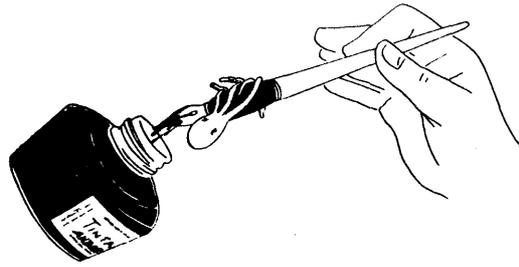


# LETTERS



## SEX/GENDER DISTINCTION: A REPLY TO PLUMWOOD

Dear RP,

In *Radical Philosophy* 51, Spring 1989, you published a paper by Val Plumwood titled 'Do we Need a Sex/Gender Distinction?'. In that paper Plumwood makes extensive use of, and reference to, a paper titled 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction' which appeared in *Beyond Marxism? Interventions After Marx* (eds. J. Allen and P. Patton). I would appreciate the opportunity to pass certain comments, observations and criticisms on Plumwood's paper, and in particular, the uses to which she puts the above mentioned paper.

Plumwood claims that the debate concerning the sex/gender distinction has, in part, been based on confusing:

- (a) 'degendering<sub>1</sub>', which implies 'some sort of radical restructuring or reformation of gender differences in [Western] society', (a formulation general enough to service both the 'new right' and the 'hard left')

with

- (b) 'degendering<sub>2</sub>', which implies 'removing *all* structure of social difference and meaning attached to male and female biologies and bodies' (a formulation that is difficult to imagine *anyone* entertaining).

Plumwood also claims that the target of the critique offered in 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction' is degendering<sub>2</sub>, and that the position of the author of that paper is 'essentialist', 'philosophically separatist', and 'utopian'.

Having carefully read Plumwood's paper I must confess that I am at a loss to explain the discrepancy between the paper she read and the one with which I am familiar. Possibly, she has confused 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction<sub>1</sub>', written by Moira Gatens, with another paper, 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction<sub>2</sub>', written by, I assume, one Moira Gatens<sub>2</sub>. I am quite happy to defend the former paper and own up to being historically continuous with Moira Gatens, but emphatically deny any association with the latter paper or the latter author, who – from the argument presented in Plumwood's paper – does indeed seem to be an essentialist, a utopian and a philosophical separatist. Alternatively, if we take account of the meagre funds available to *Intervention*, it is (just) conceivable that the copy that Plumwood purchased was faulty – perhaps whole lines, paragraphs or even pages were missing? It is difficult to explain her remarks and assessment of 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction' unless she did, in fact, work from some other paper: the one I have here

called 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction<sub>2</sub>'.

I will attempt to clarify the problem by singling out some of her most contentious criticisms.

(i) Plumwood criticises the account offered of the term gender in 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction<sub>2</sub>' because it fails to note some of the more 'subtle' uses of the term, for example, Connell (1987); Harding (1983; 1984); Jaggar (1983); and Lloyd (1984). Clearly this criticism cannot be addressed to me since 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction<sub>1</sub>' was written in 1982.

(ii) Apparently, the author of 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction<sub>2</sub>' claims that gender is related to an "imagined" body' (7), which has to do with 'mental imagery' (8), and which 'makes gender totally a function of social thought systems, and neglects the material aspects of the production of gender, except as causal consequences of thought systems' (8). Clearly, those versed in psychoanalytic theory do not understand the 'imaginary body' as having much to do with 'mental imagery' (references cited in footnotes 11, 25, 29, 33, 35, 40 and 43 in 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction<sub>1</sub>' are relevant here). On the contrary, and as I claim in 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction<sub>1</sub>': 'The imaginary body is socially and historically specific in that it is constructed by: a shared language; the shared psychological significance and privileging of various zones of the body; and common institutional *practices* and discourses (e.g. medical, juridical, and educational) on and through the body.' One would have thought it uncontroversial that language is a *material* practice and that institutional practices are tautologically material practices. Plumwood's radical 'new' theory of gender, as presented on page 8, is, in fact, little more than a restatement of views which can be found in 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction<sub>1</sub>'.

(iii) Apparently, to claim that it is an 'historical fact' that 'we are situated in a society that is divided and organised in terms of sex', and always have been, is equivalent, by Plumwood's lights, to claiming that *we will always be* thus situated (8). This is the sin of Philosophical Separatism. Who is guilty of having committed this sin is not clear. (Maybe that Moira Gatens<sub>2</sub> again!). I, on the contrary, have no interest in a *metaphysics* of sexual difference and have never professed to have such an interest. Quite early in 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction<sub>1</sub>' (148) I make clear my position – in a footnote, it is true<sup>1</sup> – in the following terms: 'To insist on two bodies is strategically important given that we live in a patriarchal society that organises itself around pure

sexual difference, that is male or female, and will not tolerate sexual ambiguity, for example, hermaphrodites, but forces a definite either/or sex on each person (see Foucault, M., *Herculine Barbin*, Pantheon, NY, 1980). However, even the biological determination of sex is not so straightforwardly clear and we must acknowledge sex as a continuum and bodies as multiple' (158). Hardly a metaphysics of sexual difference.

(iv) Her next point of criticism concerns certain comments on the differences between male and female transsexualism. Plumwood, after a rather long quote (see p. 9), suggests that I 'presuppose a far from inevitable feature of existing society; namely, that a woman has sole and exclusive responsibility for the rearing of children, and that "mothers" in this sense are exclusively female...' and hence 'the role of women as mothers (and hence a certain sort of unchangeable female nature) is treated as an inevitable part of a social structure' (9). This is the second most startling claim made by Plumwood (the first appears below). I presuppose nothing of the sort. I actually went to the trouble to read Stoller's works *Sex and Gender* (1968) and *The Transsexual Empire* (1975), and, believe it or not, the mothers of the (male) transsexuals were overwhelmingly females, that is women. Not an inevitable, ahistorical, unchanging, immutable fact, I will grant you, but none the less a modest empirical, socially specific fact about the childhood of the transsexuals studied by Stoller. I say nothing about transsexuals in future, or hypothetical societies, nor do I even suppose that they (transsexuals) will exist.

(v) The last, and most startling criticism made by Plumwood is that I, like all Philosophical Separatists, aim 'ultimately at the reversal of values and power, substituting a gynocentric separatism for androcentric tradition' (11). She quotes, out of context, the following passage to support this:

The problem is not the socialisation of women to femininity and men to masculinity but the place of these behaviours in the network of social meaning and the valorising of one (the male) over the other (the female) and the resultant mischaracterisation of relations of difference as relations of superiority and inferiority (11).

This 'allows' her – but even in isolation I fail to see how this passage supports her conclusion – to wilfully invert the intention of my paper and ascribe to me a view of 'fixed feminine essences' and 'cultural feminism' (11). Yet, I repeatedly reject such a stance in my paper, for example on page 155: 'It

bears repetition that this statement does not imply a fixed essence to "masculine" and "feminine" but rather an historical specificity.' Plumwood's footnote 17 conveniently omits this sentence. Simple reversal of values has never been my aim or desire since reversal (supposing it possible) amounts to the perpetuation of oppressive relations. Obviously what is required is a serious questioning of the dualisms and dichotomies that govern Western life and Western thought. This questioning was and is the aim of my work. The questioning of the sex/gender dualism makes up part of this work. I do not reject, holus bolus, the sex/gender distinction. Rather I sought to expose what I took to be its confusions and inadequacies. Like everyone else, I still use the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' but I try to keep in mind the problematical status of these terms.

The conception of gender mooted by Plumwood is very similar to the view offered in 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction<sub>1</sub>'. So, Plumwood has got it nearly, but not quite, right. She makes the same slide from the 'actual world' to 'possible worlds' that I criticised Chodorow for making (see 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction<sub>1</sub>', pp. 150–53). Of course, there is nothing wrong with proposing ideals to which we may aspire but these ideals should not be allowed to displace current struggles around existing, oppressive material practices. In so far as Plumwood misses the concern with material present practices, she still misses the import of the conclusion to my paper, which is that 'women's bodies, and the representation and control of women's bodies [is] a crucial stake in [feminist] struggles' (156).

These unfortunate aspects of Plumwood's rather contentious reading of 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction' are further exacerbated by the difficulty of obtaining that paper. Fortunately, this difficulty is surmountable. British, and other, readers may be interested to note that 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction<sub>1</sub>' will shortly be reprinted in *Feminist Knowledge as Critique and Construct* (ed. S. Gunew), Routledge, 1989. This will afford them the opportunity, if they so choose, to read my claims concerning gender and sexual difference *in context*. Perhaps then 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction<sub>2</sub>' can be put to rest: a kindness, it seems to me, under the circumstances.

Molra Gatens

**Note**

1 Do people read footnotes?

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# RESPONSE TO GATENS

Moira Gatens' original paper, "A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction", was vigorous, forceful, clear and unambiguously dismissive of both the sex/gender distinction and of degendering/regendering (e.g. she writes on p. 153: "to suggest the degendering of society as a political strategy is hopelessly utopian, ahistorical, and functions theoretically and practically as a diversionary tactic."). Because both of these concepts seem to me to play an important role in change, but were widely seen as discredited by her objections, I undertook my discussion in *RP* 51. The version she offers us now is plainly an attempt at modification of her original stance. Thus the view of the distinction as taking the body to be neutral and the mind to be *tabula rasa* is claimed in her original paper (p. 144) to hold for "theorists of gender" generally, with no qualifications. Although she does herself provide the basis for a more sophisticated account of the distinction (a fact I clearly recognise in my discussion), there is no suggestion at all in her original discussion that the distinction might be rehabilitated or reworked, or that there might exist ways of using it which do not make the assumptions she condemns; nor is there any suggestion that those interested in regendering might have anyway of reformulating their political programme. To proceed to her specific points.

I do not claim that the distinction has been in widespread use in ways that do not support these sweeping claims against it, but I do not think that this usage postdates her paper, and I do not refer to the people she mentions (Connell, Hardinge, Jaggar) as the support for this claim about these usages, although it is true that they do apparently make use of it in these alternative ways. I was not specifically gunning for her in my remarks about idealism of the characterisation of gender in terms of the imaginary body (which she does identify as a "psychical image" on p. 151 and as a "culturally shared fantasy" on p. 152) but simply aiming to sharpen up the resulting notion.

A careful reading of my paper would show that I do not claim that either essentialism or philosophical separatism is explicitly believed by or stated by her. I argued, correctly I think, that these were *consequences* of some of the claims she makes – an important difference. Few of us believe all the consequences of our beliefs. The fact that she does not wish to be identified with these positions now shows that she is no exception to this rule. I did not claim that her views were utopian, but that one of her proposals (for reversing values) was more utopian than degendering, which *she* claims is utopian.

I have carefully read, in context, the disputed passage on p. 154 which says "The problem is not the socialisation of women to femininity and men to masculinity but the place of these behaviours in the network of social meaning and the valorising of one (the male) over the other (the female) and the resultant mischaracterisation of relations of difference as relations of superiority and inferiority. "It seems to me to follow quite clearly from this that the problem is not the gendered characteristic or behaviours themselves, but the value and meaning attached to them, and that if the latter is the *problem* this is what we have to concentrate on changing. This yields a reverse-value position or something very close to it, and is subject to the same kinds of objections.

I believe it is important to retain a perspective on gender

and gender structures as open to change, and that current accounts of the body and its social significance as inseparable (as in the slogan "there is no neutral body"), and the emphasis on the specificity of the situated body, often obscures the possibility of change, and my remarks were designed to show how this comes about via confusion of degendering/regendering and how treating the body as the situated body can lead to essentialism. In this context, Gatens' claim in her discussion of transsexualism, that the relation of the female child to its mother *cannot* be symmetrical (p. 154) to that of the male child (and hence that transsexualism must have a different meaning for each sex) overlooks the possibility – for some an actuality – that the female child is mothered by a male parent, in which case her relationship to him could in that respect parallel that of the male transsexual to his (female) mother. Her argument thus fails to establish that men and women must be what they normally are in sexist societies, qualitatively different sorts of persons. A "slide between actual and possible worlds" is what all of us involved in creating change are engaged in. There is nothing utopian about proposals for regendering; it is a struggle happening here and now, and which would happen more if it were not dismissed, for bad reasons, as both utopian and theoretically unsound.

Moira Gatens' original paper was an important and vigorous contribution to the debate at this time and focuses on a number of important problems and dangers in both the concepts of gender and degendering. I am pleased to see that it will be reprinted. I hope that this discussion will draw attention to the ways in which the sweeping and dismissive claims made in the paper require modification.

Val Plumwood

