

Do We Need a Sex/Gender Distinction?

Val Plumwood

We live an embodied life; we live with those genital and reproductive organs and capacities, those hormones and chromosomes, that locate us physiologically as male or female.... We cannot know what children would make of their bodies in a nongender or nonsexually organized world, what kind of sexual structuration or gender identities would develop. But it is not obvious that there would be major significance to biological sex differences, to gender difference, or to different sexualities. There might be a multiplicity of sexual organizations, identities, and practices, and perhaps even of genders themselves. Bodies would be bodies (I don't think we want to deny people their bodily experience). But particular bodily attributes would not necessarily be so determining of who we are, what we do, how we are perceived, and who are our sexual partners.

Nancy Julia Chodorow, 'Gender, Relation, and Difference in Psychoanalytic Perspective'.¹

This passage seems to sum up much of what the women's movement has been about: the escape from biology treated as destiny, from sex as a 'cosmic fate', from the organisation of inequality around reproductive difference, and a vision of a future in which gender is liberated from these constraints. But to put up this vision, we seem to need, crucially, a distinction between sex and gender, a notion of gender as having some degree of freedom from biological determination.

Recently, however, the distinction between sex and gender has been under attack. The distinction has been, and continues to be, a major tool and bulwark of feminist theory. It appears to have been crucial to the statement of the major recent theses of feminist theory, both political and academic. Yet recent major criticism of the distinction has come not from the anti-feminist camp but from some feminists themselves, especially from some identifying as cultural feminists or theorists of difference.

The distinction is accused of a variety of faults, from incorporating a rationalist account of mind and body to incorporating an implicitly male account of the subject, but there has been little discussion of these claims or arguments, and critics have not faced the issue of how much remains if the distinction is abandoned. Critics have not usually supplied a replacement or looked at how or whether the distinction might be reformed.

The implication seems often to be that we can get by with an undifferentiated cover-all category of sexual 'difference'.² Whether and how much of the body of work of the last fifteen years this would allow to be saved is unclear. At issue at the same time, along with the concept of gender, is the question of how it

is possible to *change* gender, of 'degendering' or 'regendering', if it is possible to change it, and of what sorts of political strategies for feminism are viable. At issue too is the question of difference, of whether the distinction presupposes an underlying neutral subject, and/or a norm of male experience and subjectivity.

In what follows, I examine some of the arguments against the distinction, look at some of the consequences of eliminating it, and survey some of the surrounding issues. I mount a *limited* defence of the distinction – limited, because I do not want to defend *all* uses of it, some of which are rightly criticised. But I do suggest that it still has a point, and that some of the arguments against it miss their mark badly or apply only to some ways of construing it. I want to accept some of the criticisms of it, which have made an important contribution to clarifying the distinction and which have provided a useful antidote to the shallower forms of equality theory. But my claim is that in some form the distinction is both necessary and defensible. In particular, I look at some of its implications for the concepts of difference and of degendering and for different male and female subjectivities. A good deal of my later discussion will centre around two pieces of Australian work of strongly opposed tendencies, one a paper by Moira Gatens, 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction' and the other R. W. Connell's recent book, *Gender and Power*.³

1. The Context of the Distinction

The original context of the distinction was given by Robert Stoller:

With a few exceptions there are two sexes, male and female. To determine sex one must assay the following conditions – chromosomes, external genitalia, internal genitalia, gonads, hormonal states, and secondary sex characteristics.... One's sex, then, is determined by an algebraic sum of all these qualities, and as is obvious, most people fall under one of the two separate bell curves, the one of which is called 'male', the other 'female'.

Gender is a term that has psychological and cultural rather than biological connotations; if the proper terms for sex are 'male' and 'female', the corresponding terms for gender are 'masculine' and 'feminine', these latter being quite independent of (biological) sex. Gender is the amount of masculinity and femininity found in a person, and obviously, while there are mixtures of both in many humans, the normal male has a preponderance of masculinity and the normal 'female' a preponderance of femininity.⁴

Ann Oakley, whose book *Sex, Gender and Society* helped popularise the distinction, sums up: 'Sex is a biological term; "gender" a psychological and cultural one.'⁵

The concept was developed further by sex-role theory, in terms of 'sex-role stereotyping'. If sex is given in terms of the biological characteristics set out above, one's gender is given by one's sex-role, that behaviour which forms a role or is deemed appropriate for a person of a given sex. Such a notion is both heavily normative (although the role notion is neatly ambiguous between a normative and descriptive sense of role⁶) and relative to a particular society, place and time where the deeming is done. This notion of gender assumes a simple set of uniform social expectations for gender apparently taken as shared by all members of society, and neglects or fails to invite questions about social dynamics, power, and *whose* expectations are relevant. The degree of conformity to one's sex-role is the measure of gender, one's degree of masculinity, femininity, and one's successful socialisation into the appropriate role.

But although the distinction initially appeared within this context it would be a mistake to view it as irrevocably tied to such a behavioural context, or to a context of role theory, or socialisation theory. Many current aspects of the use of the distinction do not need to rely on the extra theoretical baggage which these contexts impart to it. The distinction does not stand or fall then with the context in which it was introduced, and now leads a somewhat independent life.

In order to see how far the distinction is necessary and how far it might be reconstructed in a different context, it is important to look at its major functions and uses. I don't want to suggest that the use of the distinction is always clear-cut. In fact there seems to be a good deal of confusion about some areas of use. For example, we usually speak of love between the sexes. But if it is as *social* beings, both embodied and as a part of society which treats that body in certain ways, that men and women love one another, then it is love between the genders which is in question. Clearly there are confused uses about, and often the distinction seems little more than a nuisance, insisting that we make a choice and division (is it biological or social love?) where no choice seems needed or indeed possible or relevant. We need a piece of inclusive terminology too it seems, for when we can't or we don't need to make a distinction. Nevertheless the distinction does have a real point, as I argue below.

2. The Point of the Distinction

The distinction has made it possible to do a number of useful things. A review of some of these, plus consideration of further desiderata, provide some conditions of adequacy which satisfactory ways of making the distinction need to meet.

1. Just as the word 'mother' takes it for granted that the woman who gives birth to a child (sex) also subsequently exclusively nurtures and rears it (gender) and makes separation of these functions difficult both to do and describe, except as exceptions, freaks or monstrosities, so the description of all the relevant differences as simply 'sexual differences' takes it for granted that all these different criteria always go together, that a person with a given set of sex differences (classed usually as biological) will have corresponding characteristics of gender. But these, from the point of view of the distinction, are both more variable over social arrangements and more changeable or reconstructible (or would need reconstruction for quite different reasons) than sex differences.

2. A distinction between the class of females and the set of characteristics associated with them (one version of the

distinction) is essential to explaining how it is that philosophy (and contemporary areas such as public life) has been androcentric. We seem to need such a distinction in order to say, for example, that Plato in *The Republic* allows for participation of women in the guardian class but that he excludes and devalues the *feminine*. Similarly, as historians of feminist philosophy such as Genevieve Lloyd have pointed out, philosophers such as Descartes who have given an account of Reason as sharply distinct from the feminine sphere (e.g. of the senses, of everyday life) have not thereby wished to exclude biological women from it. Unless we can make such a distinction we cannot hope to explain the complex and variable operations of androcentrism, how both women and the feminine have been systematically devalued and excluded in ways that are related but not identical.



3. The distinction has been a major tool in the battle against biological reductionism, which treats all differences between men and women as simply and uniformly 'natural'. In order to defeat biological reductionism what seems essential is that there be some sort of distinction made amongst the kinds of characteristics involved, in terms of their 'naturalness' or 'biologicalness', or else that *none* of the characteristics concerned are seen as biological. Sex needs to be seen as not determining gender. This, however, imposes quite a *weak* requirement on the distinction, and does very little to fix its form. Many different ways of making the distinction could meet it.

4. The distinction has several important *political* functions. One especially important one is that it has made it possible to recognise that people of the same sex vary greatly in the degree to which they approximate to their gender ideal or norm, in the extent to which they exhibit masculinity or femininity. Thus it has made it possible to claim that in rejecting or criticising masculinity, one is not necessarily rejecting or aiming to eliminate maleness as such (biological maleness), or all people of the male sex; that in rejecting femininity, one is not necessarily rejecting femaleness, women etc. (This is an important capacity and questions some recent feminist views of males as irredeemably violent.)

This in turn makes it possible to arrive at some important

generalisations about features of gendered character, of masculinity and femininity (very important in work such as Nancy Chodorow's and that of other psychoanalysts). Without the distinction these generalisations may become difficult because these gendered features are not always displayed clearly or universally by people of the relevant sex.

5. A further important function is that it has made it possible to see the system as open to change of certain kinds – to draw a distinction between different sorts of change required to change sex and gender, to see a good many of the characteristics involved as subject to both individual and social control and choice, and to take account of what is culturally specific and how it has historically developed in a category previously viewed as homogeneously and unchangeably 'natural'. A lot of the point of the distinction is to identify what is changeable, what it is pointless to try to change, and to identify different ways it seems appropriate to effect change. Stoller's work, for example, purported to examine what remained invariant in a situation of different sex but identical gender, and same sex but different gender.

6. The distinction should enable explication of the relation between sex or gender as at least partly an intentional one, one where gender is closely bound up with what people conceive the significance of biological sex to be. This is *implicit* in the Stollerian account of gender as produced by what people involved in key socialisation processes *believe* a child's sex to be, not what it actually *is*. Thus, parents and others believing a child to be female will help produce an appropriately gendered child, and similarly for those believing a child to be male. Social conceptions clearly play a highly significant role.

I want to suggest these as conditions of adequacy for a sex/gender distinction, by whatever name it goes under. If we did not already have to hand a distinction which made their fulfilment possible, then we would, I think, have needed to invent something which fulfilled these broad functions. In that sense, I think, we do obviously need a sex/gender distinction, or some equivalent. Clearly some of these conditions cannot be met satisfactorily with an overall undifferentiated category of sexual difference. But they are compatible with a number of different ways of making the distinction, as we shall see.

If the distinction is abandoned we do seem to face loss of the capacity to make the discriminations needed for these purposes. Do we, for example, revert to describing the difference between nurturing and aggressive character orientations as a *sex* difference, and the difference between having XX and XY chromosomes as also a *sex* difference, without any suggestion that they might be somewhat different in kind? 'Sexual difference' becomes an enforced blanket category which obscures important differences and makes important things unsayable (like 'mother').

3. Objections to the Distinction

I want to go on to consider some of the objections which can be or are made to the distinction, keeping in mind these background conditions of adequacy.

The first objection I want to look at is that sex itself is not, as Stoller and others assume, simply a natural, somehow purely and simply 'biological' category. The rigid division between the social and the biological spheres which is presupposed is mistaken.

Thus, we can ask whether people really do just *fall* under Stoller's two bell-shaped curves, or whether they're *pushed*. If we look at Stoller's rather impressive list of 'biological' criteria

which go to make up sex, for example, we can see that they often don't go together at all – that is chromosomes, external and internal genitalia, gonads, hormonal states and secondary sex characteristics. A person with the 'right' chromosomes for example might have more or less masculine secondary sex characteristics and so on. In fact there is a good deal of variation in the way in which these characteristics are clustered, both in humans and non-humans, and there is similarly room for a great deal of social and cultural input into how these characteristics are classified and grouped. The same characteristics could lead to different descriptions in different social orders, so it is not just a 'natural' fact that there are said to be just two different sorts of sexed bodies. The concept of two genders itself influences and shapes the perception of bodies as two-sexed. And it is not just the classification but the actual 'biological' facts themselves, which are socially or culturally manipulated to fit the picture of dichotomy. For example, we have whole industries devoted to ensuring sexual polarisation and eliminating overlap on secondary sexual characteristics such as hairlessness. And as Alison Jaggar points out in *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*⁷, 'cultural' criteria such as sexual selection in some societies of smaller and less physically powerful women can feed back into opportunities to breed, leading to the intensification of 'secondary' differences. The distinction between the biological and the social on which the classification is based does not hold up.

The objection is powerful and makes an important point about the way the distinction should be treated. It does not, however, show that we need to abandon it, at least in all possible forms, for two reasons. Firstly, it would only do so if it were held



that sex and gender were not merely *distinct* but in fact totally *separate* and did not even interact. If sex and gender are conceptually distinguishable but causally interacting items there is no reason why we cannot acknowledge that gender is not independent of sex or *vice versa*. The relationship between them would then be something like the relationship between a culture and its physical environment, in that a culture can shape the way a physical environment is classified, and indeed, physical features of it, and *vice versa*, while each remain distinguishable aspects of the world that there may be a need to consider and focus on separately.

Secondly, I think it can be conceded that a classification of more than two sexes would become possible. The view of gender as dimorphic clearly influences the view of sexual classification as dimorphic. Although we should view human sexual reproduction in the light of an account of general biological reproduction, which is dimorphic, it seems equally clear that the Western view

of gender as dimorphic has in turn influenced that theory. The evidential support basis for the dimorphic theory of general sexual reproduction really only provides a basis for saying that there must be *at least* two sexes, not that there must be *exactly* two sexes and no more. However, the sex/gender distinction itself does not commit us to a view that there are only two genders or two sexes.

These objections show that there are 'fuzzy areas' of overlap between the biological and the social, and that the distinction should not be treated as sharply exclusive; as creating an ontological gulf or total discontinuity (as between Cartesian mind and body). It does not show that no distinction between the biological and social is viable; that they cannot be treated as different areas of focus for many purposes. The fact of interaction and the absence of a sharp boundary is not a sound reason for abandoning the distinction, any more than it is in the case of biology and say, anthropology or sociology, although it is a good reason for being sensitive to the problem of the boundary cases.⁸

If these objections do not invalidate the distinction, they do show, as Alison Jaggar notes, the need to view human biology as always occurring in some social context and to give full weight to the interactions with it. The need in certain cultures to exaggerate and rigidify sexual difference, to eliminate overlap and polarise sexual characteristics tells us a great deal about how these cultures treat gender as well as sex, revealing not just a causal but a conceptual feedback of gender structures into sexual ones. The implications from a more pluralistic approach to gender, then, are a freeing up of the dimorphic sexual classification too.

The distinction is sometimes treated as a contrast between the sphere of freedom (gender) and the sphere of necessity (sex). But it is not essential to the distinction that it treat sex as totally 'given', not subject to any change, whereas gender is treated as totally *open* to change. Rather, both can be treated as subject to *some* change, and the distinction made in terms of the *kinds* of change or interventions that are relevant. Changing someone's sex usually does seem to be a different sort of matter to, and involve quite different kinds of changes, from changing their gender.

The sex/gender distinction is not a distinction between the unchangeable and the arbitrarily or readily changeable, and should not be taken either as a distinction between the uncontrollable or unchangeably 'given' (sex) or the easily, indeed trivially, changeable or controllable social category of gender. If it is so interpreted (and it does not need to be) it becomes difficult to sustain, since the facts of biological sex may be easier to change than those of gender.⁹ In this sense of 'nature' (the given or unchangeable order) the sex/gender distinction does not coincide with, or stand or fall with, the nature/culture distinction.¹⁰ However, the distinction is closely related to that distinction, to the extent that it raises the overall issue of how the social relates to the biological. The nature/culture distinction (or better, nature/culture dualism) is one into which Western culture has normally packed a great deal which draws on the masculine/feminine dualism, and the notion of nature (female, body, passivity, necessity) as something to be separated from and controlled and acted on by culture (male, spirit, reason, freedom). The problems of the usual network of Western assumptions surrounding this distinction, so central to Western thought, are brilliantly discussed by Marilyn Strathern in her elaboration of the contrasting network of the Hagen people of Niugini.¹¹ In this she shows how some of these assumptions are shared but how others are not. But I do not believe that this shows or is intended to show that any attempt to distinguish the biological and the social must be part of this dualistic network, or that such a distinction must inevitably be abandoned along with the assumptions which surround it. It does

show, I think, the ease with which such a distinction can be made to incorporate these further assumptions and the great care which must be taken if they are to be avoided, and how much effort is needed to obtain conceptual tools which are free of hidden gender or ethnocentric bias.

It is important to bear in mind too that it is not the existence of ways of marking out distinctions themselves, such as mental and physical, natural and cultural or biological and social, which is usually the problem, so much as ways of construing or using them - e.g. as creating a false polarity and an ontological gulf, as creating a hierarchy (e.g. of controlled and controller), and as a part of a network of further related assumptions or theory into which it is fitted (e.g. those which in Western culture link the dichotomous pairs of male/female, mind/body, human/non-human, reason/emotion and so on, and assume that the second (inferior) set is to be treated instrumentally).



I want to consider now a set of objections which have been taken by some to show the unviability of the distinction, and which focus on the notion of the subject implicit in it, and its treatment of difference. Much of this case is found in Moira Gatens, 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction'.¹² The paper contains quite a number of theses on sex and gender, but the main ones appear to be the following.

- (1) The sex/gender distinction assumes that the connection between the body (sex) and gender is *arbitrary*. It assumes that gender is a matter of consciousness, and that the body is *neutral* and *passive* with respect to the formation of consciousness. Masculine and feminine behaviours are taken to be *arbitrary* forms of behaviour, socially inscribed on an indifferent consciousness that is joined to an indifferent body. Hence,
- (2) the sex/gender distinction implicitly involves a body/consciousness distinction of a rationalist or Cartesian type, with the body assumed to be neutral and passive.
- (3) The consciousness assumed is neutral or implicitly male.
- (4) In contrast to this, it is claimed that the subject is always a sexed subject, and that
- (5) the body is always a situated body. There is no neutral or passive body, which underlies gender. As a result the attempt to treat gender as somehow *eliminable*, to see gender as the problem, is basically mistaken. I shall discuss these in turn.

Thesis 1. The distinction assumes that masculine and feminine behaviours are arbitrary forms of behaviour, socially inscribed

on a passive, neutral body.

This would indeed be a good reason to reject the distinction and some forms of the distinction do fall foul of this criticism. The 'sex/role stereotype' account seems particularly subject to this criticism, since it assumes that inscriptions are purely conventional and apparently readily changeable, and allots the body no real role in the production of the final gendered person except as a peg to hang a sex-role on. (This sort of view was nicely captured by the cover of Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* showing a 'female body suit' which could be removed or put on at will.) But the body or sex, as this objection rightly points out, is not irrelevant to the making of masculinity and femininity. The body, as Moira Gatens notes, 'can and does intervene, to confirm or to deny, various social significances.'¹³

However, it is by no means necessary for the distinction to assume this form. The sex/gender distinction can (and normally is) used in a way which takes sex and gender to be *related*. There are different accounts of what this relationship is, but most basic accounts assume that the body provides some kind of basis or



foundation upon which gender is constructed. They do not therefore assume a passive, neutral and indifferent body in the way claimed.

R. W. Connell discusses 'additive' accounts, which take sex or biology to partly determine difference, with the remainder being an added component of 'social construction'.¹⁴ But if gender is a 'social construction', it is not necessarily just *added* to sexual determination as a further arbitrary or unrelated component. It may be a social construction *from* sex, on the basis of biology and sex, not simply an extra unrelated thing which is added on top of it. Indeed, this seems to be what the common account assumes when it supposes that in Western culture, for example, it is women's reproductive capacities which have been the basis of their identification with the inferior sphere of nature, which has again formed the basis for their exclusion from culturally valued 'non-natural' activities such as rationality, and for their socialisation to a character tied to reproductive and nurturing activities. On this account the connection would not be *arbitrary*; it would rather be that sex was socially *modified* or

interpreted, operated on, to give gender. That is, the relationship would logically not be that of a conjunction, but of a modifier or operator.

What we are in fact presented with in this argument is a choice (as in biological reductionism) between taking the components of sex and gender to be arbitrarily connected or taking them to be indistinguishable. But it is clear that this is a false choice, which amounts to saying that either it's all equally 'natural' and biological or it's all arbitrary.

Thesis 2. The sex/gender distinction takes the body to be neutral and passive, and equates the distinction with a body/consciousness distinction, i.e. it is rationalist (Cartesian?).

This is an objection which must be taken very seriously indeed. The context in which the sex/gender distinction appears is one which has strongly (and I believe rightly) rejected mind/body dualism as one of the main sources, in Western culture at any rate, of the exclusion of women from what is not valued in the culture, especially rationality and its offshoots. So if a key distinction in the theory is based on a version of that dualism that would reveal a very serious inconsistency at the heart of the theory, as well as a hidden source of androcentrism.

On examination, however, it seems that the case for the distinction being so contaminated is not as watertight as it appears at first, even if we look at the Stollerian account and the sex-role stereotype account of the distinction. For example, on Stoller's account sex is bodily (biological) and gender is produced by psychological and cultural means. It doesn't follow, however, on either account, that all the ramifications and operations of gender take place in or at the level of the mind or consciousness, since among the behaviour produced will be a great deal that concerns the body, and similarly, on the sex-role stereotype account, a great many of the gender expectations of others (the society) will concern people's bodies (e.g. characteristics like hairlessness for women) and how they experience and what they do with their bodies, not just the expectation of a different consciousness. So although these characteristics might not be biologically determined it doesn't follow that they *just* concern consciousness, or that consciousness is taken to be the only operative factor in producing gender identity. 'Socialisation' needn't be assumed to operate just at the level of consciousness or the mind, indeed in this case it *can't*.

Similarly, the distinction does not *have* to assume a neutral and passive body, although particular forms of it may. What the distinction assumes is that the body does not alone *determine* a person's masculinity or femininity, gender identity, role or behaviour. This does not mean that it has to be seen as neutral or *passive* with regard to the function of consciousness, or that the relation between them has to be one of inscription by consciousness (or plural consciousnesses – society) on a passive body. The relationship can be conceived differently within the framework of the distinction. That is, the assumption is that there is a whole area of character and social relations not determined by the body. But it doesn't follow that because it's not determined just by the body that it's determined by the mind, or that the body has no role. And, as we shall see, there is considerable ambiguity in the notion of a 'neutral' body.

Again, from the fact that gender is taken to be not determined by sex it does not follow that it is taken to be a totally free and arbitrary construction unrelated to the sexed bodies; that it 'floats free' in this strong sense of being an unrelated addition, or that the body is taken to be neutral in the sense of not favouring any possible social meaning over any other.

Nevertheless this objection, although it misses its intended target of the sex/gender distinction, has a good deal of force against *particular* ways of understanding the distinction, which

can very easily be fitted into the Cartesian model, and points to the need for proponents of the distinction to give an account of just what the role of the body might be. The objection is a particularly serious one against the 'additive' theories (that is, as I explained earlier, theories which simply add a social component to an independent and apparently unrelated mechanically conceived bodily component). Such an account does fit the Cartesian picture very closely, although gender is not assumed to control sex in the way mind controls body in the Cartesian picture.

4. What is Gender?

Nevertheless the force of this objection does make it necessary to provide a better account of how the relation to the body is actually to be construed; of how the social 'gender' relates to the biological 'sex'. Gender is often assumed to be a social construction from or elaboration of sex. But if gender somehow elaborates on sex, the question is: what is meant by elaboration here?

Both Connell and Gatens, although otherwise opposed, reject the sex/role stereotype or role theory account of gender. Connell rightly criticises additive accounts on which gender simply adds a further component of social elaboration to the body. Such accounts are much too disconnected. The body does play more than an arbitrary role in the formation of gender. Gender is somehow *got out of sex*, it is not just an extra addition to it (and certainly not just the addition of consciousness, as Gatens rightly points out).

Another option which Connell considers only to dismiss is that of sex as placing limits or constraints on possible social gender arrangements. He treats such 'constraints' or limit positions as further types of additive theories. But constraints are not necessarily, and in fact usually cannot be treated as, further added conditions in this way. However, there are other objections to regarding sex, biological reality, as placing constraining conditions on gender arrangements, social possibility. The relationship between sex and gender seems much closer than this constraint position suggest, in that gender is somehow an elaboration of sex. But a constraining relation is not necessarily like this. For instance, gravity places constraints on athletics, and the size of a container on the weight of its contents, but athletics is not *about* or an elaboration of gravity in the way gender seems to be about, or derived from, sex.

Another possibility which has wide appeal for spelling out 'social elaboration' is suggested by the analogy of a building, in which sex is the foundation upon which the building of gender is erected. Thus Sandra Harding writes:

Instead of just looking at sex we should be looking at gender – the impressive and baroque superstructure of social differentiation which culture erects on what it presumes to be the appropriate foundation of our relatively modest and clearly functional reproductive differences.¹⁵

The superstructure analogy suggest that the social (gender) elaborates or is built on the biological (sex) as a building elaborates or is built on its foundations. Foundations must be appropriate for superstructures, and place constraints on them, and quite different superstructures might be erected on the same foundations, according to the desire and intention of different cultural builders. So the analogy allows for cultural variation on an identical or similar biological base. But the analogy, although appealing, has its limitations, particularly with respect to the intentional construction of buildings. Foundations can occur

without buildings (although in a sense only as an anomaly) but there can be no pure 'sex', or purely detachable biology which can occur without social elaboration. The analogy leaves a great many specific questions unanswered, and does not capture at all the sense in which gender is *about* sex (a building is not about its foundations, or constructed *from* it).

A rather different sort of account is offered by R. W. Connell in *Gender and Power* – what is essentially a *production model* of gender.¹⁶ Gender is developed out of the body in the way an object in nature is transformed by human labour into an item of use, and is to be explained in terms of a social practice essentially of *production*.



The production model has an advantage in that it does not rely on the realm of ideas, consciousness or intention as its main causal agent – Connell is explicit that production is material production. At the same time however it seems to lose the intentional connection which is a feature of the relation of gender and sex, for the rug is not *about* the wool, nor the pot *about* the clay, although each are produced from it – they are physical and material elaborations, but they are given social significance freely. The production model should also be treated with caution, since it carries the danger of viewing production as the major human activity and the human and social essence.

An apparently different kind of account again comes from Moira Gatens, who makes the interesting suggestion that gender is to sex as the imaginary body is to the actual body.¹⁷ She identifies it as 'a psychological image of the body' a 'body phantom' or an imaginary body ... developed, learned, connected to the body-image of others...'. 'Masculinity and femininity as forms of sex-appropriate behaviours are manifestations of an historically-based, culturally shared phantasy about male and female biologies.'¹⁸

This account, although promising, seems too narrow, because it is the *intentional* body rather than the imaginary body, in the sense of the 'imagined' body, which is in question. Gender on this account would be reducible to how the reproductive organs were imagined to be and to behave by a whole society, a 'shared phantasy'. It is the body as experienced as well as imagined, and as seen and felt, and what is believed about and to follow from the

body, which is relevant, not just as imagined in mental imagery.

This certainly seems to provide a key element of connection which is missing in other accounts. The sense in which gender is 'about' or is an 'elaboration' of sex is that it is, or essentially involves, if not a 'phantasy' at least a *shared social story* about reproductive difference. This allows the body to be highly relevant to gender, to be in a good sense the basis of, or the foundation of, gender, without itself *determining* it. Yet although capturing a key element, it makes gender totally a function of social thought systems, and neglects the material aspects of the production of gender, except as causal consequences of thought systems.

The notion of gender as the 'imaginary' body or the fantasy body, even the intentional body, seems still too narrow. How the body is imagined to be socially or individually, how it is given social symbolism, is only part, although a key part, of how it is socially *treated*. This treatment is not just theory, imagination, symbolism itself at the level of consciousness, but social *practice* as applied to the body. So it is not a contrast of the mind (consciousness, the imaginary body) and the materiality of the body. As Connell notes:

We may say then that the practical transformation of the body in the social structure of gender is not only accomplished at the level of symbolism. It has physical effects on the body; the incorporation is a material one.

Perhaps we can say instead that gender is what the society or culture *makes* of the reproductive aspects of the body where this includes both material treatment and practices, and especially, how the sexual aspects of the body are given social meaning and significance, as well as how they are conceived to be. Gender thus incorporates a theory, or a story, of how the body is, and how the person is, as well as material treatment (as is clear in the term 'sex of rearing' for gender). It is the social meaning of sex as embedded in social practices.

We can find parallels for this concept of gender in a number of other notions; for example, in the psychoanalytic distinction between the penis and the phallus. We can find another parallel, in some respects, in the way in which land and 'country' are thought of in Australian aboriginal culture, where 'country' is land as given social significance and meaning, in a story (theory) about the land, its origins, effects and proper treatment; and of course, how this is lived out in a *practice* relating people to the land. And gender, like country, does not involve any old story, but a culturally central or basic story (a 'big story').

The fact that gender involves a story (theory) about sex and about reproductive difference explains how it is that gender is *about* sex, how it is that gender is a (particular kind of) social elaboration of sex. Our own Western story, shared social fantasy, has until recently been difficult to see because it was so basic and so little questioned; and as usual the story, the 'shared social fantasy' determining gender, is easier to see from the outside, looking into someone else's culture, than in our own.²⁰

If gender is the social body, the sexual aspects of the body as experienced and lived in a particular culture and as given social meaning and significance, interpreted by others in that culture, we can capture what is right about the 'sex-role stereotype' characterisation in terms of social roles and expectations, without seeing socialisation as the determining factor inscribing an irrelevant, neutral and passive body, and without the problem of a theory which treats the body as a mere unrelated component, to which an arbitrary social gender ascription is added. The problems of choosing an idealist or materialist account are also avoided. And the distinction is not a distinction of body and mind. Furthermore, if gender-establishing practices include a

shared, social fantasy of the sexual aspects of the body, lived out by differently-sexed subjects, there is also room here for alternative 'fantasies', for preferring some to others, and for relating them to alternative practices. But more of this later.

Where does this leave the distinction? It seems that in fact we now have the beginnings of an account which will meet the conditions I suggested at the beginning for a sex/gender distinction. The relation between the intentionalised, social body and the body will provide the basis for differentiating what is changeable in different ways (by changing the body or by changing the 'fantasy' or practices about it). It will allow for some degree of freedom in the establishment of gender and for social and cultural variation (via change of fantasy and practice, and for people to vary in the extent to which they can approximate the fantasy. And it will give a major role to social conceptions of the body, as well as to social practice. It will fulfill the main functions of the sex/gender distinction as the conditions of adequacy explained them.

5. The Subject, Difference, and Degendering

But, according to Gatens, the body is always in some social context, and always has some social meaning and significance, always gives rise to lived bodily experience. I.e. it is always somehow situated. It is easy to pass from this to Gatens's fuller conclusion that the subject is always sexed, that there can never be a neutral subject, and that gender is therefore always present in some form. As a result the attempt to *degender*, to treat gender as eliminable or reconstructible is mistaken, and it is not to gender but to difference that we must attend and turn for enlightenment. A program of degendering is seriously mistaken, on this view. Gender itself is not the problem.

I want to look now at some of these claims, which are sometimes taken to show the unviability of the sort of view set out in the opening paragraph of Nancy Chodorow. Thus Gatens concludes (p. 150): 'Feminists who propose degendering propose it outside of history and without considering the extreme resilience of expressions of sexual difference...' And she goes on: 'The point is that we are historically and culturally situated in a society that is divided and organised in terms of sex – an historical fact.'

There are some problems here. We may agree that, given this account of sex and gender, the body *is* always situated *somehow*. It does not follow at all, however, that it is always situated in a society which is 'divided and organised in terms of sex'. The effect of this slide is to make it appear that the inevitability of there being *some* situation is the inevitability of difference in a society 'divided and organised in terms of sex' and of a body's being so situated. It *is* inevitable that bodies (or rather people) are *somehow* situated, but not that they are *so* situated.

And if the body (or the person) is not so situated, it is not so obvious that the subject is always and everywhere a sexed subject, that men and women *must* be everywhere qualitatively different kinds of people. I shall call the view that the subject is always a sexed subject, that difference in sex automatically implies difference in subjectivity, and that men and women are inevitably qualitatively different kinds of people, *Philosophical Separatism*. In a society which *is* divided and organised in terms of sex, and which has taken reproductive difference to flow on to almost every area of life, men and women's differential experiences and power will usually be sufficiently different to make it plausible to say that they are qualitatively different sorts of people. Thus, in a society which maximises the significance of differences, and expands their area, the whole of life may be-

come gendered. Initial sex differences are treated as permeating all areas of life, as a 'cosmic division', as Connell puts it,²¹ as conclusively determining 'who we are, what we do, how we are perceived, and who are our sexual partners', in Chodorow's words.

But this does not support Philosophical Separatism. For suppose the context is not one of such a society, but rather one which resembles that of the gender – deconstructed society described by Nancy Chodorow in the opening passage, or by Connell, where sex differences are not taken to flow on to other spheres of life than the reproductive one, and where men and women share equally in responsibility for reproduction.²² Is it still true that the subject must still always be 'a sexed subject', and that men and women are therefore significantly different sorts of people? The subject here is not treated as a neutral (disembodied) subject, and the body is situated. But these claims seem no longer to be obviously true (one suspects the people in Connell's society would find such a suggestion laughable). This is not to assume that the society Connell considers which completely deconstructed or minimised sex differences is automatically better – that would need to be shown – or that it's a question of quantity (maximizing vs. minimising sex differences), but rather that we don't any longer have any basis for the claim that the subject in such a situation is always a sexed subject, and that we don't have any means of expressing the difference between these social situations given this proposal. This is not to insist on a 'neutral' subject. Rather it is to insist that possession of a differently sexed body does not *necessarily* lead to difference in subjecthood, that this is not a necessary feature of *any* form of social organisation.

Gatens develops an argument (pp. 153-55) in favour of her thesis that female and male subjectivities are qualitatively different, arguing that male transsexuals have an experience of the body which is qualitatively different from female experience. Thus she writes (pp. 153-54):

The male transsexual, due to his primary relations with his mother, is in the situation of being constituted in such a way that his (primitive) ego conflicts with his imaginary (and biological) body, leading to his subjectivity being conceived by him as 'female-in-a-male-body'. Briefly this would involve the non-resolution of the misrecognition of the body of the other for one's own, that is, the male transsexual's primitive (bodily) ego is predicated upon a female body (i.e. the maternal body) and he does not develop, until comparatively late, a separate identity from his mother. His transsexualism, in fact, is evidence that this separation is never adequately achieved. The desire of the mother is active in this non-resolution or critically *late* resolution.

The case of the female transsexual *cannot* [my italics] be symmetrical. The relation of the female infant to the mother's body is not and can not be problematic *in the same way*.

This argument, like much psychoanalytic argument, presupposes a far from *inevitable* feature of existing society; namely, that a woman has sole and exclusive responsibility for the rearing of children, and that 'mothers' in this sense are exclusively female. If this is not the case the argument for inevitable qualitative difference based on transsexualism collapses; male and female transsexualism *need* not have different meaning and significance. At this point the argument does seem to presuppose much of the point at issue, since the role of women as mothers (and hence a certain sort of unchangeable female nature) is treated as

an inevitable part of a social structure.

It is unclear just when such differences would produce a qualitatively different kind of person or subjectivity, but obviously this would depend a good deal on whether those areas of life which could not be shared, where experiences were those of a differently sexed body in a social context which gave weight to that, were also treated as central to the formation of self and to the kind of person one was. *Some* experiences of a different kind of body are plausibly so treated, others are less so. (E.g. those who have athlete's foot versus those who don't – a different bodily experience which would not plausibly form the basis for a difference central to the self, to the *kind* of person one was.) Nurturing and reproductive activities obviously could be so treated.

Nevertheless, they need not be treated as giving always and everywhere a different kind of subject. The argument presents a false choice between subjects being always neutral and always and everywhere sexed, that is, having a significant qualitative and subjective difference in virtue of the possession of a differently sexed body. An alternative more flexible and sensible position seems to be that sometimes sex matters, and sometimes it doesn't. (For example, giving a 'woman's' as opposed to a 'man's' view of surviving a trip over Niagara Falls. Would such a subject be a sexed subject?) That is, subjects would not automatically and everywhere be the same (neutral), but they would not be automatically and everywhere different sorts of subjects either. Obviously we can think of contexts in present society where subjects are sexed and ones where they are not. Understanding the way the sexes yield 'different kinds of people' is essential for understanding the dynamics of most personal and social relationships, but so is understanding similarity.

But such a position is different from Philosophical Separatism. This latter position seems to have a number of unfortunate consequences. If it were correct there would be no properly shared experiences between men and women. They would form, almost, two species. If there were no significant experience of which we can say that males and females have the *same* experience, that is the same for both, there would be a problem in locating an area of common concern or interest, or a basis for community or common humanity. The ramifications are alarming, especially if one considers the way in which highly sex-segregated societies and workplaces have treated and continue to treat women – as prey, as the enemy, a separate species to be treated instrumentally and without sympathy, as 'the other'; and also if one considers the way in which the view of sex difference as providing a cosmic and universal division underlies romantic love in its most sexist form.

And do all bodily differences necessarily provide correspondingly different subjectivities, or only sex differences? If the answer is 'all', the result seems to be an individual isolation and other minds problem of horrendous proportions. If it is only sex, the result seems to privilege biological sex as the site of difference in an unjustifiable way.

What seems to be needed is an account of difference which will allow the experience of different bodies to provide a significant difference in some suitable cases but not automatically and everywhere. This would be an account which recognised that much of the occupation of the social sphere was concerned with the elaboration of difference (including sexual difference) but against a background of basic similarity, and against a further background still of both difference and similarity with the non-human sphere. It would not necessarily aim at the minimisation of difference, however, or go as far in the direction of denying difference and flow-on of reproductive difference to other areas of life as Connell does.²³

The same problem and ambiguity which underly the notion of the body as situated occurs in the discussion of 'degendering' and of 'neutrality' of the body in Gatens.²⁴

The concept of degendering is roundly rejected by Gatens, who sees degendering as presupposing a neutral subject as well as a passive body (although later this subject is said also to be implicitly male). She declares that 'to suggest the degendering of society is hopelessly utopian, and functions theoretically and practically as a diversionary tactic'.²⁵ The 'degendering' terminology, which is unfortunate and ambiguous in many ways, seems to have originated with Nancy Chodorow, who used it in her article 'Gender, Relation and Difference in Psychoanalytic Perspective' to indicate the need for a feminist strategy involving a general shake-up and restructuring of gender and gender characteristics, not just for women but also for men, and who opposed it to a gynocentric position (although she did not use that term). She also wished to take account of the way in which gender and gender difference are relational, that is the relationship between the genders is such that changes in one cannot be contemplated without corresponding changes in the other.



Degendering, as the term is now used, usually means changing the particular set of gender ideals and structures which are subject to the sort of critique developed by Chodorow and others, and changing them from ones which take biological differences to flow through to *all* areas of life. But especially it means changing the way in which masculinity and femininity in Western culture have been contrasted as a dualism (or rather a set of dualisms), in which one side of the duality has qualities which are constructed by exclusion from the properties of the more highly valued side. Because of this both genders are seen as needing to change together in a systematic way, and the result is 'degendered' also in the sense that neither side of the duality necessarily presents a model for the outcome of the transformation.²⁶

The concept of degendering has two importantly different meanings.

- (1) Degendering₁ relative to society (say Western society) implies some sort of radical restructuring or reformation of gender differences in that society, transforming that particular society's gender structure.
- (2) Degendering₂ implies removing *all* structure of social difference and meaning attached to male and female biologies and bodies.

Degendering in sense 1 is what people such as Chodorow are

arguing for. But degendering₁, restructuring a particular gender system, by no means implies degendering₂, the removal of all difference. And degendering₁ has to be argued for in quite different terms from degendering₂; namely, in terms of the harmfulness of that particular society's gender structure. Degendering₂ is quite different, and strikes quite different kinds of problems. Degendering₂ implies removing *all gender differences* that is, all difference in social meaning and significance attached to different male and female bodies and lived experience. This does indeed seem to imply an attempt to deny or somehow cancel out the different experiences resulting from different biologies, to attempt to establish or to presuppose, a neutral body and a neutral subject.

This seems not only undesirable but also impossible. It seems likely that any society will attach some different significance to different reproductive roles. And the attempt to deny or cancel out such differences is almost certain to lead to the establishment of an ostensibly neutral face which masks an implicitly male norm, and under which what is distinctive in female experience is devalued or silenced (as Gatens and others have argued is presently the case with some forms of contemporary 'neutrality' in the public sphere).

Similarly, it is claimed by Gatens that the body cannot be separated from its social meaning, that to attempt to do so assumes a 'neutral' body. It is necessary that the body has some social meaning, but not that it has the particular one given it, for example, in contemporary Western society. This is the confusion which underlies essentialism. The body, then, is not 'neutral' or detachable from its social meaning in the sense that it cannot exist without some meaning, but it does not follow from its non-neutrality that it is inseparably or necessarily attached to its given social meanings. And the body is not 'neutral' either in that it does favour some possible social meanings over others – its biology 'fits' some stories but not others, or, as Gatens says, the body 'can and does intervene, to confirm or deny, various social significances'. Degendering₁ does not take the body to be neutral in this sense; degendering₂, however, does.

It is degendering₂ then which has the qualities Gatens and others have attributed to degendering, but degendering₁ that the proponents of degendering have been arguing for. Degendering₂ *does* imply a neutral, passive body, devoid of differential social meaning, and depriving different bodily experiences of a significant role. Degendering₂ requires both a neutral subject and a sex/gender distinction which embodies mind/body dualism, but degendering₁ does not need this. For example, degendering₁, the reconstruction of existing Western dualistic gender systems, does not imply giving no special (or different) significance to specifically male or female forms of experience. A society which was degendered in this way might, for example, celebrate or otherwise mark in a special way particular events in women's lives, menstruation, childbirth, menopause. There is no requirement to minimize or remove difference, although there would be one to reduce the extent to which society was organised and divided sexually and to remove exaggerated or confining manifestations of it.

Perhaps part of the trouble lies in the 'degendering' terminology itself which has made such confusion too easy, and encourages a view of degendering as the complete *removal* of gender, rather than its *restructuring*. Perhaps a better way to describe what many proponents of degendering have in mind is *regendering* or the *liberation* of gender from the shackles of a dualistic (and dimorphic) system, which insists not only on the construction of one as the complement of the other, but excludes it from the cultural value attached to the other. This seems clearly to be what Nancy Chodorow has in mind in the opening paragraph.

The political choices these contrasting positions imply cannot be adequately captured in terms of the contrast of equality and difference with which we are often presented (e.g. in Gatens' argument). Degendering₂ does imply a blanket political aim of equality, but degendering₁, or regendering, makes possible a mixed strategy of equality and difference between the sexes, equality and an end to gender saturation in some areas, recognition and perhaps even celebration and cultivation of difference in others, restructuring of sex-segregated social structures in others. It is the logical outcome of a generation of feminist critiques of gender-structure, or dualistically constructed masculine and feminine character, and of the gender-saturation of society.

The political choice implied by the sort of Philosophical Separatism which emerges from the view that men and women are individually and everywhere qualitatively different sorts of people goes beyond the stress on difference as a welcome counterbalance to the shallow pursuit of equality within a male norm which characterised early forms of feminism. What is further involved is a stress on difference which is uncritical of masculine and feminine character, and their respective and mutual co-formation and function, and aims ultimately at the reversal of values and power, substituting a gynocentric separatism for androcentric tradition. Thus Gatens writes:

The problem is not the socialisation of women to femininity and men to masculinity but the place of these behaviours in the network of social meaning and the valorizing of one (the male) over the other (the female) and the resultant mischaracterisation of relations of difference as relations of superiority and inferiority.

But if this is interpreted to mean 'socialisation of women to *some* femininity or other', we cannot say whether it is a problem until we know what that femininity is. Ambiguity here effects a transition to fixed feminine essences, for not any femininity is existing femininity. If we interpret 'socialisation of women to femininity' here to mean socialisation of women to existing or *traditional* femininity, the implications are profoundly conservative, in that it takes it that existing socialisation and social meaning of the genders can be left as it is and all that is required is a reversal of values of the respective genders, their spheres and characteristic activities (i.e. a 'separate spheres' position or a gynocentric cultural feminism). Such a strategy faces too the problem of how to separate the superior value attached to the activities concerned from their gender exclusiveness – usually they are inseparably intertwined – and seems to be involved in an attempt to reverse cultural values on a huge scale which is far more utopian than the regendering alternative. Such a program is also misguided since it fails to take account of how such superiority/inferiority and polarisation, complementarity and exclusiveness, have developed *together* as part of a system of power in which exclusion from valued activities and confinement to less valued ones becomes written into gender. On such an analysis the problem is and must be *all* of these things, which make up the system of gender central to Western societies. The problem is gender, and regendering is its solution.

Notes

- 1 Nancy Julia Chodorow, 'Gender, Relation, and Difference in Psychoanalytic Perspective', in Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine (eds.), *The Future of Difference*, Rutgers University Press, N.J., 1985, p. 18.
- 2 See e.g. Denise Thompson, 'Essentialism, the "Sex/Gender" Distinction and Sexual Difference.' Paper presented to Women and Philosophy Conference, May 1988, p. 8.

- 3 Moira Gatens, 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction', *Intervention*, February 1983; R. W. Connell, *Gender & Power*, Polity, 1987.
- 4 Robert Stoller, *Sex & Gender*, Science House, 1968, quoted in Ann Oakley, *Sex, Gender & Society*, Temple Smith, London, 1972, p. 158.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 R. W. Connell, *Gender & Power*, *op. cit.*
- 7 See Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, Rowman & Allanheld, Harvester Press, Sussex, 1983 and Alison Jaggar, 'Human Biology in Feminist Theory: Sexual Equality Reconsidered', in Carol C. Gould (ed.), *Beyond Domination*, Rowman & Allanheld, USA, 1984.
- 8 Alison Jaggar, in 'Human Biology in Feminist Theory: sexual equality reconsidered', in fact usefully develops such an interactive theory, while concluding however that the distinction between sex and gender is thereby challenged or rendered doubtful. Yet interaction between conceptually distinguishable items is the rule rather than the exception, and grey or fuzzy areas are a normal part of distinctions.
- 9 This relative ease of changing sex as opposed to changing gender partly accounts for the phenomenon of transsexualism. 'But in the course of this long debate on nature vs. culture, I discovered that, given the present state of science & civilization, it seems to be much easier to change natural than cultural facts. It was much easier to relieve women from obligatory breastfeeding than make fathers give babies their bottles. It is much easier to develop contraceptives that eliminate the menstrual cycle than to change women's attitude to menstruation', Evelyn Sullerot in E. Marks & E. Courtivron (eds.), *New French Feminism*, Harvester, Brighton, 1981, p. 158 (my italics).
- 10 As claimed by Denise Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
- 11 Marilyn Strathern, 'No nature, no culture: the Hagen case', in Carol P. MacCormack & Marilyn Strathern (eds.), *Nature, Culture & Gender*, Cambridge, 1980.
- 12 Moira Gatens, *op. cit.*
- 13 Moira Gatens, *op. cit.*, p. 149.
- 14 R. W. Connell, *Gender & Power*, *op. cit.*, pp. 23–75.
- 15 Sandra Harding, 'Is Gender a Variable in Conceptions of Rationality? A Survey of Issues', in Carol C. Gould, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
- 16 R. W. Connell, *op. cit.*, pp. 66ff.
- 17 Moira Gatens, *op. cit.*, p. 155. 'I would suggest that "masculinity" and "femininity" correspond at the level of the imaginary body to "male" and "female" at the level of biology.'
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- 19 R. W. Connell, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
- 20 For such windows into differently based gender systems see Gillian Gillison, 'Images of Nature in Gimi Thought', in C. MacCormack & Marilyn Strathern (eds.), *Nature, Culture & Gender*, Cambridge University Press, 1980, pp. 143–73 and Anne Cameron, *Daughters of Copperwoman*, The Women's Press, London, 1984.
- 21 R. W. Connell, *op. cit.*, p. 289.
- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 287ff.
- 23 See *ibid.*, p. 170, although Connell is here, I think, not so much denying difference as denying that it can be accounted for in terms of unitary gendered character, 'masculinity' and 'femininity'.
- 24 Gatens, *op. cit.*, p. 153.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 See V. Plumwood, 'Women, Humanity and Nature', *Radical Philosophy* 48, Spring 1988, pp. 16–24, and 'Options for Regendering' (unpublished manuscript).