

## Introduction

Since the 1990s Sally Haslanger has attempted to bring the concerns of feminist theoreticians<sup>1</sup> like Catherine MacKinnon, Elizabeth Anderson and Marilyn Frye to the attention of (predominantly white, male) mainstream philosophers. She has endeavoured to do this not by lamenting (merely) their marginalisation but by arguing that at least part of the work of philosophy is not to describe concepts but to change them. Their definitions should therefore be formulated in accordance with a cognitive framework that foregrounds the question of *value*. In response to a question like ‘what is a woman?’—or ‘what is race?’—inquiry should be shaped by the requirement to elucidate the *purposes* served by such concepts. The contention is that by helping elucidate those purposes, feminist epistemology is crucial in formulating meanings that serve better our legitimate values and interests.

In emphasizing the potentially revisionist nature of her undertaking, Haslanger stakes out her position in relation to two alternatives. Whereas for *naturalists* concepts like *woman* and *race* are used to pick out (consciously or otherwise) sets of biological facts, *eliminativists* maintain that it is the very absence of such natural kinds for these concepts to track that renders them vacuous. The assumption—call it the *Reductive Assumption* (RA)—that concepts are rendered legitimate only insofar as they are analyzable in terms of the appropriate sort of facts is thus common to naturalists and eliminativists alike: they disagree merely about the existence of the associated stretch of nature. For Haslanger, then, the dispute between the eliminativist and the naturalist is grounded in a collective failure to countenance the objectivity of *non-natural* facts. On her constructionist alternative, the philosopher’s task is in part to ‘debunk’ the assumption that the categories in question are

real only if natural (2006, p. 89) by revealing that *social* kinds are “just as fully real” (2008b, p. 58) as natural kinds.

Haslanger’s view of social reality as both objective and mutable—and of one of the tasks of philosophy being to help reshape that reality in accordance with our moral and political values—resonates with the conviction held by (classical and contemporary) pragmatist thinkers to the effect that philosophy should be in the service of extending and developing democracy—of changing, rather than (merely) describing, the world<sup>2</sup>. In *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, for example, Dewey argues that if philosophy comes to acknowledge that “under guise of dealing with ultimate reality, [it] has been occupied with the precious values embedded in social traditions... it will be seen that the task... is to clarify men’s ideas as to the social and moral strifes of their own day... [and] become... an organ for dealing with these conflicts” (Dewey, 1988, p. 94). However, Haslanger’s (putative) pragmatist credentials are more fruitfully explored in relation to Dewey’s recent champion Richard Rorty. Rorty’s early work in the philosophy of mind addresses the question of what sort of considerations might be brought to bear in recommending the reduction or elimination of one concept to/by another. Moreover, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Rorty, 1980) attempts to ‘debunk’ a realist concept of knowledge in order to advance an alternative—epistemological behaviourism—that, in socializing of the sources of normative authority, clears a space for the sort of moral-political critique Haslanger favours. More pertinently, Rorty deploys the criticism of moral universalism that this socialization is thought to warrant in an interpretation of MacKinnon’s work that champions Dewey’s idea of moral progress and stands in contrast to Haslanger’s own.

The aim of this paper, then, is to evaluate Haslanger’s project ‘to offer accounts of gender and race informed by a feminist epistemology’ (2000, p. 32) by focusing in the main

on one topic: the proposed revision to the concept *woman*<sup>3</sup>. The focus in section 2 is Haslanger's view that our moral-political values are best served by *reducing* the concept woman to (roughly) 'person subordinated on the grounds of her sex'. It outlines how the constructivism that legitimates this stance relates to naturalist and eliminativist alternatives, and the consequent importance it lends to the work of feminist epistemologists. Section 3 introduces an alternative approach that draws on Rorty's early work on the mind-body problem. According to this, the concept women should be subject not to reduction but to *elimination*, the consequence being that there never were any women. The intention in proposing this is not to promote a straight alternative to Haslanger's account; rather, it is to show that the 'theory of justice' (Haslanger, 2013, p. 10) that she supposes must be available if one is to engage *legitimately* in conceptual critique is unlikely to settle the matter between the rival options, and that the search for such a theory is more a distraction from than an instrument for the social change desired. That does not however mean that the *eliminativist* option is without value, and section 4 draws on Rorty's rival appropriation of MacKinnon's work to argue that an adaptation of the idea can be justified pragmatically insofar as it illustrates how, on the basis of our best image of ourselves, we can imagine more just ways of thinking and acting. Section 5 presents the conclusion that in the case under consideration Haslanger's political project is better served by a pragmatist account of conceptual revision than by one that relies on overly theoreticist assumptions.

### Revisionism and the Reductive Assumption

In 'Gender and Race', Haslanger offers the following definition:

*S is a woman* iff<sub>df</sub> S is systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is "marked" as a target for this treatment by

observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction. (2000, p. 39)<sup>4</sup>

Call this proposed definition **D**. Since **D** is not what most people would understand by the concept woman, we appear to have two possibilities. Either,

1. most people *do not* mean (at least fully) what they think they mean, or
2. most people *should not* mean (at least fully) what they (do or merely think they) mean.

Firstly, note that this use of 'fully' isn't an equivocation. For example, Jim possesses the concept *elm*<sup>5</sup>. He knows an elm is a sort of tree and he knows that it's different from a beech tree, but he cannot distinguish an elm from a beech. This does not of course signify that Jim possesses a different concept *elm*, something corresponding roughly to what beech and elm have observationally in common. If at Jim's behest his forester cuts down all the elms he doesn't fail to carry out Jim's order because he leaves the beeches standing. Contrast this with the case of John, who for some odd reason thinks that the elm is a variety of rodent. In Jim's case we'd conclude that the concept he employs isn't exactly what he thinks it is but that the overlap in understanding is sufficient for us to view him as subject to some form of error (and to correct his understanding/usage accordingly). In John's case there's no reason to think he has the concept *elm* at all. Accordingly, on (1) people do in fact mean **D** when they use the term 'woman' even though most would deny that that do; on (2) people *should* mean **D** when they use the term. Since these alternatives put agents in somewhat different situations and it's worth looking briefly at Haslanger's (2006, pp. 97–101) taxonomy of concepts in order to clarify matters.

According to Haslanger concepts fall into three classes: manifest, operative and target. Consider an example. Jill has the concept rape, which she understands to mean

forced penetration. That is the manifest concept. Despite thinking of this as the concept she intends to apply, she only ever uses the term to describe events involving male violence towards women. The operative concept is the concept that “best captures the distinction that I in practice draw” (op. cit., p. 98). In the case of Jill, then, in failing to mean what she thinks she means her manifest concept is adrift from the operative concept (perhaps because her self-image requires a degree of self-deception). Finally, the target concept is that which “all things considered (my purposes, the facts, etc.) I should be employing” (p. 99). Assuming that an appropriate target concept removes gender specificity and includes nonviolent forms of coercion (amongst other considerations), Jill’s case demonstrates that the operative and manifest concept can fail to coincide without either tracking the appropriate target concept. She does not mean what she thinks she means, and neither what she thinks she means nor what she in fact means are what she *should* mean.

Generalising these considerations we get:

- 1' For most people, the manifest concept does not (fully) coincide with the operative concept.
- 2' For most people the manifest concept does not (fully) coincide with the target concept.

In scaling up from idiosyncratic examples like Jill’s to ‘most people’ the mismatches between manifest and operative or target concepts is not between an individual’s understanding and usage but between ‘our’ understanding and the way the concept is (operative) or should be (target) used. This raises the explanatory requirement considerably, since one has to give an account of how ‘most people’ might be self-deceiving or suffering some other form of cognitive privation. Note also that in relation to (1') the contrast between manifest and operative concepts in this context can only be sustained if the latter is

fixed by (a minority of) experts. After all, if they were a minority of *non-experts* nothing would engender the suspicion that the manifest concept was not in fact the operative concept. Recall the case of Jim: we can only say that Jim's concept *elm* does not mean what he thinks it means because we have established taxonomic practices embodied in a culture of cognitive deference. What Jim *means* is what 'we' mean, where the scope of the 'we' is constituted by those deemed expert in the determination of the relevant scientific facts. Crucially, then, it makes no sense to talk of a distinction between operative and target concepts in these scaled-up cases of (1'), for which the paradigm is something that is subject to empirical method. To open up the gap in (2') between manifest and target concepts one requires a practice that carries the authority that scientific knowledge does to determine *real* meanings, but in the *normative* realm. One needs something to do for *women* what botany does for *elms*.

Before examining this requirement further, let's consider how Haslanger positions her constructionist methodology in relation to that of the naturalist and the eliminativist. In proposing **D** she is responding to a 'what is an X?' question; specifically, the question 'what is a woman?'. There are, she notes, three approaches to such questions, which determine the shape of the analysis: *conceptual*, *descriptive*, and *ameliorative* (Haslanger, 2000, pp. 32—35; 2006, pp. 94—97). On the conceptualist approach we privilege the self-understanding of agents (the manifest concept) and use the traditional methods of a priori analysis to determine what they mean. On the descriptive approach we look for what if anything our talk of Xs corresponds to (the operative concept), with the typical requirement that putative entities are natural-scientific kinds. Finally, we can take an ameliorative approach and inquire

what our purpose is in having the concept of X, whether this purpose is well-conceived, and what concept (or concepts) would serve our well-conceived purpose(s) assuming there to be at least one best. (Haslanger, 1999, p. 467)

Haslanger acknowledges that the conceptualist and descriptive approaches in particular aren't entirely distinguishable, and for the most part the examples she gives mention the same thinkers (cf. 2006, p. 96). However, the basic point is that the naturalist and eliminativist alike pursue a conceptualist strategy, and in doing so arrive at contradictory conclusions about the reality of the entities in question and thus about the cognitive significance of the related concepts. For the eliminativist nothing natural corresponds to the (manifest) concept *woman*; for the realist it is natural-biological facts. Conversely, since the constructivist acknowledges the reality of non-natural (social) kinds it's open to her to argue that the absence of such natural kinds in this domain of inquiry does nothing to impugn the putative objectivity of a concept. Indeed, unless one thought that there was no manifest concept of (say) *woman*<sup>6</sup>, it seems evident that the overt disagreement between the eliminativist and the naturalist invites some explanation; and one candidate is that a shared adherence to the Reductive Assumption distorts their understanding of the significance of concepts. In other words, in looking to the manifest concept for a guide to the relevant *natural* facts the conceptualist approach blinds the analyst to the fact that its fuller understanding requires acknowledgement of a different reality—the constructivist's *social* reality.

We are now in a position to see how (2') works in relation to *D*, and the consequent role for feminist epistemology. Constructivism underwrites the possibility that in undertaking the ameliorative approach one is identifying the (target) concept that one *ought* to have—limning at the joints, as it were, of the realm of the normative. Just as Jim was

wrong in thinking that what he meant by *elm* was what he *thought* he meant, ‘most of us’ do not mean by *woman* what we think we mean. Moreover, where in Jim’s case the gap between manifest and operative concepts requires scientific experts, the gap between the manifest and target concepts in the gender case requires a similarly authoritative discourse—one that ensures that the ‘well-conceived purposes’ are well-conceived because they are the *right* ones. In this way, we arrive at the association with feminist theory:

Feminist work is relevant to normative epistemology because such work contributes to the exploration of what our purposes are, what they could be, and what they ought to be, in employing an epistemic framework. (Haslanger, 1999, p. 468)

If one cleaves to the view that our cognitive framework is not a given but something that can be shaped intentionally in response to what we identify as our legitimate values, then one should be open to the fact that feminist epistemologists have dealt with issues—of self, agency and of moral and political values—that are of direct relevance to the revision of that framework. Finally, if one accepts this general epistemological stance then one should be amenable to the claim that:

a theory offering an improved understanding of our (legitimate) purposes and/or improved conceptual resources for the tasks at hand might reasonably represent itself as providing a (possibly revisionary) account of the everyday concepts  
(Haslanger, 2000, p. 33)

In offering the (possibly) revisionary account of the concept *woman*, then, Haslanger’s contention is that it will be an ‘effective tool[s] in the fight against injustice’ (p. 36). Indeed, the justification for the specific revision is that in contributing to that fight it answers to those legitimate purposes that have been brought most clearly (if not for the first time) to light by feminist thinkers.



From a political standpoint, the most important point is whether or not the proposed definition will serve as intended. It should for example be clear from the nature of the proposal what Haslanger is *not* saying: she is not saying that women have been systematically subordinated and that feminist theorists have helped alert us to the oftentimes subtle—but mostly direct and brutal—forms that that subordination has taken. Rather, the proposal is that what it *is* to be a woman is to be subordinated on the grounds of one's perceived sexual role. If such subordination were to stop tomorrow, there would cease to be any women; indeed, the point of the revision is that in using the concept in the new way (with all that implies for one's beliefs and actions) one is fighting injustice by contributing to bringing about the end of women. But one can only avail oneself of a distinction between the *descriptive* efforts of feminists and others and the claim that this can do *constitutive* work in the revision of the relevant concepts if one's theory of our (legitimate) purposes is better than the one we possess at present—if we can be said to possess such a thing—in the precise sense that the purposes it elucidates are indeed the legitimate ones. And a minimal pragmatic requirement here is that one's theory should, in representing its superiority, make evident *why* it is that the proposed identity will be an 'effective tool' against injustice.

The obvious question this raises is whether a self-conscious intention to use the concept in its revised form *is* likely to bring about the desired change? More specifically, is the proposal more likely to do so than—for example—disseminating more widely the insights into the nature of women's subordination that feminists of both a practical and theoretical stamp have catalogued? Presumably, the only practical advantage to be gained from getting theorists to attempt to change their use of the concept is that they will in turn change the way that others use it. But that seems to involve far more cognitive effort than

spreading the word about the forms subordination can take—an effort that can be shared with non-theoretically motivated bloggers, journalists, film-makers and novelists alike<sup>7</sup>. These considerations point away from an overtly technical approach to this issue; but if one is inclined to think that such an approach has a role then there is an alternative formulation. Although Haslanger discusses eliminativism in relation to race and recommends the same methodological approach for both gender and race concepts, she does not discuss eliminativism in relation to gender concepts. In the next section we'll evaluate Haslanger's proposal further by examining what an eliminativist approach to *woman* might look like.

### Eliminating Women

In the 1950s, U. T. Place, J. J. C. Smart and others attempted to bring an account of the mental within a broadly naturalistic purview by promoting the so-called mind-body identity theory. As Rorty and others pointed out<sup>8</sup>, the problem with this approach was that rather than undermine mental-talk it promoted an equivalence between the two realms. If, in the spirit of naturalism, the aim was to impugn the mental—and the varieties of mystification and obfuscation associated with it—then there was a better approach; namely to *eliminate* the term. To see Rorty's alternative consider the following:

- 3 Elizabeth II is the queen of England
- 4 Water is H<sub>2</sub>O
- 5 Zeus's thunderbolts are discharges of static electricity.
- 6 Demoniacal possession is a form of hallucinatory psychosis.

When people utters sentences like (5) and (6) they are clearly making identifications that fall short of the full identity asserted in (3) and (4). For example, there seems nothing awry in holding that, because it *is* water, H<sub>2</sub>O is a transparent and odourless liquid; or that because it *is* H<sub>2</sub>O water is a compound of Hydrogen and Oxygen. But it seems odd to assert that the

average duration of one of Zeus's thunderbolts is 30ms because ... there are no such things.

Rorty's suggestion is that in (5) and (6) we draw attention to

the sort of relation which obtains between... existent entities and non-existent entities when reference to the latter once served (some of) the purposes presently served by some of the former. (Rorty, 1965, p. 176)

In other words, (5) and (6) are elliptical for something like the following:

5'      What people used to call 'Zeus's thunderbolts' are discharges of static electricity.

6'      What people used to call 'demoniacal possession' is a form of hallucinatory psychosis.

The advantage claimed for this approach is that it makes evident that there never were any thunderbolts or cases of demoniacal possession. Those concepts were used to refer to phenomena that are now (more or less) fully understood, where understanding involves identifying the legitimate purposes served by the (new) concepts—purposes relating to the customary scientific desiderata. Moreover, by eliminating one concept in favour of another, the systems of belief and emotional associations that clustered around the putative entities are revealed and demystified, since they have no role to play in the fully sanctioned domain of prediction and control.

In introducing this schema, the aim is to suggest that mental-talk can be eliminated in favour of brain-talk, the implication being that such a proposal helps to disentrall us of an understanding of what human beings *are* that is tied ineluctably to the narratives of Cartesian metaphysics and supernaturalism. This attempt to radicalise our self-understanding suggests an alternative to Haslanger's analysis. Consider:

7      Women are human beings subordinated on the grounds of their female sexual characteristics.

Instead of using this as the basis of an identity like **D** we have:

7' What people used to call 'women' are human beings subordinated on the grounds of their female sexual characteristics.

On this account, what feminist scholarship shows us is that the myths and mysteries of the feminine have no referent; that moral and political evaluations that made essential use of the concept *woman* were at best otiose. Indeed, to continue to use the term 'woman' is to implicate oneself in the very discourse of oppression that one seeks to overcome by continuing to keep in circulation a term around which cluster such deeply entrenched and morally and politically destructive associations. Accordingly, it is not the case that when humans cease to be subordinated on the grounds of their sexual characteristics women will disappear; rather, *there never were any women*.

The immediate question raised by the *eliminativist* analysis is a pragmatic one: is it likely to be a more or less 'effective tool' in fighting injustice than Haslanger's proposal? At the level of sloganeering, the announcement that there never were any women seems distinct from that which aspires to getting rid of women. But intuitions may conflict here about which would prove the most efficacious, and there seems little likelihood that a theory of justice of the sort envisaged by Haslanger would allow us to decide between them. Before rejecting either proposal fully, however, it's worth noting that in a recent piece Haslanger (2013)—through an engagement with the work of Catherine MacKinnon—has addressed the issue of *how* the proposed definition of the concept *woman* might be a tool for the sort of moral-political change envisaged

This picks up an objection raised in section 2; namely, how are we to understand the widespread privation/self-deception implied in the formulation of (2')? More specifically, the question is how, if the target concept is one we *ought* to have, can we bring the manifest

into alignment with it through exposure to the correct theory? To that end, Haslanger associates the process by which one would come to adopt the new usage with the traditional concept of 'consciousness raising'. Deploying a distinction between 'resources' (material reality) and 'schemas' ("intersubjective patterns of perception, thought and behaviour" (Haslanger, 2007: 78)) taken from social theory<sup>9</sup>, Haslanger argues that "In the context of consciousness raising, tacit schemas are made explicit and so available for critical reflection" (2013, p. 8). When one is made critically aware of the schema through which resources relating to female sexual characteristics come to be shaped symbolically and semantically in a way that subordinates the bearers of those characteristics, one becomes open to a change of schema. In having one's consciousness raised, one becomes a participant in a different pattern of perception, thought and behaviour, a constituent feature of which is that one uses the concept woman with the new (target) meaning.

As before, the question here is whether consciousness-raising as an emancipatory process requires that one come to think of women as the definition stipulates? At the critical-phenomenological level, a change in one's world-view seems entirely consistent with the realisation that some of the social factors that have conditioned it are not commensurate with one's deepest held values. Moreover, as Haslanger acknowledges (*ibid.*, p. 10, fn. 18), the schema/resource distinction bears a strong resemblance to Kuhn's notion of successive paradigms<sup>10</sup> characterising radical scientific change, but nothing in that account warrants the general claim that a concept will change in a predictable way. Indeed, the most dramatic examples of conceptual change are those in which apparently referring terms like 'the æther' are eliminated rather than reduced to equivalences. Likewise, then, it may well be the case that the most dramatic way of registering the conceptual shift that consciousness-raising represents is with the recognition that—*qua* woman—it is not the

case that one's moral identity is as one who is subordinated on the grounds of one's sexual characteristics; rather, it is that one was wrong in thinking that one ever *had* a moral identity at all.

### Woman Redescribed

Considerations raised in the previous section suggest that it's improbable that theoretical grounds will be found for favouring a reductionist approach like Haslanger's over the eliminativist alternative. But there is a deeper problem here, brought out by Rorty's subsequent reflections on his earlier work on the mind-body problem. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1980, pp. 120—21) Rorty came to reject the usefulness of distinguishing eliminativism from reductionism in the case of mind since both presuppose that the purposes served by the identification of the entities in question relate to scientific inquiry. Consequently, only someone who thought that there was an interesting theoretical question here would be bothered to pursue the matter further. Since there are scant grounds for optimism about the likelihood of making progress on the theoretical question<sup>11</sup>, a preoccupation with the ontological status of *mind* is both futile and comes at the expense of promoting the more useful business of changing *minds*.

Returning to Haslanger's constructivism, it is evident that the ontological status of the social is at the forefront of her concerns. As we noted in section 2, the required contrast between manifest and target concepts requires a non-natural (social) reality that is *real* enough to prevent a collapse into naturalism or eliminativism. And that in turn necessitates that some discourse bears an authority, in relation to the normative, equal in weight to that which scientific method bears in relation to the empirical. But now we appear to have another version of the Reductive Assumption: what it is to be *real* requires a correlate of the methods of natural science, the legitimate purposes of which are assumed to be readily

identified. But suppose science<sup>12</sup> isn't like that; or suppose that the social just isn't the kind of 'thing' that can—or indeed, is *required* to—meet that standard if it is to be judged real. Confronted with disagreements between eliminativists, naturalists and reductionists one might be inspired by Haslanger's example to ask 'what is the real?' What legitimate purposes are served by such a concept? Do we not hobble ourselves politically and morally by contrasting the non-natural/social with the natural whilst insisting that ontological respectability demands that we find some common standard of the real?

If the analogy holds, then, it isn't just that there's no (theoretically predictable) difference that makes a difference between the two proposals; rather, no case has been made for thinking that a conceptual revision of any sort is warranted in this (and parallel) cases. Moreover, an overarching concern with identifying the *theory* that would allow us to determine which is the more coherent approach to concept change would be a distraction from the business of actually changing the schema. From the perspective of one's extant values what is of practical importance here is the association of women with subordination on sexual grounds, and recognition of that—as Haslanger acknowledges—is insufficient to warrant conceptual revision.

The moral to be drawn from this is that no general theory of value—moral-political or otherwise—is likely to settle the matter between the eliminativist and the reductionist, and the search for any such theory is a distraction from the task of reforming society in the ways required. This lack of any *theoretical* decider does not however mean that there are no *pragmatic* considerations that might weigh in favour of one or the other option. And there is indeed a sense in which the eliminativist has the edge, and which returns us to the topic of consciousness-raising.

To see this, note that the rejection of the eliminativism/reductionist distinction accompanied Rorty's turn towards the moral and political interests of Dewey, and took the form of a (tacit) acknowledgement that some of the associations bearing on our use of a concept like *mind* are not easily or indeed warrantedly conscripted into a schema that restricts our interests and purposes to those of prediction and control<sup>13</sup>. Given the complexity of inferential relations and emotional affiliations that constitute our concepts/schemas and thereby (at least in part) our world, Rorty came to see that the best way to change minds and therefore the latter is through imaginative projections of possibilities in the light of existing values. Indeed, rather than seek an antecedent *theoretical* justification for those values prior to their recommendation, the suggestion is that those values are rendered more *pragmatically* legitimate through the very possibilities that represent their fuller elaboration. And so to consciousness-raising: the eliminativist's claim, it will be recalled, is that insofar as one's moral identity has been tied up with the concept *woman*, one simply did not possess one. But unlike the reductionist's, this position is consistent with the idea that the concept may yet be given a *positive* content—indeed, that the point at which one comes to see that there never *were* any women is the point at which one seeks to appropriate the concept as part of the very project of emancipation from subordination that Haslanger and the pragmatist share.

Rorty develops this idea in relation to feminism through an interpretation of the work of Catherine MacKinnon. In 'On Exceptionality', MacKinnon honours the appointment of two women to the Supreme Court of Minnesota. She concludes with the following exhortation:

I ask myself... will they use the tools of law as women, for all women? I think that the real feminist issue is... what our identifications are, what our loyalties are, who our



community is, to whom we are accountable. If it seems as if this is not very concrete, I think it is because we have no idea what women as women would have to say. I'm evoking for women a role that we have yet to make, in the name of a voice that, unsilenced, might say something that has never been heard. (MacKinnon, 1987, p. 77)

As she makes clear in her discussion of Marilyn Frye (Haslanger, 2000, pp. 39—41), there is no space in Haslanger's account for the notion that the concept women might have—might *come* to have—any supplementary value over and above the specified reduction. If women are to speak in *their* voice, then that will not be as *women*, but as persons gendered according to a schema in which sexual difference is *not* grounds for subordination. But there is, as it stands, no *name* for that identity. Rorty, however, aims to recuperate the prophetic moral tone MacKinnon strikes here by acknowledging that although “‘a woman’ is not yet the name of a way of being a human being—not yet the name of a moral identity” (1994, p. 205), it is nevertheless a place-holder around which individuals might start to create identifications, loyalties, community. In that process they would produce the sort of schema Haslanger envisages, but the concept *woman* would not have been reduced; rather, the possibility of its revision is what makes the new schema possible.

### All Change

One of the concerns that motivates Rorty's approach to feminism is that the universalism that feminist theoreticians like Sabina Lovibond (1989) promote set limits the “plurality of changing, moving, individualized goods and ends” (Dewey, 1988, p. 173) pragmatists think essential to the continuing process of moral growth that democracy requires. Likewise, Haslanger's reductionism is founded on the belief that a theory of justice not only “encourages liberation from existing oppressive structures” but “can distinguish our

replacing them with new oppressive structures from replacing them with structures that are truly just” (2013, p. 10). Indeed, the weakness that Haslanger identifies in MacKinnon’s feminism is precisely the absence of any such theory—a theory she assumes must be in place before the emancipatory project can be concluded.

From a pragmatist perspective this serves merely to raise the question how a theorist would ever know if the structures they were advocating were ‘truly just’ as opposed to ‘better in the light of what we presently value to what we have now (with the proviso: but more than likely to change in response to the very improvements envisaged)’? And without that theoretical assurance there’s nothing else to contrast ‘existing oppressive structures’ with since its on the basis of their limited actuality, or imagined possibility or extension that the existing structures are judged oppressive in the first place. Moreover, those embarking on the search for the ‘truly just’ leave themselves open to the familiar criticism that feminist theorists are no more able to escape the system that underpins the subordination they seek to avoid than others who have attempted to subject reason to radical revision<sup>14</sup>.

Ultimately, these are rather abstruse considerations. The aim in presenting a formal alternative to Haslanger’s approach to conceptual change was, in the first place, to impugn an overly theoreticist approach to this topic; and, secondly, to suggest that the eliminativist alternative does not require a theoretical justification; rather, it attempts to dramatise the contention that when it comes to changing minds and society visionary and inspiring sketches of new ways of acting and thinking that draw on what we regard as our best features are more likely to be effective<sup>15</sup>. In the case of the concept *women*, those ways of acting and thinking might—as Mackinnon suggests—require enormous collective effort but that does not mean that the concept itself should be surrendered to the reductionist; rather,

it can serve as galvanising placeholder for a moral identity that is yet to be (fully) articulated.

In that process the moral growth of women would be the moral growth of the species<sup>16</sup>.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Haslanger sees her work as applying equally to the consideration of race.

<sup>2</sup> Witt, 2005 usefully locates Haslanger's work in the context of feminist metaphysics. Witt's own gender essentialism "is motivated by the opposite intuition" to Haslanger's; namely, that "gender is unlike race, sexual orientation, class, and other social positions that are also embedded within hierarchies of oppression" (2011, p. 98).

<sup>3</sup> For Haslanger, the difference between 'woman' and 'women' is of no philosophical significance.

<sup>4</sup> This is introduced as a 'tentative' analysis, but its subsequent elaboration has little bearing on the approach taken in this paper.

<sup>5</sup> The elm example is taken from Putnam 1975. Haslanger makes repeated use of it and similar examples, which aim to show that the content of our thoughts is fixed at least in part by external states of affairs.

<sup>6</sup> This is the line taken in Saul, 2006, a response to Haslanger, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> As Mikkola (2011) notes, "ordinary thinking... sees gender as being at least partly a positive social identity rather than being a wholly negative one" (p. 75). The pragmatic approach detailed in the later sections of this paper lend weight to Mikkola's anti-constructionist relaxation concerning ontological matters.

<sup>8</sup> Many of relevant papers (including Rorty, 1965) are collected together in Rosenthal, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Giddens, 1979, 1981; Sewell, 1992.

<sup>10</sup> For Kuhn's influence on Rorty see Rorty, 1999, p. 175. See also Gascoigne, 2008, pp. 132—134.

<sup>11</sup> For Rorty's scepticism about the possibility of philosophical knowledge see the introduction to Rorty, 1992.

<sup>12</sup> For Rorty on the objectivity of science see Rorty, 1987, 1988.

<sup>13</sup> For an essay critical of Rorty's rush to dismiss the relevance of philosophical questions to the understanding of mind see Ramberg, 2000. In his reply, Rorty (2000) acknowledges that he too readily attempted to disambiguate the mind—body distinction from the person—thing distinction and in so doing neglected the importance of agency. But the recognition of agency is at the centre of his attempt to reconstruct philosophy as cultural criticism.

<sup>14</sup> Nancy Fraser, for example, includes as part of her recipe for "democratic-socialist-feminist-pragmatism... the possibility that the basic institutional framework of society could be unjust" (1990, p. 317, p. 318).

<sup>15</sup> In the famous Persons Case, the English Common Law view that "Women are persons in matters of pains and penalties, but are not persons in matters of rights and privileges" was challenged on the grounds that "The exclusion of women from all public offices is a relic of days more barbarous than ours" and that The *British North America Act* in which it founds expression was "planted in Canada a living tree capable of growth and expansion within its natural limits" (*Edwards v. A.G. of Canada* (1930) A.C. 124). It would have course have been open to the women involved to conclude that what it is to be a person is to be a man, and then contend that a new concept of civic identity was required. But it is hard to see how that

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theoretical conclusion could have served better than the desire professed by the Supreme Court to mark a distinction between what England had been and what Canada was in the process of becoming.

<sup>16</sup> My thanks to the editors of this special edition and to two anonymous readers for helpful comments.

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