, Beauvoir casts it as essential and irreducible.

Ambiguity has not always been granted this position throughout the history of philosophy. Ancient philosophers understood ambiguity as a deficient aspect of language. In his *Rhetoric*, for example, Aristotle held that one should avoid linguistic ambiguity and keep rational thinking clear and exact (Aristotle 1877). In the 19th century, Georg Friedrich Hegel emancipated the notion of ambiguity from the discourse of deficiency, describing it as an essential element of aesthetics, such that ambiguity was no longer something to be avoided. If human existence is essentially ambiguous, then one could say, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty does in *In Praise of Philosophy*, that the measure of a philosopher is their ability and willingness to truly address ambiguity. "The philosopher is marked by the distinguishing trait that he possesses *inseparably* the taste for evidence and the feeling for ambiguity. When he limits himself to accepting ambi-

guity, it is called equivocation. But among the great it becomes a theme; it contributes to establishing certitudes rather than menacing them." (Merleau-Ponty 1988, 4f.) Ambiguity is no longer understood as a linguistic deficit nor, along with Friedrich Nietzsche, as an aesthetic principle of the world, nor, with Ludwig Wittgenstein, as a simple change of perspective on a rabbit-duck illusion. Anyone who is philosophically ambitious must explicitly address ambiguity and understand philosophy as a non-universal ontology between self and other, deception and freedom, immanence and transcendence, and non-knowledge and knowledge, always realizing that human existence is inherently ambiguous. My aim is to show that this irreducible ambiguity is also found in cases of inhibited intentionality and transgressive intentionality. The former traditionally relates to women who have internalized the rules of not taking their space, while the latter is ascribed, for instance, to persons with dementia whose so-called "challenging" behavior may transgress their own space, intruding upon someone else's.[1]

Ambiguity is Irreducible

In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, originally published in 1945, Merleau-Ponty removed ambiguity from any category of value and showed that it is irreducible as an ontological category. For him, the meaning of experience or perception does not lie within objects, but is constituted in each case from the interaction and intercorporeality in which human beings participate as sensing beings within the world as a context of meaning. Thus, existence is marked by the *fact* of ambiguity. Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir agree on this conviction. The nature of this ambiguity can be clarified by setting it in contrast with its opposite, the absence of ambiguity. Ambiguity can be eliminated "by making oneself pure inwardness or pure externality, by escaping from the sensible world or by being engulfed in it" (Beauvoir 2015, 8). In other words, ambiguous existence is neither pure inwardness nor pure externality; it neither escapes the sensible world, nor is it wholly engulfed in it. While Beauvoir's often existentially motivated interest is directed towards historical investigation and concrete observations of experiences and social relations, Merleau-Ponty concentrates his phenomenological investigations on how bodily existence shows itself in its relation to the world as doubly-sensual in different ways. Firstly, I have

a body (*Leib*) and through it, I sense the world. In the innermost part of my ego, sensibility and corporeality delineate existence and place my ego in "a communication with the world more ancient than all thought," which does not become fully clear to the ego (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 265). Sense constitution does not begin with a specific object, but with indeterminate ambiguous phenomena that depend on the context of perception and are conditioned in a living situation. The "indeterminacy as a positive phenomenon" and ambiguity as a constitutive element in the relationship between humans and the world must be recognized (7). At a certain point in my life, I become conscious of myself and realize that I always find myself in a situation because "I am thrown into a nature, and nature appears not only outside of me in Objects devoid of history but is also visible at the center of subjectivity" (361). My bodily being brings the situation into myself and it brings me into the situation. Birth, each beginning, perception or action situates me in the world and directs me towards the world. My habitualization in society already begins when I am first situated in the world. Thus, secondly, I am directed towards the world because of my historically and culturally formed body, which is, at the same time, an expression of my concrete ego. Since this concrete ego is a bodily one, an anonymity rests in it. This anonymous ego gives me the impression that "one perceives in me," and pretends to be always already born and situated.

Thus, my being born is transformed into an "anonymous natality" that, in its fundamental anonymity, produces my corporeality in the dramatic tension between I-world-other in the history of meaning (224). In other words, in accordance with intention and subjective execution, the body possesses the existential possibility of understanding sense contexts, because it resides in the world and is part of the world. Being situated in the world and towards the world can be analyzed with Merleau-Ponty's notion of "drama," by which he means that, as inherently intentional, human existence is always living in the world and is directed towards that world. Thus, his concept of drama illustrates that an existential analysis of bodily being-in-the-world can neither be represented in causal references nor in purely transcendental or everyday descriptive reflection. This drama always remains in its tense double meaning, its ambiguity. Therefore, "drama" should not be reduced to a metaphysical concept but should be considered and shown in its tension as an interpenetration. Later, Beauvoir will take over from Merleau-Ponty the insight

that this interpenetration presents itself as a reciprocal precondition of my existence, which is preserved by my worldly body and my embodied worldliness. As he writes, my "body is existence as congealed and generalized," which appropriately takes over or transforms the factual situation of my existence; "existence is perpetual embodiment" (169). "'Transcendence' is the name we shall give to this movement in which existence takes up for itself and transforms a *de facto* situation" (173). Transcendence here means the existential overcoming of the existing, which, however, would neither be distinct nor unambiguous in its process, nor simply dependent on the mode of thinking.

This relationship of tension and interpenetration of the existential drama between immanence and transcendence cannot be experienced unambiguously, even in its concreteness, because an ambiguity is essential to existence, i.e., a multiple sense is always inherent in it. While Beauvoir contrasts immanence and transcendence and locates women's situatedness and experience on the side of immanence, Merleau-Ponty rejects an opposition between immanence and transcendence. He gives various examples of "normal" but also "morbid" behavior (120). These examples reveal the conditions by which human existence projects itself into the world and is directed towards the world, while always remaining inhibited by its own bodily immanence, which remains bound not only to a situation, but also to a physical or psychic structure. The "original intentionality" is not simply an "I am directed to…" but an "I can," an expression which, incidentally, is also mentioned frequently by Husserl. Depending on the situation and level of habitualization, this "I can" is more or less permeated by an "I cannot." This "I cannot," or inhibited intentionality, becomes particularly apparent in courses of movement in space, in hesitant looking, grasping, or speaking – in short, when the orientation towards the world, the spatial and interactive world with other people, is inhibited. Inhibited intentionality is an essential aspect of bodily existence, in particular, as the feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young famously pointed out, in "Throwing Like a Girl" (1980), of *female* bodily existence. Yet, as much as intentionality may be inhibited, it may also be transgressive in a way that is difficult for the person herself or for the social context. Bodily intentionality, whether inhibited or transgressive, is formed from birth onwards in intersubjective and social relationships. With birth, a person is exposed and situated in a relationship of belonging "to-the-world" and in various relationships "in-the-world." Relationships

may permit and support more or less inhibited and transgressive modes of intentionality. First, I will turn to modes of inhibited intentionality in the context of the socialization of women. Then, I will thematize a transgressive form of intentionality that is difficult for those involved because it diverges from socially accepted normal behavior.

Inhibited Intentionality and Difficult Ambiguity

In her works, and especially in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir examines the situatedness of experience and questions its consequences. In doing so, she remains methodologically aligned with phenomenology through her focus on the descriptions of the body and lived experience developed by Merleau-Ponty and Husserl. Women, she argues, are exposed to men and androcentric social norms in their specific situation in such a way that is unfavorable to them.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre used the concept of ambiguity to fundamentally define the human being, who, as Beauvoir quotes, is a "being whose being is not to be, of that subjectivity which realizes itself only as presence in the world, that engaged freedom, that surging of the for-oneself which is immediately given for others" (Beauvoir 2015, 8). But the free choice propagated by Sartre in *Existentialism is a Humanism* (2007) is not a livable reality for women. With this observation, Beauvoir transforms the concepts of transcendence and immanence. Transcendence now no longer denotes, as it did in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, the mode of existence of the subject through which it can freely conceive itself without restrictions of intentionality. Beauvoir observes that, for women, certain practices and styles of upbringing and housework, as well as demands made upon their appearance and behavior, are all predetermined. Influenced primarily by this observation, as well as by her readings of Hegel, Marx, and Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir equates the female sphere of activity with immanence and the traditionally male sphere with transcendence.

Similar to slaves, she writes in 1947, in many civilizations women are submitted to a situation, "to the laws, the gods, the customs, and the truth created by the males" (Beauvoir 2015, 40). The body "is" a situation, she writes in regard to gender, because "in the position I adopt – that of Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty – [...] if the body is not a *thing*, it is

a situation: it is our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects" (Beauvoir 2010, 68).

The body does not simply have a context, but is born into a situation of immanence. "The world is first present to the newborn only in the form of immanent sensations" (331). But then, through processes of naturalization, normalization, norming, and socialization, the girl or boy is brought forth and will live its embodied gender – as Judith Butler will also write later in *Bodies that Matter* (1993). The body is not simply a biological object, but the subject of experience in its immanence and inhibition. And this experience begins at the "scene of birth," where gender shows itself and the path of naturalization, normalization, and standardization begins (Cavarero 1997, 211).

Beauvoir's claim that "[o]ne is not born, one rather becomes, a woman" means that femininity and womanhood are based on one's upbringing and socialization, which constitute the meaning of gender difference (Beauvoir 2010, 330).[2] One becomes a woman with and through her sensations and experiences. However, Beauvoir's conception cannot simply be reduced to a sex/gender distinction or to the socialization of female roles. The "female" nature (sex) does not simply underlie her gender; nature is interpreted and values are attributed to it. Accordingly, Butler clarifies that gender is not natural, but naturalized. This naturalization is hidden under the supposed reality of gender. In temporally and bodily habitualized performative acts, gender is objectified in a historical and social discourse (Butler 1988, 531). In her various writings, Butler, like Beauvoir, places particular emphasis on social performance. The prenatal attribution "It's a girl!" already naturalizes the girl's "girlishness" through the normative power of linguistic attributions. As Butler writes, "The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm" (Butler 1993, 8). This normative power operates in different areas – each in its own specific way – yet it is always powerful and effective. Beauvoir investigated this effectiveness with recourse to Merleau-Ponty's concepts of the lived body and the primordial structures of existence, which, as the primordial structures of experience, determine our relationship to the world. The body thus does not simply have a context, but is lived bodily as the subject of experience.

In contrast to Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, Beauvoir makes the political claim that social oppression divides the genders into two classes – the oppressor and the oppressed. For the oppressed, the possibility of tran-

scendence is always negated by oppression. Inspired by the phenomeno-
logical style of asking "how," Beauvoir explores three questions, each
touching on the theme of experience, the body, gender difference and
sexuality. These questions are not new but may be posed anew by each
generation – how has "feminine reality" been constituted, or how is gen-
der difference experienced? (Beauvoir 2010, 38). How has woman been
defined as Other? Furthermore, if woman is defined as Other, how can the
world be described from the woman's situation as it is presented to her?
Whoever approaches these questions will – as Beauvoir wrote in 1949 –
understand where "the Woman's drama" lies that she – the woman –
encounters (37). Whereas Merleau-Ponty used the notion of "drama" for
the general description of bodily existence in the world, Beauvoir concre-
tizes this concept to bring out the situation of women. She stylizes this
drama as a conflict between the claim of the subject, who grasps herself as
essential with a male prestige, and the situational imposition that consti-
tutes her – the woman as "Other" – as inessential and object.

Beauvoir describes the lived experience of becoming woman as a
woman. She meticulously traces and reconstructs the sensations, feelings,
and experiences undergone by women on the basis of the situation
imposed upon them, even where they are unaware of these feelings. This
kind of self-description replaces the description of others, which often
turns out to be an attribution of others. Descriptions of what "one" does,
accepts, or avoids, disclose the situations *through* and *in* which women
and their sensations are formed. Social practices – in Beauvoir's context,
those of the 1950s – cause boys and girls to be treated differently, and
girls, accordingly, are standardized, normed, and treated as girls. Under
the gaze of the Other, they experience the "drama of every existent – that
is, the drama of one's relation to the Other" in a formative way that can
lead to "abandonment," "anguish," or even "contented passivity" (31f.) By
using stories from everyday life, literature, and psychology, Beauvoir
describes what is experienced or suffered in terms of bodily attributions,
influenced in terms of disappointments, or expected in terms of activity
or passivity. The woman "learns" how to be a woman, and even to "feel"
like one.

A concomitant inhibited intentionality draws on Merleau-Ponty's con-
cept of motility, in which intentionality is anchored as an "I can." In con-
trast, female bodily existence simultaneously holds its engagement in a
socialized and self-imposed "I cannot" (Young 1980, 146). Girls experience

themselves physically as less active and space-taking, thus as more fragile and inhibited. Based on this observation, in line with Beauvoir, Young states that women occupy less space than would be physically possible for them and that female bodily existence is "self-referred" and thus lived "as an *object*" (151).

By illuminating an ambiguous transcendence, Young reveals a sexist oppression in contemporary society where women are physically and emotionally disabled. They are disabled, for example, by education and gazes, by being discouraged from physical activity and encouraged toward seated play, and by all that accompanies them since birth. Women learn to live their bodies as objects, dangerously exposed to the world, which is why they themselves cannot move openly and transcend themselves. This not only has consequences for a woman's restricted movement in space but also for her sense and sensitivity of herself. Beauvoir brings out a dilemma that does not just lie in female consciousness but in her situation and relationship with men. Beauvoir refers to the Kinsey Report which states that "wives, more conscious of themselves, are more deeply inhibited" (Beauvoir 2010, 226). Whereas with Merleau-Ponty, a general concept of inhibited bodily intentionality can be discussed, Beauvoir points to the specific forms of socialization and situatedness of women which leads to the "ambiguity of the feminine attitude: the young woman both wants and rejects pleasure" (ibid.). Thus, Beauvoir goes even further than Young in her descriptions of the female range of movement in space by referring to very different typical cases of female ambiguities. Furthermore, by referring to "two transcendences" (849), Beauvoir has, on the one hand, laid the foundation for her studies in which women are described in their objecthood and passivity. On the other hand, she is also concerned with the emancipated woman who resists the role of passivity imposed on her, who works and demands to be creatively active like a man. Thus, she describes women as playing "both sides," because they demand "old-fashion respect and modern esteem, they rely on old female magic and emancipatory rights" (850). In response, men fight back. And therefore, Beauvoir is not surprised, he is also "duplicitous" when he demands loyalty from the woman and at the same time treats her with mistrust and hostility (ibid.). The situation remains precarious for her because "she does not stand in front of man as a subject, but as an object paradoxically endowed with subjectivity" (ibid.). In order to understand the situation of female existence, whose relationship to freedom and self-determination is highly

ambivalent, the recognition of existential ambiguity is central. At the same time, some persons who are strongly imposed upon by normalizing and often institutional regimes respond not with inhibited intentionality but with transgressive intentionality. They tend to transgress a given space and a particular situation. The next section thematizes how intentionality may not just be ambivalent because of forms of inhibition but also because of forms of transgression.

Transgressive Intentionality and Difficult Ambiguity

Taking Beauvoir's basic methodological approach of describing a situation and the living experience of a person, her sensitivities, and inner conflicts, we can also explore the environment and societal mechanisms for those who seem limitless and who transgress normal and normative borders with their behavior. Beauvoir focuses on modern society's regime and how it "successfully" installs "normal" behavior and feelings in women and the elderly. In the following, I consider another group of people who live outside of society and yet inside of institutions, namely, those who require care and demonstrate "challenging behavior." The term "challenging behavior" is used primarily in psychology in relation to people with mental, developmental, or learning disabilities (Emerson 1995).

The attempt to define challenging behavior leads to the observation that it does not only involve a single person. "Challenging" behavior presupposes someone who is challenged by that behavior. Certainly, there is a person who, for various reasons, tends to behave in a way that is considered difficult. This behavior is also always embedded in a certain social and institutional practice that is already shaped and normed. What is considered challenging behavior has to do with the caregivers, the social environment, and what is considered normal within a social context. The phenomena of "challenging behavior" and the responses registered to it are historically contingent, usually socially explosive, and personally difficult – as well as challenging as a philosophical theme.

The clinical gerontology and dementia researchers Jiska Cohen-Mansfield and Colleen Ray report cases of challenging behavior which show that the environment and context influence forms of intentionality and behavior. Here are two very different cases depicting various interactions between the patient, other people, the situation, and the environmental setting:

Mr. E. was in a nursing home and was bothered by a female resident who was vocal and would ask Mr. E. why he looked at her. Mr. E. grabbed her by the neck in a choking gesture, possibly in order to keep her quiet. Feeling unable to handle this situation, the home sent Mr. E. to acute care. In the hospital, he had his own room and did not bother anyone. Therefore, he was discharged back to the nursing home, with a report that he was calm and content. In the nursing home, he was placed back with the vocal resident and the previous episode and its consequences re-occurred. Following three such episodes, the home refused to take him back from acute care. Mr. E. was, therefore, sent to a regional behavioral unit with many vocal and aggressive residents where his aggression is continuously triggered, which results in chemical restraint, followed by functional decline and no improvement in behavior.
(Cohen-Mansfield and Ray 2014, 1)

Mr. F. has repetitious episodes in which he screams. When Cohen-Mansfield asked whether he could be in pain, the staff responded, "This is the way he is." As Cohen-Mansfield and Ray write, "Since he has been on the unit for so long, they accept the behaviors and stop inquiring about their triggers and origins. Repetitive vocalizations are so distressing to hear, yet staff has normalized them. The staff did not see any need for action" (Cohen-Mansfield and Ray 2014, 1).

Challenging behavior can be verbal, physical, aggressive, or non-aggressive. It need not be described as only one or the other. In other words, the observer may have an effect on how the behavior is described. It is part of the concept of challenging behavior that someone is challenged, be it by loud complaining, persistent shouting, screaming for help, insults, scolding, physical beating around the head, hurting others or themselves, restless running around, knocking, or efforts to run away.

Different explanatory models distinguish various causes of these behaviors and are linked to different therapeutic approaches:

A   The *Biological Model* is focused on neurotransmitters. Correct medication is required.

B   The *Behavioral Model* (Trigger Model) is focused on details or single ele-
ments that (presumably) trigger certain behaviors, e.g., a closed door
triggers one's banging against it. A change of the condition, e.g., open
doors, is suggested for such a patient.

C   With the *Environmental Vulnerability/Lower Stress Threshold Model*, the
external circumstances and environmental factors of patients are ana-
lyzed in a broad way. Challenging behavior may imply, for instance, that
a patient needs less stimulation, or perhaps even more stimulation if the
patient's environment has become profoundly boring to that person.

D   As the name suggests, the *Needs Model* focuses on the needs or (possi-
ble) interests of patients. Many patients, especially those affected by
dementia, have difficulty caring for their own needs. They often do not
know how to explain their needs, which can sometimes be difficult to
integrate into the context of a care facility (e.g., sleeping until nine
o'clock, followed by a coffee in bed, etc.). Thus, certain behaviors (such
as restlessness, aggressiveness, etc.) may compensate for these unmet
needs (Cohen-Mansfield 2013).

These cases and models show how someone's embodiedness and the
interactions between a person and her environment may substantially
impact the various ways in which she is intentionally embedded in her
context, as well as how modes of intentionality and behavior may be influ-
enced by particular circumstances. Likewise, these cases also show that
the routine of normalization habituates the associated individuals, e.g.,
the caretakers in this case, as well as the institutionalized practice. Pro-
cesses of normalization and naturalization may not "successfully" impact
the needs or vulnerabilities of particular persons and so, their way of
being remains in the ambiguous existential state of transgressing the
"wrong" situation. However, if it is always possible to tranquilize someone
then this has a very high price, namely, to kill the ambiguity of existence
and to inhibit intentionality to the rudiment of depletion. Ambiguity is a
constitutive element in the relationship between human and the world; it
is central to existence and lived experiences. Its liquidation is destructive
to human life and philosophically uninspiring.

    Acknowledging ambiguity allows the introduction of a cross-discipli-
nary approach of, for instance, medical humanities, political theory,
empirical analysis, and phenomenology. The phenomenological approach
to both inhibited and transgressive intentionalities brings out the lived

experiences of the person affected in her particular situation and social structures. How people respond to these experiences, and their consequent actions, depends upon the perceptual and evaluative views of the observers. These views may be inspired by different bio-medical, psychological, or social perspectives and prejudices. Thus, it is the task of phenomenological investigation to shed light on the central ambiguity of human existence and on the manifold perspectives of cross-disciplinary approaches. As Beauvoir clearly states, the "fundamental ambiguity of the human condition" means that the future will always be open to the possibilities of "opposing choices," the "flight from the anguish of freedom," or a life lived with its adventures and meaningful moments (Beauvoir 2015, 116).

Notes

1   I dedicate this text to Veronica Vasterling who has shown that interrelating the work of Arendt, Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty enriches phenomenological and hermeneutic research.

2   Luce Irigaray criticizes Beauvoir with regard to the question of what role psychoanalysis should play. Out of this criticism she formulates the thesis: "Je suis née femme, mais je dois encore devenir cette femme que je suis par nature" (Irigaray 1992, 168). The assumption of different given structures points to substantial differences between the two authors, especially when it comes to questions about culture and society.

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The Gender That Is None: Some Daring Reflections on the Concept of Gender in Beauvoir, Irigaray, and Butler[1]

SILVIA STOLLER

Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, and Judith Butler are now regarded as classics of philosophical gender studies. They each stand for a very specific approach: Beauvoir purports equality theory, Irigaray is considered the main representative of difference theory, and Butler is assigned to construction theory. The three gender conceptions could not be more different. The protagonists of these approaches have contributed significantly to positioning their theories as fundamentally divergent and incompatible theoretical conceptions, and feminist reception has done its part to reinforce and ultimately cement this impression of incompatibility.[2] It is possible to continue in this way – and there are perfectly good reasons to do so. But there are also reasons to step off the well-trodden paths of mainstream reception, if only to briefly give another idea a chance and revive all the more strongly the rich thinking that these three great theorists have presented to us.

I would like to draw attention to one passage from each of the three theorists' major works that I find interesting enough to relate to each other. These are passages that are significant to their philosophical concept of gender, but – with a few exceptions – do not always receive sufficient attention in feminist circles; at best they are mentioned, often half-heartedly. The following considerations are undoubtedly experimental in character and I am fully aware that they are a bit of a gamble. For they do not fit into the "mainstream" interpretation of the three classicists and even, to a certain extent, go against the grain of their theoretical designs. But how to stop thinking once one has started? Doesn't philosophical thinking live up to its name precisely when it embarks on detours not yet undertaken? Even at the risk of going astray and ultimately failing to withstand possible counter-arguments, such an idea demands to be presented.

Let us begin with Simone de Beauvoir. In her study, *The Second Sex*, the "grande dame" of modern gender studies not only provides us with a

phenomenological-existentialist description of female existence and analyzes – in great detail – gender relations in patriarchal society. She also presents very concrete ideas about what the relationship between the sexes must look like if one is to escape gender asymmetry and establish an ethical relationship between the sexes, free from oppression and characterized by reciprocity. Beauvoir sketches an alternative gender order that, at the time it was drafted, was still a long way from being realized, as the author notes in the concluding remarks of her study. Here is the passage that I would like to focus on. It reads: "The fact of being a human being is infinitely more important than all the singularities that distinguish human beings" (Beauvoir 2010, 732). Now, these "singularities" include gender identity, and people differ in terms of gender, among other things. That these "singularities" are less important than the fact of being a "human being" relativizes the importance of being a particular gender; it is lost in the face of the paramount importance of being a "human being." In philosophical terms: For Beauvoir, the universality of being a human being ultimately overrides the particularity of being gendered. This corresponds entirely to Beauvoir's humanistic conception and finally results in the plea for equality and its paradoxical formulation in the call for "brotherhood" (766).

Let us now turn to Luce Irigaray and what is probably her best-known book, *This Sex Which Is Not One*. In her attempt to conceptualize a female imaginary, she describes "woman" as follows: "*She is neither one nor two. Rigorously speaking, she cannot be identified either as one sex, or as two. She resists all adequate definition*" (Irigaray 1985, 26). While the first part of this quote is common knowledge, the second part is often omitted. Yet already the first part is intriguing, since Irigaray is considered a defender of sexual difference. According to Irigaray, woman is not "one" because the One is reserved for men in patriarchal societies, where there is no neuter and certainly no radically other feminine. In order to distinguish herself from this one sex, Irigaray envisions the woman who is already differentiated in herself and, for this reason alone, resists a clear and distinct assignment to the classical dualism of woman and man. That is why she speaks of woman as the sex "which is not one." But she is also not simply something different in herself, just "two"; according to this passage, she is "*neither* one *nor* two" (my emphasis). She is, so to speak, more than that. Which brings us to the second part of the quotation; that the woman now resists "all adequate definition" is astonishing. Thus, nothing can be said

about her sex. The question is, which sex is it about which nothing can be said? If nothing can be said about sex, what happens to sex? Does every reference to sex/gender – and therefore also to the "woman" – then become obsolete? Must we then surmise that woman is not a sex/gender at all? Or at least a sex/gender that has lost its sharp contours? Even if one concedes that there is something like a minimal definition in Irigaray, that is, that the determination of woman consists precisely in the fact that she cannot be determined, that she eludes any determination, the fact remains that the determination does not reach much further than the realization that she remains incomplete. Perhaps, however, the determination is an impossible task; woman is and remains indeterminate. Therefore, the theorist who, more than any other, tirelessly holds to the primacy of sexual difference, indeed who claims the difference between woman and man as a universal, ontological difference and is interested in conceptualizing a female subject, says at the same time that there is no "adequate definition" of woman. Even if the matter is somewhat more complicated than can be presented here, we must concede that, at least here, we are dealing with a paradox requiring elucidation.

Now, let us look at Judith Butler. Her specific contribution to gender studies, among other things, is the critique of the essentialization of the female gender ("women") and the ensuing demand for recognition of gender plurality. But this demand is not all-encompassing. Butler delves deep in her critique of essentialism, saying, not only, that gender identity is plural. She also states that such an identity cannot be conceptualized at all, at least not subjected to a complete determination. It is ontologically impossible, she tells us, to provide a complete picture of identity. Interestingly, she expresses skepticism even toward those very feminist theorists who, for the purpose of providing as complete a descriptive account of identity as possible, deliberately insist on the inclusion of a wide variety of identity categories. She quite rightly points out that those who strive for such a complete determination usually add an "etc." to the end of their list of categories of "race, class, gender, etc." – thus implicitly expressing something that, for Butler, is an inescapable fact: namely, that a complete list of identity categories is futile. The "etc." placed at the end of the list is a sign of this. Butler concludes that a determination of identity is doomed to "failure." She writes, "This failure, however, is instructive: what political impetus is to be derived from the exasperated "etc." that so often occurs at the end of such lines?" (Butler 1990, 143). That, for Butler, this

failure is not a cause for resignation but an occasion for alternative gender politics is remarkable. But what should also be of interest in our context is that she denies the possibility of determining gender identity, because what one applies to the "list" of categories also applies to the category "gender." Gender eludes complete determination. Consequently, according to Butler, feminist gender politics would have to be about keeping the determination of gender open. This is fundamentally desirable, since it holds out the prospect of alternative or complementary determinations. At the same time, however, it is not much more than an envisioning, and "gender" remains in its indeterminacy.

What conclusions can be drawn from these three quotes? In all three cases, we note a certain disappearance of gender. Simone de Beauvoir believes that a true ethical relationship between human beings ultimately transcends all gender differences in their particularity. If one proceeds in her humanistic understanding of gender justice, then gender disappears just as humanity is realized. Luce Irigaray asserts that woman is a sex characterized by indeterminacy; sex vanishes the moment its indeterminacy is asserted. Judith Butler sees the determination of identity as doomed to failure and assumes that the determination of gender is essentially incomplete. In this case, gender dissolves precisely at the point at which the possibility of a complete determination is denied.

As we familiarize ourselves with these thoughts, an interesting paradox becomes apparent. Those gender researchers and feminist theorists who are ultimately concerned with an alternative feminist gender order also have a concept of indifference in their theoretical program. Or, to put it another way, all three gender theories are developed in the name of gender – and even in the name of the female gender. Beauvoir begins with the thesis of the oppression of women and sets herself the goal of liberating women from patriarchal oppression. Irigaray claims that the female gender (woman) does not yet exist in the patriarchal culture and that it must, therefore, first be invented. And even when Butler shakes the foundations of feminism itself and makes the category "woman" or "women" the subject of criticism, she does so in the name of efficient gender politics.

All three theorists, then, strive for an appropriate gender theory that focuses on the issue of gender. Nevertheless, there are considerations in the works of Beauvoir, Irigaray, and Butler that throw thought-provoking light on their theories of "gender." In all three, namely, we find approaches to a disappearance of gender – a gender that does not actually exist in this way. They

are part of a thinking of indeterminacy, which Gerhard Gamm once identified as a characteristic of modernity in his study *Flucht aus der Kategorie* (1994).

Postscript

I am aware that the accounts of the three theorists are abbreviated and that the passages I have singled out require further analysis and discussion. It is also clear to me that my interpretation of the "disappearance of the subject" can easily be critically questioned. For example, one objection could be that the impossibility of a (complete) determination of gender does not actually make gender disappear but only expresses the difficulty of wanting to achieve a completeness of description (of gender!). Another concern could be that the thesis of the fundamental indeterminacy of gender itself represents an attempt to determine gender, even if only in its indeterminacy. Indeed, when Irigaray says that the sex is not "one" but more than that – that is, up to the point where it cannot be enumerated – then, of course, she too provides a kind of determination of sex. Likewise, in a humanist-universalist conception of gender, as in Beauvoir, gender does not actually "disappear." Indeed, when Beauvoir claims that the universal human qualities of being human are more important than the gendered particularities, she does not mean that the singular genders "disappear"; but only that they are less vital than the universalities.

However, there are, in my view, unmistakable *tendencies* in all these conceptions of Beauvoir, Irigaray, and Butler that make the following questions legitimate: How much gender do we still have when its naming and determination turns out to be impossible, as in Butler and Irigaray? And how much is left of gender if, as with Beauvoir, we are supposed to place the universally "being human" above the "being human" in particular? Why are several generations of gender theorists, with such different approaches, so keen to draw attention to the impossibility of a complete determination of sex and gender (Irigaray, Butler)? Why is it that the very gender scholars who wanted to make (female) gender visible in the 20th century claim that the difference between the sexes is less important than what is generally human (Beauvoir)? Finally, which brings me to the present: How do we approach these gender theories at a time when assertions to be recognized as a particular gender are becoming increasingly unmistakable, complex, and occasionally competitive in terms of gender politics?

Notes

1   This text originally appeared in German language as "Das Geschlecht, das keines ist. Einige wagemutige Überlegungen zum Geschlechterbegriff bei Beauvoir, Irigaray und Butler." *Was Wir. Beiträge für Ursula Kubes-Hofmann*, edited by Hanna Hacker and Susanne Hochreiter, Vienna: Praesens Verlag 2013, 142-148. It was supplemented by a final page ("Postscript") for the Festschrift for Prof. Dr. Veronica Vasterling and translated into English by Ida Černe.

2   In my Dutch PhD, supervised by Veronica Vasterling, and in my habilitation thesis, I questioned this specific history of reception in its self-evidence. But, above all, I questioned the impression of a progressive, quasi-evolutionist development of theory (see Stoller 2006, 2010).

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Redefining Sex, Gender, and Intersectionality

The Easy Difference:
Sex in Behavioral Ecology

ROSE TRAPPES

Behavioral ecologists have something going on with sex. Anyone having anything to do with this field concerned with the study of animal behavior in its ecological and evolutionary context will have noticed it. Sex is everywhere. Some of behavioral ecologists' major questions are about sexual signaling, mating systems, parental investment, sperm competition, sex ratios, sex changes, and, yes – genitals. Many of the central theories in behavioral ecology are also about sex: sexual selection theory, the equal parental investment hypothesis, and the handicap principle of sexual signaling, to name a few. Sex makes up at least a third of one common introductory textbook to behavioral ecology (Davies, Krebs, and West 2012). And, as discussed in this paper, sex is frequently called upon to explain variation in anything from metabolic rates to exploratory behavior.

What is going on here? Why is sex so prominent in behavioral ecology? I ask this question as a feminist philosopher and a philosopher of science interested in scientific practice. There is a long tradition of feminist critiques of behavioral ecology and related disciplines, such as sociobiology, primatology, comparative psychology, and evolutionary psychology. Feminist philosophers and scientists have highlighted a number of problematic features of behavioral ecology: sexist and heterosexist assumptions about male and female roles, preferences and behavior; overgeneralizations across species, time, and social systems; biased collection, interpretation and evaluation of evidence; and a general lack of diversity amongst researchers and the topics they choose to explore (e.g., Haraway 1990; Hrdy 1999; Roughgarden 2004; Lloyd 2005). Things are changing for the better, partly as a result of the cultivation of new, feminist approaches in behavioral ecology (Gowaty 2003; Roughgarden 2009). Yet, sex is sticking around in behavioral ecology. I think it's important to investigate why sex is proving so persistent, in order to envisage how behavioral ecology could be different. Rather than asking what sex is in this context, I therefore focus on the use of sex as a biological category or variable in behavioral ecological research.

Feminist critics, such as those cited above, have largely focused on theories about sex and research on sex-related topics. Less attention has been granted to another way sex features in behavioral ecology: namely, its role as an explanatory variable. In behavioral ecology, sex is often treated as a categorical variable, for which individuals can be assigned
values such as 'female' or 'male' (though sex may be better understood as gradual and multidimensional: see Griffiths 2021; Roughgarden 2004). This variable is often called on to explain variations in traits or features that aren't directly related to sexual development, mating, or parenting, such as metabolism, cognition, movement, or resource use. In these contexts, sex is not the primary topic of research, nor are researchers testing a particular sex-related theory. Still, sex is brought up and made potentially relevant to the phenomenon under study.

The practice of using sex as an explanatory variable is pervasive in behavioral ecology and related fields. This makes it interesting for feminist philosophers – perhaps this, relatively mundane research practice, is one reason for the persistence of sex. It also makes it interesting for philosophers of science. Questions about how scientific concepts are used in research accord with a shift in the philosophy of science towards paying more attention to scientific practice. Practice-based philosophy of science, or philosophy of science in practice, involves looking at the process of scientific research as it is carried out, rather than only at scientific products like theories and facts (Ankeny et al. 2011; Soler et al. 2014). In doing so, it draws on feminist insights about science as a material, embodied and social activity. A practice-based approach is thus well-suited to expand the feminist analysis of behavioral ecology.

Why is sex used so frequently to account for variation in behavioral ecology? One simple explanation is that sex is often relatively easy to identify and often does account for some variation. Biologists have standard practices for determining sex in many animal species. This can include visual identification of external genitalia or sexually dimorphic traits, that is, traits that differ consistently between the sexes, such as the large size of females compared to males in many species of spiders and fish. It can also take the form of identifying reproductive outputs, like lactation or egg production, or more complex procedures, such as genetic testing. There are species and conditions where sex identification is truly problematic. For instance, researchers may have no reliable sex identification procedures for little-known species, and restrictions on handling and

intervening on animals in the field can also limit access to information about sex. In addition, some species, such as earthworms, are so-called simultaneous hermaphrodites, which means a single individual can produce both eggs and sperm at the same time and, therefore, cannot be categorized according to sex (Roughgarden 2004; Griffiths 2021). But, for the most part, sex is an easy difference for behavioral ecologists to identify.

As well as being typically easy to identify, sex often does explain some variation in the data collected by researchers. Sex can sometimes account for differences in morphology, like body size, limb proportions, or coloration, especially in sexually dimorphic species. Often, it can also explain some variation in physiology, such as hormone levels or metabolism, and behavior, such as how animals interact with other members of their species or where and when they forage. This doesn't mean sex can explain all variation in these features. But, by splitting up data by sex or including sex as a factor in a statistical model, researchers often find that they can reduce variation enough to get a slightly clearer picture from their messy data. This reduction in variation is important for identifying other causal patterns that researchers are interested in. For instance, using sex to account for some variation can help to reveal the effect of an experimental intervention, physiological difference, or environmental change on animal behavior or resource use.

So, one reason sex is prevalent as an explanatory variable is that it's easy and often works. Yet, the story is not so simple. It is actually surprisingly common for sex to fail to explain any significant amount of variation in a trait or phenomenon of interest. Examining these cases of when sex doesn't explain reveals further reasons why researchers continuously bring sex into their research. These reasons go beyond the simple story of an easy difference to highlight, instead, the structure of science in shaping scientific practices.

Let's look at a couple of examples. This will get a little technical but it is important for the goal of understanding why sex is called upon so often in practice. To find examples, I consulted the most recent issue of the journal *Behavioral Ecology* (Volume 33, Issue 4). Many papers in the issue were about clearly sex-related topics, like mating or sexual signaling. In addition, various papers were only about one sex, which is a common strategy to reduce variation or to focus on particular behavioral phenomena, such as male parental care or aggression between females. Finally, I identified two papers that were about topics not obviously related to sex, that reported the sexes of

their animals, and that did not find sex to be explanatory. These two papers demonstrate different reasons why researchers bring sex into their research.

The first is a study of how Californian ground squirrels react to disturbances by coyotes, dogs, and humans (Gall et al. 2022). This study focuses in particular on the effect of disturbances on the squirrels' social interactions, such as play behavior and greetings. The researchers report the procedure for sex identification (inspecting external genitalia), and the number of males and females studied each year and overall. Yet, they don't present any analysis using sex. Instead, the squirrels' age (juvenile or adult), as well as the type of disturbance, are used to explain variation in the response to disturbance. So, why mention sex if it's not relevant to the study?

One possibility is that the researchers had tried sex as an explanatory variable but found that it didn't work, that is, that no significant proportion of the variation in the response to disturbance was accounted for by sex. If this analysis was conducted, it should have been reported in the publication; not reporting negative results is considered a questionable research practice and thus heavily discouraged, especially recently in ecology and evolution (O'Dea et al. 2021). It could even be considered an interesting finding that sex doesn't explain differences in how a small mammal responds to a threatening disturbance in its environment. Hence, the fact that the sex-based analysis and result weren't reported suggests that the researchers did not conduct the analysis.

There is an alternative explanation of why sex was reported but not used for analysis. The data used in this study on disturbance response come from a larger longitudinal study of Californian ground squirrel behaviour at multiple locations in a large protected area (Smith et al. 2018). In large longitudinal projects like this, researchers collect many different sorts of data for different possible research questions. As a result, papers coming from a large study typically do not make use of all the available data. In the case of Californian ground squirrels, an earlier publication from the project did, in fact, directly study the effect of sex on social interactions (Smith et al. 2018). The later study of responses to disturbances may thus have simply carried over the reports of sex identification and sex ratios from the larger project, without intending to use that sex data in the particular study at hand. Such transfer of data is understandable. Nevertheless, reporting sex when it hasn't been shown to be relevant is not necessarily benign. In particular, it risks implicitly perpetuating the idea that sex is, in fact, relevant to phenomena such as responses to disturbance.

The second paper is about the learning abilities of chestnut thrushes, a wild bird that breeds in the western Himalayas and southwest China (Lou et al. 2022). The researchers subjected birds to a novel skill test and a spatial memory test. They found that individuals with larger heads were more likely to learn a novel skill and to learn it faster, but that head size had no effect on spatial cognition. As with the previous paper on squirrels, this paper reports how sex was identified (genetic testing), as well as the number of males and females used. Unlike in the squirrel paper, however, these researchers do report the statistical tests of sex and a number of other variables, including age and exploratory tendency, none of which were found to explain variation in learning or spatial performance.

The paper is framed as a test of the effect of head size (and thus brain size) on cognition in birds. So, why did these researchers bother to test sex in the first place? Identifying the birds' sex required putting in some extra effort to draw blood and do a genetic test; this additional intervention would usually require some justification. One option may be that the researchers expected head size to vary with sex, such that distinguishing males and females could give a clearer picture of how head size affects cognition. However, the chestnut thrush is not sexually dimorphic and the researchers found no difference in head size between the sexes.

Another explanation is provided in the paper. In the introduction, the researchers cite a number of previous studies demonstrating differences in learning and spatial cognition between juveniles and adults in various bird species. These citations form the background to testing whether age affects learning and spatial cognition in chestnut thrushes. The researchers also cite one previous study on birds in which sex differences in spatial cognition were found. This one citation, it seems, is a justification for including sex as a potential explanatory variable in the study.

The cited paper found that female cowbirds perform better in a spatial memory task than males (Guigueno et al. 2014). Yet this study doesn't really support any hypotheses about sex differences in chestnut thrushes. Cowbirds are obligate brood parasites, so, like cuckoos, the females locate nests from other species and lay their own eggs in those nests. Guigueno et al. wanted to test for sex differences in spatial cognition because only female cowbirds must search for nests and, by hypothesis, should have good spatial cognition. The same sort of hypothesis is unjustified for the chestnut thrush, which is not a brood parasite.

The existence of empirical findings of sex differences in the same or a similar phenomenon, in the same or a similar species or study system, is, in fact, a very common reason to include sex as a potential explanatory variable. However, the study on chestnut thrushes reveals a danger in this practice of building on previous research. Sex can readily be mistaken for an easily transferrable explanatory variable, overlooking important differences between the study systems or phenomena under study that make sex more or less relevant.

These two papers on Californian ground squirrels and chestnut thrushes reveal two reasons why researchers bring up sex, even when it doesn't explain variation in the phenomenon they are interested in: (a) using data from larger, longitudinal projects, and (b) building on previous findings of sex differences. Both of these practices are widespread in behavioral ecology. Building on past findings is, of course, best practice in any science, and ecologists have generated many longitudinal, individual-level datasets that are used and reused for many different research purposes (Clutton-Brock and Sheldon 2010; Culina et al. 2021). These widespread practices perpetuate the attention to sex as a potential explanatory variable. In doing so, they generate a number of risks. By making sex seem relevant when it may not be, these practices exacerbate the risk of overlooking important differences in study systems and overgeneralizing findings. They also risk perpetuating assumptions about sexual difference and its importance for biological phenomena. Such risks are especially significant given that much behavioral ecology research on non-human animals is also used to make inferences about human behavior and social systems and thus can carry serious implications for how we understand and treat sexual difference in society.

Avoiding these risks requires vigilance. Here, I draw on Sarah Richardson's investigation of sex difference research in medicine, where she argues that "while sex may be a relevant variable in some cases, finding differences between the sexes should not be an end in and of itself. Sex difference research should be grounded in valid medical research questions, motivated by sound biology, and rigorously designed" (Richardson 2013, 223). The same goes for behavioral ecology: sex should be introduced into studies only when it is well-justified by biological relevance or past evidence from systems that are demonstrably similar in the relevant respects. This means resisting the inertia of the structure of scientific research and its standard practices and adopting a more responsible attitude towards sex.

Of course, many other factors contribute to sex's high-profile status in behavioral ecology. Reproduction, mating, and parenting are important for evolutionary processes, and sex is involved in many prominent theories about the evolution and ecology of behavior. Nevertheless, attending to the standard practices of identifying and reporting sex differences and using sex as an explanatory variable reveals additional elements behind the pervasiveness of sex in behavioral ecology. As well as raising important questions about how sex is understood and how it explains variation, this indicates work to be done on the part of behavioral ecologists to pay greater attention to when and how they bring sex into their research.

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Sex-Gender in Life-Science Research: Conceptual Renegotiations and an Enactivist Vision[I]

ALEX THINIUS

In her book *Sex Matters*, medical doctor McGregor recalls the following case from her practice in an emergency room:

> "I'll never forget the day that a thirty-two-year-old woman almost walked out of my emergency department while having a heart attack. [...] Julie, the young woman I met that day, had visited her primary care doctor several times prior to coming to the emergency department and had also seen at least two other physicians in the previous forty-eight hours. She was experiencing discomfort in the region of her chest and shortness of breath that worsened markedly the more agitated she became. [...] Her other doctors had attributed Julie's symptoms to a combination of anxiety and stress to her heart due to her obesity. [...] She was having panic attacks, and her weight was compounding the issue. End of story. [...] In fact, women's cardiac symptoms are often described as "atypical" and "unusual" in medical literature. [...] [H]ere was sweet, thirty-two-year-old Julie presenting with a condition that was likely to kill her in weeks, if not days, if left untreated—*and no one had thought to look for it because her symptoms and risk factors weren't consistent with the classic male model of a heart attack*. [...] To me, Julie's case was significant because she actually presented with male-pattern heart disease, but in a distinctly female way." (Original emphasis, McGregor 2020, Chapter 1)

Sex and gender (sex-gender) are increasingly recognized as crucial variables to improve life-science research and health care practice (Legato and Glezerman 2017). Differences in heart-attack diagnosis in men and women have become the symbol of the urgency to transform health care related research and practice. As McGregor puts it in *The Guardian*, "There's this

assumption that women's health is wrapped up in their reproduction. Women were men with 'boobs and tubes'" (Moore 2020). With Gender Medicine, health and life science is wrapping its head around the notion that there might not be one model of "mankind." This critique quickly turns into a view of sex as a radical difference between men and women. For example, *The Guardian* writes, the "takeaway message is that women's bodies are different to men's from cellular level onwards, yet our medical model is based on knowledge gleaned from male cells, male animals and male humans" (Moore 2020). In McGregor's words:

> "Physiologically, neurologically, cognitively, socially, and experientially, women are unique. Every system in our bodies operates according to a biological imperative fine-tuned to our womanhood and the daily functions that womanhood necessitates. We are not simply men with breasts and ovaries – or, conversely, men who lack penises and testicles. We are not a genetic offshoot of men, as literal interpretations of scripture might imply. We are unique in every single cell of our bodies."
> (McGregor 2020, Chapter 1)

McGregor's manifesto, as well as the public uptake in *The Guardian*, may be hyperbolic, however, they express a widespread approach to gendering in medicine and life-science research. In the move to taking sex-gender seriously, sex-gender differences are usually conceptualized as stable, dichotomous, and distributed in two (or three) groups: males and females, and the derived category of the intersexed (cf. Shai, Koffler, and Hashiloni-Dolev 2021).

However, in research on the biology of the sexes, as well as on trans* and intersex medical care (Zeeman et al. 2018; Schneider et al. 2018; Voß 2010), the growing consensus is that sex is nuanced, variable, and entangled with gender in complex ways. On the one hand, this complexity calls for much greater attention to contextual differences (Richardson 2021), in what different researchers refer to with terms like "sex," as well as in how sex traits are embedded and enmeshed with other aspects in different researched contexts. For example, a closer look at the widespread idea that men are "more likely to die of Covid" (Ghorayshi 2022) not only demonstrates the inadequate character of concepts such as "men" and "women"; it also reveals that analyzing the findings for contextual differences is:

> "weakening the evidence for a primary causal role for biological sex in these patterns. [...] We emphasize that understanding the role of gender and sex in COVID-19 disparities requires comprehensive, accessible, and transparent data on COVID-19 outcomes that include not only sex, but also gender identity, race, class, comorbidities, occupation, and other relevant demographic variables, in combination with quantitative and qualitative data on gendered behaviors, occupations, and comorbidities that may be associated with COVID-19 outcomes."
> (Danielsen et al. 2022, 10)

Context sensitivity can help us use our coarse-grained sex-gender concepts more carefully – this would already go a long way. However, careful use hardly turns a sledge-hammer into the sort of yarn that we need for understanding the realities of our sex-gendered lives. This creates the urgency that the concept of sex be "redefined" (Ainsworth 2015).

Conservation Approaches to Reconceptualizing Sex-Gender Face Epistemic Problems

Reconceptualizations of sex-gender can have two different aims: conserving or replacing the notion of sex as binary. Conserving some notion of binary sex, much research aims to integrate any complexities into established binary research paradigms. This faces three difficulties: pathologizing variation (cf. DuBois and Shattuck-Heidorn 2021; Cullin, Vitzthum, and Wiley 2021); compromising individualized health care aims (cf. DiMarco et al. 2022) and, thereby, saving the theory at the cost of the "phenomena." These approaches are in obvious practical and normative tension with providing and seeking appropriate medical care for everybody. Moreover, they face a less obvious epistemological problem: both in the design of research and the interpretation of findings, it is unclear how this line of research could possibly find out if sex was not "basically" binary. Even when not outright defining sex as binary difference ("Sex, Noun" n.d.), the assumption – or oftentimes, conviction – that sex-gender is "typically," "basically," or, in a similar sense, "normally" binary and stable rarely motivates research into the processes that manifest and maintain what fits a putative statistical normality (see, for a similar argument, Fausto-Sterling 2012,

2020). Moreover, this frames attention for counterindications only as "deviations" and "anomalies" – i.e., at best as "problems" for the theory. One might think of this as a less severe epistemic difficulty if, in principle, the notice of such "anomalies" could seriously challenge the research paradigm. But the interpretative framework of "definitionally," "basically," or "typically" binary difference in sex suggests that this is not the case: the framework comes with conceptual strategies that explain away *any* complexities as irrelevant, either as individual rather than sex differences, or as pathologies. Indeed, when counterindications can that easily be discarded, it is unclear which empirical impact could possibly prove it wrong – or, consequently, demonstrate its adequacy.

The task ahead is thus more difficult than merely "fitting" a few atypical males and females, intersexed, and trans* folks of different sorts into basically binary concepts of sex-gender. Instead, we need approaches that do not decide already from the outset that we have to find sex-gender to be binary at some point. This is crucial for doing justice to those of us who register as "problems" and "exceptions" to the basically-binary definition of sex. Moreover, not presupposing binarity will allow assessing when actual people in concrete contexts are distributed in a more or less dichotomous way.

Replacement Approaches for Reconceptualizing Sex-Gender

Given these problems with holding on to a binary notion of sex, other research aims at replacing static and binary notions of the sexes. Seeing sex as more and less stable sets of processes helps these approaches work in two dimensions: First, beyond the sex versus gender binary, they seek to integrate dynamic interactions and entanglements of organic, social, psychological, and environmental elements. Secondly, beyond the male versus female binary, they aim for a pluralist non-pathologizing picture of how sex-gender is distributed.

Approaches in science studies and the philosophy of science offer, by now, a broad and complex heterogenous field of conceptual research that supports life-scientists in researching sex in processual, dynamic, and pluralist terms, without pathologizing or blending-out complexity from the outset. Critique of overstatement and bias remains a core task: for example, correcting popular yet flawed narratives of genetic or postgenomic

determinism (Vasterling 2007; Voß 2010; Richardson and Stevens 2015). Moreover, approaches in science- and gender-studies (New Materialism and Posthumanism) aim at long-term shifts of fundamental ontological and epistemological frameworks (Haraway 2016b; 2016a; Braidotti 2013; Barad 2007; Wynter 2007). While the translation of these conceptual transpositions into empirical life-science research often leaves ample room for interpretation, another family of approaches (Feminist Empiricism and Philosophy of Science in Practice) aims at the piecemeal reengineering of conceptual frameworks that are already operational in life-science research practice (Richardson 2010; Crasnow and Intemann 2021; Chao and Reiss 2017; Ankeny et al. 2011).

The latter approaches speak differently to the two dimensions of the reconceptualization of the sexes. Going beyond the sex/gender binary, I want to highlight dynamic, developmental, and complex systems theories of sex-gender (Oyama 2000; Fausto-Sterling 2021) who offer powerful tools to research "biology in a social world" (Fausto-Sterling 2012). Accounting for the way in which social gendered meanings affect both research practices and the living bodies that they are researching, the "biology in a social world" paradigm helps us better understand interactions across different levels of complexity, e.g., genetic, physiological, organisms, systems, and populations. For example, changing the research question from "How do abnormalities develop?" or "Which interferences cause abnormal development?" to "How do statistically normal developments emerge?" goes a long way in not already presupposing the relevance of a distinction between "biological" and "social" factors or a binary distinction between male and female. Moreover, this sort of research affords investigating how different levels in the organization and moments in the development of an organism, a group, population, environment, etc. may be interacting. For example, one's bones are formed under conditions that are partially determined by social practices such as gender-differentiating nutrition (Fausto-Sterling 2005; 2008).

While processualist approaches beyond the sex/gender dichotomy are gaining traction (e.g., Ah-King and Nylin 2010), less conceptual attention has been paid to going beyond the male/female binary definition of the way in which sexual difference is differentiated (Griffiths 2021). Note that the difficulty, today, is less conceptualizing that individuals might not fall neatly into two groups with shared properties: over the past hundred years, various hermaphrodite-, contrary sexual feeling-, third sex-, inter-

mediaries-, intersex-, and trans*-concepts were conceivable as mixed manifestations of a sexual difference that was defined as binary. Two conceptualizations stand out in this regard: conceptualizing sexes themselves as a multi-spectral continuum (Baltes-Löhr 2018; Castleberry 2019; a "sea of gender," Fausto-Sterling 2020) and treating the sexes as statistical clusters at the population-level that feed back into individuals who then appear as mixed "mosaics" (Joel and Vikhanski 2019). While these approaches have merits, as they stand today, they can easily be interpreted on the basically-binary definition of sex as well. This is similar to various earlier ideas of sex as a "continuum" of "intermediaries." Thinking the sexes as a spectrum between normally developed full-males and full-females (Hirschfeld 2015), who would develop into gendered personalities by a process of identification, repression or direction, came at the price of restabilizing the basically-binary conception of the sexes – a spectrum of sex, at which individuals would be intermediaries; or typical sexes of which individuals would be mixtures. So-considered "full males and females," as well as "real homosexuals," would become the paradigm cases for defining the poles of the spectrum of the sexes, registering a great variety of classed, pathologized, criminalized, and – as "oriental" or otherwise racialized – "deviations" at its intermediaries (Mehlmann 2006 and 2000; Sengoopta 1992; Somerville 1994; Stein 2015; Heaney 2015; Hinchy 2019; Çetin, Voß, and Wolter 2016).[2]

If a contemporary non-binary reconceptualization of sex-gender difference wants to build on these potentials, it needs to thoroughly understand what allowed defining the sexes in racialized terms, and make sure not to "buy" any refined notion of sex-gender at the cost of postulating (possibly idealized) "full male and full female" as the defining paradigms of the sexes.

A View Ahead: How Can Enactivism and Critical Phenomenology Help?

What if the multi-spectral "sea" of sexual difference could dynamically be linked to the clusters and "mosaics" of sex, via a version of the "biology in a social world" paradigm that understands us as dynamic systems within multiple levels of other dynamic (or more complex) systems? I have recently developed such an account of gender: I have suggested that we can understand gender in a similar way as "genres," precisely when it comes to the

way in which individuals, groups, and the genders-themselves are dynami-
cally coupled (Thinius 2021). Like aesthetic genres, gender emerges in a
dynamic between classes (men "as a group"), practically operative concepts
("men"), and individual instances that manifest, reinterpret, and develop
the former two. Binary, or non-binary gendered properties are thus enacted
at various levels of our social organization of existence by arrays of embed-
ded people whose "kind membership" is ambiguous and a matter of a com-
municative shift.

As an account of gender, it is about how people (want to) participate in
each other's life, how they make sense with one another in encounters,
and how this relates to the way in which larger social contexts and popula-
tions are systematically structured. However, this does not mean that it is
not also about the "fleshiness" of us as living bodies. Recall the "biology in
a social world" framework: human organisms form in a world that is
already materially structured by social practices, including the idealiza-
tions and phantasms about desirable sex-genders that people are commu-
nicatively sharing in the population in which they are engaging. While
these dynamic and complex systems perspectives stress the interactions
between different levels of analysis (Fausto-Sterling 2019; Haslanger 2022),
my account of gender requires this perspective to be upgraded with a fur-
ther ingredient. For understanding sex-gender all the way up and down,
we need to factor-in agency, and we need to be able to integrate agency as
part of the systems-view of "biology in a social world." This is not as easy
as it might seem: dynamic and developmental systems change and
develop; some include agents. However, thinking of water-circulation or
waste-disposal systems, it is evident that while systems can have powerful
effects, they are not necessarily agential in the way in which people are.

Luckily, there is a way to translate phenomenological and other
descriptions of the perspective of agents like you and me into the abstract
and third-personalistic models of systems-theorizing: enactivism. This
translates *a description of the structures of our differentially shared experi-
ence* into *the structure of a specific sort of systems model*. Roughly, enactiv-
ism names a family of approaches in the emerging field of 4EA cognition –
embodied, embedded, extended, enactive, affective – at the cross-roads of
cognitive science, life-science, and philosophy of mind (Ward, Silverman,
and Villalobos 2017; Newen, Bruin, and Gallagher 2018). Major enactivist
programs – Radical Enactivism (Hutto and Myin 2017) and Linguistic
Bodies (Di Paolo, Cuffari, and De Jaegher 2018) – converge (Rolla and

Huffermann 2021) and diverge on many issues (Thompson 2007; Villalobos and Palacios 2021; Meincke 2019; Chemero 2009). They share the view that cognition occurs when agents, conceptualized as bodies of a certain behavioral structure, and their environments co-emerge in an ongoing, dynamic, interactive process, as modeled in systems-theoretical terms.

As a translation, this cannot substitute descriptions and reflections of agency as experienced from the perspective of agents; however, enactivism can help factor-in some important aspects of people's embodied agency into systems research, which can, in turn, help us reflect on our lives. This is most obviously interesting for developing research on how our fleshi-ness and the material world characterize our actions and interactions as bodily gendered people, at the levels of personal identity, intersubjectivity, and dynamically stabilized "self-reproducing" social systems, including the ways in which physiological and genetic elements of embodied agents shape and are shaped by these other elements (Fausto-Sterling 2020; 2021; Merritt 2010; Ayala and Vasilyeva 2015; Halsema 2020; Maiese 2021; Chapter 2, Thinius 2021). To cut, for example, Fausto-Sterling's long and complex story short: a sex-gendered environment, and the intersubjective inter-actions that shape it and are shaped by it, are crucial elements in the grad-ually emerging self-organization, enabled by and in engagement with the pregnant person in their social world, in which a human organism becomes a specific infant that becomes a person with a gradually more sta-bilized gendered identity, including sex-gendered body schema, meta-phorical gender associations, gendered toy preferences, gendered skill sets, physical capacities, brain organization habits, peer-affiliation, and symbolic gender/sex (2020, 268-313). In my view, the formations of sex-gendered bodies can then be understood along the lines of genres, with the quasi-binary or non-binarily pluralist distributions that emerge in such practices.

Does this hold for the sexes in a narrow sense as well? Is the develop-ment of the core dimensions of what we aim to understand with "sexual difference" – a genetic, gonadal, genital differentiation with reproductive functionality – dependent on a similar dynamic? At this point, these are open questions, both conceptually and empirically. However, thinking of the sexes perhaps in a somewhat similar way to genders and genres can open the view for researchers to not "automatically" apply a male/female concept of sex in their data collection and interpretation; it also asks researchers to be more precise in defining what it actually is that they are

measuring in their particular research context. The point is: this would turn us from questions of definition towards empirical questions within a limited context, bound to a more thorough theoretical reflection on the concepts that are operational in this sort of research. Rather than defining the sexes along the lines of two complementary halves or a rainbow-spectrum between two poles, we might then conceptualize reproductively relevant characteristics as dynamically changeable, locally differentiated, and somewhat like color wheels or color spheres: multi-spectral continua without fixed primaries or poles that set the stage by definition.

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Notes

1   I am indebted to Veronica Vasterling, not the least for showing me how queer feminist philosophy and hermeneutic phenomenology can have good discussions with the life-sciences. Much of this project draws on my RMA thesis titled, "Sexual Difference as Binarity: Is Critical Work on Concepts Futile?" supervised by her.

2   To my knowledge, there is still insufficient research on the relation between, on the one hand, these racialized historical definitions of "full males and females" for medical and anthropological reference, and, on the other hand, today's "athletics" bias against women of color who appear to "fail" such sets of criteria for femaleness more often than others (Karkazis and Jordan-Young 2018).

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His and Hers Healthcare? (Strategic) Essentialism and Women's Health

ANNELIES KLEINHERENBRINK

I n 1998, McCormick, Kirkham, and Hayes observed a rift between women's health research and postmodern and poststructuralist feminist theories. They describe how the latter "problematized the very basis of the feminist political project," including the basis of women's health as a research program, by critiquing appeals to universal womanhood and questioning the sex/gender distinction (McCormick, Kirkham, and Hayes 1998, 496). Initially, the authors seem in agreement with this problematization, explaining that any definition of womanhood not only unifies (some) women but also excludes (other/Othered) women, and that sex cannot be considered in isolation from gender because bodies always already exist in a social context *and* because knowledge about bodies is always produced within certain discourses. Ultimately, however, they argue that it is not feasible or necessary to completely avoid essentialism, which – they suggest – would only "satisfy the obscure demands of theoretical purity," after all (503). Here, they refer to Spivak's notion of *strategic essentialism* (Spivak & Rooney 1989). They propose that strategic essentialism, which they define as "the essentialized term (i.e., *woman*) [becoming] a mobilizing slogan aimed at specific political ends" is necessary and appropriate to guide women's health research, as long as researchers remain aware of the danger of "cutting off many groups of women and disallowing the heterogeneity that exists beyond the dominant groups" (McCormick, Kirkham, and Hayes 1998, 502).[1]

Writing 25 years later, I observe that women's health research policies and practices that have developed during this time have indeed relied greatly upon essentialism.[2] However, as I will argue in more detail below, the dangers identified by McCormick et al. have not been averted, and the categories "women" and "men" are routinely reified in ways that are detrimental to equality. In many instances, this happens through the privileging of sex as a biological variable, but even when this is not the case (e.g., when "women" remains an undefined form of address), womanhood is often

represented as a homogenous category that allows for little to no variation. As such, I will argue that the contemporary landscape of women's health fails to mobilize essentialism in a way that is sufficiently self-reflexive (if such a thing is even possible). In what follows, I will analyze a number of examples to support these arguments, question the desirability and feasibility of strategic essentialism in the interest of women's health, and point to alternative approaches.

Every Cell Has a Sex: Women's Health in the 21st Century

Why would "women" be needed as a mobilizing slogan for political ends in the first place, when it comes to health today? In 1977, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) banned all "women of childbearing potential" from early-phase clinical drug trials (Center for Drugs Evaluation and Research 1977). This was a response to the discovery that certain drugs taken by pregnant women had caused serious fetal damage (Merkatz 1998). Of course, this protective measure harmed women by drastically reducing the diversity of bodies involved in early drug trials. Women's health advocates, therefore, started to look for health differences beyond reproductive and sexual systems to amass evidence for the importance of biological sex as a health determinant (Epstein 2007). According to Eckman, this strategy profoundly transformed the landscape of women's health research as biological sex came to be "understood as residing *throughout* a woman's body, [and] constructed as the difference that *most* determines women's health" (Eckman 1998, 141, emphasis added). Indeed, in 2001, a report titled *Exploring the Biological Contributions to Human Health: Does Sex Matter?* (Pardue and Wizeman 2001), commissioned by the Society for Women's Health Research, argued that "[sex] matters in ways that we did not expect. Undoubtedly, it also matters in ways that we have not begun to imagine" (x).

The report also introduced the phrase "every cell has a sex" (4), which reverberated throughout the next two decades as large funding bodies developed policies calling for more representative research, including a routine assessment of differences between women and men. For example, the phrase was used to introduce a Canadian Institutes of Health Research grant to fund research on health disparities between men and women (Canadian Institutes of Health, 2015). It was invoked to promote a US National Institutes of Health policy that requires all funded research to

include sex as a biological variable (Rabin 2014; see also Clayton and Collins 2014), and it motivated the EC to fund the development of similar guidelines for studying sex in life science research (Klinge 2010).[3] It was also mobilized for more public-facing health communication, as in cardiologist and Wellesley College president Paula Johnson's TEDtalk "His and hers... health care" which has over 1.2 million views (Johnson 2013). These developments have been fueled by reports showing that health disparities between women and men, including treatment responses, persist (e.g., Franconi et al. 2007) and by reports showing that research often still relies on men and male non-human animals (e.g., Zucker and Beery 2010).

The necessity to make health research more representative and to study health disparities beyond reproductive differences has, by itself, not been controversial. However, dominant strategies that emerged in response to these challenges have attracted critiques informed by feminist theory. For example, whereas the separation of the terms sex and gender is professed as a best practice by many women's health advocates (in part because these terms have often been used in indiscriminate or otherwise confused ways), feminist critics have noted how this facilitates the prioritization of biological data over other types of enquiries and the subsequent naturalization of phenomena that are not strictly biological (e.g., Kleinherenbrink 2016; Shattuck-Heidorn and Richardson 2019). Instead, therefore, some feminist scientists have insisted on using the term "sex/gender" or "gender/sex" so as to not lose sight of their inseparable entanglement and to refuse the biologization of that which is always already social and worldly (e.g., Kaiser et al. 2009; Fausto-Sterling 2019).

A focus on sex as a binary, biological variable assumes that womanhood is a clear-cut, universal variable. However, as the history of feminist theory itself shows, womanhood can be construed as universal in ways that are not necessarily biological. In this chapter, I am concerned with such construals as they occur in the discourse and practices surrounding women's health. Many occur in relation to so-called sex-based or sex-specific medicine, but as some of the examples below will demonstrate, appeals to "women" as a universal medical category also occur when both sex and gender are taken into account. The point I wish to make in this piece is that when women's health advocacy moves the needle from one size fits all (i.e., the "male norm") to two sizes fit all (i.e., "his and hers" health care), this will benefit *some* women but it will also reify a binary understanding of "women versus men" that undermines the effort to improve health care for all.

The Construction of Womanhood as a Universal Medical Identity

An appeal to universal womanhood as a homogenous, clearly bounded, and biomedically distinct category appears in many instances in the current rhetoric and practices surrounding women's health. Phrases like "every cell has a sex," "his and hers health care," "the difference an X makes,"[4] or "female brain injury"[5] circulate in policy documents, research papers, conference talks, public campaigns, and other spaces. Such phrases conjure an understanding of womanhood as an essence that pervades the entire body and that cleanly separates two distinct medical subjects by scaling up linearly from chromosomes to health outcomes. This goes against well-established feminist critiques that show that sex differences are much more complex and contingent (e.g., Fausto-Sterling 2016; Pape 2021).

There are at least two problems at play here that facilitate sex essentialism: first, sex is rarely explicitly defined and operationalized in research, which both assumes and implies that sex is uniform and thus not in need of specification (DiMarco et al. 2022; Richardson 2022). Second, sex is commonly treated as a causal variable or mechanism, whereas it is more appropriate to see sex as a proxy for more specifiable factors or mechanisms that are likely to hold more predictive power, like body weight or hormonal levels (Springer, Stellman, and Jordan-Young 2012; Maney 2016).

Appeals to womanhood as a universal category also appear in (proposals for) sex-specific medical interventions. A prime example is the sleeping drug Zolpidem. The US FDA adjusted the recommended dosages after reports that women have more accidents due to excessive morning-after sedation than men. This is widely celebrated by women's health advocates as the first-ever sex-based prescription, demonstrating the need for sex-specific medicine. However, successive evidence suggests that sex is not a strong predictor of the impact of Zolpidem because of high individual variation; in fact, the new guidance risks *undertreatment* of women (Greenblatt, Harmatz, and Roth 2019). Such crude implementations of sex-specific treatment are even more problematic when one considers that less than a third of studies that claim to find a sex-based difference in treatment response actually conduct a proper statistical evaluation to support this (Garcia-Sifuentes and Maney 2021).

Another widely cited example of why sex-based medicine is necessary, is that of heart attacks. Findings of disparities in heart attack symptoms

have led to sex-specific diagnostic standards (ESC Committee for Practical Guidelines 2012) and to sustained efforts to educate the general public about "atypical" symptoms deemed more common in women. A Google image search for "heart attack symptoms" yields various infographics that distinguish between women and men. Some, like the infographic developed by the Go Red for Women initiative of the American Heart Association, explain that women experience "chest pain but not always," whereas others mention only "chest discomfort" or leave out chest pain altogether for women.[6] Whereas this suggests that "men's heart attacks are like *this*, and women's heart attacks are like *that*," a recent systematic review shows that the difference is not so stark: chest pain was reported by 79% of men versus 74% of women (Van Oosterhout et al. 2020). The exaggeration of such disparities puts men with atypical heart attacks, as well as women with typical heart attacks, at risk of underdiagnosis (Ferry et al. 2019).

As a final type of example, appeals to universal womanhood also appear in public campaigns that aim to raise awareness about women's health. In a discourse analysis of public-facing online platforms for Alzheimer's disease in women, my collaborators and I found a frequent use of rhetorical strategies (e.g., the selective presentation of statistics or the use of gender-normative style and content) that construct womanhood as a universal medical identity (Mohr, Kleinherenbrink, and Varis 2020). In addition, in contrast to previous work that criticized the overwhelming whiteness of women's health campaigns, we found a strong visual representation of racial and ethnic diversity in our corpus. This might be understood as a positive acknowledgment of intersectionality – i.e., the fact that gender/sex-related health differences and racial/ethnic health differences mutually constitute each other (along with other axes of inequality). However, actual information about racial and ethnic health disparities in Alzheimer's disease was exceedingly scarce on the platforms we examined. We contend that in lieu of such information, the visual representation of diversity amongst women has the paradoxical effect of obscuring the importance of such differences by implying that *all* women are united and the same in the face of the threat of Alzheimer's disease. This is not the case, however, since racial and ethnic health disparities overall seem about as large as gender/sex-based disparities, and these categories interact so that gender/sex differences depend on race/ethnicity and vice versa – thus, some women are more at risk than others (Mayeda et al. 2016; Avila et al. 2019).

Figure 1 The campaign image from the 'Behandel me als een dame' campaign.
WOMEN Inc., KesselsKramer, photographer Bert Teunissen, 2016.

A similar case in point is the Dutch campaign that was launched in 2016 by the NGO Women Inc. to introduce a new national research agenda to investigate health disparities between women and men. The campaign image features the slogan "Treat me like a lady," and shows women of various ages and with various skin tones and hair types, one of them seated in a wheelchair, all dressed in green operation gowns (Figure 1).[7] Whereas such visual representation of diversity is laudable, this campaign does not actually *address* the importance of diversity other than sex and gender. As such, this image suggests that we are all women *despite* these differences, and thereby invites us to understand womanhood as a universal determinant of health that overrides or precedes any other health inequalities.

Strategic Essentialism?

I do not argue that the male bias in biomedical research is not a feminist issue, or that gender/sex-based differences should not be considered in medical research or practice. I also do not argue that we must abandon the terms "women" or "women's health" altogether. Such categories remain necessary and valuable as a means of discovering, measuring, and discussing inequalities. Reducing complex realities to categories is also useful to make scientific research feasible. Moreover, categories serve as heuristics

for medical practitioners when weighing different options for testing and diagnosis. As such, I do not see flagging gender/sex-based health disparities as a *starting point* for further inquiry and intervention as the major issue. Serious problems do emerge, however, when we forget that categories are just that – a starting point, a provisional reduction, an imperfect and temporary proxy. This occurs when we talk about "female brains" as if these are actual entities that can be found in real people rather than statistical constructs; when we develop sex-based treatments because of a statistically significant but small difference; or when we suggest that men's heart attacks are like *this* and women's heart attacks are like *that*.

One might argue that reification is an unavoidable aspect of language. However, feminist researchers have formulated best practices that help us push back against this effect of categorization in scientific research, including but not limited to: better recognition of gender and sex variation beyond binary divisions, more explicit operationalization of sex (what is sex a proxy for?), better reporting of variation within and overlap between groups, and more systematic investigation of the contingency of sex differences on contextual or personal factors (e.g., Rippon et al. 2014; Richardson 2022). Such practices might be demanding but are not unfeasible, and while they still align with the goal of eliminating the male bias in medical research, they help us understand health disparities in more complex and nuanced ways than dominant approaches currently allow.

What, then, about the *strategic* advantage of essentialism? We must acknowledge the appeal: alluding to womanhood as a homogenous identity allows for a straightforward message about sexism and sisterhood that can be digested by a wide audience and that can foster coalitions. As Keyes et al. note, "nuance is not always politically possible" (2020, 7). Thus, one might argue that there is a need to take one step at a time: first, get stakeholders on board with a simple message; next, introduce complexity and nuance. In fact, sex-based medicine is often represented as a gateway to personalized or precision medicine (e.g., Ferretti et al., 2018). And, by visually signaling that womanhood is understood in inclusive terms, campaigns like the ones discussed above do seem to avoid the danger of "cutting off many groups of women" (McCormick et al. 1998, 502). However, sidestepping the problem of universalism is not the same as resolving it. Including women of color, for example, does not *address* the fact that the biomedical norm has not only been male but also white, let alone bring to light how maleness and whiteness have been mutually con-

stituted as norms. As such, the question is which damage is done if essentialism is used strategically as a first phase, and if this does not actually thwart further progression. The obvious alternative strategy is to adopt an intersectional perspective from the outset, which also considers the importance of sex and gender but not as overriding or preceding other differences (Bowleg 2012; Hankivsky 2012).[8] In this light, it is heartening that the European Union emphasizes intersectionality in its Horizon Europe funding scheme (see White et al. 2021).

Concluding Reflections

The examples discussed here create the fiction that a majority of people fall within two homogenous categories. It thereby assumes that being a (cisgender) woman or a (cisgender) man is a strong predictor of *any* medical measurement or outcome. As discussed above, however, this is not even the case for widely cited examples that purportedly demonstrate the need for sex-specific medicine. This exaggeration of health disparities, while useful for building political and scientific coalitions, potentially has detrimental medical effects. It also stands to reason that stereotypical beliefs will spill over from the medical into other realms, such that medical essentialism will encourage discrimination in other contexts.

Notions of "his and hers" healthcare furthermore exclude transgender, nonbinary, and intersex people – groups that are already poorly treated in/by the medical system. But the harmful impact of medical essentialism on such groups extends even beyond inappropriate healthcare; the notion that women and men are medically distinct populations has been leveraged to support their discrimination and persecution, including, for example, the anti-transgender law in Hungary, anti-trans bathroom bills in the US, and the transphobic "#FreeSpeechBus" that toured Europe and North America (as documented by Sudai 2019, Sudai et al. 2022, and Richardson 2022).

In an interview with Rooney, Spivak pointed out that "a strategy suits a situation, a strategy is not a theory" (Spivak 1989, 127). In the current landscape of women's health, essentialism is used in ways that appear strategic, but also as a foundation for theory – and there appears to be considerable slippage between the two modes. Rather than maintaining a strategic distance from feminist critiques that undermine the coherence of woman-

hood, as recommended 25 years ago by McCormick et al. 1998, what we need today to advance women's health is precisely the more serious uptake of feminist theories and methods that challenge essentialism and binarism (e.g., by using intersectionality as a theory and method). Anecdotally, in my personal experience, expressing such critiques is sometimes seen as "anti-feminist" because it ostensibly stands in the way of getting things done to improve women's health. The question is, however, *which* women stand to benefit and which ones are left behind if we cling to essentialism, strategic or otherwise.[9]

Notes

[1]   As Ray 2009 argues, even though Spivak's explication of strategic essentialism evolved over time, it differs overall from most contemporary invocations of the term. Whereas Spivak insisted on "appropriating" and "critiquing" essentialism in the same move, contemporary feminist discourse uses the term merely to highlight the advantage of temporarily accepting womanhood as a stable category (Ray 2009, 155). Spivak herself also lamented this uncritical circulation of the term as if it is "simply [...] the union ticket for essentialism," and she eventually gave up the term (although not the project of thinking through the problem it addresses; see Danius, Jonsson and Spivak 1993, 35).

[2]   For the purposes of this text, I understand essentialism as any explicit or implicit appeal to womanhood as a universal category – that is, an understanding of "women" as a clearly bounded group that shares, minimally, one core feature – whether that feature is conceptualized as biological or cultural or remains undefined.

[3]   This common refrain notwithstanding, the focus of policies has differed somewhat across geographical context. Whereas the US has a significant history of focusing on sex as a biological variable, EU policy has considered sex-based analysis as part of its "gender dimension." In my observation, EU policy tends to acknowledge the interconnectedness of sex and gender *and* intersectionality more than US policy.

[4]   This slogan is used by the US Society for Women's Health Research in infographics, symposia, and videos (e.g., Greenberger 2009).

[5]   See https://www.pinkconcussions.com/

[6]   See https://www.heart.org/en/news/2020/01/21/get-familiar-with-signs-of-a-heart-attack-or-stroke for the Go Red infographic; https://herheart.org/heart-attack-signs-in-women/ for an example that mentions "chest pain" for men but

"chest discomfort" for women; and https://www.munsonhealthcare.org/heart/what-are-the-symptoms-of-a-heart-attack for an example that omits chest symptoms altogether. All examples appeared on the first page of a Google search conducted on 10-08-2022.

7   https://www.behandelmealseendame.nl/

8   Another core tenet of intersectionality is to pay attention to structural power, which many of the examples discussed here also fail to do.

9   Many thanks to Veronica Vasterling, whose work and mentorship have been a tremendous inspiration and support.

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Cis- and Transgender Identities: Beyond Habituation and the Search for Social Existence[I]

ANNEMIE HALSEMA

Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of gender in the last decades has gained wide acceptance as the most influential explanation for the assumption of gender identity (see Lennon & Alsop 2020). Veronica Vasterling has shown an interest in Butler's work already from the very start. Her article, "Butler's Sophisticated Constructivism: A Critical Assessment" (Vasterling 1999) is one of the early critical feminist assessments of Butler's theory. It addresses the problem that in later debates has become one of the most important points of discussion, Butler's notion of the body. An often-heard critique is that Butler's theory would place too much emphasis on the linguistic aspects of gender acquisition, thereby neglecting its bodily, material basis (Hekman 1998; Barad 2003). Vasterling, however, gives Butler more credit and finds a phenomenological notion of embodiment in some passages in her work (Vasterling 1999, 23).

Therewith, Vasterling engages in the debate about the relationship between Butler's post-structuralist account of gender and phenomenology. This relationship is full of tensions. In an article that preceded her book, *Gender Trouble*, Butler suggests that performativity is a further extension of ideas about becoming of Simone de Beauvoir and of Merleau-Ponty's about institution (Butler 1988). Yet, performativity, in its focus upon acting, also breaks with its phenomenological antecedents. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler takes further distance from Beauvoir's work, arguing that she reproduces the distinction between the body and freedom and body and mind (Butler 1990, 12).[2] Vice versa, phenomenological theoreticians of gender have assessed Butler's work (Stoller 2010; Heinämaa 2012; Wehrle 2019), arguing that phenomenology holds a more elaborated body notion than Butler does. Recently, this debate has gained new ground in Maren Wehrle's account of performativity (Wehrle 2021), in which she argues for complementing Butler's version of it with the Husserlian analysis of bodily habit formation. Wehrle nuances the critique

that Butler would neglect the body, claiming that while attentive to the perceived body that is known by others and oneself (body image), Butler ignores the perceiving, moving, operating bodily subject (body schema) (Wehrle 2021, 202, 374). Wehrle instead suggests a performative theory of bodily habitual identity, in which habit formation at the bodily level is considered as underlying Butler's social and linguistic performativity.

In this paper, and in line with Vasterling, as she mentioned while discussing this point, I will first suggest that Butler's theory should be taken as a *frame* to understand how individuals, both cis and trans, assume a gender identity.[3] The problem I want to discuss next is that both Butler's performative theory and Wehrle's performative theory of bodily habitual identity perhaps help understand the reproduction of habitual identities, but that they have difficulties accounting for the possibility of breaking with them. In a social environment predominantly characterized by binary, heterosexual identities, Butler's performativity and Wehrle's habit formation seem to imply reproducing these kinds of identities, with the consequence that cisgender is normalized once again and transgender is considered as the exception. I will discuss how Butler and Wehrle deal with this problem and will suggest an alternative.

In the next section, I start with Butler's early account of performativity as extension of and break with phenomenological ideas (Butler 1988). I then discuss Wehrle's complementing of performativity with bodily habit formation. The trouble of accounting for transgender identities will be the topic of the last section.

Butler's Performativity as Repetitive Act

In an article that precedes their bestseller *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler introduces the concept of performativity in response to Simone de Beauvoir's phenomenological view of becoming a woman. They propose performativity as an extension of the phenomenological theory of constitution in Beauvoir and in Merleau-Ponty (Butler 1988, 520-1). While both phenomenologists consider the body as an active process of embodying cultural and historical possibilities, Butler argues that for understanding the gendered body, this view needs expansion to include a theory of performative *acts* (521). The body not only enacts gender but performs it, that is, repeats the conventional manners it encounters in its environment. The

body, thus, is not simply matter but enacts possibilities that are "conditioned and circumscribed by historical conventions" (521) and, in that sense, "materializes" them. It is precisely the repetition of actions that leads to the institution of gender and which also provides the idea of a gender as a "substance" in which we come to believe. Gender thus becomes an identity and an ideal (520). The body is not a passive thing to which a gender is assigned but acquires gender through a series of acts that are constantly renewed, revised, and consolidated over time (523). In this acquisition, several normative claims play a role: cultural conventions that dictate how one should behave as a woman or man; tacit conventions that structure the ways bodies are viewed. These sedimented expectations lead to different bodily "styles" that may come across as "natural" genders, which are binary (524).

In one of their first articles on performativity, Butler thus already argues that what we consider as "natural" amounts to a reiteration of cultural conventions and expectations about what it means to be of a particular gender. In this process, the body at once enacts and repeats. The process of repetition for Butler does not imply that it is only the existing representations of gender that are cited and repeated, instead the bodily performance of gender also opens the possibility of transforming historical and cultural conventions around gender. It is precisely in the activity of repeating that transformation becomes possible: if gender is not a "seamless identity" but a series of acts, the possibility of transformation is to be found in the possibility of repeating differently, in breaking with or subverting the stylized acts, they argue (520).

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler elaborates on these thoughts. Here again, they contest the idea that gender is a substance or fixed identity (Butler 1990, 16-25), or that it is "internal." Gender as an asymmetrical opposition between feminine and masculine is instead produced by what they, following Foucault, call "regulatory practices." These practices not only generate culturally intelligible identities (namely heterosexual female and male)[4] but also demarcate boundaries with identities that cannot exist. Gender identity is redefined as a relationship between sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire (18). Through the addition of desire, Butler refers to the fact that the socially accepted definition of femininity and masculinity implies that one is sexually oriented toward the opposite sex. Gender in the binary sense and heterosexuality are thus socially linked, though actually, they are not.

Butler contests the idea of a freely choosing subject who has the freedom to choose a gender (see e.g., Butler 1993, 225-6, 234). Instead, one finds oneself in a social order within which there are already regulative normative practices of gender, which one turns to and repeats in order to become a subject. In a recent account of performativity, "Gender Politics and the Right to Appear" (2015), Butler addresses the misunderstandings that their work of the 1990s raised, concerning the subject's possibility for agency (Butler 2015, 63). It gave rise to two different interpretations: either the performativity of gender was understood as free choice or as deterministic (see also: McNay 1999). They assume that in the reception of their earlier work, something was not articulated and grasped about performativity, namely that it describes the possibilities and conditions for acting, as well as the processes of being acted on. Performing gender means, on the one hand, repeating the forms gender has taken in a person's environment, the acquired representations of gender – which are for a large part bodily, that is, styles of walking, talking, moving, etc. – and, on the other, enacting it, that is, giving form to these representations – which may include restylization or giving another form to them. Prior to the possibility of free choice, we are already exposed to being named in a particular way: we become a subject with a gender through the naming that language entails, in the realms of the medical, legal, and psychi(atri)cal. That doesn't mean we are determined by existing normative representations of gender for, in this "being exposed to," something can also happen to that norm – it can be rejected or revised and gender can be formulated in new ways (Butler 2015, 64). It is thus precisely in the performance itself, in the social reproduction of gender, that the possibility of varying those norms can be found.

In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler distinguished between a domain of intelligible bodies and a domain of abject, unlivable bodies (Butler 1993, xi), which may have caused confusion regarding their position on agency (see McNay 1999, 177). Their claim is, however, that both domains are simultaneously formed in the performative process. In *Notes*, and earlier, in *Feminist Contentions* (1995), Butler argues there is no existence outside of the discursive conventions by which we are constituted. Agency thus exists only *within* the regimes of power that constitute us and that we may resist or oppose (Butler 1995, 136). The same goes for their notion of the body. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler returns to the notion of "materialization" and interprets it as an alternative for social constructivism. What we call "matter" is itself already

socially and linguistically constructed (Butler 1993, 9). In the case of gender, materialization involves assigning a gender to bodies, which we then regard as "natural." By linking gender to nature ("sex"), gender seems more coherent and seems a substance. Actions, gestures, and ways of moving create an illusion of an inner gender identity, which then comes to count as an organizing principle. In Butler's performativity, to conclude, the body plays a role, but it can never be separated from the social and linguistic conditions within which it lives and acts (Butler 2015, 65).

The concept of performativity thus addresses that we live within normative conditions that shape the way we understand identities and bodies and that we enact these conditions. Prior to our own will, we are part of a social order within which we are named in a certain way (63). We are exposed to language before we can speak for ourselves and before we can begin to name ourselves through language; an insertion into language and the social order thus precedes performative acts. These performative acts are not only linguistic (I don't just say, "I am a woman" – an utterance I seldom use) but they are bodily and expressed in movements and behaviors. Precisely within this domain of receptivity to norms, something different – queer – can happen (64). The space for diverse perceptions of gender and sexuality thus resides in discourse itself: from gender fluidity to lesbian femininity, from transgender to non-binary, these are variations that can occur in the process of reiteration of norms.

Complementing Performativity with Bodily Habit Formation

Butler's poststructuralist philosophy of gender has been criticized by phenomenologists as a theory that does not do sufficient justice to embodiment (Stoller 2010; Heinämaa 2012). Maren Wehrle's work is an exception to this. In several articles, she aims to bridge the gap between the Foucauldian view of power and normativity and the phenomenological understanding of corporeality (Wehrle 2019, 2020, 2021). Her work centers on the question of how social norms act on the body and how bodies in turn "elaborate on" and change those norms (Wehrle 2020, 120). In a recent article, Wehrle argues that Butler's performativity shares similarities with the concept of habit formation in the phenomenological tradition (Wehrle 2021, 366). In using a Husserlian interpretation of habit formation, she argues, that it is possible to explain how social norms become part of what

someone is or becomes. Habit formation takes place at the bodily level. In complementing performativity with an account of bodily habit formation, we can understand that social norms do not just constitute a *linguistic* network or framework, within which one becomes a subject, but a bodily one. The notion of bodily habit formation, in other words, shows how norms inform lived corporeality (376) and thus can be taken to complement Butler's theory of performativity.

Habit formation is a way of relating to the world, one that allows the individual to engage in higher forms of cognition through the routine nature of action (376). Through habit formation, a certain familiarity with our environment develops – it structures and orders our dealings with the things and living beings around us. Thus, we acquire a personal style (of walking, moving) that is recognizable to others, a so-called "habitual identity." In this sense, bodily habit formation constitutes an important part of our personal identity. According to Wehrle, habitual identity *precedes* the use of language (366, 376, 379). She speaks of "prelinguistic" in connection with bodily habits (366) and calls personal and narrative forms of identity "a higher form" that presupposes habituated identity (376). Drawing on Husserl (1952, 1995) and Merleau-Ponty (1945), she distinguishes three forms of bodily habit formation.

The first two levels still remain "anonymous" in the sense that they are pre-personal and usually not conscious, although they can be thematized by reliving the situation and movement. These levels involve repeated individual experiences, such as perceptions and movements that generate a general and enduring style of experiencing that are integrated into "a past" (Wehrle 2021, 376-7) and, at a second level, the constitution of the habitual body (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 97-8). The second level is about the way we orient ourselves in space, move in it, and how we react. This involves memory and a "knowing how," in other words, a bodily memory that allows us to orient ourselves in our environment and involves the continuity of movements and experiences (Wehrle 2021, 377). The third level is what Husserl calls the emergence of "personal habituality" (Husserl 1995, 100; Wehrle 2021, 377). This level involves the adoption of a style at a personal – and therefore thematic – level. Personal habits may have been acquired at the first two levels – at this third level they can be reflected upon and changed.

The habitual identity that consists of these three levels is thus operative but not yet thematized on the first two levels (Wehrle 2021, 378). Bod-

ily performativity and the habitual identity that results from it – that is, our styles of walking, sitting, eating, moving – are in other words present without the subject being aware of it. Prior to the awareness of assuming a gender identity, the individual thus repeats movements and forms a bodily memory. Although Butler also considers performativity to be bodily, they do not elaborate on this in detail. Wehrle's habitual identity in that respect is a welcome addition to it. However, in claiming, "[a]lthough habitual identity is a stable and characteristic way of relating to the world [...], it cannot be reduced to an already articulated social identity category (like, gender)" (378), Wehrle distances herself from Butler more than necessary. While Butler points to the fact that we live in a social world in which we encounter normative representations of gender from the outset, Wehrle gives the impression of considering gender as a social identity category that is *preceded* by bodily habit formation.[5] My suggestion is not to contrast the two approaches, but to understand embodiment *within* the framework of normative gender conditions that Butler outlines. Even though Butler does not elaborate on the bodily facets of gender identity, their view of performativity also does not exclude the bodily enactment of gender norms, as we have seen. Thus, I argue for an inclusive conception of gender performativity that includes bodily habits.

Beyond Bodily Habituation and the Search for Social Existence

Considering the performative process of assuming a gender identity in terms of habit formation raises an important question, however. Is it not the case that in a social environment of mainly binary, heterosexual identities, Butler's performativity and Wehrle's bodily habit formation imply reproducing these identities? Does the repetition that is central in these accounts not imply considering transgender identities as deviations of the norm?

  We have already seen that Butler's theory leaves the possibility open for the transformation of norms around gender: it is in the process of reiterating the norm that something queer can happen, they argue (Butler 2015, 64). Performativity therefore does not necessarily include repetition of the same normative practices around gender; the same goes for bodily habit formation. According to Wehrle, the phenomenological notion of habituation implies that a habit is addressed to a situation and therefore not a mere

repetition of the same. "[T]here might still be feelings of disorientation, uncomfortableness, and dissatisfaction," she writes, even in the early habitual stages in which there is no reflection or articulation (Wehrle 2021, 382). The implication of understanding the possibility of transformation as inherent to the process of (habitual) repetition is that cisgender is no longer *opposed* to transgender, as some argue,[6] but that cis and trans are variations of gender. Neither Butler's performativity nor Wehrle's bodily habituation therefore reproduce the normality of cisgender identities, instead, these theories account for transforming existing norms around gender.

But is that sufficient? Even though Butler, in *Notes*, is concerned with violence against trans people and questions the pathologization of trans desire (Butler 2015, 54-5), they consider transgender as a possible variation of gender. Wehrle discusses the problem of subversion but does not get any further than the mentioned feelings of discomfort. My suggestion is that to account for the experiences of transgender people, merely considering gender constitution – in terms of the repetition of social norms in searching for social existence, or in terms of bodily habits – is not sufficient, and that we need an account of identification. We need to be able to differentiate between a person's biology, the gender they identify with, and the normative practices in a person's social environment.

The gender a person identifies with in the first place does not necessarily coincide with that person's biological sex, as is argued by biologist and gender theorist Anne Fausto-Sterling. Based on a wide range of theories in biology and developmental psychology (notably dynamic systems theory, see Fausto-Sterling, García Coll & Lamarre 2012a, 2012b; Fausto-Sterling 2021), she argues that there is no decisive, necessary link between biological sex and gender identity (Fausto-Sterling 2012, 3-11, 43-57). Neither chromosomes, nor hormones, nor gonads, nor sex organs, nor the brain are, in themselves, decisive for one's gender identity. Rather, variation can exist at all of these levels. What we call gender identity only emerges after birth, Fausto-Sterling concludes, in interaction with the environment within which a child grows up (49-57). We must look at postnatal psychological and social development to find an explanation of gender identity (49). In studies conducted in the first three years of life (Fausto-Sterling et al. 2012a, 2012b) different stages may be distinguished in acquiring a gender identity. Young children do not regard gender as constant. The assumption of gender constancy, that is, the linking of one's body to a gender occurs later in life – at least in the Western world, as the research on which this

information is based is conducted in the United States and Europe (Fausto-Sterling 2012, 53). Young children of three to four months can differentiate between the voices of women and men and recognize faces (ibid.). In the next six months, children are able to associate voices with faces and begin to distinguish gender categories provided to them by their environment. In other words, in their first two years, young children are able to make socio-culturally accepted associations and also develop similar preferences in their play. However, self-awareness and gender identity do not emerge until later in life, from the third year onwards (54), or possibly even later.

The studies conducted by Fausto-Sterling et al. do not explicitly address bodily habit formation (although it is briefly mentioned in Fausto-Sterling et al. 2012a and in Fausto-Sterling 2019, 533-4, 550). The phases in the first two years in which children mimic socio-culturally accepted preferences without linking them to their own bodies and in which they do not yet identify with one or another gender can be associated with the phases that *precede* what Wehrle calls "thematic awareness." The formation of a gender identity then implies that the child adopts and explores social differences offered, mimicking them bodily and, in this process, gradually shaping the psychic "I."[7] Although bodily habituation can be considered as a facet of this psychic identification, the two cannot be identified. The shaping of this "I" is beyond the process of bodily habituation.

This gendered "I" also cannot be fully grasped by the performative process of assuming a gender identity. Butler discusses the way in which social norms act on the psyche and rejects the idea that social norms would be internalized, as this suggests that a norm from the outside would be incorporated into a pre-given psyche. It is thus not the case that existing gender norms form the psyche. Instead, Butler speaks of the process of internalization as the construction of the boundaries between inner and outer (Butler 1997, 19). The individual searches for the signs of its own existence in its surroundings (20) and may or may not recognize itself in the prevailing representations. Performativity thus can explain the process of becoming a gendered subject within the existing normative frames, but it cannot account for identification beyond that.

In order to understand transgender identities no longer as deviations of the norm but as positive identities in themselves, the theories of Butler and Wehrle thus need to be complemented with a notion of gender identification, or "psychic" gender. Herewith I do not aim at a psyche differentiated from the body, because this explicit gender identity comes about in

an intersubjective process that includes bodily habituality. Instead, my point is that gender identity should be considered as a separate facet apart from the body and the social sphere. For one's gender identity does not necessarily coincide with one's biological body, nor with the available normative practices around gender in one's environment. It is only when – apart from the multiplicity of possibilities in biology and the multitude of social representations around gender – also the many different ways to identify are taken into account that we will no longer need to categorize in binary ways or create an opposition between cis and trans, but will all be able to live as our gender in the world.

Notes

1   This paper is a revised version of Halsema 2022.

2   Other works in which Butler engages with phenomenology are Butler 1986, 2004 and 2022.

3   Butler's notion of gender was initially firmly criticized by transsexuals. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler questions the idea of an internal gender identity, while transgender people experience an incongruity between the gender assigned to them at birth and their experienced gender identity. For this reason, their work would not do justice to them (Prosser 1998). However, in a later interview with Cristan Williams, Butler adjusts that view and argues for the right of every person "to determine the legal and linguistic terms of their embodied lives" (Butler and Williams n.d.).

4   Vasterling 1999 and Wehrle 2021 interpret Butler's thinking as epistemological. "Epistemological" implies that there is something that is understood and known. However, according to Butler, there is no existence for bodies *beyond* their social understanding (Butler 1997, 19-20) and they speak of "ontological" in this context (Butler 2015, 57, 61). For this reason, I consider their work to be social ontological.

5   Wehrle distinguishes between the top-down approach that she attributes to Butler's performativity of gender i.e., bodies must adopt sociocultural identity categories that are already constituted (Wehrle 2021, 366) and the bottom-up approach she herself advocates, in which the gradual development of experience is central and prereflective dimensions precede conscious experience (367).

6   I aim at the so called "TERF wars" (trans-exclusionary radical feminist), in which feminists such as Kathleen Stock and Holly Lawford-Smith oppose the rights of women to the rights of trans people (Stock 2021; Lawford-Smith 2022).

7   For the constitution of gender identity, psychoanalysis is also an important source. See, for instance, Jessica Benjamin's phases of gender constitution (Benjamin 1995, 49-79), in which identification plays a crucial part.

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Light and Dark: Intersections of Gender and Race in Butler and Lugones

KATRINE SMIET

Within feminist philosophy, the need to recognize how gender intersects with other axes of difference, notably race, has long been recognized. However, while an intersectional perspective on gender is generally widely supported, intersectionality is sometimes taken up in an additive sense. That is, an intersectional approach is, in practice, often taken to mean expanding the focus to look not at gender in isolation but instead to look at gender *and* race, or to recognize the different experiences of white and racialized women, for instance. While these approaches are important and valuable in their own right, recognizing the mutual constitution and co-construction of gender and race demands a different approach altogether.[1] What does it mean to understand gender as inherently and constitutively shaped by and through race/racialization? Where does this leave – or, rather, take – the theoretical apparatus developed for theorizing and analyzing gender in feminist philosophy?

The decolonial feminist philosopher María Lugones posits that we should understand gender *itself* as a racialized category and distinguishes between a "light" and a "dark" side of what she, drawing on the decolonial tradition, calls the colonial/modern gender system (Lugones 2007; Lugones 2008).[2] Lugones criticizes other feminist thinkers for focusing predominantly on the so-called "light" side of the colonial/modern gender system and ignoring its constitutive other – its "dark" side. This paper asks to which extent Lugones' critique is legitimately directed at the work of Judith Butler, arguably one of the most famous and influential theorizations of gender of the late 20th century.[3] Does Butler's thinking focus on what Lugones calls the "light" side of gender, at the expense of recognizing its "dark" side? Does it overlook the mutual constitution and co-construction of gender, race, and coloniality, and if so, at what cost?

To assess this, I will first introduce Lugones' notion of the coloniality of gender. Next, I will examine whether her critique of "white feminism" should be understood to include also Butler's theorization of gender. I

argue that, while race and coloniality do not feature prominently in But-
ler's theorizations of gender, that does not mean that these frameworks
are in themselves incompatible. On many key points, we can think of But-
ler and Lugones in conjunction with one another.[4] However, there is a cru-
cial point where Butler's thinking goes a step further than Lugones', and
that is in the questioning of biological essentialism. Although Lugones
claims to go *beyond* the sex/gender distinction, biological reasoning is
nonetheless at work in the key examples she puts forward. While Lugones'
intervention allows to diagnose a form of "race trouble" in Butler, with
Butler we can see a form of "gender trouble" at work in Lugones' thought.
This paper thus brings these two feminist thinkers in conversation with
one another – using Lugones to interrogate Butler, and using Butler to
interrogate Lugones – in order to advance an understanding of the rela-
tion of gender and race in the context of coloniality.

The Coloniality of Gender

In introducing her framework of the "coloniality of gender," the decolo-
nial feminist philosopher Maria Lugones brings black feminism and
women of color feminism (specifically the framework of intersectionality)
into dialogue with decolonial theory. She draws on the decolonial frame-
work of the "coloniality of power" developed by Anibal Quijano (cf. Qui-
jano 2007) but also argues that decolonial thinkers before her have over-
looked or even naturalized gender. By contrast, Lugones brings gender
into the picture and argues that we need to understand "race as gendered
and gender as raced" (Lugones 2007, 202). In "Heterosexualism and the
Colonial/Modern Gender System," she explains:

> "Colonialism did not impose precolonial, European arrangements
> on the colonized. It imposed a new gender system that created
> very different arrangements for colonized males and females than
> for bourgeois colonizers. Thus, it introduced many genders and
> gender itself as a colonial concept and mode of organization of
> relations of production, property relations, of cosmologies and
> ways of knowing."
> (Lugones 2007, 186)

Here, Lugones posits that "gender" as we know it today is foundationally a *colonial* construction. It was constructed in Eurocentric modernity, and violently (yet differentially) imposed upon colonized peoples and, in the process, erased other ways of knowing and being. Gender and the coloniality of power are mutually constitutive for Lugones (Lugones 2007, 202).

It is important to note that this colonial/modern gender system is not uniform or homogenous, according to Lugones. While colonialism "exported" globally a specific gender system and, in doing so, eradicated other forms of social organization and categorization that were present in pre-colonial societies, such as seniority, that does not imply that colonized and racialized people were fully and equally inscribed in this Western gender order. Rather, they were denied access to the hegemonic gender system at crucial points. To clarify this differential "access" to the colonial/modern gender system, Lugones speaks of a "light" and a "dark" side. The "light" side is the "Western" or "white" gender order, which Lugones understands as being characterized by biological dimorphism, heterosexualism, and patriarchy (190). The "dark" side is its constitutive other: it is marked by dehumanization and animalization (203), and Lugones describes it as "thoroughly violent" (206). Racialized and colonized women were denied the characteristics and the status of a femininity marked as white, Western, and bourgeois. In this vein, Lugones writes that

> "The light side constructs gender and gender relations hegemonically, ordering *only* the lives of white bourgeois men and women and constituting the colonial/modern meaning of men and women."
> (Lugones 2007, 206, my emphasis)

On the one hand, Lugones notes that *both* the "light" and the "dark" side of the colonial/modern gender system are violent and oppressive. In this vein, she urges us to "understand the depth and force of violence in the production of both the light and the dark sides of the colonial/modern gender system" (Lugones 2007, 201). On the other hand, she positions the dark side as more (explicitly) violent than the light side. As oppressive as it may be, there are also advantages to the light side, that are denied to the dark side: "Colonized females got the inferior status of gendering as women, without any of the privileges accompanying that status for white

bourgeois women" (203). This terminology of "light" and "dark" supports the differential weight Lugones gives to each side of the coin.

Lugones connects her introduction of the notion of the coloniality of gender to a critique of what she – albeit carefully and hesitantly – names "white feminist theorizing and practice," that is, a feminism that does not (adequately) take into account race (187). This type of feminist thinking does not recognize the intersections of gender with race and, in doing so, it focuses on the "light side" of the colonial/modern gender system and overlooks the dark side. She contends that "there has been a persistent absence of a deep imbrication of race into the analysis that takes gender and sexuality as central in much white feminist theory and practice, particularly feminist philosophy" (189). Here, Lugones' critique of "white feminism" connects to critiques made by black and women of color feminists since the early 1980s (Amos & Parmar 1984; Carby [1982] 1997; Collins 2009 [1990]; Hooks 1981). However, Lugones makes these points in a series of articles in the early 2000s, suggesting that feminist philosophy has not taken these critiques to heart and that the recognition of the mutual imbrication of race and gender is *still* lacking in the field. This leads me to ask to which extent we can say that this is the case for one of the most prominent gender theorists of the late 20th century, Judith Butler. Can their work be characterized as "white" in the sense that Lugones' implies; or is it, in fact, compatible with the insights of Lugones? To assess this, I turn to Butler next.

Race Trouble in Butler?

Judith Butler's theorization of gender as performative has had a big influence on the field of feminist philosophy (Vasterling 1999). In this section, I will not go deeply into Butler's theorization of gender but rather focus on assessing the intersectional nature of their approach. In the very first pages of *Gender Trouble,* Butler asserts that:

> "Gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained."
> (Butler 1990, 4)

In other words, Butler, at the outset, recognizes that gender is intricately entangled with other axes of difference, to the extent that these can hardly be disentangled and cannot but be considered in their mutual entanglement. In addition, Butler is very critical of a universal(izing) notion of "woman" or "patriarchy," noting that such a conception can effectively "colonize" non-Western cultures (Butler 1990, 3). Naming a "transcultural notion of patriarchy" a "colonizing epistemological strategy" (35), Butler argues for recognizing the specificities of different contexts. When it comes to the notion of "woman," Butler notes the efforts to recognize the differences between women's experiences based on race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and nationality. Yet, while recognizing the importance of this, Butler's own criticism of the category of woman is of a different nature: they question how that category comes into being, to begin with, what meanings it is invested with, and what work it is expected to do for feminism.

In *Bodies That Matter* (Butler 1993), Butler argues explicitly against an "analogizing" understanding of oppression based on race, gender, or sexuality:

> "It seems crucial to resist the model of power that would set up racism and homophobia and misogyny as parallel or analogical relations. The assertion of their abstract or structural equivalence not only misses the specific histories of their construction and elaboration, but also delays the important work of thinking through the ways in which these vectors of power require and deploy each other for the purpose of their own articulation."
> (Butler 1993, 18)

In other words, Butler here advocates for thinking through how gender and race are shaped by one another – how gender is articulated *through* race, and vice versa (Butler 1993, 116, 182).[5] This is in line with an intersectional approach to gender, which should not be confused with an analogizing approach which insists that sexism functions "like" racism. In addition, Butler also rejects a pluralizing approach to intersectionality when they write that "it is not simply a matter of honoring the subject as a plurality of identifications, for these identifications are invariably imbricated in one another, the vehicle for one another" (116).

In the 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble*, Butler emphasizes that performativity theory *may* have something to say about the working of race, but

that "the question to ask is not whether the theory of performativity is transposable onto race, but what happens to the theory when it tries to come to grips with race" (Butler 1990, xvi). With this statement, Butler insists on the importance of not reducing race to gender and avoiding a "one size fits all" mode of analysis. Gender and race are interwoven and intermeshed but cannot be reduced to one another.

In these passages that have been foregrounded here, it is clear there is not "a persistent absence of a deep imbrication of race" (Lugones 2007, 189). Butler's theorization of gender is nominally intersectional in the sense it acknowledges the co-construction of gender with race and other axes of difference. Like Lugones, Butler recognizes the mutual imbrication of gender and race and understands "race as gendered and gender as raced" (202). Nevertheless, self-reflexively looking back at their own work, Butler also notes that "some feminist positions, including my own, have problematically prioritized gender as the identificatory site of political mobilization at the expense of race or sexuality or class or geopolitical positioning/displacement" (Butler 1993, 116). Here, we can read Butler conceding to some extent to Lugones' critique of "white" feminism: while, in theory, their framework takes in race and acknowledges the co-construction of race, gender and coloniality, their analysis nevertheless focuses on gender primarily.

Coming back to the distinction between the "light" and the "dark" side of the colonial/modern gender system, one can say that Butler's work indeed primarily tackles the "light" side. Their theorization of gender focuses on the hegemonic construction of gender in Western discourse and lays bare the workings of those characteristics Lugones identifies as being key to that gender order: namely, biological dimorphism, heterosexualism, and patriarchy (Lugones 2007, 190), albeit not necessarily in those terms. What Lugones calls "biological dimorphism," Butler refers to as the binary notion of gender, as well as the idea of a logical connection between (biological) sex and (cultural) gender – I return to this point later. "Heterosexualism" and the connection between gender and sexuality is theorized in Butler as the heterosexual matrix. The term "patriarchy" is not one Butler draws on themselves – in fact, as noted above, they are critical of the idea of a "universal patriarchy," which theories of patriarchy often fall into. Yet, in the broad sense that patriarchy refers to a system of male domination, this is exactly the gender order that Butler's work denaturalizes and destabilizes. In this sense, the concerns of Butler's early

work on gender fall within what Lugones would call the "light" side of the colonial/modern gender order.

In later work, Butler has made the connection between gender and the category of the human. In *Undoing Gender*, they argue that gender, as well as race, is central to the norms of recognition by which the category of the human is constituted (Butler 2004, 2) and that not being "legible" in terms of gender and sexuality can be a site of dehumanization. With these insights, Butler is getting closer to the point Lugones makes about the coloniality of gender. However, to fully assess how reconcilable these perspectives are, I now turn to Lugones' understanding of gender to examine it through a Butlerian lens.

Gender Trouble in Lugones?

While feminist theory routinely differentiates between biological sex and culturally constructed gender – the so-called "sex/gender distinction" – one of Butler's key interventions has been to argue that this distinction does not hold up to critical scrutiny. According to Butler, it is not only gender that is socially constructed, but sex too. That is, there is no way to approach sex that is not already shaped by gender: as a result, sex is itself already a gendered category (Butler 1990, 7). How does Butler's understanding of gender relate to Lugones'? Or, what kind of theorization of *gender* does the framework of the coloniality of gender put forward/rely on?

The impetus for Lugones' theorization of the coloniality of gender is the claim that decolonial thinkers such as Quijano did not integrate *gender* adequately in their analysis of the coloniality of power. She contends, "There is an account of gender within the framework that is not itself placed under scrutiny and that is too narrow and overly biologized" (Lugones 2007, 193). In other words, instead of taking up gender as a constructed category, Quijano and others inadvertently rely on a problematic notion of biological sex. By contrast, Lugones contends that hers is a perspective that regards *both* gender and sex as socially constructed – and notably, constructed in the context of coloniality/modernity. When Lugones argues that "what is understood as biological sex is socially constructed" (194) and claims that gender is "antecedent to the 'biological' traits and gives them meaning" (195), Lugones is very much in line with a Butlerian understanding of sex and gender.

Yet, despite this stated commitment to a constructivist understanding of sex and gender, Lugones nevertheless seems to assume biological sex as well as a straightforward connection between sex and gender. This becomes especially apparent in the non-Western cases she brings forward as examples of ways of conceiving and living gender outside of the colonial/modern gender system. A key example for Lugones is the work of Nigerian sociologist and gender scholar Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí on gender in pre-colonial Oyo-Yoruba society. On the basis of her engagement with the work of Oyěwùmí, Lugones makes the strong claim that "no gender system was in place" in Yoruba society (196), which is used to bolster her point that gender itself should be understood to be a colonial/modern construct. The work of Oyěwùmí has been critiqued on empirical grounds by feminist scholars like Oyeronke Olajubu (cf. Olajubu 2004). This critique is important: it does make a difference whether or not Oyěwùmí's claims about the lack of a gender order in Yoruba society have their basis in a sound historical and anthropological analysis. However, I concur with Coetzee and Halsema that we should understand Oyěwùmí's intervention to be primarily philosophical and epistemological, rather than an anthropological or historical one (Coetzee & Halsema 2018, 182). Furthermore, my focus here is not primarily on Oyěwùmí's work, but on Lugones' use of it to support her theorizing of sex and gender(ing). To explore the implications of that, I now turn to Oyěwùmí.

Oyěwùmí contends that the "social map" in Yoruba pre-colonial society is not based on biological/bodily/anatomical features related to sex/gender, but rather, that seniority is key. While there is a distinction made on the basis of anatomical sex and the role in reproduction between two subjects of "obinrin" and "okunrin," Oyěwùmí argues that this distinction is radically different from the Western gender system. These categories cannot be translated as "man" and "woman" since they follow a different logic: they do not rely on a binary opposition, nor do they designate a hierarchical relationship. However, since they do "specify a variety in anatomy" (Lugones 2007, 196-7), they are referred to by Oyěwùmí as "anafemale" (abbreviated from anatomical female) and "anamale" (anatomical male), a terminology that Lugones takes on.

Discussing the imposition of the colonial/modern gender system in Yoruba society, Lugones asserts:

"Oyěwùmí notes that the introduction of the Western gender sys-
tem was accepted by Yoruba males, who thus colluded with the
inferiorization of anafemales. So, when we think of the indiffer-
ence of nonwhite men to the violences exercised against nonwhite
women, we can begin to have some sense of the collaboration
between anamales and Western colonials against anafemales."
(Lugones 2007, 197)

In this passage, there seems to be no question that it is the anamale who
takes up the position of the nonwhite "man," and in doing so relegates the
anafemale to the inferior position of "woman." Rather than creating a rup-
ture, the colonial/modern gender system maps rather seamlessly onto the
supposedly ungendered Yoruba framework. The link between sex and
gender is not undone in the example: instead, it seems that sex (anatomy/
physiology) remains inextricably linked to gender (whether the obinrin/
okunrin Yoruba categorization or the colonial/modern man/woman cate-
gorization). Thus, claiming that "no gender system was in place" in
Yoruba society (Lugones 2007, 196) becomes questionable. Arguing that a
pre-colonial Yoruba gender system took a significantly different shape
than the Western colonial/modern gender system is something else than
to say that there is no gender system at work to begin with.

By following the terminology of anamales and anafemales introduced
by Oyěwùmí, while using this as a key case for a radically different con-
ceptualization of gender completely outside of the colonial/modern gen-
der system, Lugones does not manage to fully break free of the biologizing
and naturalizing logics she claims she wants to counter. What sense does
it make to speak of "colonized woman" if the very notion of woman is a
product of the colonization if the notion of "woman" only has meaning
within the colonial/modern gender system? Lugones herself admits as
much when she insists that "'colonized woman' is an empty category: no
women are colonized, no colonized females are women" (Lugones 2010,
745). Yet, even in this framing, as the gender category "woman" is exposed
as a colonial construct, the sex category "female" is assumed and taken for
granted, and the link between "female" and "woman" remains unprob-
lematized. The use of the terminology of "anamale" and "anafemale" by
Lugones is inconsistent with her stated commitment to recognizing sex as
constructed. Rather than questioning a binary and biologized definition
of sex, here, she rather uncritically adopts it.

In "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," Lugones makes her stance on the
relationship between sex and gender more explicit when she argues that
in her view, "sex stands alone" (744). Positioning herself in relation to the
debate about the sex/gender distinction, Lugones argues:

> "More contemporary analysis has introduced arguments for the
> claim that gender constructs sex. But, in the earlier version, sex
> grounded gender. Often, they became conflated: where you see
> sex, you will see gender, and vice versa. But, if I am right about the
> coloniality of gender, in the distinction between the human and
> the non-human, sex had to stand alone."
> (Lugones 2010, 744)

What Lugones means here by saying that "sex stands alone" is rather
cryptic. I take it to mean that biological sex – anasex – functions as the
grounds for differential treatment, both within and outside the colonial/
modern gender system. But, in that move, Lugones still ends up naturaliz-
ing and reifying sex – something Butler has already warned us against
and which more and more feminist scholarship in biology has questioned
(cf. Fausto-Sterling 2000).[6] And, by arguing that "sex" is the grounds for
differentiation, both in colonial and pre-colonial contexts, Lugones never-
theless upholds a connection between sex and gender(ing). Even as she
tries to work outside of the colonial/modern gender system and rejects its
dimorphic notion of sex, Lugones inevitably still brings this model with
her as she attempts to approach alternatives to the colonial/modern gen-
der system. By interpreting these non-Western or pre-colonial societies
through a frame of anamales and anafemales (a dimorphic notion of sex),
she demonstrates, in practice, the point Butler makes theoretically when
they claim that there is no way to approach sex outside of the framework
of gender.

    Not only is there a theoretical knot here, but this understanding of sex
also limits the political horizon of her project. Recognizing that gender is
a colonial/modern construction is important for Lugones exactly because
it opens up the horizon of "decolonizing gender" (Lugones 2010, 746). But,
by holding on to "sex" as the ground on the basis of which gendering takes
place, Lugones restricts the depth of this decolonizing potential. When
sex functions as an anchoring point, it keeps gender in place and restricts
the range of the analysis of how gender is produced in/through coloniality/

modernity and how it can be challenged. Bringing a Butlerian under-standing of the constructed nature of both sex and gender into the frame-work of the coloniality of gender would open up the horizon for the decolonization of gender(ing), and thus strengthen Lugones' framework.

In other words, I argue for bringing together Lugones' understanding of the coloniality of gender with Butler's performativity theory. Lugones' intervention of the coloniality of gender brings an important impetus to recognize how "gender" as a category has come into being in colonial modernity and how it is co-constructed with race, class, and other axes of difference. This element is less prominent in Butler's theorization of gen-der. However, our understanding of the coloniality of gender is further strengthened if it is brought together with a Butlerian understanding of sex/gender which does not take "sex" as the anchoring point on which gender is built. Recognizing how contemporary understandings of gender are constructed within coloniality/modernity can be brought together with an understanding of gender that does not biologize sex or assume it as the ground for gender. Bringing these approaches together allows us to better understand, analyze, and challenge intersectional oppression based on gender and race in their connection to coloniality.

Notes

1   Within intersectionality scholarship there are many debates about how specifi-cally to define intersectionality and how to differentiate it from other approaches like "interlocking" and "intermeshing" oppressions. Specifically, when it comes to the work of Lugones, recent scholarship questions to what extent this can be correctly assumed to be "intersectional" in the strict sense of the term, since Lugones prioritizes the language of "intermeshing" oppres-sions (Belle 2020; Carastathis 2019; Velez 2019). Recognizing the intricacies and nuances of these debates, I nevertheless take up the term "intersectionality" here as an umbrella term to refer to a variety of approaches that theorize the mutual imbrication and co-constructedness of various axes of difference and that insist that gender cannot be approached in isolation.

2   The conjunction of the colonial and the modern in the adjective colonial/modern is used by decolonial authors to recognize how modernity is inherently shaped through coloniality: they are two sides of the same coin, where one cannot be understood without the other. I will go further into this in the first section, when introducing Lugones' understanding of the colonial/modern gender system.

3   Veronica Vasterling writes: "Daunting in its incessant use of highly abstract
     jargon, not seldom confusing in its rhetorical effects, and often implicit in its
     argumentation, Butler's is one of the most difficult but also one of the most
     provocative texts I have been reading the past few years" (Vasterling 1999, 18). I
     share Vasterling's assessment, both of the challenge and of the value of Butler's
     work for feminist philosophy.

4   In analyzing the convergences and divergences between these two specific
     feminist philosophers, the larger picture of the differences between decolonial
     theory and poststructuralism would be interesting to bring into view as well.
     However, unlike many other decolonial thinkers, Lugones actually refrains
     from criticizing poststructuralism directly and the common antagonism
     between decolonial theory and poststructuralism does not come back in
     Lugones' writing on gender explicitly. For an account of the relationship
     between decolonial theory and postcolonial theory, which touches specifically
     on the relationship of decolonial theory to poststructuralism, see Colpani,
     Mascat & Smiet 2022.

5   The terminology of "articulation" that Butler deploys here recalls Stuart Hall's
     use of the term to understand the relations between race and class. Drawing on
     Marx, Gramsci, Althusser and Balibar, Hall develops a notion of articulation in
     order to understand how "racially structured social formations" emerge (Hall
     2018).

6   See also the other contributions in this volume that question the construction
     of biological sex by Alex Thinius, Rose Trappes and Annelies Kleinherenbrink.

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Thinking about Ethics, Love and War with Arendt

Rereading *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

HANNAH MARIJE ALTORF

I n 1963, Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* was published. The book created a controversy that lasts until today, though the focus of the criticism has shifted over the years. The original controversy concerned a number of issues: Arendt's comments on how the trial was conducted and its political aspects, the ambiguous phrase "the banality of evil," which appears in the original version only in the subtitle and at the very end of the report, and Arendt's remarks on the Jewish councils.[1] In more recent years, the focus of the criticism has moved to her portrayal of Adolf Eichmann. Was he a thoughtless petty man, who committed monstrous deeds? (Arendt 1992, 287). Or was he "a case of ...fanatical anti-Semitism"? (26; cf. Robin 2015).

Alongside these issues, there has also been disagreement about the nature of the work. Arendt calls it a "report" and speaks of "simple reporting" (Arendt 1992, 287). Yet, how does one report on the banality of evil? Some of her critics have considered the book a "faulty piece of historical writing, or even an incomplete sketch in moral history" (Neiman 2003, 66). Susan Neiman, in contrast, holds it to be "one of the best pieces of moral philosophy that the twentieth century has to offer" (Neiman 2010, 305). With Neiman, I regard the book as much more than a report on the trial. *Eichmann in Jerusalem* places Eichmann's story in a larger historical and political context, it reflects on the nature of the Nazi regime and it considers the political impact of the trial in Israel and elsewhere. Most importantly, it reflects on, what Arendt in *The Life of the Mind* describes as, the reversal of "mores and habits" in Nazi Germany (Arendt 1978a, 177-78) and thus shows itself to be a work of moral thought.

Related to Arendt's claim of "simple reporting" is another constant in the debate: the focus on factual accuracy. Her critics have denounced her use of evidence and her presentation of facts, but they have not always been accurate either. This is clear when *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was first published, and again in the more recent discussions generated by Bettina Stangneth's *Eichmann vor Jerusalem* (2011). Even though not all Arendt's "factual errors" are indeed errors, it is now generally agreed "that the

work has its share of historical mistakes" (Borren and Vasterling 2022).[2] Still, the ramifications of the criticism are often overlooked. Why are the facts so important and can they decide the controversy?

In this article I show that different sides in the debate assume that mere facts are sufficient to end the dispute, taking Bernard Wasserman's Hannah Arendt lecture in Nijmegen in 2008 as starting point. I next argue against this assumption. Facts do not exist in isolation but always appear in a particular arrangement. I then look at the arrangement of parts of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and offer a reading that shows it to be a response to a particular moral question. This reading of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* considers two stories in the book as pivotal. The first is about Feldwebel Anton Schmidt and the second is about Probst Heinrich Grüber.

In 2008 Bernard Wasserstein, then the Ulrich and Harriet Meyer Professor of Modern European Jewish History at the University of Chicago, was invited to give the annual Hannah Arendt lecture at Radboud University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. He had been invited to speak about the main theme of his most recent publication, *Barbarism and Civilisation: A History of Europe in Our Time* (2007), and possibly bring in some of Arendt's works (Vugt 2010, 7-8) Yet, on the day, Wasserstein surprised his audience by not speaking about his book at all. Instead, he spent his time repudiating Arendt's work as faulty history. The lecture, later published as "Blame the victim: Hannah Arendt among the Nazis: the historian and her sources," is a "ferocious" attack, especially on *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Horowitz 2010, 76). It started a heated debate in the audience, which resulted in a number of publications. In the discussion below I shall refer most of all to one of the more prominent publications, by Dirk de Schutter and Remi Peeters.[3]

The title of Wasserstein's lecture indicates the two major points of his criticism. He does not think highly of Arendt as a historian, because of her inadequate use of resources and because of a lack of compassion. Both points invite further reflection on facts, but first, it should be noted that it is far from obvious that Arendt is writing as a historian. Wasserstein decides very quickly that she is (Wasserstein 2009, 13, 14; cf. De Schutter and Peeters 2010, 57). For Wasserstein, two qualities of a good historian are their "balanced judgment and capacity to sift and weigh evidence" (Wasserstein 2009, 15). He judges Arendt to fail in both respects, especially when it comes to antisemitic sources. It is not just *what* evidence she uses, but also *how* she uses it (14). Wasserstein accuses her of uncritically drawing

on sources that were part of a political system that led to the displacement and the murder of millions of people and that abused facts for this purpose. More than once Arendt is found guilty by association, most deplorably when she uses a six-volume biography by Georg Schönerer of which, Wasserstein writes, the "first volume ... had inspired the young Hitler in Vienna" (14-5; cf. De Schutter and Peeters 2010, 40-1.) Wasserstein presents her as corrupted by being overexposed to "the discourse of collective contempt and stigmatization that formed the object of her study" (Wasserstein 2009, 14-5). There is an obviously patronizing tone in that last comment, but it is also a reminder that the facts under consideration are horrific (cf. Friedlander 1972, 91).

Wasserstein's criticism addresses an aspect of totalitarianism that plays a central role in Arendt's thinking. For her, one of its dangers is that it tries to destroy any sense of reality and community, and with that, the ability to act freely. It does so not just by denying facts, but also by eliminating the distinction between fact and opinion (Arendt 2006, 232; 1994, 168; cf. Vasterling 2019, 17). It can do so, because facts are vulnerable (Arendt 1972, 6). With evidence gone, it is possible to convince people that an event did not take place at all. It is for this reason, as De Schutter and Peeters write, that Arendt emphasizes the political importance of people, like the historian, the judge, and the journalist, and of public institutions, like courts and universities. They regard the preservation of fact very highly (De Schutter and Peeters 2010, 67). A good historian, like anyone who is willing "to say what is," is a defense against totalitarianism (Arendt 1994, 404; Borren and Vasterling 2022). To fail at facts can thus have disastrous consequences.

Eichmann in Jerusalem is not without its historical mistakes, and yet Wasserstein dismisses the work all too soon. His account of Arendt's scholarship is problematic because he too is selective in his use of material. He accuses Arendt of using the work of nazi-historian Walter Frank but does not note how she problematizes this (De Schutter and Peeters 2010, 37; Wasserstein 2009, 14). Significantly, even Wasserstein admits at one point that he cannot square Arendt's apparently uncritical use of sources with her knowledge of nuances in the German language, and yet at no point is he sufficiently puzzled to solve this conundrum. It seems then, that Wasserstein and Arendt agree on the importance of critical use of sources, on trying to avoid making mistakes, and regarding sources

without bias.[4] Yet, if the accurate presentation of facts is the sole criterion, neither appears to live up to it.

It is doubtful that any recourse to facts alone will be able to solve the dispute. Facts do not exist in isolation. In Arendt's phenomenological understanding, facts cannot be fully distinguished from meaning. This is perhaps best understood through examples. If someone is nodding their head, we will try and give meaning to this gesture. We may think they are agreeing, pondering what we have said, or simply trying to appear encouraging. If American citizens enter their Capitol building with violence, we try to make sense of these facts by calling them a mob or freedom fighters. What these examples show is how we constantly try and make sense of facts by giving them meaning. What is more, disagreement about meaning is a means of establishing and retaining facts (cf. Vasterling 2019, 16; Vasterling 2002; see also Arendt 1978a, 15-6). We may disagree on the name of those citizens, but in our disagreement, we confirm that they went into the building that day. At the same time, "going into the building" does not fully capture the event.

The complex relation between fact and meaning comes to the fore too in another quality of the good historian that Wasserstein mentions: compassion.[5] Especially with regard to *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Arendt has been accused of lacking compassion for the victims of the Nazi atrocities (Robin 2015, 13). This accusation is often supported with quotes from the open correspondence between Gershom Scholem and Arendt that followed the publication of the first edition of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in 1963. Michael Brenner, for instance, mentions that Scholem "criticized [*Eichmann in Jerusalem*] not for scholarly sins but for the author's lack of empathy for the Jewish people."[6] Brenner notes that this criterion is unusual, but he warns not to dismiss it too easily (Brenner 2006, 12). Wasserstein too reiterates Scholem's concern that Arendt showed little *ahavat Yisrael*, "love of the Jewish people" (Scholem 1978, 241; Wasserstein 2009, 14).

In her response to Scholem, Arendt agrees that she has never loved any group. She has love only for individuals (Arendt 1978b, 246). She does not think compassion has a role to play in this debate and points out how emotions of this kind can often be used to hide facts (Arendt 1992, 247). For that reason, she emphasizes the importance of factual reporting in the "Postscript" to the edition of 1965, which she wrote in response to the severe criticism with which the first edition met in 1963. Similarly, in the new introduction, she claims that all changes to the 1965 edition are "tech-

nical" (Arendt 1992, v). Yet, this assessment does not seem accurate. Commentators have noted that the tone is all but simple, but the issue is not just the tone. The book is a rich source of ideas that will engage Arendt for the rest of her life, as, for instance, the introduction to *The Life of the Mind* testifies (Arendt 1978a, 3-4; cf. Borren and Vasterling 2022).

Arendt's comments are also not in line with her own understanding of history or reporting. In "Truth and Politics" she writes: "Even if we admit that every generation has the right to write its own history, we admit no more than that it has the right to rearrange the facts in accordance with its own perspective" (Arendt 2006, 234). Responding again to the Eichmann controversy, Arendt not just emphasizes the importance of facts, but also mentions the act of arrangement. This latter aspect allows a move away from a debate that focuses solely on facts.

For the arrangement in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* does not simply follow the order of the trial or the chronology of the crimes. It is when studying the structure that an important moral concern for Arendt comes to the fore, as I show in the remainder of this article. My argument proceeds by outlining a reading of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* that considers two sets of stories in the book as pivotal. The first set comes near the end when Arendt relates the witness of Zindel Grynszpan, which is closely followed by the account of Feldwebel Anton Schmidt (Arendt 1992, 229-30). The second concerns Propst Heinrich Grüber and is found about a third into the work.

Grynszpan appears in the chapter on witnesses, a later chapter in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. The presence of these witnesses in the trial was unprecedented and its significance has gone well beyond the trial. As Deborah Lipstadt relates, survivors may not have had a voice today were it not for the Eichmann trial (Lipstadt 2011, xi). Significantly, until this chapter, Arendt had been critical of their presence, because many of the stories were not relevant to the trial. The majority of the witnesses were from Poland and Lithuania, where, she writes, "Eichmann's competence and authority had been almost nil" (Arendt 1992, 225). She criticizes the fact that the witnesses were hardly questioned and instead "could talk almost as long as they wished" (121).

Yet, when Grynszpan takes the stand, Arendt changes her mind and seems to accept "'the right of witnesses to be irrelevant' as Yad Vashem … phrased it" (225). Grynszpan tells the story of the expulsion of Polish Jews from Germany in October 1938. He had lived in Germany for 27 years, until the night that he and his family were deported, along with approximately

17000 Polish Jews. In a period of only a few days, they were brought to the Polish border, where chaos ensued. They lost all they had. Arendt provides a harrowing account of his testimony and then writes: "This story took no more than perhaps ten minutes to tell, and when it was over – the senseless, needless destruction of twenty-seven years in less than twenty-four hours – one thought foolishly: Everyone, everyone should have his day in court," though she adds almost immediately how difficult it is to tell such a story well (229).

Yet, it is the consequent story of Schmidt that truly marks a pivotal moment in this chapter and in the book. It comes in the testimony of a resistance fighter, Abba Kovner, who tells how, for five months or so, Feldwebel Anton Schmidt helped the Jewish underground, until he was arrested and executed. Arendt writes how on hearing the story "a hush settled over the courtroom," as if to "observe the usual two minutes of silence in honor of the man named Anton Schmidt" (231). She muses that the world would be "utterly different... if only more such stories could have been told" and discusses the objection that any resistance would have been "practically useless." She concludes:

> "Nothing can ever be 'practically useless', at least, not in the long run. [...] under the conditions of terror most people will comply but *some people will no*t... Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can be reasonably asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation."
> (Arendt 1992, 233; cf. Neiman 2003, 85 ff.)

With this last quotation, it is obvious that Arendt's writing is itself an activity of resistance against totalitarianism. What is more, it also shows how any "saying what is" can be such resistance: in the preservation of facts and in the stories it tells. If this is the case, the preservation of facts cannot be a neutral undertaking, nor proceed from an "'Archimedean point,' an abstract or (quasi-)universalistic point of view" (Borren and Vasterling 2022).

In her reflection on Schmidt, Arendt speaks of a "planet ... fit for human habitation." Different commentators have argued that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* allowed her to reconcile herself in a way to the world she lived in, a world that had been characterized by senseless murder at an industrial scale. Young-Bruehl speaks in this context of *cura posterior*, words Arendt

used.[7] Neiman sees the book as Arendt's attempt to defend "a world that contained [Eichmann]" and quotes Arendt's letter to McCarthy, where she responds to McCarthy's experience of exhilaration when reading *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: "You were the only reader to understand what otherwise I have never admitted – namely that I wrote this book in a curious state of euphoria. And that ever since I did it, I feel – after 20 years – lighthearted about the whole matter" (Neiman 2003, 90).

If the story of Schmidt thus marks one pivotal moment in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, the other is marked by Probst Heinrich Grüber. Where Schmidt reconciles Arendt to the world, with Grüber begins the descent into the deepest darkness. He appears at the end of the chapter on the Wannsee Conference, one-third into the book. What follows are chapters that are incredibly difficult to read. They relate the deportations of Jews from the various countries to the death camps. The section on Grüber marks a shift away from a situation in which other options seem still open. Until then the final solution has not appeared as a foregone conclusion. Arendt's writing exemplifies here an important characteristic of her historiography, as Marieke Borren and Veronica Vasterling describe it: its conditionality (Borren and Vasterling 2022). As a reader, one hopes against all knowledge that things will be different.

Grüber is introduced in the discussion on Eichmann's conscience when Arendt queries whether Eichmann encountered anyone who would oppose the unimaginable plans (Arendt 1992, 126-7). She concludes that he hardly did. Even those who opposed the regime would, by arguing the case for 'special' Jews, in a way confirm it. She writes: "[those who were engaged in the business of murder] … must have felt, at least, that by being asked to make exceptions, and by occasionally granting them, and thus earning gratitude, they had convinced their opponents of the lawfulness of what they were doing" (132-3). Grüber was one of those who intervened on behalf of specific groups of people and was, for a time, incarcerated in Dachau.

The episode with Grüber has not been discussed much. Yet, in my reading of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* this story is structurally very important in the book. Grüber, a German like Schmidt, was not immediately involved as either perpetrator or victim. His examination at the trial allowed Eichmann to claim: "Nobody. . . came to me and reproached me for anything in the performance of my duties. Not even Pastor Grüber claims to have done so" (131). For Arendt, the negotiations for special cases did not just operate

as confirmation of the regime but also implied that some lives are more worth saving than others. Arendt ends this chapter reflecting on those Germans who even in the early 1960s did not see how the argument for special cases was deadly, reproaching those "who still publicly regret the fact that Germany sent Einstein packing, without realizing that it was a much greater crime to kill little Hans Cohn from around the corner, even though he was no genius" (134).

When the book is read as structured around the accounts of Schmidt and Grüber, two aspects come to the fore. First, the work fits Arendt's historiography. Until Grüber makes his appearance, it seems as if history could have been different. Yet, from that chapter onwards, the book turns very dark as we read, chapter after chapter, about the deportations of millions of people to their deaths in the camps. This only changes when Arendt writes first of Grynszpan and then of Schmidt. For Arendt, we are not fully in control, but neither are we cogs in a machine. We are neither sovereign nor fully dependent (cf. De Schutter and Peeters 2010, 60-61). As De Schutter and Peeters argue, she is as far removed as possible from the thought that *Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*, history will judge (68). To value the act of individual judgment is an acknowledgment that things could have been different. It allows for novelty, which Arendt considers a fundamental characteristic of human beings – a characteristic, moreover, that totalitarianism threatened to eliminate (51).

Secondly, the two stories concern two people who, for Arendt, are both exceptional as Germans. Grüber was exceptional in his resistance to the Nazi regime. He was recognized as a "Righteous among the Nations" by Yad Vashem in 1964, and in the trial "[testified] to the existence of 'another Germany'" (Arendt 1992, 130). Schmidt's story is exceptional because stories of aid from non-Jews were rare and Schmidt's story was the only one told about a German (231). Highlighting these two stories brings back to mind Scholem's question: where is her *ahavat Yisrael*? It is clear that, as Corey Robin argues, Arendt's ambiguous relation to Israel plays a role in the background to her writing and to that of her critics (Robin 2015, 14-15). It is also clear that her relation to Germany is even more present.

Yet, this is not so much about Arendt's relation to countries as it is about making sense of horrific facts. When the book was first published, she acknowledges in private correspondence that "she knew her book had moral implications she had not thought out" (Young-Bruehl 1982, 374). In *The Life of the Mind,* she makes these explicit, first in relation to Eichmann

(Arendt 1978a, 3-5) and later in relation to the whole of Nazi Germany. In Nazi Germany "basic commandments of Western morality were reversed." The more respectable the person, the more likely people were to follow the new regime.[8] In a reading that considers the stories of Grüber and Schmidt as pivotal, this appears to be Arendt's prime concern.

This reading may not lessen the vehement nature of the controversy. Perhaps, this is not possible. Or, perhaps, as Jerome Kohn argues, a solution is not even desirable. The book should be challenging long-held beliefs (cf. Borren and Vasterling 2022). Another difficulty comes from the subject matter, which is of such a horrific nature that it seems to take away all agency and any license to judge. Yet, Arendt judges and her judgments are difficult (cf. Robin 2015, 23-4). What is more, against expectations, Arendt's first concern is not with the victims, but with the observation that morals were so easily reversed in Nazi Germany and again after the war. The victims, however, are present. Their stories help her to understand the moral issues, but also to contain the darkness in the central chapters. A discussion that confines itself to facts misses these insights and the important questions *Eichmann in Jerusalem* still raises.

Notes

1   Young-Bruehl 1982, 337. For an excellent account of the controversy then, see King 2015, 189-217. For an explanation of the criticism see also Ring 1998, the chapters on the Eichmann trial in Bilsky 2004 and, more recently, Robin 2015. Arendt explains the phrase 'banality of evil' succinctly in the introduction to *The Life of the Mind*: "The deeds were monstrous, but the doer – at least the very effective one now on trial – was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous" (Arendt 1978, 4).

2   A good number of the earliest critics consulted Jacob Robinson's *Facts* (Young Bruehl 1982, 355-7). See for comments on its accuracy Maier-Katkin and Stoltzfus 2013. For a discussion of Stangneth see Mahony 2020, 43-8.

3   The texts by Wasserman, by De Schutter and Peeters and by Horowitz are all included in *Hannah Arendt en de geschiedschrijving: een controverse* (2010). The texts by Wasserstein and Horowitz are also available in English, though the English and Dutch texts differ at points. Where a comment occurs in both versions, references will be to the English text only.

4   Wasserstein 2010, 16. This section is not in the English version.

5   Significantly, these characteristics do not appear in essential qualities of the historian as outlined by Lucian, which Wasserstein mentions at the very end of his article (Wasserstein 2009, 15, quoting Costa, *Lucian, selected dialogues*, 197; the reference is only found in Wasserstein 2010, 34). Indeed, De Schutter and Peeters note that for at least one of them, Lucian holds the exact opposite: for him a good historian must be without compassion (De Schutter and Peeters 2010, 58).

6   Scholem has doubts about factual accuracy, but it is not the focus of his criticism (Scholem 1978, 240).

7   Young-Bruehl 1982, 374. Earlier Young-Bruehl explains: "[Arendt] freed herself of a long nightmare; she no longer had to live with the idea that monsters and demons had engineered the murder of millions. The banality of evil, she said in the last sentence of the book, is 'fearsome, word-and-thought-defying.' But its existence is not proof of an original evil element in human nature and hence not an indictment of mankind" (367).

8   Arendt 1978a, 177-8. See also Ring 1998, who contrasts Arendt's Jewish identity with her identity as German scholar (Ring 1998, 2, 107-8, 166 ff.)

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'Amor Mundi' Threatened? War and the 'Darkness of the Human Heart'

DESIREE VERWEIJ

The preface to the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, that Hannah Arendt wrote in the summer of 1950, obviously refers to a different historical period, yet seems highly relevant in our day and age. This can also be said of the entire book, which is written in an attempt to understand the genocidal violence of totalitarian regimes. In her preface, Arendt mentions the chaos of wars and revolutions and the unpredictability of the future in a world "where political forces cannot be trusted to follow the rules of common sense [...] forces that look like sheer insanity" (Arendt 2017, ix). She mentions the "irritating incompatibility between the actual power of modern man [...] and the impotence of modern man to live in and understand the sense of, a world which their own strength has established" (ibid., xi). The text could hardly be more up to date in the first decades of the twenty-first century, in which autocracies worldwide threaten to overrule democracies, and in which war and conflict show their ugly faces from the centerstage position they have managed to reach. The violence of totalitarianism and totalitarian war is unmistakably the instigator of a large part of Arendt's oeuvre. Up until the last years of her life, she seems to have grappled with the question of totalitarian violence, which is for a large part – if not the largest part – personified in Adolf Eichmann's "inability to think," according to Arendt in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1992) [1963]. As Young-Bruehl remarks, Arendt often said that Eichmann's thoughtlessness was in fact the reason for her to write the part "Thinking" in *The Life of the Mind* (Young-Bruehl 2007, 156). This is underlined by Arendt herself in her introduction to "Thinking" (Arendt 1978, 3). Arendt's answer to totalitarianism seems to be to counter the destructiveness of this phenomenon by restoring the ability to think and, in doing so, restoring judgment and responsibility, for these qualities are precisely those destroyed by totalitarianism.

Yet, what does this mean in a military context; the context Eichmann also found himself in? The question seems relevant, given the fact that the

deployment of military means was, and is, often called for in fighting autocrats. Moreover, the deployment of military means is a form of "acting in concert" and, even though Arendt hardly mentions this form of "acting," she is not against it. In the German New York City-based journal *Aufbau*, Arendt made a plea for a Jewish army as part of the allied forces fighting totalitarianism in Europe (cf. Young-Bruehl 2007, 40). Arendt does not reject the deployment of military means; she is not a pacifist and neither does she seem to share the feminist critique of the male-dominated testosterone-fuelled violence of military deployment. Moreover, she acknowledges that the deployment of military means might be necessary for a community in order to defend the power structure that constitutes this community. The deployment of military means is granted when it is aimed at a just (*iustus*) goal (see also: Schutter en Peeters 2015, 85 and 86 and Verweij 2019). Notably, Arendt's political theory is based on her insight into the political meaning of war. Her questions regarding the role of force and the difference between the just and unjust deployment thereof (Arendt 2017, 178) make clear that war and brute violence are not the same (see also: Owens 2007). Yet, what does this mean? When Arendt suggests that totalitarianism can be countered by restoring the ability to think and in doing so restoring judgment and responsibility, this also holds for military personnel in their actual fight against their totalitarian opponents.

This paper tries to find out what thinking means in a military context, as opposed to thoughtlessness in a military context, of which Eichmann, according to Arendt, was an infamous example. His inability to think will be further discussed in the second section of this paper. Subsequently, John Glenn Gray's book, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (1998) [1959] will be discussed in the third section. Gray's book, to which Arendt wrote a laudatory introduction and whom she mentions in her own book, *On Violence*, is interesting in many ways. Given his ability to think, the – almost unknown – American soldier John Glenn Gray seems to be the opposite of the infamous Adolf Eichmann. However, what does this mean, and more specifically, what did this mean in the context Gray found himself in? And what does this mean in regard to Arendt's "*amor mundi*," as the love and responsibility for a common world? Doesn't the deployment of military means, which, per definition, makes room for the destructive forces of the "*homo furens*" as Gray suggests, threaten Arendt's *amor mundi*?

Thoughtlessness in a Military Context: Eichmann and the Banality of Evil[1]

Arendt wrote five articles for *The New Yorker*, as well as the book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* in which she discusses the thoughtlessness that she accused Eichmann of. It was (and is) this thoughtlessness that led (and leads) to genocide. According to Arendt, genocide is an attack upon human diversity as such, upon the human status as such, without which the very words "mankind" or "humanity" would lose their meaning. Arendt points out that "[i]t was when the Nazi regime declared that the German people not only were unwilling to have any Jews in Germany but wished to make the entire Jewish people disappear from the face of the earth, that the new crime, the crime against humanity appeared" (Arendt 1992, 268). It is precisely because of this violation of human diversity as such that state-employed mass murderers must be prosecuted. For, "If genocide is an actual possibility of the future, then no people on earth [...] can feel reasonably sure of its continued existence without the help and protection of international law" (273).

In regard to Eichmann, the person who committed these crimes against humanity, Arendt states that he is neither a sadist nor a monster and that he did not have any ideological motives. According to Arendt, the trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him – neither monsters nor demons – they were (and are) astonishingly normal. This "normality" was confirmed by six psychiatrists (25) and is revealed in his personal history, that Arendt discusses extensively. Eichmann came from a middle-class family and worked as a traveling salesman before he became an SS officer. His task as an SS officer was defined as "'forced emigration", which meant, literally, that, under his command, Jews were to be forced to emigrate. Eichmann was successful in his job. In eight months, 45,000 Jews left Austria. Due to his success, Eichmann became an expert on the Jewish question, an authority on emigration, and "the master who knew how to make people move" (65). He was effective and efficient and subsequently, he became ambitious. His aspirations grew; he wanted to become a colonel or a chief of police. However, these aspirations proved to be futile. In Eichmann's words "Whatever I prepared and planned, everything went wrong [...] I was frustrated in everything, no matter what" (50). This mono-focus on himself and on what happened to him was typical of Eichmann. What characterized Eichmann, according to Arendt, was

his lack of compassion, his deficient thinking faculty, "his inability ever to look at anything from the other fellow's point of view" (49).

There is one more important characteristic: Eichmann was in fact a very obedient officer. In his last statement for the court, Eichmann pointed out that "his guilt came from his obedience", and that, "obedience is praised as a virtue" and that his virtue "had been abused by the Nazi leaders" (247). He claimed not only to obey orders but also to obey the law and underlined the fact that he had lived his whole life according to Kant's definition of duty. Arendt considers this statement outrageous (136) since Kant's moral theory refers to the ability to judge rather than the ability to obey without thinking. With reference to Hans Frank, Arendt states that Eichmann replaced Kant's categorical imperative with the "categorical imperative of the Third Reich: act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew your action, would approve it" (136). It is clear Eichmann considered himself a law-abiding citizen, because "the Führer's words had the force of law" (148 and 105).

Arendt maintains that neither Eichmann nor the other Nazis were sadists or monsters. They all were ordinary men whose feelings of pity, caused by the sight of the suffering they themselves had created, were turned away from their victims and directed towards themselves. This was the trick Himmler used, Arendt explains. By shifting the focus from the victims to the self, the Nazis were able to say, "What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders," and not, "What horrible things did I do to these people?" (106). In Eichmann's final statement at the Jerusalem court, he still spoke of the revaluation of values prescribed by the Nazi government (287). With regard to this final statement, Arendt mentions again Eichmann's inability to think and states that "the essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanize them" (289). What is crucial, according to Arendt, is the nature and function of human judgment, which she calls one of the central moral questions of all time; being able to judge implies being able to think.

Although Arendt's insights, with regard to Eichmann's character and motives, might not have been entirely correct, as Stangneth 2014 and De Swaan 2015 have suggested, and while Eichmann was probably more cunning and more of a fervent Jew-hater than Arendt believed him to be, her analysis of his inability to think, still holds. What is often overlooked in

these critiques is that Arendt's concept of thinking is based on Kant's differentiation between *Vernunft* and *Verstand*, which led Arendt to distinguish between "thinking" and "knowing." As Vasterling 2002 points out, Arendt's concept of thinking differs from the way this concept is used in Western philosophy, in which thinking tends to be identified with knowing, which generates the idea that thinking focuses on truth. However, thinking as a goal in itself is an activity focused on sensemaking and meaning, which implies that sense and meaning are created in the thinking process itself. They are not given in the way that truth is given and can be found, or revealed, in the process of knowing. Sense and meaning are plural and changeable, leading to many different interpretations of given facts. Thinking in this way can be learned. In the chapter "The answer of Socrates" in *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt discusses Socrates' qualities as a teacher in thinking. Notably, Arendt rejects the traditional interpretation of a Platonic Socrates and stresses his authentic way of thinking based on his ability to question (see also Schutter and Peeters 2012, 23).

Being able to think implies being able to have an inner dialogue. On the basis of her analysis of Socrates, Arendt maintains that thinking is the duality of oneself with oneself. This inner dialogue implies that a person is both the one who asks and the one who answers. In this inner dialogue, the confrontation of the voices from the outside and the voices from within have to be brought to agreement. The only criterion for Socratic thinking is agreement, which means that one has to be consistent with oneself in order to be able to think. This implies that the basic criterion is not to contradict oneself; persons who are not able to have an inner dialogue, by which actions and ideas are examined, will not mind contradicting themselves. Subsequently, this person will never be able nor willing to account for what he says or does. Only those who think – who are capable of having an inner dialogue – have a conscience. Being able to think is a human faculty, just as the inability to think is a human failure, as Arendt points out. It is thinking that makes judgment possible, yet judging is not the same as thinking. This is because thinking deals with representations of things that are absent, whereas judging only concerns perceptible things. However, the two are interrelated in the sense that one facilitates the other. "The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this, at the rare moments when the stakes are on the table, may indeed prevent catastrophes, at least for the self" (Arendt 1978, 193).

It seems that John Glenn Gray, also working – like Eichmann – as a military professional during the Second World War, but then on the side of the allied forces, was able to think in this sense. Yet, was he indeed able to prevent catastrophes, "at least for the self"?

Thinking in a Military Context: Gray and the Enduring Appeals of Battle

As mentioned above, Arendt wrote a laudatory introduction to a book by John Glenn Gray, a former American soldier who had just finished his doctorate in philosophy as he entered the army in 1941. He served in North Africa, Italy, France, and Germany as an intelligence officer and was honorably discharged in 1945. After fourteen years he began rereading his war journals on which his book, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (1998) [1959], is based. As Arendt puts it in her introduction: "It took him fourteen years of remembrance and reflection to understand and come to terms with what had happened in these four years" (viii). Arendt expresses her surprise at the fact that the book did not get the attention that "good books" normally get when they are published. Yet, she notices a "small and intimate success" (viii). She calls it a "singularly earnest and beautiful book" (iv). According to Arendt, the book is "on the surface" about the "homo furens" and the "homo sapiens" (concepts used by Gray), but "in fact, it is about life and death, love, friendship, and comradeship, about courage [...] about inhuman cruelty and superhuman kindness [...] and at the end about conscience, the very opposite of ecstasy" (xi). In order to better understand Arendt's introduction and better answer the questions posed in the first section of this paper, it is relevant to take a closer look at Gray's book.

Gray discusses the effects of war on the personal level of the soldier and shows why and how soldiers do what they do. This also implies why and how they can be attracted to fighting. "War reveals dimensions of human nature both above and below the acceptable standards of humanity" (Gray 1998, 26). In the atmosphere of violence, of either killing or being killed, soldiers react in different ways. In order to resist "the encroachments of the violent and the irrational" (27) soldiers cling to the memory of their civilian existence, as Gray himself tried to do. However, the soldier who "has yielded himself to the fortunes of war" (ibid.) or who has been

exposed to battle for a long time, transforms into what Gray calls a "homo furens", a "fighting man."[2] According to Gray, a "homo furens" is a sub-species of the homo sapiens, and man as a warrior is only partly man and in danger of being overwhelmed by the "furens" part of his identity. Although Gray doesn't mention it, the term "homo furens" is also used by Philip Caputo in his book, *Indian Country* (2004), a book about a boy (named Christian) who follows his friend to serve in the Vietnam War. The term appears when a letter is discussed that Christian's father wrote to his son when he was told that Christian was going to Vietnam. The father is shocked and disappointed by his son's intention and hopes that Christian turns out to be a bad soldier because a man cannot be a good soldier and a decent human being at the same time; a good soldier belongs to a different species, homo furens, half man and half beast. "I do not fear for your life or safety, but for what may happen to you inside. Homo furens, half man, half beast, that is what I fear you will become" (Caputo 2004, 98). This fear seems real, given the fact that in Gray's words: "The emotional environment of warfare has always been compelling [...] reflection and calm reasoning are alien to it [...] It was hard for me to think" (Gray 1998, 28). Combat is both loved and hated. Gray discusses the three often over-looked "attractions of war": the delight in seeing, the delight in comrade-ship, and the delight in destruction; all three belong to the enduring appeals of battle.

With regard to the delight in seeing, Gray states that war is an enormous spectacle that should not be underestimated since we all experience "the lust of the eye."

Although Gray refers to the Bible in this context, one can also mention Plato's discussion in *The Republic* of Leontinus and the dead bodies he wants and does not want to see. There is a passion to see, as the interest in accidents and fires makes clear. The eye yearns for the new, the unexpected, and the spectacular as a welcome distraction from the monotony and boredom of everyday life. Gray compares certain war scenes and battles with images of storms above the ocean and sunsets in the desert that absorb the spectator; he calls these experiences of war experiences of the sublime (33). With awe and amazement, we lose ourselves in the perception of something bigger and more powerful. Gray calls this an "ecstatic" experience, in the original meaning of the term: a state of being outside the self (36), which implies the loss of morality, since "morality is based on the social; the ecstatic, on the other hand, is transsocial." Gray asks if this

"aesthetic ecstasy" is not also one of the causes of the loss of morality in war (39).

The second enduring appeal of battle Gray discusses is comradeship, which also includes this ecstatic element. The communal experience of being close together in extreme conditions, in which the lives of all who are present are at stake, creates a special bond. "An hour or two of combat can do more to weld a unit together than months of intensive training. Many veterans [...] will admit, I believe, that the experience of communal effort in battle [...] has been a high point in their lives" (44). This experience of comradeship in the face of mortal danger or the threat of destruction is also an ecstatic experience, according to Gray. "We feel earnest and gay at such moments because we are liberated from our individual impotence and are drunk with the power that union with our fellows brings" (45). In situations like these, the comrades "sense a kinship never known before." Furthermore, "their 'I' passes insensibly into a 'we', 'my' becomes 'our', and individual fate loses its central importance" (45). According to Gray, self-sacrifice in situations like these is relatively easy: "I may fall, but I do not die, for that which is real in me goes forward and lives on in the comrades for whom I gave up my physical life" (47). With reference to a book by Georg F. Nicolai entitled *The Biology of War* (1915), Gray wonders whether this intoxicating "capacity for self-sacrifice" might not be the reason that "men will never give up warfare" (48).

The third enduring appeal of battle Gray discusses is the delight in destruction, which he says is much more sinister than the other two delights. Here the homo furens, as discussed above, comes to the fore. In their "blinded rage to destroy, and supremely careless of consequences," soldiers seem "seized by a demon and are no longer in control of themselves" (51). Gray quotes from the diary of Ernst Juenger, who fought on the German side during the First World War: "With a mixture of feelings, evoked by bloodthirstiness, rage, and intoxication, we moved towards the enemy. [...] Boiling with a mad rage which had taken hold of me and all the others in an incomprehensible fashion. The overwhelming wish to kill gave wings to my feet. Rage pressed bitter tears from my eyes. [...] The monstrous desire for annihilation. [...] A neutral observer might have perhaps believed we were seized by an excess of happiness" (52). According to Gray, many soldiers have learned of this mad excitement and the delight in destruction in military practice. Of the many authors who have written about the urge toward destruction and the spirit of violence, Gray consid-

ers Hemingway the best. With reference to Hemingway, Freud, and Empedocles, Gray discusses the two familiar "primordial forces" of "eternal conflict": Eros and Thanatos (53-5). Eros is the power to connect and unite, whereas Thanatos is the power to annihilate, and thus to destroy what is connected and united. Gray also talks about love as a concern (88), which is also present on the battlefield and, like friendship, is directed toward preservation of being (93) and thus, also opposed to destruction. Yet, the satisfaction in destruction seems overwhelming and, as such, "peculiarly human" […] "We sense in it always the Mephistophelean cry that all created things deserve to be destroyed" (55). The delight in destruction also has an ecstatic character, however. It is "an ecstasy without union," for, unlike the other delights, it turns men "inward upon themselves and makes them inaccessible to more normal satisfactions" (57). According to Gray, it is the "spiritual emptiness and inner hunger that impel many men toward combat. Our society has not begun to wrestle with this problem of how to provide fulfillment to human life, to which war is so often an illusory path" (58).

Arendt's introduction to Gray's book is full of quotes taken from Gray's text which show her appreciation of his work and his ability to reflect. Notably, she does not only seem to admire him as a writer but also as a soldier. With reference to Gray's conclusion at the end of his book and his statement that "Survival without integrity of conscience is worse than perishing outright," Arendt maintains: "Nowhere perhaps than in these passages does one understand better that Glen Gray's friend thought of him as '*the soldier*' [italics by Arendt]. For they express but the last and, under today's circumstances, inevitable conclusion of the soldier's basic credo – that life is *not* [italics by Arendt] the highest good" (iv).

'Amor Mundi' and the Danger of the Darkness of the Human Heart

Against the backdrop of the political chaos in our era, in which war and conflict are again instigated by reckless autocrats, this paper focuses on the meaning of Arendt's concept of thinking in a military context (as exemplified by Gray), as opposed to thoughtlessness in a military context, of which Eichmann was an infamous example. Although both Gray and Eichmann were soldiers, the context they worked in was rather different,

and it could be argued that this influenced their ability to think. Eichmann might be called a "desktop killer," who, with one single stroke of his pen sealed the fate of millions of Jews. People he had never seen himself were brutally maimed and murdered on the basis of the decisions he made from behind his desk. Gray, on the other hand, experienced war up close. Even though his work as an intelligence officer was different from that of an infantry soldier, Gray saw, heard, smelled, and felt what war actually consists of. This experience from up close – looking one's enemy in the eye – makes it more difficult to dehumanize him for, after all, he is just a human being, mortal, like oneself. Behind a desk in a bureaucratic organization, dehumanization and "reification" (Honneth 2008) arise quite easily. The other is stripped of his human qualities and reduced to a digit, an anonymous "n." Unless, as Arendt points out, one is able to think, even behind a desktop in a full-blown bureaucracy, "thinking" is possible.

As discussed above, the inability to think was and is, according to Arendt, one of the main causes – if not the main cause – of totalitarian violence. Thus, countering it implies restoring the ability to think, both in the civilian and military context, as well as on the battlefield and behind the desktop. What Arendt seems to appreciate in Gray is precisely his ability to think, to reflect, and to judge, on the basis of which he was able to act conscientiously. Yet, as Gray's analysis of the enduring appeal of battle makes clear, this is not the case for every soldier (perhaps for most soldiers), for war seems to be able to blow away the capacity to think and reflect, as Gray himself states. It is precisely in the ecstasies, present in all three of the "delights," as discussed above, that the ego – and thus the capacity to think – loses itself and seems to dissolve. Gray acknowledges this, as was discussed above. With regard to the first appeal of battle, the 'delight in seeing', he poses the question whether the aesthetic ecstasy present in the delight in seeing is not also the cause of the loss of morality in war, given its "transsocial" character. With regard to the second appeal of battle, the "delight in comradeship," Gray discusses the experience of belonging to a "band of brothers," in which an unprecedented kinship is experienced that frees individuals from their insignificance, their weakness, and vulnerability. Comrades become one, powerful and potent, and willing to sacrifice themselves for their beloved unit, in which their egos have dissolved. In regard to the second appeal of battle, Gray poses the question whether this "intoxicating" experience might not be the reason men will never give up war. The third appeal of battle, the "delight in

destruction," concerns a mad excitement that many soldiers have learned in military practice, according to Gray. He connects the ecstasy found in destruction and annihilation to the "spiritual emptiness" and "inner hunger" that drives many men toward battle.

Thus, Gray's book is not only "on the surface" about the "homo furens," as Arendt claims. It is precisely this "furens" part that is, in its destructive ecstasy, able to switch off the ability to think, like the other ego-transcending ecstasies Gray discusses in reference to seeing and comradeship. In that sense, "thinking" soldiers are in danger of losing their ability to think and thus their ability to judge in the heat of the battle. Yet, Arendt is also right that Gray's book is also about love, friendship, comradeship, "superhuman kindness," and most importantly, conscience. And, as stated above, it is – even in the context of war – about love as a concern, which comes very close to *amor mundi* as the love and responsibility for a common world. It may precisely be out of concern for a common world, for *amor mundi*, that injustices are fought and that armed force is needed to save the plurality of perspectives that – per definition – gets lost in totalitarianism. However, the destructive side of war, even of just wars, is always present; it hangs like a shadow over Gray's story. This is the strength of his book, as Arendt states in *On Violence*. Arendt maintains that once a person enters "the community of violence" he will "fall under the intoxicating spell of "the practice of violence" which binds men together as a whole (Arendt 1970, 67). Arendt refers to Gray in a note, writing that his book "is most perceptive and instructive on this point. It should be read by everyone interested in the practice of violence" (ibid.). In the pages following this reference, the echo of Gray's words can also be detected. Arendt maintains that the danger of violence, however well intended it may be, will always be that "the means overwhelm the end." She also adds that "the practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world" (80).

It seems that Gray's story reveals the danger of what Arendt calls, in *The Human Condition*, "the darkness of the human heart" (Arendt 158, 244). She is here referring to the basic unreliability of human beings, who can never guarantee their own integrity; "who can never guarantee today who they will be tomorrow" (ibid.). And this seems to hold in the civilian context, as well as in the military context. This lack of integrity means that the consequences of actions taken within a community by the members of this community can never be fully predicted. This also holds both in a civil

and military context. In the words of the chorus in Sophocles' *Antigone*, man is *deinon*, both capable of the most wonderful and the most reprehensible actions. It is the destructive side of this *deinon* character that Arendt calls "the darkness of the human heart." It is always there and, in times of war, it is able to increasingly create space for itself.

Totalitarianism is not defeated, as Arendt already feared; a fear she expressed using the symbol of the desert, which she borrowed from Nietzsche's poem "Die Wüste wächst." The whole title of the poem is: "Die Wüste wächst: weh dem, der Wüste birgt" (Nietzsche 1988, 380). Nietzsche's individual focus in this poem differs from Arendt's broader focus on the desertification of the world (although one might ask how individual Nietzsche's focus in this poem is, given his reference to Europe and Europeans in the poem). In *Was ist Politik?* (1993), Arendt discusses the progressing desertification in our world and sees it in the "desert psychology" that tells us that something is wrong with us (Arendt 1993, 181). She points out that we do not acknowledge the fact that we cannot live in desert conditions and, for that reason, have lost our ability to judge. The fact that something is wrong with us under these conditions at least shows that we are still human, according to Arendt. Fortunately, there are oases in the desert, which are identified by Arendt as areas that are independent of political conditions, for something has gone wrong with politics and thus, with us (183). These areas are the places of artists, philosophers, lovers, and friends; they are life-giving sources that enable us to live in the desert, without reconciling us with it (ibid.).

As Arendt suggests, we need to keep sharpening our ability to think and thus to judge, both in a military and in a civilian context, by taking the plurality of perspectives into account. Sharpening her ability to think is what Arendt did, Young Bruehl tells us, and she quotes Arendt, saying in her thick German accent: "Vell, Vell, und from the other side... und listen, look at it this way..." (Young Bruehl 2007, 19). It is the ongoing wind of thought that prevents us from losing hope in the possibility for action and thus for change.

Notes

1   Parts of this section are based on Verweij 2004.

2   The Latin *"furere"* means rage, rant, being possessed.

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At Home in the World.[1]
Hannah Arendt's Transposition of
Saint Augustine's Concept of Love

MARLI HUIJER

What prompted a young, nonreligious woman from a German-Jewish family to write a dissertation on the Christian philosopher and bishop Aurelius Augustine? She did so in the late 1920s, at a time when the Weimar Republic, Germany's first democratic experiment, was coming to an end and National Socialism was emerging.

It is unlikely that the author, Hannah Arendt, acted out of the Christian love for God or the Christian commandment of neighborly love. In view of her later critical remarks on the abstract man of human rights, it is also implausible that she acted out of a love for "man." The most likely reason for interpreting Augustine's concept of love is that she acted out of love for the world in which people live together. Or, who knows, out of love for philosophy.

Her motive remains guesswork, but that doesn't make her dissertation any less special. It tells not only about the thinking of Augustine (354-430) but also about Hannah Arendt (1906-1975). The now world-renowned philosopher and political thinker unknowingly laid the seeds in her dissertation for the ideas she would develop in later books. Not by adopting Augustine's thoughts, but by taking them as an outlet to arrive at her own insights about man's love of the world (*amor mundi*).

What did Arendt learn from Augustine? What did she find behind the incongruities in Augustine's love concept, and how did she develop her own thinking of love for the world in response? To provide an impetus for an answer, I will go through Hannah Arendt's oeuvre with seven-mile boots and give clues as to how, in her book on Augustine's notion of love, she takes the first steps toward her own interpretation of what it is to be at home in the world. By developing, in response to Augustine, her ideas of "new beginnings" (natality), "plurality," and the relationship between past, present, and future, Arendt created a solid and still current foundation for political thought.

Loving With Your Back to the World

When Hannah Arendt defended her dissertation on November 28, 1928, in Heidelberg, the work of the – then almost 1500-year jubilarian – Augustine was at the forefront of attention in German philosophy and theology. Her thesis director Karl Jaspers, her former teacher Martin Heidegger, as well as her friend and fellow student Hans Jonas, all wrote about the work of the Christian Church father (Kurbacher 2018, VIII).

Arendt herself chose to study Augustine's concept of love – although it might be better to speak of "concepts," three ways of understanding love. The first is love as craving (*amor qua appetitus*), the second is love as a relation between Creator and creature, and the third is neighborly love (*dilectio proximi*) (Arendt 1996,² 3-7). Interwoven in the description of these concepts, Arendt reveals the incongruities in Augustine's thought. Examining the first and second love concept, her main question is: how can a person in God's presence, and isolated from all things mundane, at all be interested in his neighbor (Arendt 1996, 7)? The solution Augustine offers is the commandment of a specific form of neighborly love. In the final pages of the book, Arendt cautiously criticizes this commandment. How does she come to this criticism?

In her first analysis, Arendt explains that Augustine's "love as craving" is aimed at a specific object that human beings know and desire but do not have. This object is a worldly thing, a "good" (*bonum*) that we seek for its own sake. Once we have the good, our desire is satisfied and ends. We live happily as long as we possess and hold our good and have no fear of losing it. The ultimate or highest good of this *appetitus* is life itself: we would be most happy if we could fearlessly live forever. It would be a life we cannot lose, unlike life on earth, which is determined by death.

For Augustine, the difference between the craving for a "good" and the craving for the "highest good," *summum bonum*, is similar to the difference between a disordered, wrong love (*cupiditas*) and a well-ordered, right love (*caritas*). The former is a mundane love, the latter an eternity-seeking love. In disordered love, people love the wrong things or in a wrong way. For example, they want to cling to a worldly love object, even though it is not in their power. In well-ordered love, they let go of transient things and strive beyond the temporal to the pinnacle of goodness: God and eternity. By focusing on the highest good, the individual can leap out of time, reach eternity, and forget that he is a mortal man. That is the high-

est self-fulfillment. Man's temporal way of being has to be overcome in order to be, that is, to enjoy God (*Deo frui*).

Here, Arendt points out an incongruity in Augustine's definition of love: eternal life means that the present has become an eternity, it is a present without a future; but the *appetitus* itself is a longing in the present for the future *summum bonum* of eternal life. We are ordered to let go of perishable things and forget the present for the sake of the future. But that means we are no longer connected to things and men in the world, that is, to God's creation.

This last reflection brings Arendt to her second analysis of Augustine's concept of love: love as a relationship between Creator and creature. According to her, Augustine claims that in order to desire happiness, man must know what happiness is. This knowledge, which precedes desire, is stored in our memory. By remembering, we, as human beings, are able to reach back to the distant past, to the origin, and understand who we are in our primal self, as beloved creatures of God. We become aware that eternity, with which our existence begins and ends, is part of our being. By calling past and future into the presence of memory, man concentrates his whole life in the present and loves the eternal in himself and in others. In this movement of memory, the creature of God returns to God, "to Him who was before all things." As God's creature, he leaves the worldly world behind and denies himself in this world. He loves himself only insofar as he is God's creation and hates everything that he has made in himself (Arendt 1996, 91).

Why is Augustine talking about neighborly love, Arendt wonders, after these two analyses, if God's creature is ordered in the *appetitus* to covet the highest good, rather than mundane goods and persons, and, in the second love, is ordered to leave the mundane world behind and deny the self of self and others?

In her third analysis, Arendt explains that Augustine's concept of neighborly love surmounts this incongruity. By understanding neighborly love (*dilectio proximi*) as loving one's neighbor as God does and secondly, as loving one's neighbor as one loves oneself – i.e., as God's creature – neighborly love becomes an extraworldly relationship: I deny the other as well as myself, but love in him the Being who lives in him as his source. This source, the Creator, is similar in every human being. In neighborly love, our "neighbors" are not loved as unique persons, but only as "occasions for love"; they are no more than occasions to love as God loves and to love ourselves and others as God's creatures.

Why then, Arendt asks, is the *dilectio proximi* so important for Augustine, if the creature finds the meaning of its existence only in a complete isolation that denies both itself and the other? Could it be that there is another world, society, community, or context, with a different origin and independent of God, in which the neighbor has a specific relevance? Arendt shows how Augustine introduces the idea of the "earthly city" (*civitas terrena*), which precedes the city of God (*civitas Dei*). In this city or community, all people are kin by virtue of their common descent from Adam, the First Man. The advent of Christ, the new Adam, added a kinship of all people based on the grace of God, which also referred back to the common sinful past. That past created a common faith and life, grounded in Christ. Because of their common share in original sin and the redemption of all through Christ, all people are equal before God.

The commandment of neighborly love seeks to replace the mutual dependence that people experience in living together with mutual love for, or faith in, the Creator. In this love, the believers dissolve the ties that bind them to the earthly city and become "brothers," sharing a community of faith and being on the road to the heavenly city of God. For Augustine, *caritas* does not grow out of the mundane interdependency of people living together, but out of this tie of brotherhood. Thus understood, neighborly love has become an unworldly love.

At the end of the book, Arendt criticizes this detachment from the world that makes mutual dependence, which cannot be chosen, impossible. Our neighbor is already there, Arendt writes before any choices can be made (Arendt 1996, 110-111). The indirectness of neighborly love, that is, loving my neighbor only for the grace of God and not for his own sake, breaks up social relationships. These are made provisional and radically relative by eternity because caritas is only needed in the mundane world. The neighbor as a unique individual with whom we live together before any choice and share the dependence in which all people live with one another is absent from Augustine's vision.

It is fascinating to follow, in the elaboration Arendt gives in her dissertation, the doublings Augustine adds to his thinking about love as he grows older. But it is equally exciting to decipher the developments in Arendt's own efforts to understand the world as a home to human beings – and not as a site of transition. If we look at her later works, it becomes clear that, for her, the highest good is not love for God or eternity, but love for the concrete, man-made and man-inhabited world (*mundus*). In this

world lives not one person to whom all are equal, but a multitude of differ-
ent people, each of which comes into the world as a unique being. Here,
people enter into relationships, not for the sake of God, but because they
live together, creating webs of human relationships and experiencing
mutual dependence.

Arendt's love for the world and concrete temporality in the here and
now are at odds with the Augustinian leap from temporality. Characteris-
tic of her "humanity" then is not the origin of divine creation or the eter-
nity that precedes and transcends creation, nor is it the common descent
from the First Adam and the salvation by Christ as the new Adam, but the
fact that new, unique human beings are continually being born into the
man-made world.

New Beginnings

How does Hannah Arendt elaborate this love of the world in her later work?
What role does Augustine's work play in it? Many years pass before her
next book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, is published in 1951.[3] The book is a
multifaceted examination of the various elements that made the totalitari-
anism of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia possible. Love appears in it
only in a negative sense, as the destruction of love for the world. Arendt
describes how millions of Europeans lost their homes after World War I
because of poverty, unemployment, or because they were deprived of their
nationality and were cast adrift. The uprooting created masses of "atom-
ized" individuals who experienced daily loneliness. The severing of social
ties rendered them worldless and there was no longer an in-between, a
world in which they lived together. This loss of their everyday world made
them susceptible to the propaganda of the totalitarian movements, which
portrayed to them a new, ideological "home": a perfect world glowing on
the horizon. The catastrophes into which the totalitarian movements and
their promises culminated are indescribable. Arendt ends her book pessi-
mistically with the warning that this entirely new form of totalitarian
government is likely to remain with us from now on (Arendt 1960, 478).[4]

But then, Augustine pops up in a quote from *De civitate Dei* (City of
God): *Initium ut esset homo creatus est* – "that a beginning be made man
was created" (479).[5] Arendt understands "being created" not as "God-
made," but as "human creatures" who are newcomers and beginners by

birth. In history, she argues, every end contains a new beginning. She regards this "beginning" the supreme capacity of man. Through this new beginning, we have the freedom to always make new beginnings and do things differently than before (Arendt 1998, 177). No matter how black the pages of European history are, her confidence that people in unity can achieve much good remains intact.

Arendt uses the aforementioned Augustinian quote again in *The Human Condition*, published in 1958, shortly after the launch of the Russian Sputnik that ushered in the arms race between Russia and the United States. In this book, Arendt opts for a seemingly un-Augustinian way of examining the "being" of man. She focuses on the human-inhabited world: what activities are fundamental to what she calls "the human condition"? This "being-in-the-world" refers not to the contemplative life in search of the origin or the future *summum bonum* but to the active life in the present.

In this everyday world in which people live together in plurality, according to Arendt, they are active in three ways: by caring for children, food, and a clean house, by fabricating worldly things such as houses and books, and by speaking to and acting with other people in the public sphere. These three activities, "labor," "work," and "action," constitute the active life, the *vita activa*.

That active life in which we depend on one another, in which we restlessly labor, work, and act, and in which we engage in politics in the public sphere, is reminiscent of the "belonging to the world" that falls under Augustine's *cupiditas*. Augustine commands Christians to reach into the past and yearn for the highest good of the future. In contrast to Augustine, Arendt sees that people live in the present; they care for the world, which they love for the sake of the world itself, and they address the concrete needs of those with whom they share the world in real-time.

At this point, she again cites Augustine's quote in which he says that man was created that there be a beginning. This is not the beginning of the world, but the beginning of "somebody, who is a beginner himself" (Arendt 1998, 177). With the creation of man, as one who takes initiatives, the principle of beginnings, natality, was born – which is the principle of freedom.

Arendt would not be Arendt if she did not give that "beginning" her own personal interpretation. According to her, God is not at the cradle of beginnings, as He was for Augustine – human beings are. Unlike God's one man, from whom all others descend, Arendt's human beings are plural, and they begin – i.e., are born – billions of times. Beginnings are not

about one God-made creature, or about neighbors who are all equal before God because of their common descent (Arendt 1996, 102) but are about a plurality of different people. That we as humans can make a beginning we owe not to divine creation, but to human natality. Arendt's beginning is thus not limited to the first birth. People can make new beginnings throughout their lives or throughout history by telling their diverse stories, bringing together points of view, and taking action with each other in the human world (Arendt 1998, 176).

Natality and plurality are thus, for Arendt, the preeminent conditions of being human. *Natality* is the condition for new initiatives and thus entails the freedom to do things differently. *Plurality* is the basis for political life – since there are many perspectives and points of view, we can arrive at political decisions in conversation.[6]

These two key concepts are ones that Arendt reads in Augustine's *initium*. But this "beginning" leads her not to the Creation, a one-time and unique event according to Augustine, but to the man-made world, in which new and unique people are time and again born who take the initiative to care for the world in which they live together.

Between Past and Future

Augustine's notions of time also return to Arendt throughout her life. For example, the image of man as sandwiched between the eternity preceding and following his life returns in a mutated form in the 1961 collection of essays, *Between Past and Future*. Using Franz Kafka's parable "HE," in which a man stands sandwiched between a force pressing him from behind, from the origin, and a force blocking the way ahead, Arendt shows that man is not only a "beginner," but also someone who breaks in on time. Man punches a hole in time, metaphorically, by placing himself in time, "making a stand against past and future" (Arendt 2006, 10). At the first cry of a newborn, there is suddenly a time before and a time after birth. We would now say: just as with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, in early 2022, there is suddenly a time before and a time after the start of the war. Again and again, this is how people create gaps in time and separate past, present, and future.

In doing so, Arendt seems to stay close to Augustine, who indicated in book XI of his *Confessions* that, although he doesn't know what time is, he

does know that things pass and therefore, there is a past and a future time with the present time in between. The past is no longer there, with Augustine, and the future is not yet there. But thanks to the memory of the past, the view of the present, and the expectation of the future, which dwell in the soul, man can picture what is past, what is happening now, and what will happen in the future (Augustine 1966, book XI ch. 14 and 18).

Yet, here too, there is a clear difference, for whereas, according to Arendt, people break in on time over and over again, according to Augustine, man does so only once, at the time of Creation when God created something completely new – that is, the first human creature (Augustine 1998, book XII). The mankind descending from this creature is part of a chronological history, an ongoing time that cannot be disturbed by secular events or the birth of unique, new human beings (Arendt 2006, 66-67).

There is something more. For Hannah Arendt, the gap men leave in time is the preeminent moment for thinking. Sandwiched between past and future, they make a new beginning by thinking and, subsequently, by speaking and acting together. By giving political shape to their ideas in the here and now, in concert with each other, they can turn the struggle between the forces of the past and the future in new directions (Arendt 2006, 12-14).

In Augustine's perspective, nothing remains of this collaborative political action. It is to this, according to Arendt, "greatest theorist of Christian politics," that Christianity and its "anti-political impulses" transformed into the great political institution that we know it as today, from the fifth century onwards (Arendt 2006, 73; 126-127). Although ecclesiastical and secular power were separated, the authority of the Pope and the Church increased so much that the durability and permanence of political structures were lost.

The trick with which Augustine managed this transformation in *De civitate Dei* (412-426), which he wrote after the fall of Rome, is the distinction he made between the heavenly city of God and the earthly city, where people are equal to one another because they have the same sinful past (Arendt 1996, 100; Augustine 1998, Book XIV, ch. 1). An "unworldly" brotherly love has taken the place of being-attached-to each other, Arendt says. This shared love in faith – or now in an ideology – is diametrically opposed to her love of political life, which takes place between people who together take responsibility for arranging the human world so they can live well together.

Augustine remains a close friend to Hannah Arendt to the very end, when her mind withdraws from the world, without ignoring it, and she devotes herself to her last book, *The Life of the Mind* (Young-Bruehl 2004, 439). He is frequently present in the posthumously published volumes I (*Thinking*) and II (*Willing*) (cf. Arendt 1978a and 1987b). His statement about the "*initium*" also recurs on several occasions. She does, again, correct her old friend here and there. In *Willing*, for example, she notes that if Augustine had taken his idea of man as a "new beginning" to its logical consequence, he would have defined man not as mortal but as "natals." Moreover, he would also have understood freedom of the Will not as the free choice between willing and nilling, but as the freedom to spontaneously make a new beginning (Arendt 1978b, 109).

Totalitarianism wanted to completely erase human spontaneity. But precisely this freedom, Arendt does not fail to emphasize, is the condition for political life.

The World as *Summum Bonum*

Writing a dissertation in philosophy forced Hannah Arendt to delve deeply into the work of Augustine, a philosopher whose thinking was in many ways far removed from hers. In her academic willingness to understand and reflect the other's vision as completely as possible, she experienced how Augustine's work helped her develop her own, in many ways opposing notion of love. Contrary to his *cupiditas* or "wrong love" for the world, she worked out the idea that love for the world is a principal condition for man's being and living. Not vertical love, directed to God and eternity, brings the highest good, *summum bonum*, but a horizontal love for the world where people live and act together. By the term "world" or *mundus* she does not refer to the earth, as she explains in later work, but to "the man-made home erected on earth," (Arendt 1998, 134) that is the man-made world of languages, buildings, tables, institutions, and so on.[7] God, Creation, and eternity are absent in Arendt's love-of-the-world narrative. And yet, in the *initium*, with which Augustine refers to the creation of man, she finds a pearl that shows her the way to what characterizes men and their political action, i.e., natality. *Initium* and natality guide her to a political thinking that starts from the plurality of unique, world-bound, and mutually dependent people, each capable of setting something new

in motion, making promises to each other, and shaping political life together – thus making the world a home for men during their life on earth. This outcome is radically opposed to Augustine's political thinking, in which the Church was the authoritative institution that decided on politics and destroyed the structures for public and political speech between people.

Arendt thus shows the importance of plurality within philosophy: by immersing herself fully in the thinking of a philosopher who thought completely differently, it became possible to find the depths in her thinking.

Notes

1   This contribution is a translated and highly revised version of my preface to Hannah Arendt, *Het liefdesbegrip van Augustinus*. 2022. Utrecht: Ten Have.
2   This is the dissertation's English version of 1966, translated by E.B. Ashton, substantially revised by Arendt herself and edited by J.C. Vecchiarelli and J.C. Scott.
3   In 1933, she finished her book *Rahel Varnhagen: Lebensgeschichte einer deutschen Jüdin aus der Romantik.* It was not published until 1959.
4   This Second Enlarged Edition of 1958 contains two extra chapters "Ideology and Terror" and "Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution."
5   The quote is included in the chapter "Ideology and Terror," added to the second edition. Arendt incorrectly refers to chapter 20 of book XII of *De citate Dei.* The correct reference is chapter 21 of book XII (last sentence). The translation of the quote is Arendt's. In *The Human Condition*, she included the whole sentence and translated it more literally: *[Initium] ergo ut esset, creates est homo, ante quem nullus fuit* – "that there be a beginning, man was created before whom there was nobody" (Arendt 1998, 177).
6   For a more detailed explanation of Arendt's concepts of plurality and natality see: Vasterling 2011, 83-7.
7   See Oliver 2015, Chapter 3 for a further analysis of the relation between earth and world.

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Arendtian Understanding and Feminism

AOIFE MCINERNEY

It is a long-standing criticism of Hannah Arendt that she does not address issues of gender inequality in her work. This failure has been attributed, for one, to the "masculine" tradition in which she was educated. Adrienne Rich famously described Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958) as a "lofty and crippled book," an example of the "tragedy of a female mind nourished on male ideology."[1] Arendt's uncritical theorising of political structures that historically exclude women from political participation has been identified as a flaw in her work, particularly for feminists.[2] Adrienne Rich claims that the very definition of feminism "implies that we recognize fully the inadequacy for us, the distortion, of male-created ideologies, and that we proceed to think, and act, out of that recognition" (Rich 1979, 249). In other words, attention must be paid to the political and social structures and ideologies which preclude or disadvantage one on the basis of sexual identity. Others find valuable resources in Arendt to think through issues of sexual difference and the exclusion of certain groups from politics based on identity, sexual orientation, race and class (Cavarero 1995; Kristeva 2001; Honkasalo 2014; Maslin 2013).[3] However, in spite of her exclusion of explicit gender-based oppression, Arendt's staunch rejection of conformism and attentiveness to the political relevance of experiences of alienation make her an unlikely ally for those who attempt to articulate and understand the diverse nature of political and social oppression.

Arendt's resourcefulness for such discussions stems from the fact that underpinning her work is the fundamental question concerning how one relates to the world; a world which simultaneously shapes and alienates us. Likewise, feminist thinkers begin by acknowledging that often, experiences of alienation stem from the realization that one's experiences and even identity are in some way formed by experiences of systematic oppression. As Sandra Lee Bartky has it, "To apprehend oneself as victim is to be aware of an alien and hostile force outside of oneself which is respon-

sible for the blatantly unjust treatment of women and which enforces a
stifling and oppressive sex-role differentiation" (Bartky 1990, 15). We are
faced, it seems, with the challenge of having to live in a world in which we
often do not recognize ourselves, in which there are forces that thwart
individual actualization through the, often subtle, assumption of gender
roles, economic oppression and even sexual self-objectification. While
Arendt does not address the gendered nature of these structures explic-
itly, what she shares with feminist discourse is a deep recognition of the
existential and political nature of oppression and alienation.

Here I clarify Arendt's concept of understanding and argue for its
potential usefulness for feminist discourse. For Arendt, understanding is
the "unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we
come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at
home in the world" (Arendt 1994, 308). It is a world-orientated activity, a
reflective act that is not totally bound to essentialist definitions of gender
and identity (see Allen 1999, 102-106) and so is advantageous for feminists
for it reduces the traditional prominence given to identity categories.
Efforts for a unified theory of feminism generate considerable difficulties,
to say the least (Ramazanoglu 1985). The advantage of an Arendtian under-
standing is that it is carried out in the absence of any traditional moral
categories or normative standards. It seeks neither to eliminate the par-
ticular in the service of the universal nor does it fall into the trap of relativ-
ization.

Given this, I believe certain experiences which feminism aims to recog-
nize overlap with Arendt's theory. I am not alone in this recognition. In
"Feminism and the Abomination of Violence," Jacqueline Rose, for
instance, utilizes Arendt's notion of thoughtlessness "as offering a new
way of thinking about violence against women in our time" (Rose 2016, 7).
The existentialist concern with a world which one is at once bound to, and
alienated from, is given significant attention in her thought. There are
aspects of our facticity that simultaneously place us and estrange us to the
world, one of them being gender. As such, I discuss Arendt's concept of
understanding in light of how it addresses experiences of alienation from
the world while helping to overcome them. An Arendtian understanding
means to reconcile oneself to the times in which one lives *without* having
to accept them and, as such, aligns with the experiences and goals of femi-
nist theory.

Mass Loneliness and Oppression

It was the phenomenon of totalitarianism which first stirred Arendt to truly reflect on the nature of understanding. In Lisa Disch's words, "The problem of understanding is to find a way to make a spontaneous but principled response to the phenomenon of total domination" (Disch 1993, 666). Understanding, Disch continues, does not rely on experiences of oppression which give people a privileged access to structures of domination (667). Arendt sought to dispel the many misconceptions she perceived about the essence of totalitarianism. These misconceptions, she held, are largely born out of a desire to ease our sense of discomfort. Faced with the unprecedented, knowledge is often obtained by analogy, that is, by comparison to something that has already happened and hence is already known. Such a method emphasises similarity at the expense of originality. But Arendt was adamant that "[t]otalitarian government is unprecedented because it defies comparison" (Arendt 1973, 461). What was new about totalitarianism was what she called "mass loneliness."

Mass loneliness differs from our conventional understanding of what it is to feel lonely. Loneliness is caused by the absence of company and a lack of companionship. Yet, this state is rectifiable for most, for the possibility to seek out others and form a connection ultimately remains. Mass loneliness, however, is different because it eradicates the common world; that is, the shared space between people, and so destroys the potential for human connection. The result is the alienation of large groups of people from the world and from one another. People do not feel they belong anywhere, because, essentially, there is nowhere to which they can belong. There exists no common space that, under normal circumstances, is established between people whenever and wherever they come together; it is the condition of meaninglessness. This absence of meaning should not be taken in the nihilistic sense, rather, we are robbed of meaning when we cease to live in a shared world. In this way, mass loneliness is detrimental to the survival of the world. Arendt's insight is that radical loneliness occurs even in the company of others at times when speech, action and self-actualization are suppressed.

One group who explicitly thematize this experience are feminists, although they are by no means the only ones. To think from a feminist standpoint, one must be aware that: i) one is treated differently due to one's gender or sex; ii) that such treatment is unjust, and; iii) be willing

to change these conditions in the goal of achieving gender equality. This awareness often co-exists with experiences of alienation where one is in tension with both oneself and the world. It is a form of altered world engagement where one is always alive to oppressive experiences and hurtful assumptions, where one is both agent and victim. It places them outside the usual, pre-reflective mode of living where one does not feel at odds with themselves and their environment. Instead, the true meaning of events, even the most mundane, becomes suspect. Reality is no longer an unmediated experience but has become deceptive and even painful. As Bartky puts it:

> "To apprehend myself as victim in a sexist society is to know that there are few places where I can hide, that I can be attacked almost anywhere, at any time, by virtually anyone [...] In short, these are revealed as instruments of oppression or as articulations of a sexist institution. Since many things are not what they seem to be, and since many apparently harmless sorts of things can suddenly exhibit a sinister dimension, social reality is revealed as *deceptive.*" (Bartky 1990, 17)

There is a tension with the world which sees them as inferior, as different, and, if they wish to change this perception, as difficult.

The feminist's experience of time is likewise altered. They are split between the current circumstances which alienate them and are projected towards a future reality in which these circumstances may be different. This temporal split is a central feature of feminist experience. In other words, "The very *meaning* of what the feminist apprehends is illuminated by the light of what ought to be" (Bartky 1990, 14). This experience marks an existential paradox for feminists as one is both alienated from the present and always, in some way, projected towards a future in which circumstances are different; a future in which experiences of oppression and alienation do not occur because the world, in this sense, is changed through action. This notion is reminiscent of Beauvoir's conception of transcendence. In her own terms: "Every subject posits itself as a transcendence concretely, through projects; it accomplishes its freedom only by perpetual surpassing toward other freedoms; there is no other justification for present existence than its expansion toward an indefinitely open future" (Beauvoir 2010, 37).

The danger for Arendt, then, is that one tries to console oneself by retreating from the world as the source of these difficult experiences, a retreating into immanence. Doing so means not only that the structures of oppression go unaddressed and that the world is ultimately unchanged, but it also means one never faces the reality of the situation for what it is. When reality becomes too much to bear, one is thrown either into the comfort of the past or a sense of optimism (or pessimism) about the future. But neither situation serves to better the world nor entails a reconciliation to things as they are now, a necessary step if one wishes to enact change.

The Discomfort of Understanding

The mass phenomena of loneliness and domination are moments in which one is in tension with the world and often with oneself. Only through understanding can one begin a process of reconciliation and eventual change. Reconciliation is not resignation; it does not mean acceptance of circumstances or limitations. Rather, reconciliation is a mode of living in a world which simultaneously relates and alienates us. Arendt's hermeneutic-phenomenological method posits the world as the meaningful context of shared human interests and interaction. The world is essentially plural, multifaceted and intersubjectively guaranteed. Unlike a robust empirical or rational theory of world, phenomenologists maintain our primary access to the world is through "lived experience." Lived experience signifies our pre-reflective understanding of phenomena. It is inherently meaningful, but this meaning is not always immediately clear to us.

   Arendt was someone who remained uniquely aware of the differences in experiences and sought to preserve them as per her theory of action, plurality and natality. Given this, understanding is not an abstract endeavour but one bound to real-world experiences, as such, her approach is a phenomenological one. Her analyses remain bound to the lived experiences that inspire them and remain true to their worldly manifestation. Arendt was all too wary of the ways in which phenomena may be distorted by the various methods used to understand them. Her goal is to understand, rather than to know in an objectivist sense what something is.[4]

   Arendt maintains that truly grasping the meaning of an experience or event entails reflective understanding, which is not the same as subsuming and categorising information. Hence, Arendtian understanding is not

a cognitive endeavour in a strict rationalistic sense. Invoking Kant, she makes a clear distinction between knowing and understanding, that is, between cognition and meaning (Arendt 2003, 163).[5] In other words, understanding is world-oriented, rather than strictly logical. Whereas logical operations proceed according to stringent principles of validity, and by which we arrive at conclusive results, Arendtian understanding is the continuous process through which we "try to be at home in the world." As a consequence of this, understanding never yields definitive conclusions. "Understanding, as distinguished from having correct information and scientific knowledge, is a complicated process which never produces unequivocal results" (Arendt 1994, 307). Thus, while traditional epistemology prioritizes the method by which we come to know something, Arendtian understanding is closer to an existential mode of living. "It is the specifically human way of being alive; for every single person needs to be reconciled to a world into which he was born a stranger, and in which, to the extent of his distinct uniqueness, he always remains a stranger" (308).

We can know what truth is but we must constantly rediscover and establish meaning. This latter task is done in the world and is achieved intersubjectively, rather than in the solitary capacity of logical reasoning. The world-directed nature of understanding means it is a perpetual activity which, from the perspective of knowing, is also futile. Yet, this apparent flaw is actually a strength. The world is ever-changing and continuously presents us with new experiences, new challenges and the different perspectives of others with whom we share and co-constitute the world. The co-constitution of the world is explained by Vasterling in the following:

> "A world must be built and maintained which is partly the work of homo faber, human beings who produce relatively permanent artefacts – from houses and cars to sewage systems, and from art and house decoration to books and movies – and who design and maintain the material (infra)-structure of the world. More important, however, in view of the (survival of the) political, is the immaterial or 'intangible' dimension of world, described by Arendt as the ephemeral and fragile 'web of human relationships', and the events, facts and states of affairs resulting from human action [...]" (Vasterling 2007, 250)

Arendt distinguished between the world, the human artifice and the natural world. Natural phenomena encompass the biological, empirical domain of the human species, whereas the world as human artifice is the intersubjectively socio-historical context in which human life unfolds. The human artifice produces a common world. The world is both the material and immaterial product of human activity (Vasterling 2007, 250). This means that "[i]f someone wants to see and experience the world as it 'really' is, he can do so only by understanding it as something that is shared by many people, lies between them, separates and links them. Showing itself differently to each and comprehensible only to the extent that many people can talk *about* it and exchange their opinions and perspectives with one another, over and against one another" (Arendt 2005, 128). As such, our world constantly changes, and hence, understanding, in order to remain receptive to change, remains unfinished.

   Understanding is what we refuse to do when we do not think for ourselves but rely on convention and dogma. Perhaps nothing is so appealing than the temptation to invoke the wisdom of tradition or the authority of science, especially when confronted with a new situation. But these actions inhibit our ability to respond meaningfully to events and experiences as "[...] they put to sleep our common sense, which is nothing else but our mental organ for perceiving, understanding, and dealing with reality and factuality" (Arendt 1972, 8). They anaesthetize people from reality, especially during moments when we are "denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt" (Arendt 1994, viii).[6] It is often the experiences that make us uncomfortable that require the most understanding and yet are the hardest to reflect on, of which Arendt was well aware.

Conclusion: Reconciliation and Feminism

Recognising the dimensions of alienation – be they through forms of oppression, loneliness or sexual difference – is a deeply uncomfortable and challenging experience for feminist thinkers, as Bartky points out. These experiences can never be known in the same way that we know an equation or a physical object because some things are not accessible through rationalistic means or empiricist methods. Whereas, Arendtian

understanding is the unending task by which we reconcile ourselves to the world in which injustice, violence, racism, sexism and all forms of oppression exist.[7] It entails being ready to comprehend reality as it is and face up to experiences as they are, no matter the difficulty, for only then have we right to hope that things may change. I believe, with some justification, that this facing up to reality, without having to accept it, is an essential experience of feminists. We are torn between an uncomfortable present and a hopeful future. While Arendt's work may noy directly speak of the feminist movement, this does not mean that her thought does not speak to it. It is the challenge to understand what we cannot know which unites Arendt and feminism. It is her insight into experiences and conditions of alienation that makes her useful for those who feel as though they do not belong, that convention has deemed them unconventional, and so, as outsiders.

Despite her more recent popularity, Arendt is largely seen as an outsider regarding the philosophical tradition. Yet, this is also her strength, for it enables her to address what tradition has neglected. Understanding as an act of reconciliation is crucial for those who seek to change the world. According to Arendt, solidarity based on oppression and exclusion is insufficient for change because it excludes the world in favour of the refuge of subjective experience. As a political movement, feminists sometimes struggle to find unifying experiences of oppression and, as a consequence, what political goals the movement should achieve, too, remains fragmentary and often in contention. The upshot of Arendtian understanding (and reconciliation) is the central importance of the world and not a reliance on traditional identity categories (Borren 2013, 198). However, in struggling with experiences of oppression, exclusion and alienation, the worldly structure of these phenomena tends to recede and, in its place, emphasis is often given to defining a one-size-fits-all definition of subjugation. The significance given to unifying definitions of oppression is done in the hope of establishing a common solidarity among victims and so make political change more effective. Yet this exclusive focus would be, in Arendt's eyes, to risk further alienation from the world. The task of reconciliation and the challenge of understanding means constantly reorienting ourselves to reality. I believe that only then can there be any hope for a better future; after all, it is not our experiences we wish to change but the world itself.

Notes

1   Adrienne Rich writes of her experience reading *The Human Condition*: "To read such a book, by a woman of large spirit and great erudition, can be painful, because it embodies the tragedy of a female mind nourished on male ideologies [...] The power of male ideology to possess such a female mind, to disconnect it as it were from the female body which encloses it and which it encloses, is nowhere more striking than in Arendt's lofty and crippled book" (Rich 1979, 255). Mary O'Brien refers to Arendt as "a woman who accepts the normality and even the necessity of male supremacy" (O'Brien 1981, 99-100).

2   Hanna Pitkin criticizes Arendt's distinction between public and private space because of a normative gender implication: "Thus, it seems that for Arendt, because political action cannot solve economic problems, and because misery can become active only in destructive ways, it is best for the poor and the laborers to be kept out of the public sphere. Like women, they belong in the household, with concerns of the body" (Pitkin 1981, 335).

3   Adriana Cavarero praises Arendt's inversion of the "patriarchal tradition" which has prioritized the concept of death and mortality, while Arendt places the notion of birth and natality at the centre of her philosophy (Cavarero 1995, 6-7).

4   For an elaboration of understanding's relation to knowledge and common sense, see Borren 2013.

5   Here, meaning does not primarily refer to the meaning of words in a linguistic sense. As Veronica Vasterling writes, "[w]hereas meaning as sense making refers to the cognitive ability of comprehending the meaning of the words uttered, meaning as meaningfulness refers to the existential effort of trying to understand the world one inhabits" (Vasterling 2019, 14).

6   Also cited in Vasterling 2011, 510.

7   I recognize the difficulty of using blanket statements to try and convey what are undoubtedly multifaceted and uniquely individual experiences of oppression. I do not wish to deny or suppress this fact, however, for our purposes here, I follow Caroline Ramazanoglu's understanding of oppression to mean "[...] the various ways in which men have been seen to dominate women, and in which social structural arrangements have been seen to favour men over women." Furthermore, "oppression," she acknowledges, "is not wholly satisfactory as a term, but it is useful as a single concept which conveys the political impact of recent feminist thought" (Ramazanoglu 1989, 21).

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Reconsidering the Political

From the Politics of Compassion to Imagination: Hannah Arendt on Collectivized Affect

MARIEKE BORREN

The last decades have seen a so-called "affective turn" in feminist theory, democratic theory, and humanities and social science disciplines more widely.[1] Scholarship on political affect or emotion[2] – both the prosocial ("positive") and antagonistic ("negative") ones[3] – has proliferated in various schools of thought, from continental feminist theory, Spinozist-Deleuzian cultural studies, and phenomenology (Szanto and Landweer 2020), to analytic moral theory (Nussbaum 2015).[4] Underlying this turn to affect is the desire to correct for the alleged excessive rationalism in (neo-Kantian) liberal moral and political theory: the overemphasis on the role of reason, discourse, and rational deliberation in understanding political judgment and collective action. Many of these theorists of affect are committed to progressive politics and do not just *analyze* the affective dimensions of collective political action, they also *valorize* the "collectivization" (Szanto 2020) of emotion – most of all, but not exclusively "positive" emotions – as serving emancipatory causes.

Unlike them, Hannah Arendt scrutinized and castigated the political workings of pity, compassion, and love, in its various guises, such as charity, love of mankind, brother/sisterhood and *Ahabath Israel*, love for the Jewish people. She was also very critical about citizens' political action based on vicarious feelings of collective guilt (Arendt 1994, 131-2; 2003, 147-8). Affects obviously play a significant role in personal relationships and intimate friendships, Arendt believed, but they are out of order in the public domain and can even cause a lot of harm. Affects are a poor ground for solidarity, engagement with one's fellow citizens or human beings – who typically are *anonymous* others most of the time – and for political community. This reticence has caused many readers to accuse Arendt of heartlessness.

My aim in this essay is to discuss Arendt's critical exposition of the role of "positive" affect in public affairs, more particularly compassion.[5] Also, I aim to demonstrate that this criticism does not follow from rationalism, nor, reversely, does it lead to it. Instead of loving or pitying human beings or the Other – *amor homines* – Arendt advocates a much cooler and distant care for the *world – amor mundi*.

My argument proceeds in three steps. First, I discuss Arendt's arguments for distrusting compassion in the public sphere, especially when it comes to refugees and the poor and low-skilled workers. In the process, I hope to clarify as much what her criticism does *not* as what it *does* entail. This distrust has caused many readers to accuse Arendt of heartlessness. In response, I want to show that Arendt's reticence does not stem from a commitment to *Realpolitik*, nor from contempt for socially weak groups. Instead of compassion, and empathy, Arendt advocates the kind of *representative thinking* that appeals to imagining the possible points of view of others. In the final section, I evaluate the timeliness of Arendt's criticism of the politics of compassion in the context of the so-called "refugee crises" in Europe, on the one hand, and the upsurge of right-wing populism, on the other.

The Politics of Compassion

Nowhere has Arendt set forth her reservations about the politics of compassion as sharply as in her essay, "The Social Question" (1963). The "social question," or poverty, was key to the French Revolution. The urban proletariat and the poor peasantry who, from 1789, revolted against the privileges and power of the nobility, feudal landlords, clergy, and the absolute monarch, thus bringing the *ancien régime* to an end, demanded bread above all else, i.e., the immediate relief of their misery. The revolution, as is well known, resulted in the bloody Terror of the Jacobins, led by Robespierre. These political activists proclaimed themselves the representatives of the suffering masses in the newly established *Assemblée Nationale*. The politics of compassion that Robespierre advocated involved the revolutionaries' readiness – themselves not belonging to the poor at all – to identify their personal interest with the will of the people, *les misérables*. Here, virtue was understood as selflessness, the ability to lose oneself in the suffering of others. Those within its own ranks who failed to fulfill this

duty were unceremoniously condemned to the guillotine, just like the "enemies of the Revolution," alleged or not. "Unity and Indivisibility of the Republic. Liberty, Equality and Fraternity – or Death," read the text on one of the banners of Jacobin activists.

The main source of inspiration for Robespierre's "terror of virtue" was Rousseau's political philosophy. Against absolutism, Rousseau declared the people rather than the monarch sovereign. In a just political community, every person gives up their short-sighted self-interest in favor of the common good. The political community results from the workings of affect, in particular, "com-passion" (literally, the capacity to "suffer-with" others) and "em-pathy" ("feeling-into"). Rousseau considered people's "innate aversion to see others suffer" a felicitous remnant of their affects in the state of nature, before they became corrupted by modern society (Rousseau 1984, 99).

According to Arendt, the Terror made it clear that violence is not an unfortunate side effect, but the necessary consequence of the Rousseauian politics of compassion. Like all affects, Arendt argues, compassion is by nature "speechless" and inarticulate, because it arises immediately and spontaneously when one sees a fellow human being – and often also other animals, particularly mammals – suffer. So far, Rousseau is right, according to Arendt. Unlike Rousseau, however, Arendt believes that compassion does not provide a proper foundation for political action, judgment, and community. Even the SS officer Adolf Eichmann may not have been lacking in compassion; at least that's what he tried to make it look like in an interview he gave to the Dutch SS officer Willem Sassen after the War. In it, Eichmann says, among other things, that he could not bear the sight of corpses and he was "deeply affected" by a visit to a concentration camp.[6] Eichmann may indeed not have been a stranger to compassion, but this did not prevent him from acting as he did.

Compassion, like love, does not care about the formation of judgments in the conversation between citizens "in which someone talks to someone else *about* something that is of interest to both" (Arendt 1963, 86). That "something" Arendt calls the *world*, which consists of man-made things (material objects and artifacts, including institutions and laws) on the one hand, and the immaterial world of shared meanings and stories on the other. Speaking about the world in the presence of others is precisely the stuff of political action, according to Arendt. Seeing others suffer is felt as an incentive to act immediately, without the intervention and mediation

of political or legal institutions, or the often tedious and lengthy process of discussion, persuasion, and negotiation. It is no coincidence that Rousseau, in his *Social Contract* (1762), famously discouraged citizens from engaging in conversations about public matters (Book II, chapter III). This immediacy, Arendt warns, easily leads to violence. This is further reinforced by Rousseau's representations of the political community as an organic unit, literally a "body politic." Compassion leads to homogenization as soon as it enters the public sphere, Arendt believes, because human suffering, with hunger as the clearest example, is uniform to a great extent. "The cry for bread will always be uttered with one voice. Insofar as we all need bread, we are indeed all the same, and may as well unite into one body" (Arendt 1963, 94).

Collectivized compassion may lead to fusion on different levels. First, it tends to lump together those who suffer into a seemingly amorphous mass of misery. Also, in Rousseauian politics, compassion is supposed to unite the elite with this suffering mass, in a grand gesture of solidarity to restore the supposedly authentic and natural bond that society would have lost. And finally, this derivative suffering supposedly unites the (privileged) activists who claim to represent the masses, amongst *themselves*. Any diversity and individuality of citizens – plurality – is thus suppressed.

According to Arendt, the collectivization of compassion is also key to understanding the violent course of successor revolutions, after 1789, that centered on the "social question," such as several communist revolutions in the 20th century. Earlier, in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Arendt had warned against the dangers of a compassion-driven course of action in the public domain, considering the plight of the stateless in Europe during the interwar period. After the First World War, millions of former citizens became refugees as a result of the break-up of multinational and multi-ethnic states in Europe, such as the Habsburg Dual Monarchy, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia. The states subsequently brought into existence by peace treaties, such as Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, were created after the model of the nation-state, that is, based on ethnic and cultural homogeneity. Millions of people began to drift: Belarusians, Greeks, Armenians, Bulgarians, Germans, Hungarians, and Romanians. Arendt keenly demonstrated that these displaced persons were forced to leave their country, but in fact, had nowhere and no one to go to and turned stateless as a consequence.

The stateless refugee is disenfranchised and homeless. By being thrown back onto their "natural givenness" (Arendt 1958a, 302), according to Arendt, such a person lacks what makes one properly human, namely a person with the ability to speak and act with others in a common world. Refugees, asylum seekers, and illegal immigrants writes Arendt, are indeed still human, in fact: they are "nothing but" human (300) – a condition which, however, is of no use in our world if one does not dispose of the right papers. Being pitied does not mean that the disenfranchised is recognized as a democratic actor and citizen with a legal personality. "Charity is no right. Charity should come after justice is done [...] To throw [stateless persons] into the lap of charity organizations meant practically: they are completely rightless. [They have] no right to live in the sense [of] no business to be on the earth" (Arendt 1955, 1). Suffering often prompts exactly the opposite of compassion: hatred, resentment, or mysophobia. "It seems that a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man" (Arendt 1958a, 299-300). Compassion is a volatile emotion. The suffering body, in its "abstract nakedness" (299), can just as well evoke disgust as compassion.

Arendt's point here is not so much to expose compassion as hypocritical or insincere, for even sincere and truly well-intended compassion can easily lead to the problems mentioned. Rather, she argues that collectivized compassion leads to over-engagement with others, because "pity abolishes the distance, the worldly space between people where political matters... are located" (Arendt 1963, 86). And it is precisely the distance between citizens – their radical plurality– that allows for a public space and political community to come into existence.

Arendt's predilection for distance is hard for many readers to digest and has earned her the reputation of a cold and elitist intellectual. Yet, unlike the Nietzschean aristocratic pathos of distance, the Arendtian distance does not express the superiority of a strong Lord over the weak. On the contrary, for Arendt, politics has nothing to do with the rule of the few over the many but arises only in the horizontal relationship between very different but equal citizens, nor is it fueled by a commitment to Hobbesian power politics based on well-understood self-interest. Arendt sensitizes us to the fact that engagement presupposes distance. I call this the "paradox of distance and engagement." This paradox is most strongly expressed in Arendt's phenomenological conception of the public and

shared world as *inter-esse*, the space between people "which simultane-
ously relates and separates them" (Arendt 1958b, 52). The common public
world is like a table that gathers people, while simultaneously keeping
them apart, as everyone sees the table from a different perspective as a
principle. What this metaphor also tries to express is that not people, but
the world – the table – is at the center of the public domain. "Politics is
concerned with the world as such and not with those who live in it"
(Arendt 1961, 200). The fact that citizens do not relate to each other
directly, but indirectly, mediated through the world – an issue, an event,
an institution – obviates over-engagement and emotional fusion and
ensures that a public space can arise in which plurality flourishes.

Institutions, including legal ones, play an important role in this medi-
ation. For example, laws and the constitution appeal to standards that are
outside of people, but which they nevertheless share with each other.
Amor mundi, the love or care for the world which Arendt advocates, makes
human coexistence possible by providing relative stability and a shared
framework of meaning; it is a much cooler love than *amor hominis*: com-
passion or charity.[7]

Imagination and Representative Thinking

Even though Arendt is cautious to embrace the value of affect in political
action, she *does* believe that compassion – or other prosocial emotions,
such as love or enthusiasm, or even antagonistic emotions like outrage,
for that matter – can and may even need to play a role in spurring people
to collective action – such as the struggle for civil rights by disenfran-
chised groups – in the first place. Gut feelings can give rise to sound moral
and political judgments. Arendt speaks not so much of affect or feelings,
but of "taste." Taste immediately discriminates because a thing or event
evokes pleasure or displeasure, enthusiasm or aversion, etc. However, a
taste sensation is only a start, and thus no sufficient condition for sound
political and moral judgments. After all, taste is the most subjective and
partisan of all the senses. Taste judgments are hardly communicable:
"there is no accounting for taste," as the saying goes. Judging well is hard
work, not simply giving free rein to sentiments, preferences, and preju-
dices. Imagination and critical thinking play a crucial role in this.

Imagination means trying to put oneself mentally in the possible position of others while knowing one is in fact not there and to imagine how the world appears to them. It means that one is, as it were, "visiting" the perspectives of others that are often fundamentally different from one's own. No one can ever know for sure how others "really" see the world. It therefore urges people to tell stories. Storytelling is an experimental practice as it always transcends the given, the facts, and forges them into something meaningful. This is why it is not so much a matter of comparing one's own judgment with the *actual* judgments of others but with their pluralistic *possible* judgments. Nor does it mean that one necessarily adopts the point of view of others; one does not put one's own judgment out of order.

 Political judgment additionally appeals to a faculty that is opposed to the imagination that takes account of others, namely critical reflection. Criticism means thinking for oneself, independent from what others think or may think. Political judgments are "matter of fact," that is, they are concerned with a particular cause, namely the state of the world that people share with each other and that lies *between* them. That world and not so much people, are at the center of judgment. Therefore, it may seem insensitive, blunt, or arrogant. Yet, unlike compassion, representative thinking does justice to the paradox of distance and engagement, because it does not lead to fusion with the – assumed – affects of others.[8]

Timeliness

Above, I called attention to the case of Eichmann to illustrate the argument that compassion is unfit for grounding political action and judgment. We may now see that his crimes resulted not from a lack of compassion or empathy – which he, in fact, disposed of – but, rather, from a lack of imagination and representative thinking. As Vasterling writes: "[T]his lack of imagination, and in particular, the inability to see the world from the perspective of others, allowed Eichmann to carry out, over the course of several years, the worst imaginable crimes" (Borren and Vasterling 2022).

 A first example of the continuing relevance of Arendt's critique of the politics of compassion is the situation of refugees and migrants in our time, as has been argued by the American-Turkish political philosopher Ayten Gündoğdu. In her book *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights* (2015), Gün-

doğdu argues that Arendt's reflections on statelessness from 1951 have unfortunately not lost their validity. Although our so-called "era of human rights" has since arrived, large groups of people still have an extremely precarious legal position. For example, refugees and illegal immigrants have great difficulty claiming the rights they may formally have, such as the right to legal aid and to appeal against detention or deportation. There is a tension – or sometimes outright contradiction – between human rights and the institutions that are responsible for guaranteeing and enforcing these rights. The precarious legal position of refugees, asylum seekers, and illegal immigrants is partly the result of national (and EU) legislation that tries to restrain international law.

One of Gündoğdu's strongest arguments is that the precarious legal position of marginalized groups is not only the result of strictly legal mechanisms. The most important example is humanitarianism, an approach to human rights based on compassion and administrative management. Humanitarianism reduces human rights issues to problems of suffering bodies and thus risks turning refugees into passive and speechless victims who depend on the volatile affects of others, such as generosity and charity, or into objects of humanitarian administration and technocracy. Human rights conceptions are thus limited to the basic physical needs – "bed, bath, bread" – inherent in our "naked humanity." Refugees are often seen as little more than members of a homogeneous mass of suffering bodies, such as Robespierre's *misérables,* in the case of Europe literally a (Mediterranean) sea of suffering. People who are "no more than human beings" lose their human dignity – in the eyes of others, but also for themselves. As such, compassion can promote rightlessness, despite good intentions.

Arendt's critical exposition of the politics of compassion contains a warning not only for institutions such as governments, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and human rights courts but also for activists and concerned citizens who want to help refugees and migrants. While part of the European population sees refugees merely as a threat to "our" prosperity and security, another part sees them mainly as victims – not only of foreign aggression, governments that perpetrate violence against their own populations, or of terrorist groups such as IS, but also of geopolitical relations and harsh Western countries – and believes they deserve our hospitality.

Compassion, as mentioned, is volatile and usually has a natural ending, for instance, the moment one realizes that it is impossible to carry the suffering of the whole world on one's shoulders, or that it is sometimes difficult enough to keep one's own daily life on track. Also, when some refugee turns out not to be helpless and destitute, compassion can cause a backlash. Compassion can easily slide into distrust and even hostility, as with the lady I recently heard cry out indignantly that "all those Syrian refugees carry the latest model iPhones." Refugees are often seen as piteous, and vice versa: anyone who is not poor, hopeless, or uneducated is not a *real* refugee. Favors are not rights, however, not even if they come from the goodness of the heart. The fact that current Ukrainian refugees are met with much more compassionate affects among the European citizenry does not alter the fact that, in due time, they will need more than mere favors and charity. A few weeks after the first Ukrainian refugees arrived in other European countries, several who were accommodated by private citizens were already reported to be sent off to public housing projects for supposedly being "too demanding."

A second example shows yet another dubious aspect of the politics of compassion: the fact that it presupposes that we can feel the pain of others. That is rather presumptuous and people often turn out to be wrong. Since the recent revival and victories of (far) right-wing populist and nationalist movements in Europe, the UK, and the US, the highly educated, left-liberal elites have taken to search their own consciences: "we" have not taken the grievances of the mostly low-skilled white voters for Trump/Wilders/Le Pen/Brexit/the AfD seriously enough. This self-criticism is not only paralyzing but often comes down to thinly veiled arrogance. Left-liberal elites study the proverbial "angry white man" just like zoo visitors watch monkeys or scientists investigate their research material, driven by the belief to know exactly what motivates these "Others." For example, blatantly hateful or otherwise harmful prejudices against non-white people, refugees, women, and Jews are framed as "actually" expressing the pain of the so-called "losers of globalization"; a pain that merely receives a destructive translation. Additionally, like the politics of collective guilt, collective self-criticism centers more on care for the self than care for the world. By looking mainly at *themselves*, liberal elites ignore the question of what the common *world* needs right now.

What does it mean to live in a common world? In Arendt's analysis of this issue, humanity has become increasingly integrated through pro-

cesses of globalization in the course of the twentieth century. That means not only that global flows of capital and people have soared but also that risks and responsibilities have become globalized. Issues such as refugee flows, labor migration, pandemics, food and energy security, the availability and reach of weapons of mass destruction, and, especially, climate change transcend the boundaries of the nation-state and seem to have made it anachronistic, while, at the same time, nation-states defend their sovereignty with increasing fervor and aggression. The increasing securitization of borders, the global upsurge of walls, Brexit, and the rise of populist and nationalist movements in Europe, the UK, and the US, are symptoms of this. Moreover, thanks to the new media, we know more about human rights violations everywhere in the world than ever before. Humanity is above all united by "negative solidarity": we are all in the same boat. This presents us with enormous new responsibilities, but we hardly have any idea what to do with it. Arendt writes in this regard: "[The] idea of humanity, when purged of all sentimentality, has the very serious consequence that, in one form or another, men must assume responsibility for all crimes committed by men [...] It becomes daily clearer how great a burden mankind is for man" (Arendt 1994, 131).

Representative thinking requires us to make present to ourselves a hypothetical view of the position of others and to imagine the world we would like to live in, knowing that we must share it with others with whom we often fundamentally disagree. The perspective on the world that right-wing populists in Europe, the UK, and the US express excludes large groups of people, such as refugees and Muslims, and proves to be anything but pluralistic. The question to be asked to their constituencies is whether excluding others will really lend them a decent paid job, good and affordable housing, education, and care. Their legitimate concerns point to the looming neoliberal superfluousness common to many citizens in Europe, the UK, and the US (not just angry white men).

Perhaps it is precisely the aforementioned negative solidarity, and not the sentimental and misguided identification of self-proclaimed elites with alleged losers, that offers modest clues to the possibility of occasionally talking to one another across dividing lines between "us" and "them." For, the power of citizens consists in people with different perspectives acting together with a view to the world they share, not in "us" "feeling-with" the pain of the alleged losers of neoliberal globalization.

In conclusion, affect theorists can learn from Arendt that compassion is a bad counselor in *political* affairs. Arendt's criticism does not stem from the often-heard reproach that the elite's compassion with the marginalized and charity is hypocritical, or from a commitment to *Realpolitik*, nor from the contempt for socially weak groups or anti-democratic feelings. Her concern is that over-engagement with the emotions of others robs public issues of their worldly quality. Imagination, representative thinking, and care for the world are Arendtian alternatives for the politics of compassion. As Arendtian representative thinking appeals to the aesthetic faculty of imagination, it avoids the rationalist bias of much neo-Kantian thought on moral and political judgment that affect theorists also seek to challenge.

Notes

1   For an overview of the literature that enacted the affective turn, see Gregg and Seigworth 2010.

2   "Emotions," "feelings," "affects," and "passions" are each of them translations of the ancient Greek "*pathos*." Henceforth, I will use "affect."

3   I borrow these notions from the research project Antagonistic Political Emotion, Center for Subjectivity Research, University of Copenhagen, Denmark.

4   For a critical reading of Nussbaum's earlier work on the moral and political value of emotions and the cognitive theory of emotion, see Vasterling 2007a.

5   Arendt does not differentiate between "compassion" and "pity" and uses the two interchangeably, perhaps because in German, both translate as "*Mitleit*" (also see the Dutch "*medelijden*").

6   The so-called "Sassen Tapes," recorded 1955-1956, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lRflMywj7mQ (translation mine). Stangneth 2014 contains excerpts from transcripts of the Sassen Tapes.

7   On "care for the world" as the proto-normative commitment that informs Arendt's work, see Borren 2023.

8   My reading of Arendt's thought on judgment, imagination, its critical and representative moments, and on storytelling is deeply shaped by Veronica Vasterling's work and her distinctly hermeneutic-phenomenological reading of Arendt's thought on judgment (especially Vasterling 2007b) and on storytelling (especially Vasterling 2007a).

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From *Animal Laborans* to *Animal Agora*: Hannah Arendt and the Political Turn in Animal Ethics

CRIS VAN DER HOEK

The relevance of Hannah Arendt's (1906-1975) work endures to this day. In contemporary interpretations, her work continues to be read and re-read, not only in its significance for political philosophy but also for the contribution it continues to make to ecological thinking. As we will see later, this is precisely what Vasterling does in her article, "The Human-Animal Distinction in Relation to World and Plurality" (Vasterling 2021).

Already in *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt describes *avant la lettre* that which we have come to understand today as the Anthropocene: "Human beings have begun to act into nature" (Arendt 1958, 231). That is to say, we have started to create natural processes that would have never come into existence without human intervention, the outcomes of which are unpredictable (see also Belcher and Schmidt 2021). As Arendt later states in *Between Past and Future*: "We have begun to act into nature as we used to act into history" (Arendt 1968, 58). In response to these observations, ecological readings of Arendt's work tend to focus, amongst others, on how the Earth, nature, and the world relate to one another.

At the time of writing, pressing global concern for the sustainability of our planet has become more prominent. This has led to arguments in favor of granting rights to nature – not only to animals but also to forests and rivers – in the fight against destruction and pollution. Nature here comes to be seen as a subject with an intrinsic value that can be represented in court (amongst others, see the United Nations' Harmony in Nature network). A growing awareness of the interconnectedness of human and non-human nature, of culture and nature, and the recognition that plants and animals, rather than passive beings, are entities that communicate with one another and the environment in myriad different ways, also forces humans to listen to the voices of other living beings.

According to many animal activists and eco-philosophers, granting animals so-called "negative rights," such as the right not to be mistreated

or abused, is an important step, yet one that ultimately does not go far enough (Meijer 2019). How might animals determine how they want to live *for themselves*? Moreover, considering the myriad possible relationships we can have with animals, how might we shape our relationships with animals in new ways? As Donna Haraway states in response to our living with dogs: we live with them "in the flesh" (Haraway 2003). According to various sources, dogs and humans have lived together for 15,000 years; even their immune systems are a product of co-evolution. So the question for Meijer and others is: how can animals gain an actual political voice? In their book, *Zoopolis* (2011), Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka argue not only for animal rights but also for animal citizenship.

In this contribution, I ask whether Arendt's political-philosophical thinking can be a source of inspiration for the so-called "political turn" in animal ethics advocated by many animal activists and eco-philosophers. At first sight, such inspiration is not at all evident. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt states explicitly that political action is the sole preserve of human beings, as the ability to act is explicitly related to speaking in the presence of other people – something that also has the potential to reveal mutual differences. Implicitly, Arendt endorses Aristotle's view that because animals cannot speak, they are unable to act politically. For Aristotle, humans alone are political animals, because they have language. The sound of a voice is, fundamentally, an expression of pain or pleasure, and therefore all living beings have a voice. Language is, according to Aristotle, intended to express that which is either just or unjust – concepts of which animals have no understanding.

Importantly, animals have now been shown to communicate in much more complex ways than was assumed at the time of Aristotle. Modern technology enables us to analyze sounds – such as differences in frequency and pitch – in ways that were previously inconceivable, and the same is true for the analysis of complex scent trails and body movements (Haraway 2008; Meijer 2019, 2020; Dufourcq 2021). Animals give meaning to each other, to humans, and to the environment. They play and collaborate with humans, and they can resist against oppressive situations imposed on them. Here you may think of dolphins who attack their trainers, a flock of sheep escaping, Australian magpies attacking cyclists whose race track crosses their breeding grounds, and geese who frequently enter into boundary disputes with humans. Yet, we can also deliberate with animals. A simple example would be the cat who indicates she would like to

go outside, but you do not want to keep opening and closing the door and so, the solution is a cat flap. However, the question remains, does this also make animals potential *political* actors?

Animal Laborans

In *The Human Condition*, the animal is addressed only in relation to the activity of labor. Labor corresponds to the biological process of the human body; it is an activity that is concerned with satisfying the body's basic, recurring needs. In classical antiquity, this activity was outsourced to women and slaves, thus liberating men to occupy the *agora* – the public space. According to Arendt, the slave was rightly referred to as an *animal laborans*: a member of the human species that had no freedom but instead was subject entirely to necessary activities. While humans are mortal beings, unlike animals, they are not merely members of their species. Rather, they can achieve a certain degree of immortality by creating lasting objects and by performing great deeds. Meanwhile, the immortality of animals as members of the species is guaranteed through procreation (see also Rossello 2022).

In the reception of her work, Arendt has been accused of demonstrating a certain contempt towards cyclical caring tasks and reproductive labor. While in the light of her description of the Greek polis, this is understandable, it is also unjustified. Indeed, the activity of labor is considered fundamental to existence: the human condition of labor is, so Arendt writes, *life itself*. In this sense, we are all *animal laborans*. However, according to Arendt, it is violent and unjustified to prevent part of humanity from participating in public life and to force people to live purely within the "private sphere of darkness" (see also van der Hoek 2000). While people have a certain capacity to transcend life processes, vitality can only be maintained if people also take it upon themselves to experience the pain and difficulty – the darkness – of life.

In addition to labor, Arendt distinguishes between two other fundamental activities, namely, work and action. The human condition of working means being in the world (worldliness). Work, as such, is concerned with the creation of lasting objects, from tools and cities to works of art.

All of these things make up our world, both connecting and separating people, in the same way a table both connects and separates those who are seated at it. The world is the public stage upon which humans come to act. And plurality is the condition of this action – there is no such thing as *the* human. Instead, humans appear in the world in both word and deed, in all their diversity. It is here that they engage in a mutual exchange of perspectives on the world. The political realm rises directly out of acting together, the "sharing of words and deeds" (Arendt 1958, 198). And power or empowerment is actualized where words are used "to disclose realities" and deeds are used "to establish relations and create new realities" (200). In this manner, action implies taking initiative.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt argues that the condition of being in the world and the condition of plurality are specifically human. They are, however, placed under increasing pressure in the modern times. Already, since Plato, in an attempt to control the inherent unpredictability of the political realm of human affairs, political matters should be handled in the mode of fabrication – that is as an activity of work. However, this comes at the expense of plurality and spontaneity in the sense of taking initiatives and freedom. Subsequently, the activity of work, of fabricating things, has degenerated into a form of labor – a complicated function of the process of life itself. In other words, as mere *animal laborans*, humans no longer create a sustainable, communal world as a place of encounter but merely produce in order to consume, assisted by increasingly sophisticated technologies. Arendt argues that, as an activity, acting has moved from the political domain to the natural sciences – with unpredictable and irreversible consequences.

Rather than the world, life itself has become the highest good. In this way, Arendt argues that man may be on the point of developing "into that animal species from which, since Darwin, he imagines he has come" (322). She considers such a Darwinian reduction of the human to a biological organism as a great danger. However, perhaps it is also here that we can conceive of an opportunity for these times. As many as a hundred animal species are becoming extinct each day, and humans themselves will, in time, be threatened with extinction. The growing awareness of the physical vulnerability and interdependence of all that lives forces us to take new initiatives. Arendt's later work may serve as inspiration here.

The Value of the Surface

In the first part of *The Life of the Mind, Thinking* (1978), Arendt employs an understanding of the world that not only encompasses artificial objects that have been created by humans but also all natural things. The latter all have in common that "they appear and hence are meant to be seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled, to be perceived by sentient creatures endowed with the appropriate sense organs" (Arendt 1978, 19). These creatures, and hence also animals, are themselves appearances and, therefore, "not just in the world, they are *of the world*, and this precisely because they are subjects and objects – perceiving and being perceived – at the same time" (20). Hence, this world is relational, with a wide variety of perspectives and actors. To live means to be filled with an "urge to self-display." "Living things make their appearance like actors on a stage set for them" (21). Not only does this act of appearing differ between species, but it is also different for each individual creature. Hence, plurality is no longer merely conceived as a human condition. Rather, as Arendt writes, it constitutes the law of the earth itself. It is this point that Vasterling emphasizes in her aforementioned article (Vasterling 2021).

Arendt here both refers to, and is in agreement with, the work of the biologist Adolf Portmann, about whom she spoke in her *Denktagebuch 1950-1973* as early as the 1960s (Arendt 2002). Portmann has argued that what appears in terms of animal life is not there for the sake of the life process, in service of self-preservation, or the preservation of the species, but rather, the opposite is true: it is self-display *"that makes these functions meaningful"* (Arendt 1978, 27, emphasis in original). The enormous diversity of animal and plant life, and the richness of self-display, cannot be explained in terms of Darwinian functionality. That which appears cannot be reduced to some inner process that lurks beneath. This implies that animals in their appearances can no longer be reduced to mere examples of a given species, subject only to the biological process of life. Here, too, there is individuation and distinction.

Arendt subsequently describes the distinction between animals and humans in terms of, respectively, self-display – something that is shared by all living creatures – and self-presentation, which is the sole preserve of humans. Whereas animals can only show themselves without self-reflection, to some extent, humans are able to choose how they want to appear to others. For example, any *display* of anger, as opposed to the anger that

I feel, already contains a reflection of that anger. What becomes manifest, Arendt argues, is never the emotion itself, but rather, what we think about it, and thinking is a linguistic, metaphorical activity. In other words, humans present themselves through words and deeds, and, to some extent, this always involves choice. Thus, self-presentation is not possible without a certain degree of self-consciousness, and this ability is inherent in the reflective nature of mental activities. Surely, this reflection transcends consciousness as such.

Arendt here explicitly invokes Aristotle's idea that distinction and individuation occur through speech. As animals do not possess symbolic language, they express their feelings through unarticulated sounds and thus lack individuation and distinction. Thus, we have now returned to the distinction proposed in *The Human Condition*: plurality is a human condition. In her article, "The Human-Animal Distinction in Relation to World and Plurality," Vasterling rightly points out an inconsistency in Arendt's work: while there is nothing wrong with the distinction between humans and animals in terms of self-presentation and self-display, Arendt's explanation thereof – namely, her appeal to Aristotle – is unjustified. After all, numerous studies have since revealed animals communicate both with each other and with their environment and express themselves in complex ways that far exceed the idea of mere unarticulated sound. Moreover, it has now become evident that also, within a given species, individual differences exist. Hence, self-display as a form of embodied uniqueness not only refers to how the species expresses itself but also encompasses individual differences. One chicken or cow is not the same as the next.

Nevertheless, argues Vasterling, the distinction between self-display and self-presentation is still useful. Indeed, self-presentation involves a deliberate choice of how you want to appear to others. Here, the presentation of the self is the reflective goal, as expressed in life stories and biographies, and such reflection is linked to the mastery of symbolic language. Self-display results in distinction and individuation, without individuation being the preconceived goal. Self-presentation as a choice is only possible *up to a point*, as Arendt argues, precisely because self-display as embodied uniqueness is always inherently part of it.

This statement does not contradict Arendt's claim that plurality is the law of the earth. According to Vasterling, this means that animals should also be able to differentiate and individualize. In my view, the latter argu-

ment is entirely concurrent with the defenders of the political turn in animal ethics. Notably, this political turn is not defensible from the perspective of Arendt's thinking itself, and the topic also resides beyond the scope of Vasterling's article. However, when we place it alongside the thinking of Donna Haraway and Sue Donaldson, for example, it can not only serve to enrich and deepen our thoughts on the encounter between people and animals but also on the appearance of animals in the public space.

Space of Appearance and Encounter Value

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt does not differentiate between self-presentation and self-display, where the space of appearance is concerned. In acting and speaking, humans reveal their unique personal identity. This disclosure of *who* you are, as opposed to *what* you are – the qualities and characteristics that you may have in common with others, and that you can choose to either reveal or conceal – appears in everything you do. It is, however, most clearly visible when people come together with the explicit aim to act in the public sphere. This identity – who you are – does not precede acting and speaking, but only comes into being through acting and speaking; it is performative (see also Van der Hoek 2000). This disclosure "can almost never be achieved as a willful purpose" (Arendt 1958, 179). Rather, it comes into being in relation to others and is incorporated into the network of human relations and narratives. Of course, even though every action has its own motives and purposes, simultaneously, the action itself cannot be reduced to these. Indeed, even the most purposeful action involves a form of self-disclosure that lies beyond one's own control, and hence, the action always has consequences that go beyond the motives and goals of the actor. Moreover, because of factors, such as pre-existing networks and the many conflicting intentions that may also come into play, the action almost never reaches its goal. In other words, intentions and choices do not determine the meaning of the action. Instead, its meaning resides in the network of narratives that together constitute the communal world.

The concept of the world – or, more precisely, that of "reworlding" (Haraway 2003, 2008, 2016) – also plays an important role in the work of Donna Haraway. Hers is a worldliness that also encompasses earth and nature, more strongly and explicitly than for Arendt. Indeed, Haraway describes the world as a "compost pile," in which animals, plants, humans,

technologies, and all other critters interact (Haraway 2016). Her thinking –
often in the form of telling experiences and stories – is intended to also
provide the world with alternatives. The world consists of the interactions
between countless "companion species" in a web of interdependencies and
entanglements. While companion species may make one think primarily
of domesticated animals, the concept is much broader and more heteroge-
neous. Here, you may think of bees, rice, bacteria, etc. The word "compan-
ion" stems from *cum panis,* which literally means "with bread." We are all
companions, in the sense that we are dining companions at the same din-
ner table. Whereas Arendt uses the table as a metaphor for the world, for
Haraway, that table is also explicitly a *dining* table. In this way, Haraway
acknowledges the fact that all living beings must eat and that eating always
necessarily implies killing.

Haraway argues that the existence or identity of any living being is the
result of the interaction and intersection of many forces: "To be one is
always to become with many" (Haraway 2008, 4). The relation between
species as companions is a *becoming with.* The question is: how is this
becoming with a practice of "becoming worldly"? For Haraway, the answer
can be found in adding to Marx's notions of labor and work, value and
exchange value, another important value – that of encounter. This non-re-
productive value is crucial to the making of concrete companions: the
encounters involve "*subjects* of different biological species" (46). The
encounter value implies a reflection on (the rethinking of) instrumental
relationships between human and non-human animals (see also Van der
Hoek 2018). In doing so, Haraway asks for a different form of engagement,
namely: how can instrumental relationships become less painful and freer
for all parties concerned? I think that the encounter value fits well with
Arendt's recognition of the self-disclosure that is inherent in all actions by
human and non-human animals. Precisely in appearing to each other, as
Arendt describes it, the encounter value becomes manifest.

There are many types of relationships of use between human and
non-human animals. For example, you may think of dogs that are charged
with tasks such as guarding, herding livestock, tracking, and therapeutic
support. According to Haraway, these instrumental relationships are not
necessarily the same as a lack of freedom, or violence. There are degrees of
unfreedom and violence. Instead, reworlding, in terms of companion spe-
cies, is about destabilizing hierarchical relationships of use. Precisely here
lies its transformative power.

This transformation requires deliberation, not only *about*, but also *with* animals. Proponents of the political turn in animal ethics want to consider animals as citizens who participate in and shape the world. Among others, this requires that animals are free to make clear their preferences and to improve their relationships and communication with other human and non-human animals. For example, dogs that must always walk on a leash are severely restricted in this respect. In order to improve freedom of movement and thus animal agency, humans should literally grant other animals more space and make infrastructure safer. Consider also the experiments with mobile milking robots to be operated with cows on pasture, allowing cows to decide for themselves when they want to be milked by walking over to the robot. A new relationship between farmers and cows comes into being. They learn from each other and the subjectivities of farmers and cows are being redefined (see Driessen 2014). Beavers, for example, can also help humans avoid the desiccation of the land, as their dams naturally retain water. Geese are often shot or chased off for causing inconvenience – this while, Meijer suggests, it is indeed perfectly possible to deliberate with geese, for example by planting (or by precisely not planting) crops that they find appealing (Meijer 2019, chapter 7).

Sue Donaldson argues in favor of an "animal agora" in which "human and animal co-citizens can engage one another in spontaneous, unpredictable encounters, spaces that they can reshape together" (Donaldson 2020, 713). Here, she imagines the design of a new kind of *commons*: spaces to which all kinds of animals have access, such as parks, squares, and the redesign of the landscape. As Rossello also concludes: "Donaldson's animal agora substantially overlaps with Arendt's idea of a public sphere conceived as a shared world of appearances" (Rossello 2022, 222).

Hence, we can certainly find inspiration in Arendt's political-philosophical thinking to consider the "political turn" in animal ethics. Often, the political participation of animals is legitimized by the idea that animals are very similar to humans, or precisely rejected because they are not. Both perspectives, however, are clearly anthropocentric, and this is something that indeed can never be avoided. Opponents argue, for example, that animals have no self-consciousness or real intentions – something that is also being refuted by new research. However, in Arendt's view, as described above, this issue may in fact not be that relevant. After all, as Arendt has argued in *The Human Condition*, it is not intentions that

determine the meaning of actions. Rather, their meaning resides in the narratives and the new relationships that emerge from them.

Those opposed to the idea of the political agency of animals also argue that animals are only able to articulate their own preferences and interests. They are unable of, what Arendt would call, "representative thinking" (Arendt 1968). For Arendt, this ability to represent the possible and actual positions and perspectives of others is a crucial aspect of political judgment. Precisely by using the power of our imagination, we are able to place our own troubles at a distance and bring closer that which is otherwise far away. Whether or not animals are truly capable of this: here lies an important task for human animals when it comes to the political turn in animal ethics. From the increasing awareness of shared bodily vulnerability – after all, humans are always also *animal laborans* – and the increasing awareness of mutual interdependence, it is imperative that humans broaden their perspectives, learning to listen better to animals and exercise their ability to respond (literally, their response-ability).

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Climate Change as an Existential Threat: Environmental Politics in the Shadow of Nihilism

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Many philosophers, including me, have emphasized that climate change is foremost a political problem, as opposed to being merely a scientific or a technological problem.[1] It is a political problem in the obvious sense that it cannot be solved without profound transformations in political and economic practices and forms of global governance because its proximate and efficient cause is a historically fairly recent socio-economic system or way of life. In this essay, I want to argue that climate change is also a political problem in a deeper, existential, and ontological sense: responding to the climate crisis adequately requires politics that is able to confront and work through the nihilism that this crisis generates. In other words, we must not merely solve the practical task of how to rescue the planet's biosphere from an imminent collapse, but we must also restore and create the values in the light of which such a task will matter to us. I suggest that Veronica Vasterling's reading of Arendt brings to the fore the specific meaning of "politics" at hand here. As Vasterling writes, politics for Arendt is much more than the technological and scientific implementation of policy solutions: it is "not the drafting and execution of policies, nor the achievement of political goals, but, first and foremost, the realization of plurality and freedom in word and deed" (Vasterling 2007a, 86). Considered through Arendtian lens, climate change is a political problem in this sense: it fundamentally threatens our current modes of life, and thus calls for the creation of new meanings which can sustain our world. Hence, environmental politics should not be reduced to pragmatic problem-solving; it should be understood as an existential project of safeguarding the stability and dignity of the common world.

I

Based on the available climate science, there is no doubt that climate change presents an existential threat in the sense of threatening the continued existence of human civilization. The safe limit for atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations established by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 450 ppm, will be reached in less than twenty years at the current emission rates. Many important climate scientists, such as James Hansen, have contended, however, that the safe limit was actually closer to 350 ppm, a level we already overshot in 1988, which is why we are experiencing many of the predicted effects of climate change much earlier than anticipated (Hansen et al., 2008, 229).[2]

An acute awareness of this situation is inevitably starting to weigh heavily on many of us, generating a palpable sense of hopelessness, apathy, and anomie, increasingly referred to by the terms "eco-anxiety" and "climate-anxiety." This is particularly significant among young people, whose future will be impacted the most. According to a recent poll, 71% of American millennials, for example, reported that climate change was negatively affecting their mental health, as well as influencing major life decisions, such as their career paths and decisions to have children (Haaland 2020).[3]

In a recent essay, Wendy Brown notes two striking aspects about politically alert millennials and Gen Z-ers. First, given the pace of the climate crisis, they have no confidence that the planet will remain livable or even last through what is supposed to be their lifetime. Second, socioeconomically, they know they are not going to have the kind of job security and easeful career trajectory their parents and grandparents had. "Consequently, on the one hand, they feel existential terror or extreme fatalism or futility; on the other, they feel the imperative to dedicate every waking hour to plotting their individual course through social, economic, and technological orders changing by the nanosecond... they are frantically trying to curate and secure futures for themselves in what they understand to be end-times" (Brown 2022, 162).

In light of this astute diagnosis, I have found it striking that when Greta Thunberg and the other young organizers for the global school strikes were asked in the media to explain the reasons for their activism

and give advice for other young people anxious and depressed about climate change, their answer almost invariably has been that their climate anxiety and profound sense of loss has been mitigated by their political action – by joining a movement and pushing for systemic change. They have also emphasized the enabling aspects of anxiety in making this possible: confronting the situation and facing the anxiety it causes must be the first step. In this regard, they follow existential philosophers, from Kierkegaard to Heidegger and Sartre, who have insisted that anxiety is something inescapable, and potentially enabling. It is something that needs to be acknowledged, shaped, and ultimately honed into something liberating, not something to hide away or flee from.[4] In other words, political action has been, for them, a way of working through the nihilism generated by the existential threat of the climate crisis. The climate activist Luisa Neubauer, one of the main organizers of the "Fridays for Future" movement in Germany, for example, gives us the following advice: "Allow yourself to be touched by what you're seeing around the world. Feel grief [at what's already been lost] and joy about what's still there... That's an important first step" (Young-Powell 2021).

It seems tempting for many older people to reduce this youth activism to a psychological coping mechanism similar to building a compost – something that might make one feel better, but ultimately changes nothing. I want to argue that such dismissals are misguided, however, for the crucial reason that they overlook the important existential dimensions of politics. I will investigate these dimensions here with the help of Hannah Arendt (and Veronica Vasterling). While Arendt is sometimes read as a critic of the modern technocratic mass society, who was not able to recognize the severity of the environmental crisis in the optimistic and modernizing 1950s (Chakrabarty 2012), I suggest that her work can, nevertheless, contribute some important insights for the question of what a meaningful political response to the climate crisis might look like. Recognizing the existential significance of climate change must ultimately lead us to philosophical questions about the meaning of politics, and, more specifically, about the self-understanding of environmental politics.

II

In *The Human Condition,* Hannah Arendt makes the profound argument
that our sense of reality is dependent on the permanence of our humanly
created world, which is meant to outlast and transcend our individual
lives. For Arendt, the "world" is a distinct concept that refers to the
humanly created world of meaning, as opposed to merely the physical
environment in which we move about. The world is never a given; rather, it
is something that generations of humans must keep building, sustaining,
and caring for. While it cannot exist prior to the arrival of humans and
cannot outlast their extinction, it nevertheless possesses an independent
existence apart from the individuals who built it. As Vasterling contends,
the permanence of the world has two aspects. On an immediate level, the
physical structure of the world must be maintained with the production
of "relatively permanent artifacts – from houses and cars to sewage sys-
tems, and from art and house decoration to books and movies" (Vasterling
2007b, 250). Secondly, and more importantly, the immaterial dimension of
the world must also be maintained, the "'web of human relationships' and
the events, facts, and states of affairs resulting from human action" (250).
Evidently, climate change constitutes a threat to both of these dimensions.

   Arendt's profound insight is that without such independent, durable
objects held in common – whether architecture and infrastructure or
myths and artworks – there would be no stable context for meaningful
human reality.[5] While every individual has a singular and unique perspec-
tive on the world, it is nevertheless strictly nonsensical to speak of one's
own world: "Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects
without changing their identity so that those who are gathered around
them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly
and reliably appear" (Arendt 1998, 57).

   Arendt's concept of the world thus foregrounds the strongly social or
intersubjective character of meaning giving: the assumption of a durable
physical environment and an ongoing social life are the implicit precondi-
tions for our ability to lead meaningful lives (80). She writes: "our trust in
the reality of life and in the reality of the world is not the same. The latter
derives primarily from the permanence and the durability of the world,
which is far superior to that of mortal life. If one knew that the world
would come to an end with or soon after his own death, it would lose all its
reality…" (Arendt 1998, 120). By the world's "reality," I read Arendt to be

referring not to its ontological status, but to its meaning and value. In other words, Arendt suggests that the imminent disappearance of a distinctly human world would destroy people's confidence in the value and intelligibility of their activities. As Samuel Scheffler formulates a similar idea, our conception of a human life fundamentally relies on an implicit understanding that such a life occupies "a place in an ongoing human history, in a temporally extended chain of lives and generations" (Scheffler 2013, 43).

It is not difficult to draw the inference from Arendt's claim to eco-anxiety and to the feelings of meaninglessness, loss, and depression that many young people in particular are reporting. The existential threat of climate change, understood as a credible threat to the survival of human civilization, inevitably morphs into an existential threat in the other, experiential, and philosophical sense that I am discussing here: life begins to drain out of meaning. A philosophical analysis of eco-anxiety brings to view the insight that what ultimately appears to keep nihilism at bay for most ordinary people living in a secular world are historically created and shared communal values and meanings, even if they are all too human. In other words, even if we acknowledge that nihilism reigns supreme today in the sense that gods, as well as all divinely sanctioned values, have fled the world, the shared cultural values and meanings embedded in various traditions that particular communities of humans have created and are committed to upholding, have proven to be stable enough to provide the historical frame of reference for our individual lives. They constitute the "reality" that makes our actions and pursuits appear worthwhile. As Wayne Allen quips, Nietzsche's "Übermensch" have turned out to be mere mortals who have learned to live in the world they themselves have created (Allen 1982, 174).

The problem now is that the durability of these shared cultural values and meanings is fundamentally threatened by the climate crisis. While the world for Arendt specifically designates the world of human artifice, not the natural world, it is clear today that the two are irrevocably interlinked – the former cannot survive without the latter. Whether we fully grasp it yet or not, we are living through a time of civilizational devastation, and this forces us to confront the philosophical problem of nihilism in a new, hyperbolic form.

III

Arendt's emphasis on the durability of the humanly created world is, importantly, tied explicitly to politics, or more precisely, to politics' condition of possibility. The implicit frame of reference for most of our judgments about what matters is essentially constituted by the public realm of politics, which we must necessarily share with others because it "assures us of the reality of the world and of ourselves" (Arendt 1998, 50).[6] Arendt contends that this public sphere of politics can never "be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life-span of mortal men" (55). It is essentially what "we have in common, not only with those who live with us but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after us" (55). In other words, the political realm, and political institutions in particular, must be built with the explicit aim that they transcend my individual life span into past and future alike. Only then can they provide the stable frame of reference capable of supporting a meaningful life for mortal beings.

   Again, it is not difficult to see how this insight has direct and far-reaching consequences for environmental and climate change politics. Recognizing that the meaning of our lives literally depends on the existence of future generations does not necessarily, or in any straight-forward way translate into climate change politics that advances intergenerational climate justice. It is not difficult to draw the conclusion that it should, however. As Scheffler notes, in climate ethics, the reasons we have for attending to the interests of future generations are usually conceptualized as moral obligations or understood as grounded in our responsibilities to our descendants (Scheffler 2013, 77). He suggests that this discourse of obligation and responsibility is ultimately misleading because it reinforces our tendency to think that the salient features of our relations to the future generations are our power over them and their dependence on us. The reasons we have for taking their interests into account would be the moral reasons of obligation, duty, and responsibility, which must override our egoistical concern for ourselves. But we should have reasons of a very different kind – ontological or existential reasons – for attending to the interests of future generations: their survival sustains the meaning of our finite lives. From this perspective, what is salient is not their dependence on us, but our dependence on them.

In addition, the durable world of meaning built by human political communities makes political action possible in the specific sense that Arendt gives this term. For Arendt, "action" refers to the fleeting activity – words and deeds – that makes human events of historical importance possible. While this concept has been widely criticized in political theory for privileging individual glory, masculine heroism, and the extraordinary, I suggest that it nevertheless has two important implications in terms of my question of overcoming the political nihilism generated by the prospect of climate breakdown.

First, political action in the public sphere is existentially important because, for Arendt, it is the privileged means for a person to reveal who they are and thereby, to live an existentially singular or "true" life. Arendt distinguished the "who" from the "what" a person is – the singular, unique self from general descriptions and social roles. She explains: "The moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type of "character"... with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us" (Arendt 1998, 181). The unique self can thus only be enacted, not described. It must be actualized and manifested in actions and decisions witnessed by others in the public realm.

Climate change politics is often criticized for being overtly individualistic: it is too focused on consumer choices and futile exercises in personal expression. As Roy Scranton, for example, laments, it has become "little more than an orgy of democratic emotion, an activist-themed street fair" (as cited in Ghosh 2016, 130). To read Arendt as advocating such individualistic politics by emphasizing the importance of the political realm as a space for exhibiting one's unique individuality would be to profoundly misunderstand her idea, however. The political attitude or ethos that political actors must express, above all, is *amor mundi* – a devoted concern for the world's futurity, not for one's own interests. *Amor mundi* is both a commitment to the world on the part of political actors who acknowledge that the world is entrusted to their care only for a short duration, and it is a promise that they will preserve it so that newcomers following them can be assured of a place in it (Bowen-Moore 1989, 56-7). To act politically is therefore, irreducibly, both to live an existentially singular life and to devote it to something greater than oneself, namely the world shared with others here and now, as well as with the people yet to come.

Second, political action is also existentially important because it is the privileged means of creating new meanings. Arendt claims that the mistake made by political philosophers since Plato has been to ignore the fact that politics is an activity that goes on among plural human beings. As Arendt famously formulates this idea: "men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (Arendt 1998, xii). While the plurality of human beings forms the condition of possibility of politics, paradoxically, this plurality consists of distinct human beings, each of whom has a unique perspective on the world and is capable of acting in the world, thereby starting something new. Importantly, this capacity for action by each unique newcomer ensures that politics is generative of new meanings (324). As Vasterling shows, for Arendt, the new meanings that politics can create are tightly connected to human plurality: "the newness introduced by the second birth of speech and action is the newness of a new, unique individual who, together with other unique individuals, past, present, and future, constitutes human plurality" (Vasterling 2011a, 142).

Arendt uses the somewhat hyperbolic term "miracle" to emphasize this spontaneous and unpredictable capacity of human action to generate new meanings: "action, seen from the viewpoint of the automatic processes which seem to determine the course of the world, looks like a miracle" (Arendt 1998, 246). Because action is the "miracle-working faculty of man," in politics we can expect even the unexpected. "The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws... The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected of him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable" (178). While humans are able to begin something new, they can never completely control or foretell the consequences of their actions. This gives the political realm "its miraculous openness and desperate contingency": new beginnings cannot be ruled out *a priori* even when society seems set on an inexorable course (Canovan in Arendt 1998, xvii).[7]

In sum, Arendt's thought shows that the collective practice of democratic politics is important for staving off nihilism in at least three senses.[8] It is never a predetermined activity, but neither is it nor should it be, a purely instrumental activity. Irrespective of its actual consequences, democratic politics has intrinsic value as an activity that creates meaning. It should therefore be recognized as always potentially constituting an enacted response to nihilism in the straightforward sense that it is a collective practice of meaning-making and world-building: democratic

actors engage together in the project of materially constructing the world – enduring conditions for a meaningful human life. Second, politics is a privileged arena not just for collective meaning-making, but for the creation of new meanings. The radical possibility that the future could be different from the present and, moreover, open to human intervention, is not merely reducible to the psychological attitude or emotion of hope for Arendt but anchored ontologically in her understanding of the political – its sheer contingency and spontaneity. Politics is never a pre-determined system but a distinctively human praxis generative of new and unanticipated meanings and values. That is another important reason why it holds the potential to combat the nihilism shadowing us today. Finally, politics is also existentially important for living a meaningful life: to live a life true to oneself and to express one's dedication for *amor mundi* by living for something greater than oneself are ultimately identical endeavors.

IV

While it is indisputably in the realm of the political that the concrete solutions for climate change mitigation must be found, the political struggles ahead of us also require that the dignity, durability, and meaningfulness of this realm are preserved and protected. Environmental politics should therefore not be reduced merely to questions of technical utility; it should be understood, also, and more profoundly, as a project for safeguarding the possibility of a genuinely pluralistic, democratic, and egalitarian public sphere, which anticipates and includes the concerns of those who come after us and must outlive us. This is the only way that environmental politics can provide a meaningful arena for staving off the nihilism generated by the existential threat of climate change.

A discussion of the concrete forms that such "post-nihilist politics" should take is unfortunately beyond the scope of this short essay. Vasterling highlights Arendt's contention that politics after the "death of God" can only acquire solidity through human plurality. While democracy no longer offers the permanent foundation upon which to base politics that divinely sanctioned monarchy provided, within democratic societies pluralist speech and action, especially in the form of collective story-telling, can now serve a similar founding purpose. As she writes, "stories in all their plural variety have the enormously important function of rendering

the transient and fragile symbolical dimension of the world more solid and real, and of sustaining it as a common public space" (Vasterling 2007b, 251). Wendy Brown suggests that March for Our Lives, Sunrise Movement, Extinction Rebellion, and Black Lives Matter could be seen as manifestations of post-nihilist politics in the United States. What characterizes the participants of these movements is "their wariness, if not outright hostility, toward both capitalism and parliamentary democracy, the one for its failure to sustain either the species life or their individual prospects, the other for its apparent indifference to and incapacity to stem this failure" (Brown 2022, 162). But Brown also sees the rise of these movements as importantly signaling the beginnings of working through nihilism: "the mourning of one kind of meaning and value generation and arriving at another; deliberately deciding what to live for and how to live together; and building a postfoundational democracy *not* 'under God'" (164).

Similarly, I already referred to the Fridays for Future movement, the school strikes that have taken place not only in Europe but around the world. We should recognize the activism of these young people as a crucial attempt to work through nihilism: they are trying to avert the sapping of meaning from the world on the brink of destruction with their courageous attempts, whether successful or not, to safeguard the possibility of a human future. In the process, they are also creating new political meanings by stretching the timespan of politics and by posing the question of what a valid political response to an unprecedented existential threat should look like. In other words, these young activists are not just trying to solve an urgent problem, unparalleled in terms of its difficulty and created for them by others; they are also trying to make sure that we all can continue to live meaningful lives.

Notes

1   See, e.g., Oksala 2016.
2   Scientists also emphasize the nonlinear nature of climate change. The risks associated with it are difficult to assess because of thresholds, tipping points, and irreversibilities. If we overshoot important GHG tipping points for long enough, unstoppable feedback processes will be triggered, such as a melting West Antarctic ice sheet, a thawing Siberian permafrost, and a dieback of the Amazon rainforest. Any of these events alone is predicted to prompt the falling of the dominos: unstoppable feedback processes would accelerate the destruction of the planet so quickly that it would become impossible to control them.

Drought, crop failures, floods, fires, storms, rising seas, fatal heatwaves, and ecosystem collapse would then rapidly start to overwhelm the capacity of states to meet the needs of their citizens, leading to the collapse of their infrastructures, civil unrest, unprecedented migration, and countless deaths.

3 The phenomenon of eco-anxiety or climate anxiety is significant enough that psychotherapists are increasingly providing counselling on how best to manage it and the Internet now provides dozens of sites dedicated to offering advice on how to deal with climate anxiety; see, e.g., Broughton 2019, Beddington 2019, Sarchet 2019.

4 As Kierkegaard famously wrote: "Whoever has learnt to be anxious in the right way, has learnt the ultimate (Kierkegaard 1980, 421). Heidegger described anxiety as an experience in which the familiarity of our life has suddenly been stripped away, forcing us to face the unavoidable questions of what life is about (Heidegger 2010, 172-78).

5 As Lena Zuckerwise writes, this independence is not merely incidental to the objects and meanings produced by humans, but definitive of worldly durability: "Whether craftsmen constructing tools, structures, or other utility items; artists imagining and then creating works of beauty or interest; or intellectuals writing books, generating new meanings, and resurrecting or recreating old ones, worldly tangibles and intangibles possess an independent existence apart from their makers, outlasting the finite lifetimes of mortal humans" (Zuckerwise 2016, 488).

6 Veronica Vasterling artfully emphasizes this link between the prevalence of nihilism in our societies and the decline of real politics in an existential sense. For Arendt, these interconnected phenomena are both explained by the expansion of capitalism, science and technology, and the consequent overexploitation of nature. As Vasterling writes: "Because of the emergence and increasing dominance of capitalist consumer society and the conquest, supported by science and technology, of earthly nature and the universe, strategic and instrumental exploits have all but replaced political action, and, as a consequence, the experience of freedom and plurality has withered and been forgotten" (Vasterling 2007b, 249).

7 Veronica Vasterling defends Arendt's conception of the political dimension of truth against a poststructuralist account which problematizes it. Vasterling shows that human political action is distinctive in that it has the possibility of introducing new things into the world. "Contingency" is the shorthand Arendt uses to name this human characteristic: it refers not only to the fact that historical events do not *need* to happen as they do, the traditional philosophical

opposition to necessity, but also, to the unique human ability to "be new or introduce something new in the world" (Vasterling 2011b, 509). In regards to this matter, Arendt's existentialist framework can be seen as having an advantage over a poststructuralist perspective in which the possibility for new meanings to emerge is far narrower. In a poststructuralist view, new meanings can only be constructed as re-articulations of norms, or subversions of it, which reinvoke the power they resist in their very resisting. For Arendt, such a version of re-articulation would seem insufficient, and appear as a mere "reducing the new to the old and known" (511).

8   Arendt is an existentialist thinker in the crucial sense that she eschews all forms of naturalism, postulating instead a decisive gulf between the world described by natural science and the distinctive political qualities of human existence. It is important to read Arendt's political thought against the background of German existentialism, particularly the thought of her mentors Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers. Lewis Hinchman and Sandra Hinchman contend that Arendt's political thought should be understood as a politicized version of existentialism (Hinchman and Hinchman 1991, 464). She was troubled by the tendencies towards solipsism, intellectual arrogance, and political irresponsibility she detected in existential philosophy and sought to build a conceptual bridge between individual existence and political commitment. Wayne Allen (1982) argues similarly that Arendt's political ideas can only be understood properly if they are subsumed under her existentialism.

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Puppets' Uprising: Passive-Active Ethics Within the Trap of Play

ANNABELLE DUFOURCQ

To Veronica,
who knows how to combine play and revolution,
for all her inspiring literal and symbolic actions

The feminist protest, like any revolt, is essentially a mixture of serious-ness and play. Play is essential because of the position of minorities in a patriarchal regime: they never act on conquered territory and, for this reason, direct action never has the greatest power among the forces present: it cannot but come up against a greater power. Playfulness is important in exchanges between feminists, between feminists and other activists, and in developing tools to challenge the existing order (Frey 2021). It allows us to recognize and confront an unjust and violent situation, without letting ourselves be destroyed by it or by raw anger, which always comes up against incomprehension, defensiveness, and the inertia of the system in place. This playfulness unfolds, for example, in the development of memes of all kinds, the use of accusations as self-descriptions, such as in "killjoy feminism" (Ahmed 2023), or the reappropriation of the label "slut" brought up at protests like the *Marchas de las Putas*. Now, such ironic positions concern serious matters and sometimes we no longer have the desire or the strength to laugh about them. Yet the danger of humor and play is that we cannot get out of it so easily. Minorities must thus confront the social injunction to have a sense of humor and "play the game." The stereotype of the angry, humorless feminist and the infamous term "feminazi" die hard. Further, from an ontological perspective, we must also recognize that play is an essential dimension of existence. So, are we doomed to play even when we would rather not?

This paper takes an ontological and existentialist approach to play to illuminate this practical question. It takes its starting point in an apparent paradox, at least a tension between an ontological and an ethical perspective on play: if we start from the claim – which I will briefly flesh out in the first part of this paper – that play is first and foremost a structure of being, this means that we all play. Whether we want to or not, whether aware of it

or not. We all play, not only in the sense that we are played: indeed, the ambiguity of being obliges us to interpret the world instead of simply discovering what is true and what is not. We also must play roles all the time and are often thrown into situations we did not choose to be in and that we do not completely master (for instance, the role of being a parent, a professor, etc.) but in which we must act and make choices. Yet, play is no longer play when one is forced to play. The ethical and political problem here is the following: if play is an ontological structure, where is the room for maneuver for the subject who wants to challenge the established order? Is it at least *possible* to instigate a breakaway from play within an essentially playful existence, to stand up for serious values, for instance, or to achieve a rebellion that would not be at the same time undermined by ambiguities and counterforces? What are the exact relationships between the play of the world and the activity of individuals? Is it possible and/or valuable not to play? These questions are highly topical, also at a time when play has become a patent and constraining social structure: adaptability, malleability, and distance are encouraged in the covertly highly oppressive society of "coolness" (Baudrillard 1976, 41). When irony undermines everything, every attempt at revolt against this system might be doomed to be re-caught by the latter and turned into a fashionable trend, a logo for an advertisement, pictures on tee-shirts, or badges. Is revolt possible within an ontology of play? This question is exactly, I think, one of the keys to the dispute between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, hence I will devote the last three parts of this paper to their different approaches.

Ontology of Play

The ontological approach of play is quite a widespread stance in contemporary philosophy. I draw my inspiration in this regard from phenomenology and existentialism.

What Husserl's phenomenological approach demonstrates is that the being of beings must account for their ability to appear, their phenomenality. Appearing entails appearance, possible illusion. It is impossible to suppose that there is a solid and positive being of things or persons behind their fluctuating appearance. There cannot even *be* (in the strong sense of a substantial being) an Idea of their essence that would define their nature in a perfectly circumscribed and definitive way. Indeed, such

a solid core of being, or such ideas behind appearances, would be *de jure* accessible to a superior divine spirit but: 1) the world would then be absolutely transparent for such a spirit; 2) namely, it would not be any longer a world (a transcendent diversity of beings that do not merge into a pure and simple unity); 3) even more problematic: the very possibility of our points of view, our existences (made of distance, hesitations, mistakes, misunderstandings, foreignness, and opacity) could not any longer find any explanation. As a result of this *reductio ad absurdum*, it must be deduced that beings are their appearing and appearances.

Thus, Husserl points out that there is no true circle – a perfect circle – in the world, only many round shapes and figures. These shapes certainly point toward the possibility to draw more and more perfect circles and to conceive the geometrical idea of the circle so much so that we can also recognize them as being more or less circular. Yet they are only approximately circular, they "oscillate" and "fluctuate" (*im Schwanken*) (Husserl 1954, 22). They are and are not circles, exactly as we are and are not human.

The being of beings must consist of unfinishedness, relative indeterminacy, and hovering. This Being, that Merleau-Ponty, in agreement with Beauvoir, also calls a fundamental and inescapable ambiguity (Beauvoir 1947; Merleau-Ponty 1945, 18) can be, I think, connected to the ontology of play developed by Gadamer, in which play is first and foremost an anonymous structure, like in the expression "play of light," "the play of the waves" or, "the play of gears or parts of machinery" (Gadamer 1960, 104). "Play" here means an order that is not rigid, though not completely malleable, and that maintains a leeway for different changes and, consequently, launches an indefinite process of to-and-fro movements. Such an oscillation, such a hovering of being, cannot be a displacement from one place to another of a substantial self-identical body.[1] Rather, beings "are" never fully themselves; they point toward other beings (for instance, the round shapes below are and are not circles; each of them points toward other actual or possible round shapes and toward the ideal of the circle). They are outside of themselves.
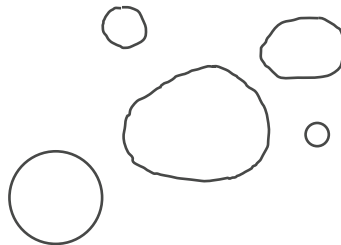
Consequently, the original form of play is to be described as follows: *it plays.* Things are and are not what they seem to be. I have to act in a context and through a body and personal characters that, for a significant part, are beyond my power and my understanding and may always reverse or overthrow my initial project. We are all like Oedipus, Merleau-Ponty argues, and we can always be doing the exact contrary of what we think we are doing (Merleau-Ponty 1947, xxxv). He gives the example of the French supporters of communism before the Second World War who were turned into indirect supporters of Nazi Germany after the German-Soviet Pact in 1939. They "realized that to be a communist is not to play a role one has chosen, but to be caught in a drama where, without knowing it, one receives a different role" (Merleau-Ponty 1960, 31). "It" plays, somehow with us, but, since Being is unfinished, we exist our situation, namely we necessarily enact it and interpret everything.

Hence, I contend, through a cross-referencing of Husserl's, Gadamer's, and Merleau-Ponty's thoughts, that it is ontologically impossible to escape play. But the very concept of play entails that one may stop playing. What is the relationship between ontological play and individual play?

Ontological Play and Individual Play

As shown by Roger Caillois (1958), play always and essentially involves two dimensions: 1) *Paidia* (with a component of *Ilinx*, i.e., vertigo, and a component of *Alea*, i.e., chance); 2) *Ludus* (with *Âgon*, i.e., competition and *Mimicry*, i.e., simulation).
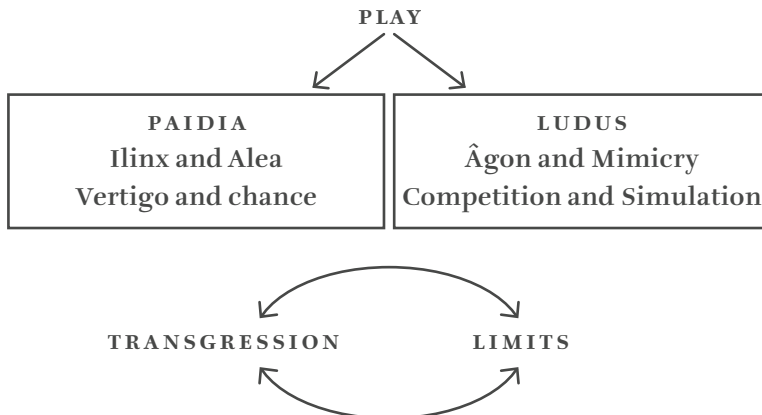
The first dimension, *Paidia*, is predominant in many children's games consisting of scribbling, spinning around, doing somersaults, running madly, and shouting. The second, Ludus, is predominant in games with more fixed rules and requiring the training of some skills. However, the *Paidia/Ludus* distinction is relative. On the one hand, even though vertigo is typical for *Paidia*, still, in *Ludus*, a form of vertigo challenges our capacity for maintaining and restoring order and effectiveness: the game consists of putting oneself in a difficult position and dares us to accomplish difficult tasks or imposes especially complicated and uncomfortable conditions in which one has to accomplish a task. *Ilinx* may always win in games. Similarly, on the other hand, in *Paidia*, our resistance and capacity for maintaining pleasure, minimal coherence with oneself, and motor coordination is challenged by an experience that brings us close to chaos: it is challenged, namely, it is *also* an integral part of play.

As a result, *Paidia* and *Ludus* are present in every form of play and games. Play essentially consists of a dialectic between, on the one hand, if not rules, then a principle of order, of self-control and self-integrity, and, on the other hand, vertigo and chaos. More precisely, play consists of mutual transgressions of vertigo into order and of control into chaos. As such, it is a dynamic and fragile equilibrium. Ontological play also involves those two dimensions, which helps us understand what our status as individuals within ontological play entails exactly.

Being is hovering and beings are ambiguous, yet we are not living in a sheer chaos and our structuration of the world is not merely arbitrary. A transcendent *world* is irrepressibly taking shape, some perceptions recur stubbornly, and individuals come to being and keep existing for a while under certain specific conditions (some consistent structures and combinations of characteristics that persist or recur for a certain amount of time). Ontological play *requires* such temporary dams and canals that protect it from permanent and pure instability: without them, there would not be any play.

Our own limitations as living beings require the formation of a certain relatively stable structure: a peculiar body, that is indeed open to the others, but would not live and remain oneself as a pole for perception and action without a distinction between interiority and exteriority, at least without the preservation of some vital norms (e.g., a certain cellular, tissue and anatomical organization, a regulated temperature, a specific chemical balance) but also the relative self-cohesion of a personal conatus: when

they are not respected, then the individual loses its autonomy, its vitality, it shatters and fades away.

Therefore, we are both always unavoidably involved in ontological play and threatened by play. The boundaries that define my individuality and my autonomy may be what is especially tormented by this or that game. The way some people play or the play of the world may be a violence for me. To be sure, within a playful being, the dams that define individuals are not rigid. However, this ontology also entails that such individual limits possess a certain inertia and, moreover, there is a difference between my modification of these norms and enduring their modifications. Although all is play, it still makes sense to claim that being played can be painful and even destructive: people who may like this or that power or social game and blame some of the involuntary or even voluntary partners for their lack of playfulness use a coarse understanding of the ontology of play to their advantage. When I am in a situation of pain, when I feel exploited and oppressed, being told that life is a game or an adventure or that I should grow a sense of humor is lived as a redoubled violence.

It is essential *for the ontological play* – which requires a challenged order – that I also tend to protect my integrity. Ontological play necessarily involves the possibility for players to call for a break in play.

As a result, it makes sense to speak of an ethics of play centered on individual behaviors, intentions, and choices and focused on the problem of violence. However, a difficulty arises: what is exactly our room for maneuver in this framework? Shall we try to institute islets or blocks of seriousness in a globally playful Being? We certainly may decide not to play and to reinforce dams to a certain extent, but this will not prevent us from keeping playing, at a more profound level. And there is a second difficulty: it is impossible to claim that we may find an absolute point of view outside of the realm of play and from which it would be possible to define *good* and *bad* forms of play. Hence the challenge of devising ethics in the absence of solid ground.

Sartre's Ethics of Play in Being and Nothingness

To start with, I will examine Sartre's first ethical stance – although not his last word: precisely an ethics that could be called an ethics of play, sketched in *Being and Nothingness* (1956). It is tempting, Sartre demonstrates, and always possible to identify oneself with this or that *being*: with

my past, my body, my social status, my belongings, etc. This is what Sartre calls the "spirit of seriousness" (Sartre 1956, 641), which leads to the restriction of our possibilities, but also provides a ground for evaluations, social organization, and, more essentially, for the feeling of being justified. In the realm of seriousness, my goals cease to be arbitrary, I gain a function in a system that transcends me. But, as demonstrated by Beauvoir 1947, the main ethical problem of seriousness is the fact that my desire to *be* provides a ground for oppression. To be sure, oppressors possess the actual power to manipulate the situation we are living in, through institutions, language, official culture vehicles, control of lives and bodies, education, and the media, to define in a rigid and apparently objective way what the rules of a legitimate order and the limits of humanity and inhumanity are. However, as an existent being, I have the capacity of distancing myself from the current structure and imagining alternative social organizations. Oppressive structures are never constraining, they need the oppressed to fool themselves and to take such structures seriously.

The "solution" sketched by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* consists of embracing the playful nature of existence and producing works that explicitly give themselves to the other as the basis for playful resumptions. This is what Sartre conceptualizes as generosity. Books, for instance, essentially call for an activity of creative synthesis and do not absolutely determine it. The author offers her work to the readers and the very reality of the book involves these original readings as its integral part. "Play contrasts with and confronts the spirit of seriousness" (Sartre 1956, 626). "As soon as a man apprehends himself as free and wishes to use his freedom […] then his activity is play" (580).

Nevertheless, there is a tension between this ethics of play and a philosophy of the revolution in Sartre's later works.

Sartre's Criticism of Irony and Passive Activity

In the passage of *Being and Nothingness* that I just mentioned, Sartre already points out that "revolutionaries are serious" (580). Precisely, in later works, especially in *The Family Idiot* and in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre focuses on the conditions of an action that could radically break with oppression and class society. Correlatively, as it is patent in *The Family Idiot*, Sartre shows a deep hostility to those whose revolt comes

down to mere irony and who rebel by parasitizing and subverting the self-image they passively received as the role ascribed to them by society.

Sartre clearly emphasizes in *The Family Idiot* that Flaubert's way of mocking romanticism through the scientists' perspective, and vice versa, discourages every praxis and legitimates resignation. Flaubert plays into the hands of the enemy: of a bourgeois society that he hates, but to which he belongs and, thanks to which, he can live comfortably. Sartre shows the considerable limits of every protest action built on irony, and which he calls passive activity, a phrase that denotes a parasitic form of quasi-action that contests oppression from within, by using, in an ironic or provoking fashion, the role built for us by the oppressor. Sartre gives the example of black people who call themselves "negros" as a provocation and claim to turn it into a source of pride.[2] This strategy is extremely tricky in Sartre's eyes: Flaubert denounces bourgeois stupidity but constantly plays the fool, so that, as Sartre points out, his criticism is ambiguous and he equally suggests that no one can escape stupidity, which deeply discourages any kind of revolt. This passive activity is not, Sartre emphasizes, straightfor- ward praxis, namely open dissent, clear rupture, revolution. In light of Sar- tre's numerous comments about Flaubert's queerness, on the one hand, and of Beauvoir's analyses of the dangerous proximity between femininity, hysteria, and an immersion in the imaginary field, it may be added that, in Sartre's view, this revolt is not "manly" enough.[3] Passive activity, according to Sartre, lacks effectiveness precisely because it does not attack oppres- sion from a new territory, developing new concepts outside of oppressive structures, but from within, using the tools forged by the oppressors: it strengthens these structures of oppression by using them and, in a way, confirming them, and it exposes itself to the risk of being misunderstood, redirected and twisted. Thus, for instance, the feminist Slut Walks and the activism of groups like FEMEN, which use women's nudity or skimpy cloth- ing to protest, somehow feed the media's appetite for pictures of women's naked bodies in order to be heard and they face the accusation of actually reinforcing the objectification of female bodies.

A mode of protest that uses play but which does not exactly "play the game" and tries to change the game from within – by introducing more play, more irony, more distance in the game and wants to make patent that "this is a game" (existence, social roles, serious duties are games) – is also a tricky and dangerous form of protestation. It is what I called a "pup-

pets' uprising": a form of contest that remains entangled in the strings of conditioning structures.

Thus, at some point, Sartre reverts to seriousness: this is especially obvious in his argument with Merleau-Ponty in 1953. There was a political disagreement between them, but Sartre refused to let Merleau-Ponty publish his critiques against him in *Les Temps Modernes*. When it comes to political effectiveness, Sartre claims, consensus, and clear-cut stances must be used to defeat a common enemy: Merleau-Ponty's critiques against Sartre would be turned against them both and the left-wing project they share. In Sartre's words, "you are playing into the hands of reactionaries and anticommunism. Period" (Sartre, Merleau-Ponty 1994). Sartre also reproaches Merleau-Ponty for his timid commitment, for his "dreamy" distant attitude, and his praise for philosophical irony.[4]

Symbolic Action and Revolt

Merleau-Ponty's position in this dispute is particularly interesting in relation to the problem of revolt and play: Merleau-Ponty is both aware of the flaws of passive activity and convinced that it is impossible to exit the game.

Here, Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity, a concept that Merleau-Ponty placed at the heart of his philosophy is crucial. Let us return to Beauvoir's characterization of women as often stuck (historically, yet not essentially) in the imaginary field instead of being engaged in action: Beauvoir's use of the word "instead" ("instead of reasoning, she dreams") is misleading and should be corrected in light of her theory of ambiguity since even the freest activities include a way of being haunted by slimy figures/roles that we do not fully encompass or master. And, reciprocally, there is always a dimension of subversion and nascent perspicacity in the most bewitched enactment of myths and social roles. Hence, the special ability of the oppressed to gain deeper access to the knowledge – both ultimate and yet always unsettled – of oppressive structures as smoke-and-screens systems.

"There are only symbolic actions," Merleau-Ponty writes in *Adventures of the Dialectic* (Merleau-Ponty 1955, 250). "Symbolic action" is a phrase that commonly denotes useless actions incapable of producing an effective transformation of reality: "you may protest, but this will be merely symbolic." Merleau-Ponty acknowledges this aspect of symbolic actions: they are somehow, he emphasizes, weak actions, or could be regarded as

such. And, indeed, it is never possible to fully master the ins and outs of our actions. Merleau-Ponty thus partly integrates Sartre's critiques against passive activity: it is not strongly effective. Revolt is never devoid of ambiguity, and we should always use it with distrust. Here, Merleau-Ponty deflates the traditional positivist practical concepts: action should not focus on clear bases, clear goals, self-control, or blatant concrete effectiveness.

Now, "Symbolic" also means "meaningful." Moreover, if action is *always* symbolic, it is possible to embrace and to deepen its meaningfulness. Merleau-Ponty outlines a new form of ethical and political fruitfulness resulting precisely from the lack of formidability and raw efficiency of symbolic actions and from their focus on meaning.

And, indeed, Merleau-Ponty claims, it is absurd to contrast action on meaning (as merely symbolic) with action on things themselves: The world is intrinsically, in its very flesh, made of meaning, but an unfinished and constantly changing meaning. Actions should "count as much upon the effect they will have as a meaningful gesture and as the mark of an intention, as upon the direct results of the event. If one thus renounces pure action, which is a myth [...] perhaps it is then that one has the best chance of changing the world" (279).

I specified in the beginning of this paper that the meaning in question is always an unfinished and changing one: this is a crucial point, since one may demand meaningful actions without appealing for an ethics of play; the latter is essentially connected with the necessary ambiguity of every meaning.

Indeed, Merleau-Ponty argued that no universal reason can provide unquestionably legitimate values and models. A meaningful action consequently consists of an action that others will actually find meaningful, an action that will inspire their own actions, that they will take over. But the margin of indetermination – or ontological play – in the very being of things, as well as in the subjects' beliefs allows this action to escape pure opportunism or demagogism. Meaningfulness is not reducible to the *actual* persuasion of the majority at a certain moment. Hence, the following five main traits of what we could call a Merleau-Pontian ethics of play as a way of navigating the tension I described earlier, between being stuck in a playful being and the desire to make serious changes happen.

A First, it is important to pay attention to the singular situation, the institutions, and the anonymous infrastructures from which lines of meaning emerge and through which they evolve. For instance, it is possible to study the slight signs and the fundamental structures that allow us to wager that an event is coming soon or that enable us to seize a *kairos*. Symbolic action involves a significant dimension of critique and hermeneutics.

B Second, symbolic action is based on the always available possibility to deviate and modify the lines of meaning that are currently forming in things and societies, and, this, precisely through the art of creative interpretation and inspiring expression. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes, in this regard, the difference between, on the one hand, conformist, flat discourses, works of art, and theories and, on the other hand, the ones that were able to become mythical. What is at stake is thus *a ludic critical hermeneutics developed through concrete actions.*

C Correlatively, symbolic actions imply a full commitment to relational structures. I cannot lean on my own certainty of being on the right track. What is primordial is to strive for the intensification and the maximal openness of an intersubjective quest for a common path, in other words, for meaning. Symbolic action addresses neither an actual factual group, nor the (highly questionable) ideal Human Being, but an imaginary human that is beyond the existing class structures yet still must be built in common, a phantom that helps me aim beyond the actual but does not give me any self-assurance.

D As a result, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that, even if my concrete project does not convince anyone, symbolic action will be successful if I have advocated this project in a way that reinforces the liveliness of the intersubjective dialogue. The declared vulnerability of symbolic action here becomes its best strength. It deepens the game: subjects become more aware of being played, they realize that there is no clear-cut or stable "self," that people only play roles, but can also modify them. The power of being here and there, ubiquity as the essential characteristic of the ontological structure of play may then be fully seized to facilitate a fruitful dialogue between ironic subjects: these are conditions for the uprising of puppets acknowledged as such and who embrace their being entangled within the tricks and strings of the ontological and socio-historical play. The main interest of the concept of symbolic action lies in the fact that it permits to show that, although passive

activity should always be considered with suspicion, the latter is an essential part of the *profundity* of symbolic actions. Such a profundity becomes the main virtue and replaces the ideal of authenticity. It makes possible a greater awareness of the layers of meaning that are sedimented in history, our institutions, our cultural tools, our concepts, and even our bodies. Correlatively, it gives rise to a concerned, and therefore careful and dynamic, dialogue.

E   This ethics is immanent to the ontological play. It is not born from the application of absolute values to play but from the very experience of the violence implied by the play itself, the desire to go out of the game. This experience gives rise to the *axiological* project to look for conditions for a better attunement between the different players.

Thus, for instance, the debate around Slut Walks and Marchas de las Putas is part of their symbolic success. The term "slut" is a trap for every woman will, at least at some point, whatever life choices she makes, be called a slut or a whore, but reclaiming this term can, for instance, be a form of denial that waters down sex workers' specific stigma. The term is divisive – and thus furthers oppressive structures by fostering discussions regarding what a good form of protest is and by making all sorts of failures in feminist solidarity possible – but, if the dialogue between sex workers, women who reclaim the word "slut," and women who advocate a feminism free of patriarchal clichés can take place around Slut Walks, as it in fact does, this symbolic action is as fruitful and revolutionary as it gets. Even more so that every attempt at seriousness will remain stuck in the ontological structure of play and the phenomenology of ambiguity.

The concept of symbolic action allows us to contend that passive activity – puppets' ambiguous revolt – should never be discredited, despised, or underestimated: it is possible to completely reinvent *effectiveness* – from an ethical perspective – by working and deepening the very structures of this passive activity.

Notes

1   Play cannot be a mere third-person structure. Gadamer has the tendency to objectify the ontological play in a way that fails to account for it. "It is the game that is played – it is irrelevant whether or not there is a subject who plays" (Gadamer 1960, 104). See, in this regard, Gregory Bateson's analyses in *Ecology of Mind* (1972): play essentially includes a fictional dimension. In other words, there is "play" when the reference occurs to what *could* happen *instead*. More precisely, the playful nip intrinsically includes the following meaning: "this action does not denote what the action for which they stand would denote. [...] This nip does not denote what would be denoted by the bite" (Bateson 1972, 180). Ontologically, how can such a fictional dimension be achieved? A mere to-and-fro movement in the third-person cannot suffice. There must be a nascent interiority and intentionality, that is the ability of one entity to aim at what is beyond itself.

2   See, for instance, the *Universal Negro Improvement Association* created in 1914 by Marcus Garvey.

3   Beauvoir explains that the lot of women, in a patriarchal system, is often to imagine for lack of a world that can welcome their action: "Woman struggles with a magic reality that does not allow thinking: she escapes through thoughts lacking real content. Instead of assuming her existence, she contemplates in the heavens the pure Idea of her destiny; instead of acting, she erects her statue in her imagination; instead of reasoning, she dreams" (Beauvoir 2010, 672).

4   There is an obvious tension between Sartre's ethics of play and what I have called his return to seriousness. Sartre does not resolve this tension. His concept of "sympathy with communism" was maybe also a way of combining seriousness and play. In fact, existentialists cannot but struggle with some dimension of ambiguity in this respect, as demonstrated in a blatant way by the dispute with Merleau-Ponty: Sartre and Merleau-Ponty blame each other for being too detached, too distant, too deeply entrenched in the imaginary realm.

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Feminist philosophy seems to always exceed its own limits – it is dynamic, shifting, and in dialogue with other academic disciplines. The adjective "feminist" marks not so much a specific subfield of philosophy or topic that is studied, but a political sensibility, an engagement in practicing philosophy. The playful title "Purple Brains" indicates a thinking that goes beyond established binaries, notably the gender binary signified by the colors pink and blue.

As feminists, we face the challenge of finding our own place and inventing ways to understand and overcome discrimination and exclusion. Situated within a world we want to change, feminists cannot afford to reject unlikely interlocutors out of hand, but must instead engage in interdisciplinary, inter-generational and cross-fertilizing dialogues.

This volume brings together 19 articles that practice feminist philosophy through an engagement with the work of Dutch philosopher Veronica Vasterling. As one of the pioneering women philosophers active in Dutch academia since the mid-1980s, Vasterling explicitly expanded her outlook to embrace feminist themes and authors. She stands out as a prominent figure in the exploration of the boundaries of femi-nism through critical dialogue across multiple perspectives. Her work not only explores neuro-psychology through a feminist lens but also extends into domains such as critical phenomenology of gender and race, critical hermeneutics, and sub-jects including sexual difference, the philosophical oeuvre of Hannah Arendt, and that of Judith Butler.

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