

# Investigating Wittgenstein

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In debating the interrelation of malestream philosophy of the twentieth century and feminist thought, Wittgenstein is often mentioned. Yet little of the feminist literature seems to take up the challenge of weaving his later philosophy into feminist critique in an explicit fashion. Perhaps we are all too busy with our own ideas and spokeswomen; to adopt an old-fashioned Austrian philosopher is too ironic. Yet the plea for the recognition of difference within the feminist movement and recent writing on the subversion of gender identities finds a strong philosophical underpinning in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Much recent feminist writing contains personal and powerful rhetoric about the material and psychological constraints of the category of “women” on women of the “Third Wave,” and a compelling critique of the way this category has been tinkered with (rather than undercut) by white liberal feminists in order to serve their own political ends in the name of Universal Woman. These criticisms often seem to reflect the fact that “feminist scholarship has remained insufficiently attentive to the theoretical prerequisites of dealing with diversity, despite widespread commitment to accepting it politically” (Fraser and Nicholson, 1988: 389). To this we might add that whilst theory alone is seldom enough, there is a good case for making it part of the political battle to critically examine the often well-hidden philosophical paradigms which tempt us into essentialist and exclusionary ways of thinking.

Wittgenstein’s remarks, in a central section of the *Investigations* (§§ 66-131),<sup>1</sup> on the craving for generality and the failure of philosophy to “look and see,” shed light on the problem of essentialism in feminist thought, and the

tightrope on which feminists always balance in asserting the category of “women” at the same time as they try to subvert it. The way in which models of womanhood have been constructed and used as transcendental necessities by patriarchy has been well-documented. But what still disappoints contemporary feminism is the fact that this process continues within the movement, as the lives of white middle-class Western women are analyzed as typical of all female oppression. By paying close attention to Wittgenstein’s text, I believe, first, that we can solve these problems by accepting his method[s] of undercutting the traditional philosophical picture which “holds us *in*.” Second, I think the *Investigations* helps us find a third way between clinging to the category “woman” (overdetermined by patriarchy and sometimes painfully stereotypical) and launching into a poststructuralist rejection of categories *per se*, which makes feminist politics seem untenable (see Alcoff, 1989).

Thus, in what follows I first construct a Wittgensteinian version of the philosophical argument I wish to pursue in more tangible terms via feminist theory. In putting this together it became clear that §§ 66-131 provide a very helpful springboard to leap into feminist debates. However, as I particularly wanted to avoid writing (another) feminist theory paper which footnotes Wittgenstein as useful background without being attentive to his text, I focused initially on what I have called *Philosophical Investigations (in a feminist voice)*. However, following up on certain key points in the argument I move away from his words and style into excursive fragments which encompass thoughts culled from a large variety of issues within feminist thought.

## *Philosophical Investigations (In a Feminist Voice)*

And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread  
we twist fiber on fiber. And the strength of the thread does not

reside in the fact that some one fiber runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibers [§ 67].

1. Let us consider the construct that we call “woman.” I don’t just mean the white, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, young, beautiful, Western ‘woman,’ but all women. What is common to them all? Don’t say: “there must be something in common or they wouldn’t be called ‘women.’” Likewise, don’t say: “if women have nothing in common then how can feminism form a political movement?” Look and see what the construct of woman consists of, and what women might have in common. For if you look at them, and I don’t mean objectify them, you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships and a whole series of them at that. For example, look at heterosexual women. They are attracted to, and may form sexual relationships with men. Now pass to bisexual women; some features drop out and others appear! Think now of Women of Color. How are they like white women? And what is the relationship of a white lesbian to a Hispanic heterosexual? Does a rich woman in England have anything in common with a poor one in South Africa?

And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail [§ 66].

2. Furthermore, even when I talk about one woman it is not correct to find the logical sum of these individual interrelated concepts: if I am white, English, middle class..., the concept of “me” is not an additive analysis of these different parts. I cannot abstract from the rest that part of me that is race, that which is sexuality etc. Yet obviously, I can still *use* the concept of myself.

3. “So how can you talk about ‘women’ at all?” Well, in talking about them I give examples and intend them to be taken a particular way, so that they may be *used* (in the

game of politics perhaps). The danger of this is that we may not recognize that these are just examples and not an inexpressible common thing which represents all women. For what does the mental picture of a woman look like when it does not show us any particular image, but what is common to all women? I think that if you see “women” in a certain light you will use the concept in a certain way, and because your account does not apply to all women, but only to those you are thinking of, you will be guilty of a generalization which is quite unjustified:

The idea now absorbs us, that the ideal ‘must’ be found in reality. Meanwhile we do not as yet see *how* it occurs there, nor do we understand the nature of this ‘must.’ We think it must be in reality; for we think we already see it there [§ 101].

4. “So what is the purpose of this ideal, if it is not found in reality?” In this case, the ideal comes to serve a political purpose for you, as my examples serve my political purpose. The ideal woman can be held up as a transcendental necessity which comes to legislate who I ought to be. So when we identify similarities and differences, we must be quite clear that this is a pragmatic exercise: “for our forms prevent us in all sorts of ways from seeing that nothing out of the ordinary is involved, by sending us in pursuit of chimeras” [§ 94].

5. In fact, the ideal becomes an empty notion, which muddles me, and prevents me from seeing what I have to do. What feminist action should I take if I am in pursuit of a chimera? We have taken out all the substance of woman, and are left with a vacuous concept: “we have got onto slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!” [§ 107].

6. “But if you are a feminist, then you need to make generalizations about women, for this is the essence of

feminist politics!” Exactly. I have never denied that. When I look around a classroom, I see women having common experiences of exclusion and trivialization. But that is not to say that even we are all the same! I can draw a boundary around us, for a special purpose.

7. Sometimes you draw a boundary around concepts to use them yourself. This can be called a stereotype. What matters is that you look and see whether or not you have drawn the boundary accurately. Sometimes the boundary is oppressive; sometimes it acts as an object of comparison:

For we can avoid ineptness or emptiness in our assertions only by presenting the model as what is, as an object of comparison — as, so to speak, a measuring rod; not as a preconceived idea to which reality must correspond. (The dogmatism into which we fall so easily in doing philosophy) [§ 131].

8. But now you will say: “This is nonsense. All women do have something in common; namely, their bodies. Do you want to deny that?” Alright, the concept of “woman” is bounded for you by the physical reality of gendered existence. It need not be so. You have given the physical character of “woman” rigid limits, but I can use it so that the extension of the concept is not closed by a frontier.

9. But this much I will allow you: some aspects of male and female bodies are different. But have we drawn the most important boundaries there? Why do we not draw them around other differences between us? Certainly, it matters that I menstruate, have breasts, a vagina, a clitoris. But beyond this is anything certain? The physical boundaries of gender are arbitrary foundations, supported by the walls of social practice. The discourse we weave around our bodies is what creates what we think of as necessary reality.

10. So now you agree: “bodies don’t matter” — on this I am still only partly in agreement — and ask again “if even bodies can change, how is the social construct of ‘woman’

bounded?” By a set of rules which regulate it very well, yet which leaves some gaps.

11. “*Essence* is expressed by grammar” [§ 371].

First, the category of “woman” has been confirmed by language: by the gendered pronouns we use to divide the world in two. This obscures the contingency of that division and leads us to assign it more importance than we might otherwise do: “Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by our means of language” [§ 109].

12. The category of sex is created and defined by an abstract boundary, which is in fact, fluid. For what matters about being a woman? Look and see. We can claim things in common, like perhaps motherhood, or sexuality, or emotional sensibilities, but that is not to say that we will all, always, have these things in common. I use my own experience to find out what the women I know have in common. The construction of gender identity is a complex thing, and varies between people, and that is to say that it is mutable. (We have approached the problem from the other side and now we know our way about!)

One might say that the concept ‘game’ is a concept with blurred edges — ‘But is a blurred concept a concept at all?’ — Is an indistinct photograph a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn’t the indistinct one often exactly what we need [§ 71]?

13. So, perhaps we don’t need to specify what the concept “woman” is at all. In fact, specifying might not be to our advantage. Rather we need to take the longer path towards discovering who we are, and who we are not:

*And we extend our concept of woman as in spinning a thread we twist fiber on fiber. And the strength of*

*the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fiber runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibers.*

## First Excursus: Essentialism in Feminist Thought

Wittgenstein exhorts us to abandon the illusory ideal as a concept which must exist in reality. Rather, we should recognize our “ideal” for what it is: an empty notion which we struggle to make the world conform to:

What I am opposed to is the concept of some ideal exactitude given us a priori, as it were. At different times we have different ideals of exactitude, and none of them is supreme (Wittgenstein, 1980: 37e).

These comments are especially apt when thinking about how the category “woman” has been created and changed over time. Conventional, patriarchal political thought contains much theorizing about women which has (almost) never been based in empirical, reciprocal investigation of women’s lives and concerns. Rather, men have set up models for women to conform to, and when women turned out not to be like the theories, they didn’t try and change the theory, but all too often, the women: those who do not match the model are “not real women,” or “unnatural.” Stereotypes of virgin, whore, and mother are central to the enterprise of women’s oppression by confining women in narrowly defined and limiting roles. In her book, *Am I That Name?* Denise Riley outlines some of the ways in which the category of woman has changed through history as an ideal, in philosophical excursions which deny the nuanced realities of female experience and consciousness (see Riley, 1988). Different “theories” of womanhood have been constructed based on the structure of the soul, the potential for rational thought, biological determinism, and women’s relation to society. Taking a historical approach to this process reveals how the

definition of “woman” has been an ideological construct within which different ideals have held sway at different times. The results have usually been to use power in establishing a model which serves either as a box into which to shut women away (for example, a model of woman as physically weak being used to prevent any woman entering traditionally male work), or as an exhortation, urging women to be more like the philosophical creation (for example, models of female virtue which exalt “feminine” attributes). The process of learning gender is that of conforming the self to a pre-designated category, and the reason it is so successful is that the self comes, in part, to be constituted by that category, with varying degrees of mis-fit. In his rejection of metaphysics, Wittgenstein teaches us to recognize that this is a real process, different to different women in different places at different times:

If we look at these historical temporalities of ‘women’ in the same light as the individual temporalities, then once again no ordinary, neutral and inert ‘woman’ lies there like a base behind the superstructural vacillations (Riley, 1988: 98).

This philosophical realization has firm political implications. In the everyday, the ideal (and misguided) notions which we form of groups and then extrapolate to the individual are known as stereotypes. From what Wittgenstein writes of ideals, we can see that his philosophy is an injunction to flexibility in thought, and a rejection of unjustifiable generalizations which limit possibilities for the individual. This is a very familiar point, and one which has an honorable history in feminist challenges to patriarchal thought. There has been much worthy feminist theory that critiques the philosophical canon and shows, not only how it directly excludes women, but also how it does not recognize the partiality of its “male” perspective, and how it makes spurious claims to truth, reason, objectivity.

However, in what has been an increasingly soul-searching and disappointing project, straight white middle-class feminist theory has come to the realization that in doing

philosophy it has fallen into precisely the same traps Wittgenstein is so anxious to warn against. In practice, the tendency toward the universalizing meta-narrative has been carelessly adopted by feminists in positions of power with insufficient critical attention being paid to the realities of many women's lives. As Nicholson points out, there is a certain irony in the fact that this criticism has been rapidly recognized and deployed by feminists and anti-feminists, in most cases before the original, unsatisfactory paradigm had even become "normal science" (Nicholson, 1986). Patriarchal thought, on the other hand, has been rather slower to change. However, that does not mean that there is room for self-congratulation. If the strength of feminism really does lie in the "overlapping of many fibers" then we need as many fibers as we can get; we also need a critique of the kinds of thinking that have denied the multiplicity of women. In her book *Inessential Woman*, Elizabeth Spelman critiques universalizing feminist thought and employs a philosophy which is implicitly Wittgensteinian. Yet, she makes only one mention of the *Investigations* — in a footnote—and does not use Wittgensteinian language to make her points. Therefore what I would like to do in this excursus is to set out what I consider to be the connection of a Wittgensteinian method to the critique of exclusion in feminist thought that Spelman outlines.

Since the early 1980s, voices criticizing the feminist movement for its false generalizations about women's experience have been heard (or, rather, listened to). Tired examples of this universalizing include Betty Friedan's, *The Feminine Mystique*, which presents "getting out of the house and into the workplace" as every woman's salvation. As bell hooks and Audre Lorde subsequently pointed out, she could not have been thinking of those Black women who had worked outside of their homes, often in other (white) women's homes. The issue has therefore always been presented as a pragmatic one, and the demands for feminism to become a broader movement and one which recognizes the difficulty of a multitude of life experiences have been heard on the battlefields of political rhetoric. Yet I feel a

certain unease about the limitations of the philosophical discourse I have to work with in describing these issues. The totalizing, universalizing language we work in handicaps our ability to truly express the desire for difference: I do not want to say, "feminism should be more inclusive," because I am inviting others to be associate members of my special club. I do not want even want to say "feminism has been exclusive" because then I will be assuming that the monolithic politics that I know and understand is all that counts as feminism, and the experiences of other women have been marginal musings. Perhaps the solution is to say that there is not one feminism, but many—like different therapies! So what feminists of all kinds are looking for is a way of thinking, a philosophical imagination, which embraces plurality:

When I do not see plurality stressed in the very structure of a theory, I know that I will have to do lots of acrobatics — of the contortionist and the walk-on-the-tightrope kind — to have this theory speak to me without allowing the theory to distort me in my complexity (Lugones, 1986: 43).

The search for conceptual tidiness in philosophy conceals complex identities, as we will see, and therefore limits our political understanding and the potential for action. I want to show how this process occurs, and the kinds of implications it has, keeping in mind that *Philosophical Investigations* offers a way out of this labyrinth.

Clearly Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblances is an attempt to critique certain kinds of mistaken additive analysis. Rather than offering an account of the essence of any particular term, he points to a variety of connected ways it is used in language, none of which is definitive. He refutes several objections to this argument, all of which are helpful for our anti-essentialist feminism. First, concepts like "game," or, we might add "women," do not have a disjunctive common property—some part we can identify as being common to all games—but rather a set of overlapping similarities. Our attempts to find common properties are

examples of us being led astray by the single word which links these family resemblances. Second, a concept is not the logical sum of sub-concepts each of which can be rigidly defined — board games, card games, Olympic games, etc. — since we can, and often do, use it in a way which is not bounded. That is, we invent new games, or make the case that something not previously thought of as a game should be included. What Wittgenstein seeks to rebut is the idea that a concept with no rigid boundaries is useless, and shows us a variety of ways in which we use concepts despite their frontiers remaining open. We must take explanations by example at face value and avoid the temptation to seek out an essence for every phenomenon we encounter. As Baker and Hacker comment, this latter approach leads only to oversimplification and dogmatism, and may actually impede study rather than further it (Baker and Hacker, 1980). These ideas are highly pertinent to the debate surrounding how we define or investigate the concept of “women,” and also, as we will see, how we consider its constituent parts, like, for example, “lesbian.”

As I said in § 2 of the feminist version of the *Investigations*, my identity cannot be separated out into different parts: gender, sexuality, race, class, etc. This mistaken philosophical classification and division of concrete whole occurs frequently, and obscures the effects and the interrelations of class, race and gender. A misleading ontology which sets up mutually exclusive, bounded categories cannot accommodate those in between. For example, Spelman makes reference to a newspaper article which discussed “women and Blacks” in the military. Clearly this assumes that no women are also Black. The particular experience of Black women is not the sum of sexism and racism, but rather a unique oppression emerging from the dialectic of the two. Thus we begin to see how rigid, and strictly delimited, categories privilege the experience of certain groups and erase the realities of others.

Casting our political identities as a mixture of separable conceptual ingredients also leads to the creation of the hierarchy of oppressions. If they are separable, then one can

be fundamental, whilst the others are superstructural. Radical feminist thought often exhibits this tendency in sophisticated ways: classic works like *The Dialectic of Sex*, or *Sexual Politics*, make the claim that sex is the most basic of discriminatory factors, and in some context they are probably right. However, this glosses over the fact that as a universalizing philosophical point the argument is quite unjustified: how ridiculous to say that I, a white Englishwoman with an Oxford BA, am more oppressed than a poor, Black man in Harlem! Recouching the argument to be that I “suffer from a more basic type of oppression” is playing with words—precisely the kind of nonsense that Wittgenstein criticizes. For how can oppression be abstracted from its concrete forms? It is clear that all too often the “hierarchy of oppressions” philosophy serves the political purposes of the dominant group by setting Others against Others. Recognizing the family resemblances between the oppressions of different people rather than demanding that they be either entirely separate or exactly the same builds political bridges.

The preceding discussion shows that a philosophy of generality serves to delegitimize the needs of particular women. If we have a simple theory that explains sexism in one tiny slogan, then why look further for different realities? Here we see the misleading ontology of which Wittgenstein is so critical being used to oversimplify and restrict the search for different examples. The most crucial lesson to be learned here seems to me to be that the right to define identity, to think up the slogan, is not equally shared. Decisions about what similarities are to count (and which differences really don't matter) are often made by those with the most political power. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the group of women who have been rebuked for universalization are white, middle-class, heterosexual academics and professionals, the very women who have made the greatest headway into patriarchal power structures and are most preoccupied with the luxury of theorizing:

Essentialism invites me to take what I understand to be true of me “as a woman” for some golden nugget of womanness all women have as women; and it makes the participation of the other women inessential to the story. How lovely: the many turn out to be one, and the one that they are is me (Spelman, 1988: 159).

## Second Excursus: On Gender Identities

Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print. For their application is not presented to us so clearly. Especially when we are doing philosophy! [§ 11]

In what Wittgenstein has to say on the possibilities of setting the boundary of a concept in many different places, and further on the need to set a boundary at all, we see radical possibilities for feminism. It might seem at first as though we are here ignoring our own advice and using philosophy to obscure reality, as the word “women” actually corresponds to the set of women which is bounded by the physical reality of the female body. Indeed, as I will argue later, we do need to recognize the reality and significance of biology. However, we are also seeking to highlight the political content of “women,” which has been problematized by many feminist theorists, and particularly by lesbian philosophers. Thus, I want to argue that where we draw the boundary around the category of “women” constitutes in part, a political act, and one which should be scrutinized as to its particular purpose. “To repeat, we can draw a boundary - for a special purpose. Does it take that to make the concept usable? Not at all! (Except for that special purpose)” [§ 69]. If we see reflected in the term “women” a whole set of constructed gender recipes, then we must recognize the many cases of women and men who try to challenge the established frontier. Once we recognize the transcendental ideal which is patriarchy’s notion of “women,” and the political purposes to which it has been put, we should try to reclaim a better kind of female identity,

and do we even want to use the concept at all? Rejecting an ideal conception of Women should impel us to investigate further the diversity of roles and social constructions which coexist as examples of womanhood. We can take up the Wittgensteinian notion of foundations as axes:

I do not explicitly learn the propositions that stand fast. I can *discover* them subsequently like the axis around which a body rotates. This axis is not fixed in the sense that anything holds it fast, but the movement around it determines its immobility. (Wittgenstein, 1969: 152)

And thus we see that a displacement of those who are accepted as “women” — a shove against the barriers of the concept — might alter its meaning.

The possibilities for psychic and material gender transformation and the subversion of gender identities form a key part of breaking down simplistic and rigidly imposed binary gender definitions — an integral part of the task of feminist theory.<sup>2</sup> Again, there is a tremendous tug-of-war between the fact that feminists often lay claim to gender as the crucial element of an explanation, yet also struggle to be allowed to relate in gender patterns which are not (necessarily) heterosexual or “feminine.” If we agree that gender is a social construct, then there is no reason why it should, in a better future, reflect a binary sex distinction. Therefore I think Judith Butler is right when she says that we can, and maybe should, engage in:

an effort to think through the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power, to make gender trouble, not through strategies that figure a utopian beyond, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundation illusions of identity (Butler, 1990: 34).

The notion that the male and female bodies create two discrete groups which are 'bounded' obscures the fact that we almost never identify an individual's gender by unequivocal reference to primary or even secondary sexual characteristics (except, crucially, at birth), although these are usually posited as the "cause" of gender identity. In fact, physical gender cues can be overridden to an astonishing degree by social context (see the case studies in Devor, 1989). Breaking away from the notion that gender is a binary attribute, and moving towards a conception of gender as a multiplicity of relations is a huge leap for the gendered and straight mind. In what follows I want to examine non-essentialist challenges to the belief that the relational aspects of gender are immutable. Such challenges are made in a variety of ways, and by very different people, and therefore it helps to think of them as having "family resemblances" to each other, rather than representing a set of programmatic prescriptions. Some — most notably the transsexual phenomenon and the ideal of androgyny — turn out to be highly problematic for feminists. Others, however, like lesbianism, bisexuality and gender b[1]ending, may be more accessible and successful attempts to lend credibility to the idea that the concept of woman need not have a frontier. In the process we will become aware of the need likewise to sometimes draw boundaries around otherwise open concepts to ensure their political efficacy, and to affirm the significance of those very real, physical boundaries which we must work within.

In challenging the boundary of "woman," it is to begin with those who (wish to) change their bodies into that of the opposite sex (transsexuals), or those who have ambiguous primary sexual characteristics (hermaphrodites). Whilst an obsession with "genital status" merely reflects the myth that sex and gender are determinately linked, these phenomena remain deeply fascinating from a feminist perspective, not least in the way they have been treated in literature and popular culture (see Barbin, 1980). The extreme reactions of confusion and distaste towards those whose bodies do not accommodate gender demonstrate the deeply ingrained

nature of the binary schema. It is partly through the historical examination of the treatment of sexually ambiguous individuals that we gain a clearer perspective on the contingency of gender identity. Such examples serve useful heuristic purposes in exposing myths about sex and gender. However, they are just that — explanatory, not didactic — and therefore do not help us, located in different cultural milieux, to expose and subvert gender. They are often examples based on men and the male perception of femininity; to certain extents most transsexuals are male-to-female, most transvestites are men, the androgynous image tends to be masculine. Just as appeals to pre-patriarchal societies and feminist utopias can limit our ability to think and work in the here-and-now, so novel gender identities which have been constructed by men create illusions of radicalism and leave feminists back at square one.

Therefore, I think we need to look at what women themselves have done to subvert their gender identities, as they understand and accept/reject them. What can be done to extend the concept of woman, to challenge its boundaries, to subvert it, and to step outside it? In looking at the sexuality of the category "woman," Wittig asks:

What is woman? Panic, general alarm for an active defense. Frankly, it is a problem that the lesbians do not have because of a change of perspective, and it would be incorrect to say that lesbians associate, make love, live with women, for 'woman' has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems. Lesbians are not women (Wittig, 1992: 32).

By her account, our "form of life" is defined by sexuality, and heterosexuality is what creates the categories of man and woman by a series of relations and exploitation's which are part of our social systems. Thus Wittig presents us with a radical and provocative way of stepping outside the category of woman:



What a materialist analysis does by reasoning, a lesbian society accomplishes practically: not only is there no natural group 'women' (we lesbians are living proof of it), but as individuals as well we question 'woman,' which for us, as for Simone de Beauvoir, is only a myth (Wittig, 1992: 10).

In so doing she puts a twist on the homophobia of those who also maintain that "lesbians are not *real* women" (because they are, variously, "unnatural," "inhuman," or "wannabe men"). She agrees, but because she sees the category "woman" as beyond philosophical redemption she steps outside it to evoke a political and positive notion of "lesbian."

Yet how far is this falling into the essentialist trap itself? Wittig is violently opposed to the necessity of the category of sex, which is "a totalitarian one" (Wittig, 1992: 8), yet she creates the third category "lesbian" with the assumption that it is homogeneous (Fuss, 1989: 39-53). Wittig does not consider the butch/femme tradition, or the sado-masochistic trend in some contemporary lesbian cultures, both of which have profound implications for whether the category of "lesbian" can ever mean the same thing to all dykes. The "institutionalization" of sexual relations, the product of heterosexual society, has not been carried over into gay society *in toto*, and these acts are not pale imitations of their straight counterparts, yet norms, rules and role-playing exist and vary. In *Les Guérillères* and Wittig's other creative writings we glimpse what the lesbian future might be, and whilst it offers brave and dramatic philosophical vision, the view of the narrative "I" is intensely personal. Idealization of queer communities comes perilously close to making lesbians into paragons, the flip side of which is viewing them as demons. Better, perhaps, to recognize the family resemblances among dykes without holding them up as the new, improved Ideal Woman.

The way that Wittig's seemingly radically anti-essentialist position appears to throw up new points of essentialism is reflected within other lesbian philosophy. How exactly should "lesbian" itself be defined, and where

should the boundary be drawn? This debate stems from empirical realizations that lesbianism can be a political position as well as an emotional and sexual orientation (and that sexual orientation can be political, and politics can be emotional), and also from the perplexingly inconsistent response to the question "what do I have to do to be a lesbian?" The reply "engage in genital sex (only) with other women" seems, first, to reflect a phallic notion of sexual experience, and second, negates the experiences of those "lesbian" who have never even seen another clitoris, because they are, variously, celibate and not "out" or choose not to have sexual genital contact. Yet, if we go to the opposite extreme and posit aspects of a lesbian world-view in a great number of female activities, like having close female friends, caring for other women, nursing a girl-child, holding radical feminist views, then the definition is in danger of becoming meaningless. Anti-essentialist lesbian theory, like Rich's well-known lesbian continuum, is useful in pointing out the "family resemblances" between sexual relations amongst women and their (sometimes) attendant emotional, political and philosophical implications (see Rich, 1980).

Yet many lesbians resist what they see as an appropriation of their choices of sexual partners by (often heterosexual) feminist theorists who have not confronted their own bedroom politics. In a heterosexist and homophobic society, being on a comfortably distant point on the continuum is not the same as living in a sexual relationship with another woman, and on the most personal and profound of levels, professing oneself to have worked through homophobia and to be queer-positioned is no preparation for the "hands-on" bodily experience of learning to relate sexually to another woman. Nor does it adequately prepare for the extent of daily abuse which women who are publicly lesbian must endure, or for the strained/awkward/shocked/downright disgusted attitudes of friends and family which somehow were kept politely hidden until the physical presence of lesbianism entered the room. The same reservations we have about the "non-sexual" lesbian apply *vice versa*, to the "non-political"

lesbian, since although many lesbians *are* political articulate about feminism and engage in feminist activities, not all are. Some may resist strongly the notion that their “sexual orientation” be presented as a political issue. Resisting the urge to reduce lesbianism to sex does not mean that there are not good reasons for taking sex very seriously and drawing the boundary around the concept very cautiously.

The task of defining “lesbian” thus seems to flounder because no definition of who is to count is ever quite satisfactory. Ruth Ginzberg discusses various attempts to define “lesbian” before concluding that the problem lies in a kind of essentialism which insists that persons “be” their sexual orientation rather than behave in certain ways (Ginzberg, 1992). The demand to “be” lesbian thus insists that one fall neatly into a complex paradigm of behaviors and attitudes, without realizing that one is only partly defined by “lesbian.” As Ginzberg highlights, the term used thus mirrors our earlier reservations about identifying as a woman by being both under — and over — descriptive: the former because other things about the self-like age, race, religion, able-bodiedness etc., may be just as important to any individual’s conception and experience of self, the latter since to be able to identify primarily — indeed, *essentially* — as a lesbian reflects a certain amount of privilege and is the prerogative of those whose identities are unproblematic in other respects. Therefore, whilst we recognize the family resemblances between lesbian behaviors and experiences, we must resist a kind of essentialism which sees peoples as definitively “owning” a sexual orientation, although the demands of lesbian politics and the force of cultural oppression often impels lesbians to act as if this identity is primary and clearly delimited. The case for drawing boundaries around concepts is here an overtly political one, and I want to show how a Wittgensteinian-feminism clarifies the case for groups who are fighting to maintain a challenged identity in the face of political oppression.

Some feminist theorists have argued that “essentialism is a risk we need to take.” True enough, if this means finding things we have in common and asserting them against the

opposition; not so true if it entails a philosophical appeal to a transcendental self. The game of politics requires objects of comparison; it demands that we draw boundaries around concepts to use them as “measuring rods.” Clearly, Wittgenstein recognizes the need for some conceptual delimiting, rejecting a chaotic postmodern view of the philosophical world. However, he urges us to acknowledge the contingent nature of our concepts, and to view them as purposive tools rather than “a preconceived idea to which reality must correspond.” This approach can be useful in thinking about identity politics. This tag is often applied to feminism, the politics of race, and lesbian/gay politics, to mean that these movements are somehow defined by the essential nature of their participants. It often seems to be the case that the label “identity” obscures the fact that there is no essential affinity joining together groups of people which then inspires them to enter into politics, but rather sometimes *vice versa*, that the political system of coalition formation encourages the creation of affinities (Fuss, 1989: 97-112). Fraser and Nicholson draw similar conclusions, arguing that feminist politics should view itself as an alliance rather than a unified movement around a universal interest or identity (see Fraser and Nicholson, 1991: 389). The diversity of needs and experiences of women means that this must be a very specific kind of politics: composed of self-reflective members, in reflexive relationships with the organization, it must have institutionalized mechanisms for dissent and be willing to constantly criticize and change its self-proclaimed identity. Identifying weaknesses and criticisms of existing politics are what lead to the creation of an opposition. Within conventional socio-economic cleavages, even class allegiance is not taken to demonstrate “identity” politics. Therefore, feminism can make the case that it is a coalitional movement formed of people (women and men?) who have a number of political agendas which bear strong family resemblances to each other. Similarly, the people themselves have personal family resemblances, just like people who join the Conservative party have features in common (like wealth, perhaps, or conventional morality). Once we have

got this across, we may be better equipped to make real headway on political issues with which we are concerned, which are, to me, much more important questions than whether or not women have an Identity. Likewise, lesbians might want to restrict their definition to women who have taken the personal risk and commitment of relating sexually to other women, making clear that this boundary is a contingent political one.

Between the two poles of radical deconstruction and rigid essentialism lies a large philosophical terrain, and it is here that Wittgenstein sets us down. His choice is plain: we can leave a concept open (and use it perfectly well) or we can draw a boundary around it for a purpose. Here I think there is a case for taking very seriously the possibly negative political implications of that boundary, yet I do not want to suggest that for every concept Wittgenstein-feminism can keep its “blurred edges;” indeed, in some cases leaving open the frontiers of a concept might have negative political connotations, as we saw above. For example, some postmodern commentaries on categories like “women” and “lesbians” seem excessively reluctant to draw boundaries; leaving concepts open risks political vacuity and ineptitude. There are good political reasons for being inexact about what we mean in some cases, yet at other times philosophy must not be allowed to run ahead of reality it contends with, lest it (ironically) participate in the creation of deconstructive theories which are far from usage and experience as the metaphysical categories they seek to undermine. There is always a suspicion that this kind of theory is written by those who can afford to let their philosophical imaginations run away with them, leaving behind the prosaic politics for the less privileged.

An example of this excessively deconstructive approach appears in Jacquelyn Zita’s article, “Male Lesbians and the Postmodern Body.” Zita poses the question:

If, according to some postmodernists, the body itself is a product of discursive construction and a field of interpretive possibilities that can occupy different locations or

positionalities, what prevents a male body from occupying the positionality of ‘woman’ or ‘lesbian’? (Zita, 1992: 107),

before making the strongest case for the possibility of a male lesbian. Clearly, there is something Wittgensteinian in this:

...confirmation of socioerotic identities rests on sex-specific sex acts, or I might add, on the absence of expected sex-specific sex acts. In this commonplace construction of lesbian identity, bodies come to occupy an historically preestablished category of existence. The ‘male lesbian’ is not saying that occupants of this category are not lesbians, but that the category needs to be stretched — not by adding men, but by adding men who happen to be lesbians (Zita, 1992: 117).

Why does the suggestion also seem ridiculous, not to mention offensive, to many people, and especially to many “real” lesbians? The main reason seems to be that this “theory” works to its logical conclusions by focusing on linguistic politics rather than on the bodily experience of the agent and how she is located in a societal context of oppression. Zita sets out a postmodern theory of the body thusly:

The body under postmodernist imagery can be extracted from its historically concrete daily context and ‘shifted’ into an ever-increasing multiplicity of positionalities, a creative movement... which ‘invents’ the body itself. The simple unities and stabilities of self in the modernist world are shattered in this choreography of multiple selves, as the body loses its surety of boundary and its fixity of truth and meaning (Zita, 1992: 109).

What this seems to do, ironically, is deconstruct to such an extent that the everyday experience of bodies becomes an uncomfortable aside to the philosopher’s fantasy.

The possibility of a male lesbian is all very well, in terms of his politics and approach to sexual relations, but to affirm the validity of such a postmodern creation implicitly devalues the lived realities of female body experience. In other words,

a heterosexual man might *think* he's really a lesbian, but society certainly won't. When the "male lesbian" goes to a restaurant with his "female lesbian" lover, the wine will be offered to him. When he walks down the street with her, people will not throw cans at them from passing cars and scream "dykes"! Here again language obscures reality. These are good reasons for drawing the boundary around the concept "lesbian" in such a way that it includes those who have lived experience of the female body, since the social and political ramifications of this body are huge. The "male lesbian's" claims to lesbian identity seem to be based on a linguistic confusion about the usage of the term, and a desire to appropriate the concept for political purposes. There are better political reasons for lesbians to resist this appropriation: if the result of allowing "male lesbians" to enter the fray is a reduction in the amount of "female-lesbian-only" space available, or a loss of the distinct character of lesbian communities, or a weakening of the ability to powerfully name oneself "lesbian," then "male lesbians" are not helping their namesakes and should find another word to describe themselves.

We seem to have stumbled onto a curious paradox, namely, that at the same time as we try to subvert the stereotypical categories established by patriarchy, we may wish to defend the conceptual limits of the categories women create for themselves. Otherwise, everything becomes linguistically available for co-optation, and in the process its political saliency is weakened. Overcoming the "bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language" is not simply a matter of opening every conceptual boundary and inviting everybody in. Rather, it consists in careful attention to the political, ethical and epistemic implications of where we draw the boundaries around concepts. This attention focuses us on the realities of the category rather than on philosophical well-wishing. Similar cautions apply to the concept of "woman." Rejecting idealizations and challenging the boundaries of the category takes place against the complex yet real relationship between the experience of the female body and the politics of postmodern

feminism. Extending what "woman" means we are tempted to say "anyone can be a woman," yet the fact remains that the physical experience of the female body is a key determinant of women's identity. Thus, in my *Investigations (in a feminist voice)* I sounded a note of caution about neglecting the fact that the boundary of the category of "woman" is a physical one. Rejecting biologism should not imply an erasure of biology itself, but rather a more careful examination of the links between "the body" (or maybe, to be even more cautious of essentialism, "my body") and the discourses which are woven around it.

### Third Excursus: Toward Feminist Philosophy

We have seen that feminist theory itself must always be on guard against participation in the project of creating ideals which are stereotypical either because they are not based in women's real lives, or because they falsely generalize the experiences of one group of women to another. We need to realize that the very project of "theorizing" can undercut our own arguments by removing the political problems we face from the realm of the personal, the pragmatic, the specific, the *urgent*. The enterprise of "feminist theory" is one that makes many feminists uneasy, and when we examine the effects of exclusion in feminist thought it is not difficult to see why. Links between academic and activist feminism are generally tenuous and often hostile, and the politics of feminist philosophy itself are full of doubts and conflicts surrounding privilege and usefulness. In both Wittgenstein's life and work we find a clear unease with the very idea of philosophy, and a personal ambivalence towards giving up time and effort in order to create more of it. The irony of constructing an anti-theoretical theory has familiar parallels with the work of many feminist writers. As Wittgenstein says, I am also "by no means sure that I should make all these questions superfluous" (Wittgenstein, 1980: 61e), and therefore, there are clearly very many reasons to devote one

feminist efforts toward a tangible political contribution rather than an academic exercise in philosophy. In this section, I want to link Wittgenstein's ambivalence toward philosophy with the same kinds of feelings which arise for feminist theorists, and show what type of theory (if any) remains and can be justified.

What did Wittgenstein think philosophy itself is? This is one of the most vexed questions in scholarship on Wittgenstein, not least because the answers must be sought in some of his most perplexing aphorisms. Primarily Wittgenstein rejects a Cartesian philosophy of doubt and certainty (the aim of philosophy thus being to discover what we can *know*). Rather, he examines problems in language, and seeks to demarcate sense and nonsense: "My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense" [§ 464]. Philosophy ceases to be a cognitive activity and offers instead only new insights into old facts, clarifying and describing rather than explaining: "Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain" [§ 126]. It offers no theories or hypotheses (unlike science) and consequently rejects idealizations:

It was true to say that our considerations could not be scientific ones. I was not of any possible interest to us to find out empirically 'that, contrary to our preconceived ideas, it is possible to think such-and-such' — whatever that may mean. (The conception of thought as a gaseous medium.) And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place [§ 109].

Philosophy is not progressive but rather becomes a skill (Moore, 1959: 322-323) for dealing with the illusions of philosophy stemming from those fundamental features of language and structures of thought which shape the way we look at things. For those who see in this a kind of

conceptual chaos, Wittgenstein offers carefully justified footholds. We saw earlier how objects of comparison function in this way, and similarly a recognition of family resemblance concepts does not preclude a systematic description of conceptual phenomena or rule out generalizations. In fact, the skill of the philosopher might lie in precisely this, as Baker and Hacker suggest:

What, then, are the criteria for possession of philosophical understanding...?...the skill manifest in marshaling analogies, disanalogies, and actual or invented intermediate cases that will illuminate the network of our grammar (Baker and Hacker, 1980: 544).

Wittgenstein seemed to envisage philosophy as thus entering a new paradigm — a kink in the development of human thought analogous to Galileo's revisions (Baker and Hacker, 1980: 322-323) — where it no longer mimicked science and struggle with metaphysics; instead: "The [philosophical] problems are solved, not by giving new information but by arranging what we have always known" [§ 109].

In reflecting on recent feminist theory, I can immediately see some points of connection. Certainly there has been minimal emphasis on uncovering truth *a priori*, and radical feminist philosophy has in general been imbued with a keen sense of theory as de-/re-constructive, with the recognition and acceptance of previously silenced or unheard voices, and with philosophy as the investigation of alternative world-views. Philosophical language has featured in this project as a significant limitation to the free expression of women's voices: in the critique of sexist/phallogocentric discourse, in creating new, gynocentric forms of philosophical expression, in challenging narrow parameters of what is to "count" as philosophy, and in confronting language as a tool of oppression. This strategy undermines a phallogocentric conception of philosophy which posits "hard" disciplines such as logic and epistemology as the "core" of philosophy, whilst "soft" areas — like ethics — remain peripheral, and in doing so echoes a Wittgenstein concept of

the “democratic” “body philosophical” (Baker and Hacker, 1980: 685). For feminist philosophers as well, philosophy is a skill and activity, a way of shooting down conceptual dogma through the affirmation of different experience and reality. And Wittgenstein has helped us to see the dogmas of narrow concepts, essences, and ideals and to find a philosophical therapy which frees us from them. However, we have also seen how hard it is for feminist philosophy to evade such philosophical doctrine and a preoccupation with theory above action.

In this sense, María Lugones joins Spelman in voicing doubts about the implications for feminism of theorizing itself. The demand for the “woman’s voice,” as we have seen, presupposes an identity in which no other elements are part of the speaking out as oppressed (Lugones and Spelman 1986) and leads us to treat identities as conveniently compound. Furthermore, Lugones and Spelman place theory in a sociopolitical location, pointing out that it requires time and privilege. Asking what the motivation is for doing “feminist theory,” and especially debating a “philosophy of difference,” Lugones affirms that:

White women theorists seem to have worried more passionately about the harm the claim does to theorizing than about the harm theorizing did to women of color (Lugones 1991: 41).

Hallett reinforces this point more conservatively, by documenting the “will” to essentialism which historically pervades philosophy. Philosophers have always felt free to disregard usage, and desire generality and unity, whilst arguing that theory which draws on essence facilitates “crisp communication, rigorous reasoning, and general understanding” (Hallett, 1991: 137). Hallett comes close to recognizing that his point is politically charged — “essences may play a key role in an individual’s intellectual agenda, or that of a whole school; they may appear crucial to large speculative projects...” (Hallett, 1991: 137) — yet it remains to Lugones to show how essentialist “theory” has erased the

experience of women of color. Again theory — echoing Wittgenstein “instead of craving for generality I could also have said ‘the contemptuous attitude towards this particular case’” (Wittgenstein, 1958a: 18) — undermines specificity: This time not by denying difference in language, but in reality:

The white woman theorist did not notice us yet, her interpretation of the question placed emphasis on theorizing itself, and the generalizing and theorizing impulse led the white theorizer to *think of all differences as the same*, that is, as underminers of the truth, force, or scope of their theories. Here racism has lost its character and particular importance — a clear sign that we have not been noticed. This trick does not allow the theorizer to see, for example, the need to differentiate among racism, colonialism, and imperialism, three very different interactive phenomena (Lugones 1991: 410).

The sources of this kind of obfuscation once again lie in the (politically and philosophically motivated) will to essentialism. The verbal sameness of the term “difference” and the multitude of arguments we have advanced under its banner again redirect attention to linguistic uniformity rather than to the many political issues surrounding “different differences” which exist in real lives.

This highlights the anti-philosophical nature of the Wittgensteinian feminist view, and indeed it is opposed to a philosophy in the traditional style which seeks to identify transcendental and universal truths. Yet it does not preclude the type of philosophy which attempts a careful picking apart of the falsehoods that the old philosophy perpetuated, and a better kind of thinking which recognizes its own partial view. I think that the project of “feminist theory” can proceed, but with caution. In part, this is to avoid the total fragmentation of solipsism by a radical postmodern view. If “difference” is pursued with too much zeal, then one conclusion is that the only interests I can intelligibly have at heart are my own (and they too disintegrate), and feminist politics becomes as individualistic as the most extreme liberal

view. Here again, the Wittgensteinian notion of objects of comparison can come to our aid by showing us that we draw boundaries around concepts to use them for a purpose, not to give any privileged ontological status to what lies within the boundary.

The challenge to feminist theory comes from the successful integration of thought and action, and an effective and honest articulation of the connections and contradictions which link them. It is impossible to imagine a world without theory, in the broadest sense of the term, where people did not enquire into different conceptualizations and seek to explain a variety of events within a single framework. Moreover, this process is itself rightly prized as one of the attributes of a self-determining individual or community. What is of greater concern than philosophy itself is the form and context of theory and the uses to which it is put. Therefore, in the next section I would like to offer some tentative ideas for a Wittgensteinian-feminist research program.

If we have a philosophical imperative to base our theories on the lives of real people, then as philosophers, and especially as feminist theorists, there is a corresponding duty to base ideas and creative thought on the experience and investigation of other viewpoints. The injunction to “look and see” is a very political one, linking philosophy to other disciplines in the social sciences and to literature, as we seek to expand our awareness and understanding of the “extended family” of women. In the *Investigations* we are urged to abandon the ideals which have led us onto “slippery ice,” and I suggested that this implies a return to the rough ground — to the everyday of female experience as the source of feminist reflection, rather than vacuous and universalizing definitions of Woman. Furthermore, in Wittgenstein’s analogy of the labyrinth we see this theme developed: there is no way of looking at the labyrinth from above, rather it must be approached by a particular path:

Language is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from one side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side no longer know your way about [§ 203].

Thus the closest we come to a notion of objectivity is the gathering together of a multiplicity of viewpoints. To extend the analogy, if we want to map out the labyrinth we must enquire of those that have entered it along various routes. Perhaps there is no one objective language use, no correct way of representing the world, but a variety of ways which, according to their various strengths, hold the foundation in place [Wittgenstein, 1969: § 152]. In these remarks, I think, Wittgenstein’s work clearly resonates with (feminist) standpoint epistemologies, which seek to offer some epistemic privilege to those who perceive the world more complexly by virtue of their location. By placing us squarely on the rough ground, it is clear that a Wittgensteinian philosophy offers an injunction to find out about different women’s lives.

We are still left with the question of whether or not such philosophy suggests a certain *kind* of approach to research, a certain method. In particular, we might ask whether or not there are any enlightening analogies to be drawn between *feminist* research and Wittgenstein’s method and ideas. Here I leave this question aside, yet I think there are fruitful connections to be made between certain radical anti-positivist methodologies and a Wittgensteinian philosophy of social science.<sup>3</sup> Discussion of these issues might also lead us to a more purposeful and empowering feminist theory. The attempt to change our conceptions of self and society has been a key element of, for example, consciousness-raising, and are not something feminism can afford to dismiss as a luxury. What is problematic, of course, is the *kind* of theory that has been done, and the people who have done it. Here we are also trying to find a different context. He seems to have felt (in a time when he was probably right) that a dissolution of conventional metaphysics and the “bewitchment of our understanding” by language leave no justifiable role for the “armchair philosopher.” Hence he

enjoined his pupils to be actors in the world and abandon academic philosophy. What he leaves is a “therapy” in philosophy which can itself serve educational goals, but which, maybe more importantly, delegitimizes the passive Cartesian search for a single truth and sends us out instead to investigate multiple discourses. For the political activist this investigation can and should be conjoined with a discussion of information and political work. Clearly this dual role can be problematic and anxiety-provoking, and within the confines of the academic establishment is all too often met with varying degrees of incomprehension and disapproval. However, the example of some feminists’ commitment to pursuing the interests of the disempowered groups they work with, and to challenging the boundaries of academic research, illustrate a certain potential for transformative feminist sociology.<sup>4</sup>

## Epilogue

In the preceding I have tried to show how adopting Wittgenstein’s methods for philosophy can chart a third course for feminism, between the rocks of determinist essentialism and nihilistic postmodernism. In particular, I hope I have pointed to some of the traps that feminist theory might fall into by using ideals and by indicating how the notion of “objects of comparison” might help avoid the kinds of philosophical mistakes, which translate into politics, are partial and exclusionary. I think that the vision of the *Philosophical Investigations* offers the possibility of attacking the seemingly immutable parameters of everyday concepts and can be taken as a manifesto for social change (see Skinner, 1988) and I have tried to illustrate a few of the implications for feminist politics, philosophy and research. Whilst what I have to say has mainly been directed against the philosophical project of essentializing, it is clear that this critique also has implications for how far we can go politically with gynocentric feminism. It is no longer enough to come up with theories of mothering or women’s relation

to nature that posit immutable feminine characteristics which are the flip-side of patriarchal stereotypes. In a sense, the recognition of the partial nature of these accounts marks a new stage of maturity in the discipline “Women’s Studies.” Reversing the traditional social science course, we are moving from grandiose and overarching theory towards an attempt to pick out the pieces of the huge jigsaw puzzle that forms women’s lives. Rather than a failure of feminism, this needs to be seen as progress, a step back to the “rough ground.”

There is a strange paradox in working through the Wittgensteinian mind-set, which is that the end result is often a sense of frustration with those who have not, in his sense, “given up” philosophy. Being Wittgensteinian in a world where no-one else is can be lonely, especially when we have to argue with others on their terms, not our own. Of course, this realization does not preclude us advocating what we have learned from the Investigations, and in the case of feminist politics, from forming groups with similar understandings of identity. As Wittgenstein says:

A present-day teacher of philosophy doesn't select food for his pupil with the aim of flattering his taste, but with the aim of changing it (Wittgenstein, 1980: 17).

The limitations and failures of changing the “tastes” of others account for the sense of struggle and frustration which often accompanies a Wittgensteinian program.

So, what has been the point of going through this philosophical exercise at all? Especially if it only “leaves everything as it is?” Wittgenstein baldly states:

A philosopher is a man [sic] who has to cure many intellectual diseases in himself before he can arrive at the notions of common sense (Wittgenstein, 1980: 44).

Yet apart from the obvious rejoinders above — that we have learnt something about feminism and demystified philosophy in the process — there is a final sense of having gone



through a therapy, of being better for having realized the error of our ways, and quicker to pounce on mistakes on other's part. Furthermore, if we come to the realization that philosophy in the traditional sense can be abandoned then what we are left with, it seems, is an injunction to action:

Working in philosophy — like work in architecture in many respects — is really more a working on oneself. On one's own interpretation. On one's way of seeing things. (And what one expects of them.) (Wittgenstein, 1980: 16).

What we expect of Wittgensteinian therapy is perhaps a new political vigor, a renewed commitment to action. If we see possibilities for social criticism and change in the ideas he offers, then it is crucial that feminisms seize the opportunity to shape the social construction of gender. The difference between feminists and anti-feminists strikes me as precisely this: the affirmation or denial of our right and our ability to construct, and take responsibility for, our gendered identity, our politics, and our choices (Alcoff, 1989: 322).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This and all other references to Wittgenstein are taken from *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed, 1958, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting here that breaking down a binary gender/sex schema would not only benefit feminists/women. As Cornell points out ("Gender, Sex and the Equivalent Rights" in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Judith Butler and Joan Scott, eds., New York: Routledge, 1992), gay men are not awarded equal rights because they are constrained by the gender/sex dichotomy e.g. in their right to marry.

<sup>3</sup> In another version of this paper I develop this theme at greater length. See Cressida Heyes, "Investigating Wittgenstein: Essentialism in Feminist Political Thought," Master's Research Paper, McGill University, 1993: 34-40.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Elizabeth Frazer's methodological approach in "Thinking About Gender, Race and Class" in Deborah Cameron ed., *Researching Language: Issues of Power and Method*, London: 1992.

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## Richard Rorty's Post-Foundationalist, Historicist, Ethnocentrist Solidarity

*Pura Sanchez Zamorano*

In "Liberalism and Communitarianism," Will Kymlicka argued that, despite Rorty's misleading remarks, Rorty's disagreements with "those Kantians" are not about "where to *begin* the moral conversation ... but about where that enterprise *must end up* .... [For] Rorty, 'the notions of community and shared values mark the limits of practical reason,' not just its point of departure" (J. Cohen quoted in Kymlicka, 1988: 18). Kymlicka is especially distressed by Rorty's argument that "liberals need be responsible only to their own traditions, and not to the moral law as well," *because* there are no (justificatory or moral) reasons which are not internal to a historical tradition or interpretive community (Rorty, 1991). He calls these tenets a dogmatic prophecy.

Although I agree with Kymlicka, I submit that Rorty's disagreements with many of us are also about what characterizes and who were/are the parties to the (moral) conversation of liberal democracy; about who and where "we liberal democrats" really are, and what made it possible for liberal democracy to get to where it is now. For, against those who "*pretend that everybody (every 'culture') has always spoken the same language*," Rorty has done his best to show that no one (no culture) ever has. His dogmatism is also retrospective. With the "happiness" of the latecomer he praises, Rorty strengthens the Eurocentric or West-centric (ideological) "narrative" of the progression of liberal democracy's ideals from Greece, to European Christianity,