THE PHENOMENAL WOMAN

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1
Introduction: Fleshy Metaphysics

PHENOMENAL: *extraordinary, exceptional, prodigious, unnatural, marvellous, amazing; often used hyperbolically in reference to some object or person of extraordinary power, gifts or other quality which excites wonder.*

PHENOMENAL: *in philosophy, that which has the nature of a 'phenomenon' (pl. 'phenomena) and is the object of sense experience; applied to that which only seems to exist but which is a mere illusion of the senses; often opposed to that which is 'real', 'objective' or 'noumenal'.*

In the history of western metaphysics 'woman' is phenomenal in a double sense. She's something wonderful, amazing, astonishing, peculiar. But she's also just a surface deviation; mere 'appearance'; unrepresentative of that distinctive, underlying 'essence' of humanity that philosophers have associated with 'truth'. She falls outside 'essence' – or the defining characteristics of a species or thing – in ways that have been supposed to make it a mistake to look for an essence of female nature or experience.

I write from within a post-Kantian tradition of philosophy, analysing the philosophical concepts of the transcendental ego, 'personhood' and related notions of spatial and temporal self-identity. However, since the subject of woman has always only ever been at the margins of philosophical discourse, I move between two conceptual and experiential registers. On the one hand, there are the language and traditions of philosophy in which the 'real' world has been constituted as the merely 'phenomenal' world. On the other hand, there is also the language of women's singularity and

the need to talk of that ‘real’ or ‘phenomenal’ female body which has fallen outside the universals of philosophy.

In my current project I am seeking to use the antinomies of the female subject-position to think identity anew. I am not positing an ‘other’ form of subjectivity which is that of the ‘feminine’ or ‘female’ subject. Instead, I am asking what happens if we model personal and individual identity in terms of the female. Rather than treating women as somehow exceptional, I start from the question of what would have to change were we to take seriously the notion that a ‘person’ could normally, at least always potentially, become two. What would happen if we thought identity in terms that did not make it always spatially and temporally oppositional to other entities? Could we retain a notion of self-identity if we did not privilege that which is self-contained and self-directed?

Immanuel Kant’s ‘Copernican revolution’ sought to rewrite philosophical tradition by placing man – instead of God or the object – at the centre of the reality which we inhabit. My own feminist philosophical turn displaces the apparently gender-neutral Kantian self at the centre of the knowable world. However, instead of dispensing with the self in ways now fashionable in the postmodern tradition, I am attempting to construct a new subject-position that makes *women* typical. In effect, this means dispensing with the (Kantian) notion that the ‘I’ gives form to reality by imposing a grid of spatio-temporal relationships upon otherwise unformed ‘matter’. Focusing on the female subject involves treating humans as non-autonomous, and instead thinking relationships of dependence (childhood/weaning/rearing) through which one attains selfhood. It also involves thinking the process of birthing as neither monstrous nor abnormal. Mothering, parenting and the fact of being born need to become fully integrated into what is entailed in being a human ‘person’ or ‘self’.

In 1994, as I started to write the opening chapters of this book, I sat looking at the sunset over the sea, and chatting with one of the villagers from the obscure Cornish village which I had decided to make my base. He was in his mid-forties, had not been to college, and had instead worked on boats, as well as at a variety of clerical jobs. Now on long-term sick-leave, he was embarked on a programme of distance learning, and this included some Philosophy courses. As I started to talk about my project for a feminist metaphysics, and the need to think through a philosophy that deals seriously with birth, the man became excited and uneasy. He then suddenly offered the following unexpected remark:

> ‘It’s odd. Philosophers say that it is not really possible to understand and accept the idea of one’s own death. However, that is not what I find hard; it’s rather to believe that I was born. Indeed, when I try to think of my own birth, my brain goes all red and I feel sick and dizzy. I once tried to tell my mother that I could not accept that I had been born. But she told me I was just being silly.’

Of course, as the man knew well, it is absurd not to accept that one has been born. But this man’s remark is also acute, in that it reveals a central failure in our culture. Philosophers have notably failed to address the ontological significance of the fact that selves are born. Furthermore, there is also a more general inability to imaginatively grasp that the self/other relationship needs to be reworked from the perspective of birth – and thus in ways that never abstract from power inequalities, or from issues relating to embodied differences. We carry on idealizing autonomous ‘individuals’ who have equal rights and-duties, and look away from the fact that ‘persons’ only become such by first moving out of a state of foetal and childhood dependency on others. Just thinking about being born made this

(fiercely independent) man's 'brain go all red'. And yet this man's illness made his continued existence as an embodied self intimately dependent on the care of others: doctors, home-helps, social-workers, family, friends, neighbours.

In so far as we focus on these issues, we do it primarily in terms of ethical and political dilemmas. We see the failures in modern western philosophy and in our modes of imagining most clearly in current debates about abortion and about medical technology, for example, or in the current row over the 'identity' of a Europe that is made up out of individual states. However, this book does not deal with the question of identity on such overtly ethical or macro-political levels. Instead, it works more abstractly – and explores an ontology in which 'self' and 'other' intertwine in ways that allow us to think identity alongside radical novelty, power-dependencies, singularity and birth. In so doing, I will offer a critique of the metaphysical pessimism implicit in much poststructuralist and postmodernist feminist theory. But my conclusions are not just relevant for those immersed in the complexities of contemporary feminist discourse.

The response of my friend from Cornwall shows that even though this book starts from a feminist perspective – and asks how we need to rework notions of identity if we are to take the female human as norm – the conclusions that I reach are also relevant to males. Indeed, I would suggest that the model of identity that I put forward is more adequate for men (as well as women) than the classical philosophical understanding of the subject, substance and identity. There are imaginative and conceptual gaps – places where the 'brain goes red' – even for males who attempt to think the continuity of their lives in apparently more 'commonsensical' terms.

‘Common’ sense is pretty strange if it leaves this man from Cornwall unable to think his own birth. Although some of the arguments in this book might seem counter to ‘common’ sense and at odds with some of our most ‘intuitive’ certainties about the nature of ‘subjects’ and also of ‘objects’, the arguments are no more strange than some of the models adopted in recent science. And, indeed, some of the underlying metaphysical schemas of the ‘new’ physics will be used in chapter 3 in support of the metaphysics of sexual difference argued for in this book. I write about embodied selves that are paradigmatically female; but I would nevertheless hope that the male reader can overcome this barrier (which, after all, a female reader has to negotiate most of the time) and follow the development of the argument. There are important consequences for *him* – as well as for *her* – as I explore the theoretical grounding for a self which is born, and which is gradually shaped as it negotiates and renegotiates otherness, registering the resonances and echoes that the repeated movements produce.

As far as my female readers are concerned, I am only too aware that many of them will be distinctly uneasy with a feminist metaphysics that includes an emphasis on birth. Women have very good reasons to feel uncomfortable with any attempt to link female identity to reproductive capacities. I will need to return to this point later, in order to emphasize that ‘sex’ (one’s identity as a ‘female’) is no more a brute ‘given’ than is one’s ‘gender’: the ‘femininity’ – or ‘masculinity’ – that a woman’s behaviour might reveal. But perhaps it is enough to point out here that the hypothetical link between ‘woman’ and ‘birth’ that matters is ‘If it is a male human, it cannot give birth’, not ‘If it is a female human, it can give birth’. I will be suggesting that the dominant metaphysics of the West have been developed from the point of view of an identity that cannot give birth,

so that birthing is treated as a deviation of the ‘normal’ models of identity – not integral to thinking identity itself.

Metaphysics Defined

Many feminist theorists would also object to my starting point on the grounds that any feminist metaphysics involves a contradiction in terms. In subsequent chapters I will argue that some of the most powerful critiques of metaphysics emanating from within feminism are only effective because these feminists keep Aristotelian parameters for metaphysics in place. In fact, the term ‘metaphysics’ came from the way that Aristotle’s writings were ordered by his followers. Thus, Aristotle’s analysis of being *(ousia)* and substance came after or beyond *(meta)* his writings on natural sciences *(physica).* As a consequence, the word came to stand for the branch of study (ontology or the science of existence) that was treated in these writings and that was supposed linked with, but ulterior to, the sciences proper. ‘Metaphysics’ became synonymous with that which transcends the physical, and with the study of ‘being’, ‘substance’, ‘time’, ‘space’, ‘cause’, ‘essence’ and ‘identity’. Furthermore, ontology was regarded as necessarily bound up with the study of a ‘primary’ and separable substance or ‘being’ that is fundamental, non-relational and that remains constant through change.

What will be argued in this book is that other approaches to being, substance, time, space, cause, identity, and so on, are possible, and those who refuse to accept this are clinging to an Aristotelian tradition of ‘metaphysics’ that philosophers before me have also rejected. Thus, with Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century it became possible to distinguish two kinds of metaphysical enterprise. There was, on the one hand, ‘speculative’

metaphysics that dealt with an ‘unknowable’ and immaterial substrate of things-as-they-really-are. This ‘noumenal’ realm is Kant’s equivalent of Aristotelian ‘being’, but any speculation about it is rendered illegitimate – at least as far as knowledge is concerned. For Kant there was, on the other hand, ‘descriptive metaphysics’, which analyses what it is to ‘exist’ within the parameters of this space-time world: a world that was for Kant collectively structured via the underlying framework of human understanding, senses, imagination and reason. Descriptive metaphysics was, therefore, implicitly relational – and the ‘substance’ that was posited in respect of the space-time world reflected the relationality between ‘self’ and ‘not-self’.

This book develops a kind of ‘descriptive’ metaphysics, and thus operates within a post-Kantian tradition of metaphysics. But it departs radically from Kant in that it seeks to add sexual difference to the Kantian frame by querying the space-time structures and subject–object relationships that Kant viewed as both universal and necessary for any subject that could think itself as a persisting self. In particular, it is argued that considering the question of sexual difference – and taking the embodied female as norm – makes it possible to focus on other possible modes of ‘descriptive’ metaphysics apart from the one necessary and ‘transcendental’ structure laid down by Kant as necessary to ‘all’ human understanding whatsoever. Thus, my own feminist metaphysics rejects those parts of Kant which retain – and rework – Aristotelian ‘substance’. I argue that to think a persisting self it is not necessary to posit a permanent, underlying substrate that persists beneath matter and that remains always the ‘same’.

In effect, those who argue against any feminist metaphysics are blocking the imagination of an ontological alternative

to those substances that the Aristotelian tradition posits as the bearers of qualities and attributes. In subsequent chapters I will be developing a relational model of identity that can deal with the specificities and paradoxes of the female subject-position. However, since within feminist theory metaphysics is an underdeveloped field, a relational model of identity is more strongly associated with various forms of 'feminine' ethics than with a concern with an ontology that can take the female human as norm. In particular, Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982) is often positioned as fitting with a model of the self as always in-relation. Given that I have strong objections to Gilligan's 'ethics of care' – and given that I also need to discuss relationships of 'care', community and dependence in discussing the ontological constitution of selves – it is important to insist that a model of identity that works with relationality does not entail an ethics of care. Some further comments on this will be found in the conclusion to this book.

Indeed, this is a book of feminist metaphysics, not a feminist ethics. Although I do not give up on notions of 'female identity', I will argue throughout this book that there is not *one* dominant 'feminine' response to the paradoxes and predicaments of the female subject-position in western modernity. Women's predicaments are infinitely variable – and so are women's experiences. The identities of individual women are scored by a variety of forces and disciplinary structures. Not all of these scorings relate to issues of sexual difference. Race, nation, religion, education, family-background, neighbourhood, class, wealth – all contribute to configuring and patterning the individualized self that persists through time. My analysis does not, therefore, start with the 'inner' experience of feminine modes of consciousness or of 'feminine' subjectivity. It is not another contribution to the ongoing

debates about feminist epistemology, ‘ways of knowing’ or problems about epistemological (or ethical) ‘objectivity’. Indeed, Adorno’s attack on epistemology considered in chapter 7 is, in part, endorsed.

Instead, I am interested in models of identity for ‘the object’ – and, in particular, for a body that is capable of generating a new body from within its ‘own’ flesh and from within the horizons of its ‘own’ space-time. In other words I treat ‘woman’ as ‘object’, in order to find new models of the self/other relationship and new ways of thinking ‘identity’ – and, in particular, persistence of an embodied self through mutation, birth and change. The argument of this book will focus on the ‘female’, rather than on the ‘feminine’: on ‘sexual difference’ rather than on ‘gender difference’, but the analysis of ‘essence’ offered in chapter 2 of this book allows for individual difference – and, indeed, shifts in meaning in what a term denotes – whilst also emphasizing that for us (in our culture) to be a female human is tied to a body that could birth.

Recognizing natality – the *conceptual* link between the paradigm ‘woman’ and the body that births – does not imply that all women either can or ‘should’ give birth. Instead, an emphasis on natality as an abstract category of embodied (female) selves means that we need to rethink identity. The ‘self’ is not a fixed, permanent or pre-given ‘thing’ or ‘substance’ that undergoes metamorphosis, but that nevertheless remains always unaltered through change. Instead, we need to think of identity as emerging out of a play of relationships and force-fields that together constitute the horizons of a (shared) space-time. We need a metaphysics of fluidity and mobile relationships; not a metaphysics of fixity, or even of flexibility. However, that metaphysics must also be able to explain how a subject might be scored by relationality into uniqueness.

There will be appeals to my own specificity and to others' reports of their experiences at stages throughout the analysis. However, for the most part the argument proceeds by raiding the philosophical past for models of mobile identities that work without underlying permanent 'objects', 'substances' or unchanging and universal 'forms'. Although the position I am arguing does not fit with the dominant discourses of classical, modern or postmodern philosophies, it is important also to register that philosophical ages are not homogeneous, and that there always have been a variety of metaphysical traditions. Thus, both before and after Aristotle there were ways of thinking identity that privileged 'becoming', rather than 'being'.

The position that I am adopting does not lack philosophical precursors – and various philosophical voices will gradually be put in dialogue in these pages. Theodor Adorno, Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze, Luce Irigaray, are amongst those who play an important role – although if the book has a 'hero' that hero is (perhaps surprisingly) Søren Kierkegaard, since it is the latter who develops furthest the model of a relational self using 'woman' as key. Simone de Beauvoir, Henri Bergson, Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway and Friedrich Nietzsche also play key (though largely mute) parts. I am also aware that other philosophers could have been given a supporting role: amongst them, Denis Diderot (for mobile identities), Alfred North Whitehead (for 'process metaphysics'), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (for embodiment) and Hannah Arendt (for 'natality' and also for her attempt to rework Kant).

The Five Features

These raids on previous theorists are always conducted with the problem of sexual difference to the fore. This

involves taking natality seriously, but also four further characteristics of the female subject-position that make the position of the ‘female’ paradoxical (both excessive and lacking) if the male subject is taken as norm. The first of these additional characteristics relates again to the ontological dependence of the foetus on the mother, and to the fact that (in our culture at least) the woman is socialized as the primary carer for any children. This means that the ‘female’ subject-position is normalized as linked to a set of relationships in which power-dependencies and inequalities are basic. For the human female, inequalities in power relations cannot simply be treated as atypical, abstracted or put to one side. The idealized equal, individualized and autonomous subjects of Enlightenment thought do not fit the position of a subject who is normatively female, even though much contemporary ethics and metaphysics carries on using models of identity that treat power differences and relationality as philosophically irrelevant. For the (normalized) ‘woman’, society is not ever – not even ideally – a collection of equals.

The next (third) characteristic of the female subject-position that is relevant here is also linked with the ontological dependence of the foetus on the mother during the process of birth. For the (normalized) ‘female’ there is no sharp division between ‘self’ and ‘other’. Instead, the ‘other’ emerges out of the embodied self, but in ways that mean that two selves emerge and one self does not simply dissolve into the other. The consequences of this are extreme in terms of the models of ‘self’ and ‘other’ that typify western modernity. This ‘self’ does not emerge out of the exclusion or abjection of the ‘other’ (as is too often suggested in poststructuralist philosophy). Instead, it is from intersecting force-fields that ‘self’ and ‘other’ emerge.

This ‘self’ is not a ‘thing’ – a ‘substance’ that remains permanent through change – it is more like an ‘event’ that is ‘born’ in the space and time of interactive forces. This does not mean that ‘selves’ no longer exist; nor that there is no way of talking about persistence of the self over time. On the contrary, I will argue that thinking about the female subject-position allows us to retain a notion of self, but construe identity in terms of living forces and birth, not as a ‘state’ of matter that is dead or as a characteristic of a ‘soul’ or a ‘mind’ that remains fixed and constant, no matter which of its qualities or attributes might change. This self is scored by relationality, and attains its uniqueness in ‘experience’ as potentiality is patterned through directional movements over time. For this self the ‘other’ is within, as well as without. Rhythmic repetitions provide the ‘labour’ that allows identity to emerge from conflictual multiplicities. In chapter 9 I will turn to thinking identity in a world of sound and music, in order to make it easier to grasp how identity can establish itself via a pattern of relations, and an intertwining with otherness.

Models of the self/other relationship based on sound will be remarkably helpful. However, in our culture, at least, female identities are fleshy identities, and this is the fourth characteristic of the female subject-position that I need to mention here. In this regard I need to talk briefly about the English language, which is unlike the other main European languages in that it is has two terms – ‘female’ and ‘feminine’ – with related, but different, meanings. ‘Femininity’ denotes a set of psychic or behavioural dispositions that are more commonly associated with women than men; but there is no contradiction in talking about a ‘feminine male’. By contrast, a ‘female male’ involves a category-mistake or, more precisely, a medical or biological ‘problem’ that it is currently deemed necessary to ‘normalize’ either hormonally or surgically. To be

‘female’ involves a reference to embodiment, in a way that to be ‘feminine’ does not.

Foucault (1980) has argued that it is only in the nineteenth century that western Europe insisted on ‘normalizing’ the bodies of hermaphrodites to fix identities to a sexual binary so as to rule out sexual indeterminacy. However, what matters to the argument of this book is not whether there might not be other (better) modes of dealing with sexually ambiguous bodies, but that the metaphysics developed is one that tries to think what happens if we develop a metaphysics based on the subject-position that in English is linked with the ‘female’, not with that linked to the ‘feminine’. I will return to these issues in chapter 2. But this distinction is important if it is to be grasped how my position departs from more standard accounts of the ‘feminine’ in postmodern and poststructuralist theory. What matters to the argument of this book is that I am concerned with embodied subjects, not with ‘souls’, ‘spirits’ or an immaterial ‘I’ that is only lodged in the flesh.

This is particularly important, since not only is the subject-position of the ‘female’ more integrally linked with embodiment than that of the ‘feminine’, it is also more tied to fleshiness than that of the ‘male’. As my historical analysis of the category of ‘genius’ in my *Gender and Genius* (1989) showed, males were allowed transcendence of their biological subject-position via the tasks of spiritual production. The paradigm genius was both ‘feminine’ and male. By contrast, women were deemed ‘unsexed’ by their ‘genius’. They were seen as tied to a body that was designed for biologically reproductive – not culturally productive – work. In so far as there were women of genius they were not simply masculine women, they were ‘made male’. Indeed, it became a kind of cliché to say: ‘there are no women of genius; the women of genius are men’ (Lombroso, 1863, p. 138).

The ‘female’ subject-position is linked to fleshy continuity, rather than to an autonomous and individualized ‘soul’ or ‘mind’ that merely inhabits the flesh. However, the dominant model of the human in western modernity is disembodied: a ‘spirit’, ‘soul’, ‘consciousness’ or *‘cogito’* whose ‘personhood’ is bound up with rationality and soul, rather than with flesh. As Susan Bordo puts it,

> Not all historical conceptions view the body as equally ‘inescapable’ …. But what remains the constant element throughout historical variation is the *construction* of body as something apart from true self (whether conceived as soul, mind, will, creativity, freedom …) and as undermining the best efforts of that self. That which is not-body is the highest, the best, the noblest, the closest to God; that which is body is the albatross, the heavy drag on self-realization. (1995, pp. 4–5, second ellipses Bordo’s own)

Susan Bordo is careful in her phrasing. She does not claim that there have been no changes in the history of western attitudes towards the body. Indeed, she recognizes that for the ancient Greeks body and soul were regarded as inseparable, except in death. She asserts only that over this history the body has been devalued (in a variety of ways), and that throughout women have been linked with the ‘unbearable weight’ of the body:

> ‘weighed down,’ in Beauvoir’s words, ‘by everything peculiar to it’. In contrast, man casts himself as the ‘inevitable, like a pure idea, the One, the All, the Absolute Spirit.’ (1995, p. 5, quoting Beauvoir, 1949)

Even Bordo’s careful phrasing does not quite capture the complexities of our philosophical past, however. Whilst not denying that ‘the body’ is generally a negative term in the history of western philosophy, there are nevertheless writers in that tradition (Nietzsche, Deleuze, Foucault,

Sloterdijk, for example) who valorize the body. The question then becomes are (mature) female bodies also valorized by these thinkers? Or do the very real possibilities opened up by their writings still continue to take as norm a (male) body that is incapable of birthing new selves from within the embodied self? Sloterdijk's sexy – but also sexually neuter (male) – bodies are subject to critique in chapter 7 below. We will also explore Deleuze's use of 'woman' in chapter 9. Here I will argue that 'becoming woman' need not be conceptualized as no more than a 'flight' from all 'molar identities' – as Deleuze, and so many post-Deleuzian feminists and postmodernists, now suggest.

And that brings me to the fifth and final characteristic of the female subject-position that I need to mention here. This also derives from this historical link between the female and an embodied, fleshy self, and relates to the conflictual expectations bound up with the female subject-position. The 'experience' of the female human in our culture has direct links with the anomalous, the monstrous, the inconsistent and the paradoxical. Whatever the (very great) differences between women, all female (not 'feminine') subjects in western culture have to negotiate the paradoxicality of a mode of selfhood that is positioned somewhere between freedom and rationality, on the one hand, and passive and thing-like embodiment, on the other. This fifth feature is that woman is 'monstrous', but in a way that allows us to think identity otherwise.

'Here There Be Monsters'

I will be using this monstrosity – this 'phenomenality' – productively. Thus, I will argue that 'woman' is not simply all that has to be excluded in order for the (masculinized) self to establish its (fragile) autonomy and identity – as the

psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and so many post-Lacanian feminists and deconstructionists, would insist. Instead, I will be developing what might be termed a ‘metaphysics of immanence’ (in Kantian language), or also a ‘metaphysics of becoming’. In particular, I will be interested in a metaphysics of morphological transformations and identities that emerge through repeated patternings, intersecting force-fields, and flow. In chapter 6 this is related to Irigaray’s account of the ‘red blood’ that metaphorically links the mother to the daughter. There I develop further Irigaray’s notion of the ‘other of the Other’, which in Lacanian and Derridean frameworks cannot possibly exist. I also offer a critique of Judith Butler’s position on Irigaray’s ‘monstrous’ rethinking of identity, since Butler remains closer to Lacan and Derrida than to Irigaray herself. The quarrel with Butler is taken further in chapter 7, where her deployment of Nietzschean weapons for epistemological ends is contrasted with that of Adorno in the context of developing an ‘anti-metaphysical metaphysics’. However, I am also indebted to Butler’s ‘queer’ philosophy, which directs attention to power inequalities between women that have been underplayed by Irigaray herself.

Butler opposes any kind of metaphysics of identity and uses temporality to disrupt the categories of ‘woman’ and ‘women’ by parodic interventions. By contrast, I will explore what happens to the notion of ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ if we start from a consideration of the paradoxes that characterize the human female. In chapter 3 I will appropriate the concept of ‘dissipative systems’ from contemporary physics, and employ this model of structuring to help us think the female subject-position – as well as related concepts, such as ‘patriarchy’ or ‘post-colonial’ or ‘diasporic’ identities. Then in subsequent chapters, via an engagement with the ontological positions

of Kierkegaard, I will move on to explain how habit, repetition and the temporary equilibrium of force-fields can be used to explain how stability can emerge in a world of 'events' and 'becoming', and how we can think 'essence' without positing underlying 'substances' that remain unaltered through change.

I am not concerned to argue the only metaphysics possible is this 'metaphysics of becoming'. Instead, my concern is to show that it is not necessary to think in terms of fixed 'essences', permanent 'substances' or unchanging 'being' to secure stable patternings. Persistence of a 'subject' or 'object' over time can also emerge from within intersecting force-fields, dependence and flow. The subject that I will posit is neither completely free nor autonomous, but is also not simply passive. It is both marked – 'scored' – into specificity by its relationships with 'otherness', and yet is itself also capable of agency and of resisting modes of domination. This self is not only shaped by 'the other', it is also self-shaping as potentiality is transformed into actuality via echo and the feedback-loops of memory.

In developing the notion of such a self, this book will, of necessity, open a dialogue with those postmodern feminists who have regarded any account of 'feminist metaphysics' with deep suspicion – or, worse still, with hostility. I will be claiming that the accounts of 'metaphysics', 'modernity' and 'postmodernity' offered in many postmodern feminist texts are generally too simplistic – even where it is allowed (with Jean-François Lyotard) that postmodernity does not come after modernity, but is implicit within modernity. (See Lyotard, 1982.) Here, however, it is necessary to offer a caution. As is well known, 'postmodernism' is a notoriously slippery term and has developed in markedly different indeed conflicting – ways across a variety of disciplines (and countries). (See Bertens, 1995.) What I have termed 'feminist postmodernism' is not typical of all forms of

postmodernism. Furthermore, many of the most influential theorists on ‘postmodern’ feminisms would (or did) explicitly distance themselves from such a labelling: including Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Although my own preference is for making a sharp distinction between ‘poststructuralism’ (which involves a thesis about language ‘after’ structuralism) and ‘postmodernism’ (which involves a variety of theses about modernity and temporality), in feminist theory these strands are not clearly distinguished.

What matters to the argument of this book is that within many feminist texts that recycle these theorists as ‘postmodern’, a kind of orthodoxy about the undesirability of ‘metaphysics’, ‘ontology’, ‘identity’ and ‘essence’ has become a kind of mantra. Furthermore, ‘Otherness’ is generally positioned as antithetical to the ego, such that identity can only be established by the refusal of ‘Otherness’. Indeed, in much film, literary and art theory it also seems to have become an orthodoxy to insist that the ‘feminine’ cannot be represented and can only be mobilized as a site of disruption. It is this epistemological ‘take’ on postmodernism that I will argue against – not ‘postmodernism’ *per se.*

For me what is most exciting about postmodernism is the radicalizing of ontology that a number of the key theorists produce: including Deleuze, Foucault, Irigaray and Haraway. But this ontological radicalism is lost when these same theorists are viewed through an epistemological frame. Thus, for example, in chapter 3 I will discuss Haraway’s ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’ (1984) in ontological terms. However, Haraway’s figuration of the ‘cyborg’ – a machine/human hybrid – has been generally read as ‘anti-metaphysical’ or ‘postmetaphysical’, as we will see in the discussion of Rosi Braidotti’s *Nomadic Subjects* (1994) in

chapter 9 below. To a large extent, such an epistemological bias is due to the influence on feminist theory of 'the two Jacques' – Lacan and Derrida – who both place the '*féminin*' outside the bounds of the knowable, instead of emphasizing woman's potential to transform the actual.

In this book I argue against those who would demonize metaphysics – and who see no ontological alternative to the 'metaphysics of presence' or the 'metaphysics of substance' that have been deemed a necessary feature of 'phallogocentric' thought. Instead, I explore models for conceptualizing ontology that would allow us to retain a notion of sexual difference whilst also theorizing difference *amongst* women. Such a radicalized ontology does not deal with individualized substances, nor with a form which shapes matter in a top-down kind of way – by the imposition of spatio-temporal or categorial structures, for example. The identities I describe emerge out of patterns of movement and relationality, including 'resonance' and 'echo' in which the past is taken up into the present in ways that do not simply 'copy' a neutral 'real'. Although this ontology has been developed primarily with the problems of female specificity in mind, it should be clear that it is also useful for men and also for a variety of 'minoritarian' groups.

I am not pretending that Irigaray, Deleuze, Haraway and Foucault have not offered their own versions of an ontology in which 'otherness' is not always oppositional to the self. However, because these theorists have been so frequently read (and misread) through an epistemological frame both within feminist theory and also by other commentators on the 'postmodern' scene, I have found it useful to look back at the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. For me, at least, this has provided a useful way of separating the ontological and epistemological confusions that seem frequently to mire contemporary debate. Leaving aside Kierkegaard's

‘religious’ and ‘ethical’ writings, which have attracted most attention from the philosophical commentators – and concentrating instead on the aesthetic writings in which he explores the ‘phenomenal’ – will allow me to open up some of the potential of ‘a metaphysics of fluidity’ to deal with sexual similarities and fleshy singularities.

The metaphysics of flesh and fluidity that is developed in this book is far from being a new ‘common’ sense. However, in chapters 3 and 10 I will also suggest it is not all that strange, and that it is one of a number of ontological frames that are already operational. I would even go so far as to suggest that in the twenty-first century it is the metaphysical despair of the postmodern feminists that will come to seem odd, and that the currently fashionable dream of a fleshless cyborg will also seem naive. If there is to be a human/machine hybrid, we need to think one that does not just rework traditional models of identity in which ‘real’ identity is not fleshy. The ‘cyborg’ needs to incorporate a matter that can ‘morph’ new identities from within itself. In addressing these gaps in past and current philosophical theories – gaps in which selves are born and the ‘brain goes all red’ – it will be necessary to think female specificity. We will thus need to start by examining the problem of ‘essence’ in terms of a body that bleeds with other potential ‘realities’, and that generates new selves from within the embodied (fleshy) self.

2
Essentialisms, Feminisms and Metaphysics

I define ‘patriarchy’ as that form of social organization which takes male bodies and life-patternings as both norm and ideal in the exercise of power. In the patriarchal tradition of metaphysics, birth, growth and differential modes of embodied selfhood remain remarkably untheorized subjects. I am, of course, by no means the first feminist theorist to focus on these issues. But what is distinctive about my own approach is the emphasis on finding a new *metaphysics* that would allow us to take the female as norm. This is at odds with much recent writing in feminist theory where the issues under debate have focused much more centrally around feminist epistemology and the validity of ascribing distinctively female ways of knowing, experiencing, gazing, writing or speaking. Indeed, metaphysics itself has got a bad name, with many theorists maintaining that there has only been one metaphysics in the history of the west and that all metaphysics is necessarily complicit with patriarchy.

From such a viewpoint, feminist metaphysics would be a contradiction in terms. The only way forward would be to move ‘beyond’ metaphysics, ‘beyond’ firm identities – often, beyond sexual difference itself. But this is, I would argue, to adopt a too partial view of the history of philosophy and, indeed, of contemporary science. It is not necessary to be so defeatist. There are metaphysical alternatives that model identity in ways that would help us topple the patriarchal view that thinks human, sub-human and superhuman essence in androcentric terms. However, no

such move would be possible if – as some theorists have claimed – any talk of essence or ontology is anti-feminist in operation or intent.

For some time feminist theory has seemed caught on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, there are those who – recognizing differences amongst women – end by denying any form of female identity. On the other hand, there are those who – supposing male/female difference overrides other differences – look for a female 'sameness' or 'essence' based either on nature or on shared work or life practices. Although since 1984 a number of the most important feminist theorists have argued that it is worth adopting an essentialist 'strategy', essentialism has continued to be presented in most Anglo-American feminist contexts as a theoretical vice.[1] For those theorists who advocate taking the 'risk' of essentialism, it is just that we cannot avoid working *as if* there were female sameness if feminism is to work for political change. A few feminist theorists have adopted a slightly less unsatisfactory form of Lockian nominalism to find a way out of the predicament.

Lockianism will be considered later in this chapter, along with a more 'risky' essentialism. However, to preview my own solution to current dilemmas, I will be concerned with developing a theoretical model that allows us to deal with difference-in-sameness and sameness-in-difference, without reifying a given female 'nature', and also without supposing that there is such a thing as a shared female consciousness – or even styles of life. I will defend the notion of a female essence; and yet I will also insist that women's experiences are diverse – so diverse as to be untheorizable in terms of empirical generalization. Our identities are shaped by a conglomerate of forces and regulative practices, not just by the single matter of sexual difference. In so far as there is 'sameness' between women, this is not a matter of shared experiences or life-histories. It is, rather, a question of a

shared positioning *vis-à-vis* the founding metaphysical categories that inform our notions of individuality, self and 'personhood'. Thus, whether or not a woman is lesbian, infertile, post-menopausal or childless, in modern western cultures she will be assigned a subject-position linked to a body that has perceived potentialities for birth.

This point comes out in a recent interview with Judith Butler, who is amongst the most extreme of those who would deny any form of female sameness, insisting in her book *Bodies that Matter* that 'women' is a term that 'marks a dense intersection of social relations that cannot be summarized through the terms of identity' (1993, p. 218). However, questioned by *Radical Philosophy* about the omission of issues relating to impregnation and birthing from her account of what is involved in being ascribed a body that is 'female', Butler responds by suggesting that she is unsure that the question of reproduction 'is, or ought to be, what is absolutely salient or primary in the sexing of the body. If it is, I think it's the imposition of a norm, not a neutral description of biological constraints' (1994, p. 33).

What interests me here is Butler's argumentative slide from what 'is' to what 'ought' to be the case about the body marked as female. We can agree that there is nothing 'neutral' about any such description, but Butler implicitly recognizes the normative connection of the link between female identity and the capacity for pregnancy. Thus, Butler first of all points to the variety of women who cannot be impregnated or choose not to be impregnated. But she then goes on to explore the practical consequences of the way discourse works to establish sex-differential markers:

> It’s a practical problem. If you are in your late twenties or your early thirties and you can’t get pregnant for biological reasons, or maybe you don’t want to, for social reasons – whatever it is – you are struggling with a norm that is regulating your sex. It takes a pretty vigorous (and politically informed) community around you to alleviate the possible sense of failure, or loss, or impoverishment, or inadequacy – a collective struggle to rethink a dominant norm. (1994, p. 34)

Butler seems to be implicitly accepting that the potential for pregnancy acts as regulative norm for women in modern western culture. However, whereas her concern is to find a supportive community and a philosophy of gender that can be used to counter the link between the female sex and the potential for reproduction, my own philosophical concern is to ask what happens if we treat the potential for pregnancy, and the other four features of the ‘fleshy’ female subject-position, as central to the notion of personhood and self.

Butler would seem to think that there is nothing fruitful about my question – that the interesting work on the connection between being assigned to the female sex and the potentials for birthing has all already been done. However, although I have political sympathy for her oppositional politics, in philosophical terms a major question remains unaddressed in ways that also have consequences in terms of what is involved in living life as a female. What potential for opposition is open to those who cannot – or would not – reject the connection between being female and birthing? Indeed, philosophically speaking, what is it to think identity, personhood, essence, from the position of one who is normalized by the discourse of patriarchy as abnormal – with a body that bleeds with the potentiality of new selves?

Philosophers have endlessly written about death, about living towards death, about life after death and about finitude and fortitude as experienced in the face of death. However, there were very few philosophers prior to the feminist philosophers who took birth into account in the analyses that they offered of freedom, self-identity, virtue or the good life. Reading many philosophers we might, indeed, suppose that man experienced himself always first in isolation from others; that he never had to learn where the boundaries of his own self, his will and his freedom lie; and that he (or rather she) does not carry within himself (or rather herself) the gradual capacity to become two selves. We are lacking models that explain how identity might be retained whilst impregnated with otherness, and whilst other selves are generated from within the embodied self.

This lack of theorization of birth – as if birth was just 'natural', something that simply happened before man 'is' – might be most evident in some continental philosophers (in Heidegger, for example, whose theorization starts with an existent who is simply 'thrown' into the world); but it also evident in the way that the debates abut abortion are conducted in analytic philosophy. The debates about the 'rights' of the foetus feed on a tradition of locating rights in individuals, as if individuality was something that was established with maturity and was retained until death, unless there was some 'fault' or 'illness' or 'failure' in the individual. Similar assumptions can be seen in play in theories of freedom and justice which do not recognize power-dependencies, and treat individuals as if they were all equally rational, equally autonomous, equally self-legislating, equal partners in an implicit social contract – as if, in other words, children and babies did not exist and we were all equally (simultaneously) mature.

Feminine/Female

In the early years of second-wave feminism, there was an attempt to substitute the term ‘person’ for ‘woman’; to get rid of linguistic examples and expressions in which women were treated simply as objects, instead of fully human subjects. These reforms are by no means complete, and I am not arguing against them. But what is now recognized is that it is no good simply demanding that women are treated as, and referred to as, ‘persons’ if it turns out that our very concept of a person is itself gendered; if it turns out that we understand what it is to be a person or a self only by normalizing the mind/body relationship that marks males in our culture; and if it, also, turns out that this model of the mind/body relationship generates an inadequate ideal – even for men.

To exhort a boy to ‘become a man’ is, in our culture, to exhort him to take charge of his own life: to adopt codes of behaviour and conduct that involve, at the very least, a control of – and often an outright denial of – his emotions and his appetites. The anthropologist Alfonso Ortiz (1969) has recorded that in the culture of the Tewa Indians men who undertake demanding tasks are encouraged with the words ‘Be a woman, be a man’, whilst women are simply exhorted to ‘Be a woman’ (Hastrup, 1993, p. 38). For us, by contrast, it makes sense to enjoin a woman to stand up to danger ‘like a man’; but we hardly ever use ‘Be a woman’ – even to women themselves. Indeed, if we ever used such a phrase, we would probably be enjoining a teenage girl to accept her developing body. And that is because becoming a woman involves a privileged relationship to a bodily morphology – to breasts, body hair, menstruation, and the like.

A young woman is trained to fashion herself as a body and, often, to employ her mind solely in order to make herself more pleasing as a body. This is not (of course) identical with being judged as a body with a potential for pregnancy.

However, these two characteristics of the female predicament are not unconnected, in that it is in terms of a relationship with her body that female identity is secured. By contrast, as I insisted also in the last chapter, males are permitted a form of identity that is less self-evidently bodily and that can more easily be located in terms of a disembodied mind or spirit. In so far as the body comes into account, the (white) male body is frequently represented as a thing that is capable of being transcended – or as ennobled by forms of agency ('manliness') in which full humanity is expressed. Women's flesh is, by contrast, monstrous – with a materiality which is more fully immanent, and yet with the capacity to birth new selves from within the embodied self. As such, 'woman's' identity falls into an unrepresentable zone: somewhere between less-than-one and a becoming more-than-one.

For many poststructuralist feminists it has become conventional to link the monstrous 'otherness' of woman to the claim that there can be no essence of the feminine. The appeal to the 'feminine' in these theories draws on the gender/sex divide that played such a key role in the early years of second-wave feminism, but is also a consequence of the fact that the English language is being used to translate French philosophical theories and that in French the word '*féminin*' means both 'female' and 'feminine'. The word '*femelle*' does exist, but is generally employed only for plants and animals. '*Féminin*' is thus used for all the varieties of sexual difference that relate to 'woman'. By contrast, the 1970s socialist feminists in English-language cultures saw a way of improving women's lot by making a sharp distinction between being 'female' (a matter of 'sex' and biological 'givens' which cannot be changed) and being 'feminine' (a matter of 'gender', cultural conditioning and hence open to change).

In the poststructuralist tradition in English-language cultures, it is the monstrous (and dispersed) ‘feminine’ that moves to the centre of attention. The ‘feminine’ fluctuates and cannot be defined. Indeed, under the influence of Lacanian psychoanalysis and deconstructionist discourse, the ‘feminine’ is treated as the signifier of that which is excluded and at the margins of ‘phallogocentric’ language. As we will see in chapter 5, for Jacques Lacan the ‘I’ is only ever established as a unity, by pushing away all that threatens its fragile and fictional identity. That unity is the prerogative of a masculinized self. Thus, for theorists in this tradition, talking about the essence of the feminine is regarded as self-contradictory. But so also is any talk about the essence of the ‘female’.

Any attempt to reconstitute a female subject-position as linked to a body that could birth is viewed as being guilty of a triple category-mistake: firstly, of essentializing the ‘female’; secondly, of privileging ‘birth’ and assuming the ‘naturalness’ of heterosexual orientation; and, thirdly, of consolidating female selves into autonomous, closed unities. Thus, for many postmodernists it is also problematic to talk of a female ‘subject’ who preserves her identity from birth to death. Instead, the self is fragmented into a fleeting array of desires and impulses, driven by symbolic and cultural propulsions that come from beyond the self – with the ‘feminine’ that which represents this dissolution of self.

In recent years this ‘feminine’/‘female’ divide has been subject to critique, as a consequence of the fact that the 1970s sex/gender distinction has itself been re-examined. As Moira Gatens put it in an essay written in 1983 (before the so-called ‘new French feminisms’ had had much impact): it is a mistake to regard the body (= sex) as ‘neutral and passive’ and consciousness (= gender) as

socially determined. On this, I think Gatens is right, and I would also accept her blunt claim:

> Concerning the neutrality of the body, let me be explicit, there is no neutral body, there are at least two kinds of bodies: the male body and the female body…. If one accepts the notion of the sexually specific subject, that is, the male or female subject, then one must dismiss the notion that patriarchy can be characterized as a system of social organization that valorizes the masculine *gender* over the feminine gender. Gender is not the issue; sexual difference is. The very same behaviours (whether they be masculine or feminine) have quite different personal and social significances when acted out by the male subject on the one hand and the female subject on the other. (1996a, pp. 8–9)[2]

I would also go along with Gatens in emphasizing that 'biological' male and female bodies are themselves historically and culturally shaped. Being 'female' is not just a matter of biological 'fact' that somehow precedes the cultural markers that constitute 'gender'. Biology itself is a mode of discourse, and cannot be separated out from other symbolic codes and practices that assign privilege in the social networks of power. Biological 'facts' – and bodies – are themselves socially and historically constructed. Unmediated 'givens' play a relatively small role in the way in which we live out our sexual identities as 'female' or 'male'.

Although I accept Gatens' argument that 'biological' bodies are as socially marked as are the characteristics of 'gender', I would also wish to insist on a separation of the categories of the 'feminine' and the 'female' along the lines developed in *Gender and Genius* and also emphasized in the preceding chapter. As previously explained, there are two differing, but related, sets of terms in the English