

## Feminism and Metaphysics

Sarah Borden Sharkey & Christopher Manzer<sup>1</sup>

Wheaton College

While there are certainly conceptions of the human person at play in various feminist philosophies at the turn of the 20th century, they are often incorporated as parts or functions of historical, biological, sociological studies, etc. Outside of the work of Prudence Allen, there is a significant lack in 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century accounts of gender of a philosophy of the human person which is explicitly metaphysical, rigorous, and comprehensive, bringing into relation the physical, social, historical, cultural, volitional, and rational aspects of a person's identity.<sup>2</sup> Feminist thinking in the 20th century, in all its diversity, has addressed many critical aspects of the constitution of human identity, the modes of that constitution through history and social relationships, as well as courageously exposing injustices in the economic, legal, and social conditions of women. But there is also a kind of collective confusion over more explicitly metaphysical themes, for example, the nature of the relations among reason, biology, gender, and identity.<sup>3</sup> Such a disinterest in more metaphysical theories of the person is not unique to feminist

---

<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to Wheaton College and the Wheaton Alumni Association for providing funding for research on this paper.

<sup>2</sup> By and large metaphysics has not been an explicit part of feminist theory. Among the partial exceptions to this are Alison Jaggar's *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983); Sally Haslanger's 2007 entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy ("Feminist Metaphysics," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-metaphysics/> [accessed May 27, 2009]) and her contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy* ("Feminism in Metaphysics: Negotiating the Natural," in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy*, ed. Miranda Fricker & Jennifer Hornsby [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 107-126); and Charlotte Witt's essays both on feminist metaphysics more broadly and Aristotle's metaphysics (see, for example, "Feminist Metaphysics," in *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, ed. Louise M. Antony & Charlotte Witt [Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993], 273-288 and "Form, Normativity and Gender in Aristotle: A Feminist Perspective," in *Feminist Interpretations of Aristotle*, ed. Cynthia A. Freeland [University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998], 118-137).

<sup>3</sup> For a brief discussion of contemporary feminist attitudes toward metaphysics, see the opening pages of Haslanger's "Feminism in Metaphysics: Negotiating the Natural."

theory,<sup>4</sup> but it has particularly significant consequences for feminism and contributes to a general lack of cohesion in feminist discussions.<sup>5</sup> Prudence Allen's work, with her explicit metaphysical approach and her metaphysical categories and distinctions, stands in a particularly significant place in these discussions and could help to organize at least some of the work being done in contemporary feminism.

We can see examples of the need for such comprehensive and more metaphysical work in, for example, debates regarding rationality. In Anglo-American feminism, distinctively gendered accounts of our "ways of knowing" have emerged, developing in significant part from the work of Carol Gilligan on moral development.<sup>6</sup> Among the epistemological heirs of Gilligan are Lorraine Code and Phyllis Rooney. Although accepting a Gilligan-style distinction between different styles knowing, Code and Rooney argue that traditionally "masculine" epistemology not only fails to account for women's experience, but also fails to account adequately for anyone's use of reason. On most of these accounts—including Gilligan's, Code's, and Rooney's—"feminine" (contextual and embodied) and "masculine" (instrumental and abstract) modes can be contrasted but should not be immediately associated with individual women and men.<sup>7</sup> Code says, for example, "'autonomous man' is an abstraction . . . . Yet, autonomous man

---

<sup>4</sup> Though this list is hardly comprehensive, Friedrich Nietzsche, A.J. Ayer, and Martin Heidegger stand out as critics either of metaphysics as a discipline or traditional forms of metaphysics. See A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, Incorporated, 1952), 33-45; Friedrich Nietzsche, "'Reason' in Philosophy," *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Penguin, 1954), 464-563; Heidegger, "The Onto-theological Constitution of Metaphysics," in *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969), 42-74.

<sup>5</sup> One example of this broad lack of cohesion can be seen by comparing various textbooks in feminist theory. There are numerous ways that comparisons among the various positions in feminism are made but, as yet, no overarching or agreed-upon way of dividing up and comparing the positions. Rosemarie Tong perhaps comes closest with her divisions in *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* [Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998], but there are still relatively few textbooks following this schema. This difficulty is made even more challenging by the laudable but complicating interdisciplinary and activist dimensions of many feminists.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Mary F. Belenky, Jill Mattuck Tarule, Nancy Rule Goldberger, Blythe McVicker Clinchy. *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986) and Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989). See also the work of Nel Noddings, Eva Feder Kittay, and Virginia Held.

<sup>7</sup> Phyllis Rooney, "Gendered Reason: Sex Metaphor and Conceptions of Reason," *Hypatia* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 77-103; Lorraine Code, "The Impact of Feminism on Epistemology," *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* 88, no. 2 (March 1989).

enjoys the status of a character ideal whose ways of acting and knowing are declared worthy of emulation.”<sup>8</sup> Code articulates a genealogy that, with close attention to the use of metaphor in philosophical accounts of reason, describes the association of certain demeaned aspects of human existence with femininity and the association of positive (rational) capacities with masculinity; this terminates in concrete exclusions of women from, for example, institutional academics. Code’s project includes rehabilitating the more “feminine” patterns in light of the failure of “masculine,” abstract, universal reason to meet its own strenuous standards.<sup>9</sup> In making this distinction between, on the one hand, concrete women and men and, on the other, “feminine” and “masculine” elements, however, it is unclear how reason as a capacity and reason as an institutionalized practice relate to gendered human persons. Should “masculine” reason be identified with the practices of actual men or the institutionalization of reason in a male-dominated society, or is there some other, perhaps looser connection? There are several ways one could go. Gilligan’s work and the work of feminists in her mold (for example, Mary Belenky et. al.) suggest a fairly direct association of certain modes of reason with gendered individuals.<sup>10</sup> Alternatively, however, feminist epistemological critique could be considered as part of a larger critique of abstract, instrumental reason that would have a bearing on the practice of reason in both genders, which seems to be the position Code and Rooney are suggesting. If Gilligan, Code, and others engaged in more explicit metaphysical analyses, it might be possible to clarify the relationship among these so that the ambiguities could be dispelled and comparisons among these positions might more fruitfully be made.

---

<sup>8</sup> Code, “The Impact of Feminism on Epistemology,” 26.

<sup>9</sup> She writes: “mainstream epistemologies evince a concern with formal, ‘generalized’ knowledge claims which are so distant from actual human experience—both female and male—that the discipline is rarely able to tell us very much about the nature and status of knowledge we deal with every day” (Code, 25).

<sup>10</sup> Gilligan occasionally says that she distinguishes the two patterns of moral development by *theme* rather than gender, and she is clear in asserting that the connection between gender and certain modes of moral reasoning is an empirical observation that is not without exceptions (*In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982], 2). Nonetheless, Gilligan’s work often appears to connect “feminine” patterns with actual women, and most of her successors and commentators take her to be doing so.

We might consider another example from the other side of the Atlantic. Luce Irigaray and Simone de Beauvoir differ on legal equality. Both support some form of legal equality, as Irigaray acknowledges in the preface to *je, tu, nous*, a collection of short texts dealing with practical issues and outlining ways to achieve a sexually differentiated equality. Many of the concrete legal goals of Irigaray and Beauvoir are quite similar (e.g., the right to abortion, contraception, legal support for victims of domestic and public violence, among other issues), but the nature of legal equality is different. Beauvoir is much more egalitarian in the kind of opportunities which she wants to open up for women,<sup>11</sup> whereas Irigaray focuses on gendered legal advancements which would move the emphasis away from equality for the sexes to a new sexually differentiated culture in which the feminine is valued in various cultural forms. Irigaray recommends, for example, that the mother-daughter relation be represented culturally and cultivated within the family, in addition to explicit legal advancements of the sort Beauvoir would approve.<sup>12</sup> The distinctively gendered changes would, Irigaray believes, contribute to a feminine culture, through encouraging a concrete and developing feminine discourse, and they would affirm the right of women to be unique members of civil society as possibly, but not necessarily, mothers.

This divergence is the result of differing ontologies of the self; where Beauvoir inherits and develops an existentialist account of the self, Irigaray develops an ontology of the self through psychoanalytic interpretation. And these differences in starting points make for substantive differences in their proposals for concrete social change, despite the superficial similarities regarding certain of their claims. Simply looking at their final suggestions, or even their differing methods, is not sufficient for appreciating the depth of their disagreements, and more explicit metaphysical reflection could be

---

<sup>11</sup> Beauvoir writes, for example: “the ‘modern’ women accepts masculine values: she prides herself on thinking, taking action, working, creating, on the same terms as men; instead of seeking to disparage them, she declares herself their equal” (*The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley. [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952], 753) and “To gain the supreme victory, it is necessary, for one thing, that by and through their natural differentiation men and women unequivocally affirm their brotherhood” (ibid., 767).

<sup>12</sup> See Luce Irigaray, *je, tu, nous*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 47-50, 86-88.

helpful here. Despite Beauvoir's extensive analysis of the history of women's oppression, her account of the human person does not, for example, well take into account the ways in which sexual difference (which could be construed biologically) is not merely an obstacle to the freely acting self, but a constitutive moment that differentiates us in critical respects (for example, in our lived experience of the body). Irigaray, in contrast, focuses on differences in our lived bodily experience, but at times seemingly to the detriment of a rich account of human freedom as a part of our current social situation<sup>13</sup> The debate is precisely one of human ontology: What priority do contingent and material aspects have in the constitution of the human person, and how do these act on formally undifferentiated moments of the person, like intellectual capacity? Beauvoir seems to diminish the significance of contingent and material aspects of the human person in an articulation of our capacity for free action, and it is not clear that Irigaray would recognize formally undifferentiated moments in the human person.<sup>14</sup>

Our goal in the paper is to suggest that these and other issues related to gender can be more fully addressed by engaging in metaphysical analyses, and we would like to do so by examining and justifying the use of metaphysics in the work of Catholic philosopher Prudence Allen. While this will not, by any means, solve every problem or bring every disagreement into agreement, a more explicitly metaphysical account of gender and identity could provide a more adequate basis for discussing the diverse investigations conducted in the name of feminism, as well as helping to clarify and challenge the

---

<sup>13</sup> See Alison Stone, "The Sex of Nature; A Reinterpretation of Irigaray's Metaphysics and Political Thought," *Hypatia* 18, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 60-84; as well as Irigaray, *I love to you*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1996). In the latter text, Irigaray writes: "female and male corporeal morphology are not the same and it therefore follows that their way of experiencing the sensible and of constructing the spiritual is not the same" (Irigaray, *I love to you*, 38). She makes the point even clearer, claiming: "Sexual difference is an immediate natural given and it is a real and irreducible component of the universal" (ibid., 47). These comments are written in the context of a response to the Hegelian universal, which Irigaray claims is masculine. Nevertheless, it is clear that sexual difference is of such significance as to tangle the skein of Hegelian historical metaphysics.

<sup>14</sup> Though Irigaray unambiguously rejects grammatical neutrality as a legitimate form of expression (see *je, tu, nous*, 31) as well as cultural neutrality (ibid., 21), these are concrete forms of expression, of which formally undifferentiated moments may be constitutive.

sometimes ambiguous ontologies of the person which are operative in the varieties of feminism present today.

Doing this will involve the following four aspects: (1) addressing contemporary feminist challenges to metaphysics, (2) showing the lack of metaphysics in contemporary feminist thought, (3) examining the role of metaphysics in Prudence Allen's work, and (4) showing how her metaphysical perspective can be brought to bear on certain issues in feminist thought. This is done in hopes of developing a creative integration of the issues surrounding gender and human identity.

### **What is metaphysics?**

Few things have been as frequently reviled in the past quarter-century of philosophy as metaphysics, yet the term seems to take on a new meaning with each critique. What follows is a sketch of two common senses of metaphysics that nonetheless fail to capture what this paper seeks to establish as metaphysical thought.

A. J. Ayer claims that metaphysics is "a knowledge of reality transcending the world of science and common sense," and his version of the verifiability principle ensures that metaphysical speculation is without sense.<sup>15</sup> There is justification for Ayer's ire, given the speculative excess of some of the British Idealism in the early 20th century; nonetheless, this definition of metaphysics highlights an understanding of metaphysics as a kind of knowledge that is beyond the realm of ordinary experience, which is not beholden to any discipline besides itself.

In his critique of metaphysics, Martin Heidegger puts forward a slightly different account, understanding metaphysics as the study of what is objectivistic presence-at-hand. In this form, metaphysics is a set of constricting determinations of things that reduces the Being of beings to their

---

<sup>15</sup> Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 33. Ayer writes of a metaphysical claim: "Would any observations be relevant to the determination of its truth or falsehood? And it is only if a negative answer is given to this second question that we conclude that the statement under consideration is nonsensical" (Ayer, 38).

brunt presence to consciousness. Thus, for example, Locke's metaphysical distinction between primary and secondary qualities would appear to be an example of this reduction, insofar as determinate physical characteristics are considered more fundamental to Being than secondary qualities.<sup>16</sup> Plato's Forms are likewise considered to be metaphysically real entities insofar as they are present, insofar as one can contemplate and have them 'before' one. This understanding of metaphysics takes the theme of metaphysical analyses to be whatever is "constant presence-at-hand." What is metaphysically real is what is present, in some form. If this is the scope of metaphysical analysis, then it fails to account adequately for beings that are not primarily constituted in presence. The being of things like tools, art, and language, no less the being of the human person (*Dasein*, as a subject and not merely a substance) itself is either misconstrued or neglected when thought on terms of brunt, determinate presence to consciousness.

These two conceptions of metaphysics, legitimately or illegitimately, represent common understandings of metaphysical thought, making suspicion of metaphysics in contemporary discussion understandable.

### **Feminist responses to metaphysics**

There are numerous understandings and criticisms of metaphysics and 'the metaphysical project,' and feminists have certainly been among those critical voices. Some of the critiques have been more performative than explicitly stated; others have been quite direct. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* falls in the former category. Like Sartre, Beauvoir places the emphasis on human freedom, understanding the human essence as liberty, freedom. The title of de Beauvoir's work—*The Second Sex*—alludes to Sartre's famous distinction between *pour soi* and *en soi*. As the second sex, women are *en soi*; they do not exist for themselves but, rather, in an object-like way, exist in themselves. Beauvoir

---

<sup>16</sup> See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), ¶ 21, which makes this critique of Descartes.

is concerned about the oppressive definition of women throughout history as passive, objectified beings restricted from the activity of rational autonomy. Beauvoir calls women to engage in a process of self-description and self-understanding on the basis of their own experience, and not on the basis of problematic and oppressive (male) definitions.

This importation and expansion of Sartre's understanding of the human person, although illuminating, appears to be a rejection of significant metaphysical reflection. *The Second Sex* proceeds along what Beauvoir terms "existential" lines; it might be described as a comprehensive socio-historical genealogy of the many dimensions of women's oppression. Beauvoir does not deal thematically with metaphysics as a discipline, offering neither metaphysical critiques, nor an alternative explicit metaphysics. Famous metaphysicians—for example, Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas—enter her discussion at various stages as propagators of the mythology of the feminine that has served as an intellectual analogue to the economic and political oppression of women. Aristotle is considered in a line of Greek thinking that associates the female with contingency, earth, and passivity and the male with the active and rational.<sup>17</sup> Thomas Aquinas is identified as the propagator of a Christian theological tradition, with its own debts to Aristotle, which defines female as a lack or deprivation of male.<sup>18</sup> Thematic metaphysical exposition is not central to Beauvoir's text, but certain metaphysical positions are repudiated as myth at various points. It seems that metaphysics, then, enters as one of the oppressive, objectifying discourses on woman that Beauvoir critiques through historical-existential analysis.

Nevertheless in a limited respect, the *pour-soi/en-soi* distinction is metaphysical, and the metaphysical dimension of woman thus is not entirely rejected. The distinction itself is metaphysical as a statement of the basic ways of being, namely, being as a determined object (in-itself) and being as a

---

<sup>17</sup> Beauvoir, 152.

<sup>18</sup> Beauvoir, 104, 213.

determining, free subject (for-itself). Nonetheless, de Beauvoir's method of analysis is primarily one of socio-historical critique, not metaphysical investigation. Insofar as metaphysics enters in any explicit manner, it is seen to be part of the problem to be overcome rather than any useful aspect of a solution.

Luce Irigaray's critique, in contrast to Beauvoir's, is more direct, criticizing tools and distinctions at the heart of metaphysical work. Her *The Speculum of the Other Woman* represents a fairly broad critique of the Western philosophical tradition which is filled out to a greater degree by her texts on Nietzsche and Heidegger (*Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* and *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*), as well as the various engagements taken up in *Elemental Passions* and *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. While she proceeds by critiquing various, distinct figures, the shape of Irigaray's critiques of metaphysics and of philosophy is similar. Irigaray attempts to subvert traditional philosophical positions by "'re-opening' the figures of philosophical discourse . . . in order to pry out of them what they have borrowed that is feminine, from the feminine, to make them 'render up' and give back what they owe to the feminine."<sup>19</sup> For example, Irigaray takes Kantian transcendental philosophy to represent an expression of power, where "from now on nature will be put under the control of the human spirit."<sup>20</sup> It is true that, in Kant, the subject must relate to empirical things in order to discover itself and the form of transcendental constitution. Yet, this "cooperation" is subverted by the "arrogant claim to sovereign discretion over everything," whereby things become self-representations constituted by the subject, as they are conceived.<sup>21</sup> Irigaray writes, "in its own refusal of blindness [i.e. materiality and the feminine], consciousness is blinded by all knowledge that does not find its cause in the mind itself."<sup>22</sup>

In order to subvert traditional philosophical discourse and make manifest the exploited and rejected elements, Irigaray suggests the use of other "tools," most prominently psychoanalysis, as well

---

<sup>19</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 74.

<sup>20</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 203.

<sup>21</sup> Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 204.

<sup>22</sup> Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 211.

as a form of multivalent, critical, disjunctive writing she calls writing (as) woman.<sup>23</sup> At each point, the traditionally rejected but nonetheless essential term of philosophical discourse is precisely matter and the affective moments in thought, which are exploited by the imposition of logos. Logos, in contrast, is the linguistic region of man's manipulable control; by imposing logic and language, the material experience is made intelligible in thought, and whatever cannot be subsumed into this logical intelligibility is rejected. By rejecting what escapes intelligibility, however, change and possibility are also rejected. What is intelligible becomes ideological when this material source of thought (i.e. experience) is constricted by a system of intelligible signs and patterns. For example, Irigaray identifies, in Aristotle's metaphysics, feminine prime matter as the generative source of beings that is then rejected in the metaphysical system by Aristotle's divinity, which is the ersatz generative source. This metaphysical system is, then, properly ontotheological, since the divine is brought in to stabilize and secure the complete essential intelligibility of things.

On the one hand, if Irigaray's critique is leveled against representational, logical thinking as such, then it is not clear how theoretical (including her own) or scientific thought could proceed. On the other hand, a critique of this kind of force cannot simply be ignored. It might be helpful to distinguish two moments in Irigaray's critique of Kant. First, Irigaray notes Kant's cooperative engagement of the ego with material affectivity, which is a time of self-discovery as well as non-reductive engagement with the other of thought. As noted above, Irigaray takes there to be an immediate shift to the autonomous sovereignty of the ego after this mutual constitution of ego and other. It is the first moment that is the proper place of philosophy. The primary problem Irigaray identifies in Kant and Aristotle here is the closure of both discourses—whether it be by means of ontotheology or rational autonomy—to the

---

<sup>23</sup> Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 135. To write (as) woman is "to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it . . . to make 'visible,' by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language" (Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 76).

disruptive elements (prime matter, empirical materiality) that would upset the logical and intelligible order. The problem is not so much logical and intelligible thought itself, employed necessarily in the intellectual understanding as we explore and explain nature through our engagement with affective materiality (and by means of historically-conditioning questioning and in a certain language), but what is excluded. Where Irigaray's critique has its force is the place where intellective investigation ends, where questions stop being asked, where the engagement with affective experience is dictatorial rather than dialogical, and certain aspects of experience are denied or ignored for the sake of logical order. And so many of those denied and ignored aspects are associated with women, which helps justify notions of women as intellectually deficient or more emotive and intuitive beings.<sup>24</sup>

If Irigaray hews away at core tools of metaphysical analyses, Martha Nussbaum simply avoids engaging directly in metaphysics, despite the seeming metaphysical underpinning of any Aristotle-based capabilities approach.<sup>25</sup> Nussbaum explicitly states that her neo-Aristotelian approach in *Women and Human Development*, for example, is political and not metaphysical. Rawls's ideal of "overlapping consensus" is a recurrent motif in her work, and when she lists ten critical human capabilities, she claims that the list "can be endorsed for political purposes, as the moral basis of central constitutional guarantees, by people who otherwise have very different views of what a complete good life for a human being would be."<sup>26</sup> Early in the same text, she makes the point even more explicit, claiming that

---

<sup>24</sup> A relevant example of the impact of persistent association of women with emotion and irrationality comes from the interaction between Kant and Maria von Herbert. Von Herbert had sent Kant letters with serious questions regarding his moral theory, as she understood it bearing on her own life and decisions. After a time, Kant decided to send these letters to another woman, along with a derogatory letter written by J. B. Erhard, which suggested that von Herbert was hysterical. In doing this, Kant practically rejected the philosophical significance of von Herbert's inquiries, choosing instead to abuse her confidence in sending the letters and ignore her questions; this reflects an attitude that this young woman's concerns were irrelevant to philosophy, emotional and irrational. Prudence Allen discusses this interaction at length in her draft of *The Concept of Woman*, vol. 3.

<sup>25</sup> Nussbaum's capabilities approach and its relevance for women is most fully developed in *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). But see also "Human Capabilities, Female Human Beings" in *Women, Culture, and Development*, ed. Martha C. Nussbaum & Jonathan Glover (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 61-104 and "Public Philosophy and International Feminism," *Ethics* 108 (July 1998): 770-804.

<sup>26</sup> *Women and Human Development*, 74.

she will place her capabilities “in the context of a type of *political liberalism* [in contrast to comprehensive liberalism] that makes them specifically political goals and presents them in a manner free of any specific metaphysical grounding.”<sup>27</sup> This last claim is particularly striking: “free of any specific metaphysical grounding.” Nussbaum argues that Aristotle’s account of human functioning can be separated from his metaphysics. She claims, for example:

As I interpret Aristotle, he understood the core of his account of human functioning to be a freestanding moral conception, not one that is deduced from natural teleology or any non-moral source. Whether or not I am correct about Aristotle, however, my own neo-Aristotelian proposal is intended in that spirit—and also (clearly unlike Aristotle’s) as a partial, not a comprehensive, conception of the good life, a moral conception selected for political purposes only.<sup>28</sup>

First, she takes Aristotle’s account of human functioning to be separable from his broader metaphysical claims and, second, so separating the two and focusing on a less comprehensive account allows for greater agreement and consensus among those who might have very different understandings of a good life, if understood more comprehensively.

Nussbaum is surely right that certain limited political goals can be achieved more easily if one avoids detailed metaphysical discussions and does not require commitment to comprehensive metaphysical views regarding human nature and fulfillment. It is not clear, however, that—if this is her goal—she has fully avoided metaphysics. Her position is not compatible with just *any* metaphysical view. A Hobbesian metaphysic, for example, could not well fit with the notion of potency oriented toward its fulfillment essential to any account of a capability. But her point, presumably, is less that any metaphysical account of the person one could possibly have would fit with the view presented, than

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 5. Similarly, she says: “people may sign on to this conception as the freestanding moral core of a political conception, without accepting any particular metaphysical view of the world, any particular comprehensive ethical or religious view, or even any particular view of the person or of human nature” (ibid., 76) and “we need only notice that there is a type of focus on the individual person as such that requires no particular metaphysical tradition” (56).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 76-77. “The basic intuition from which the capability approach begins, in the political arena, is that certain human abilities exert a moral claim that they should be developed. Once again, this must be understood as a *freestanding moral idea*, not one that relies on a particular metaphysical or teleological view” (ibid., 83).

that she thinks human beings should accept her view—at least for political purposes—regardless of their private metaphysical views.<sup>29</sup> Or, perhaps put another way, only some very limited and ‘thin’ version of an Aristotelian metaphysic need be accepted in order to ‘sign on’ (for whatever purpose or reason) to the general capabilities approach in our societal organization.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, Judith Butler develops a critique of metaphysics considered as the metaphysics of substance. Butler claims that gender identity is not substantive but, rather, produced through social regulation of biological sex and sexual desire. Nonetheless, our societies commonly construe our gender identity as a natural expression of sexual differentiation. Butler’s main concern is heterosexual activity, and she understands the regulation of heterosexual activity to be tied to our understanding of gender and a dual sexual differentiation. We distinguish two sexes because we prioritize heterosexual (and reproductive) sex. Since this activity is socially regulated,<sup>31</sup> what is merely a contingent form of sexual practice comes to have a priority as an essential structure in the common and natural understanding of human sexuality. This substance metaphysics of gender is upset by non-normative practices and non-normative sexes (that is, neither male nor female) that disassociate the produced relation between sex, desire, and gender.<sup>32</sup> Because intelligibility is maintained through the regulation of sexual practice—e.g. a woman is a woman because she desires men, and vice versa—the intelligibility of gender is

---

<sup>29</sup> In a footnote, she says: “My conception requires only that citizens support the goodness of the relevant *capabilities*, and this *for political purposes only*. They are perfectly at liberty to say or think what they like about the goodness of the relevant functions, and also at liberty to differ about the metaphysical grounding of the capabilities. Any of course, given the protection of the freedom of speech, they are perfectly free to challenge the philosophical basis of the constitutional principles by speaking against the capabilities list” (*Women and Human Development*, 96).

<sup>30</sup> Although ‘thin,’ in some senses, Nussbaum defends it, in part, by pointing to its substantive nature. See *Women and Human Development*, 149.

<sup>31</sup> For example, many forms of sexual behavior are prohibited and prosecuted (e.g., pederasty, bestiality, etc.), while other forms (e.g., permanent heterosexual sex) are rewarded through marriage benefits, etc.

<sup>32</sup> The problematic view of gender “subordinate[s] the notion of gender under that of identity and . . . lead[s] to the conclusion that a person *is* a gender and *is* one in virtue of his or her sex, psychic sense of self, and various expressions of that psychic self, the most salient being that of sexual desire. In such a prefeminist context, gender, naively confused with sex, serves as a unifying principle of the embodied self and maintains that unity over and against an ‘opposite sex’ whose structure is presumed to maintain a parallel but oppositional internal coherence among sex, gender, and desire,” Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 21-22.

dissolved by the disruption of regulated sexual practice. Butler writes, “these substances [i.e. traditional gender identities] are nothing other than the coherences contingently created through the regulation of attributes, it would seem that the ontology of substances itself is not only an artificial effect, but essentially superfluous.”<sup>33</sup>

As the review of these various feminists has shown, metaphysical analyses are regularly either neglected or explicitly critiqued. While many of these critiques are compelling, it is not clear that each has metaphysics in mind of the form employed by Prudence Allen. Further, the usefulness of Allen’s metaphysical approach for illuminating feminist discourse suggests that perhaps the common feminist side-lining, if not rejection, of metaphysics is precipitous. Through her extensive historical work in the philosophy of gender, as well as her unique metaphysical account of gender, which adopts the neo-Thomistic metaphysics of Bernard Lonergan, Allen crafts a particularly illuminating feminist metaphysical discourse.<sup>34</sup>

### Post-critical metaphysics

Metaphysics has many critics—both feminist and otherwise. It is not clear, however, that it need be an enemy of feminist reflection, and the work of Allen reveals tremendous uses for it. Allen’s understanding of metaphysics, however, is not Ayer’s, Heidegger’s, Irigaray’s, Nussbaum’s, or Butler’s.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Butler, 24.

<sup>34</sup> It should be noted that the Catholic philosophical community has carried forward the metaphysical tradition, brought into the 20th century by Edith Stein, Jacques Maritain, Etienne Gilson, and other Neo-Thomists. John Paul II has been a source of inspiration for conservative Catholic feminists, in particular his texts *Mulieris Dignitatem* and *Evangelium vitae*. See Prudence Allen, “Integral Sex Complementarity and the Theology of Communion,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 17.4 (Winter 1990): 523-44; Helen Alvaré, “A New Feminism: The Holy Father’s Call to Christian Women,” *Liguorian* (May 1997): 4-11; Léonie Caldecott, “Sincere Gift: The Pope’s ‘New Feminism,’” *Communio* 23 (Spring 1996): 64-81; Mary Rousseau, “The Primacy of Gender,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 66 (1992): 1-12

In addition to these thinkers, theologian and ethicist Lisa Cahill has developed a moral realism on Thomistic grounds, in conversation with Martha Nussbaum, which takes seriously the historical contingencies in acting virtuously and living well, without dispensing with a conception of common human nature and human goods. See Lisa Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 46-72.

<sup>35</sup> For an alternative defense of the import of metaphysics for feminism, see the work of both Sally Haslanger and Charlotte Witt.

Rather than a conception of metaphysics as unhindered speculative excess, which Ayer rightly rejects or a conception of metaphysics that constricts and falsely stabilizes the real, which Irigaray, Heidegger, and Butler rightly criticize, metaphysics must be a self-critical enterprise that reflects adequately the diverse and contingent reality of gender as it comes to bear on the structure of the person. In articulating the metaphysics of gender, Allen recapitulates Bernard Lonergan's critical recovery of Thomism.<sup>36</sup> While we will not be able to treat Lonergan's metaphysics in depth, it is important to show the way in which his account of metaphysics avoids both naïve objectivism (which Heidegger critiques) and idealism (which Ayer and Irigaray critique).

Lonergan's metaphysics comes as a result of his attention to cognitional operations and the structures of consciousness—experience, understanding, and judgment—which make up the process by which reality comes to be known. Like Kant and the phenomenologists, Lonergan emphasizes the 'turn to the subject' and the need to begin with our experience. This move to the cognitive operations of the subject avoids naïve objectivism. This is evident in his critique of positions that reduce knowing to a single act analogous to looking, characterized as "gazing, intuiting, contemplating."<sup>37</sup> Seeing, as a form of sense experience, is an essential part of the dynamic structure of knowing—sense experience gives something to be understood and reflected upon. The operations of understanding and judgment, however, have a different character, of the intelligible explanation of internal and external relations of

---

<sup>36</sup> Though she neither discusses Lonergan often nor is Lonergan the only theorist from whom Allen draws for articulating her account of metaphysics, I think that a careful reading of Allen's other works indicates the importance of Lonergan to the whole of her approach, because of Lonergan's carefully argued metaphysical realism and recovery of Thomism. Allen's "Metaphysics of Form, Matter, Gender" and her draft of *The Concept of Woman* vol. 3, which she has graciously provided, offer extended comments on Lonergan and gendered personhood.

This does not obviate the importance of other metaphysical thinkers that Allen's draws on, including Edith Stein, Karol Wojtyła, and M. A. Krapiec, whose influence can be seen in Allen, "Integral Sex Complementarity and the Theology of Communion," and "A Woman and a Man as Prime Analogical Beings," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (Autumn 1992): 465-482.

<sup>37</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Insight* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 344

what is understood, and the conditional and contextual affirmation of that understanding.<sup>38</sup> As the final moment in cognition, judgment is uniquely important in Lonergan's account of knowledge; it is in judgment that the reality of understanding is evaluated and affirmed or denied. If reality is not simply *encountered* in brunt presence, it is not done away with either (through some sort of constructivism or idealism). Through the operation of understanding, the intelligibility of reality is understood in explanation, and this explanation is affirmed or denied on the basis of its fulfilling the understood conditions which an explanation must fulfill in a given situation; in the case of insight, all pertinent questions have been answered. For example, the affirmative judgment of a sex/gender distinction can be made based on its fulfilling the conditions of changing historical and cultural values related to male and female, and relatively unchanging biological differences between males and females. It is important to note that the intelligibility affirmed is contextual, changing with the accumulation of new experience and insight. These changes may be abrupt and demand significant and revolutionary change in thought or higher explanatory integrations of insights, or they may simply call for less demanding shifts in understanding.

At this point, metaphysics can be introduced. Lonergan correlates the three interdependent cognitive operations (i.e. experience, understanding, and judgment) with three basic metaphysical elements: potency, form, and act, respectively.<sup>39</sup> These metaphysical elements pertain in being, because, as Lonergan argues, intelligibility is intrinsic to being. Being, according to Lonergan, is the objective of all knowing, beckoning inquiry, so through the operation of experience, understanding, and

---

<sup>38</sup> See Bernard Lonergan, "Cognitional Structure," in *The Lonergan Reader*, ed. Mark D. Morelli and Elizabeth A. Morelli (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 381-82.

<sup>39</sup> Lonergan writes: "'Potency' denotes the component of proportionate being to be known in fully explanatory knowledge by an intellectually patterned experience of the empirical residue. 'Form' denotes the component of proportionate being to be known, not by understanding the names of things, nor by understanding their relations to us, but by understanding them fully in their relations to one another. 'Act' denotes the component of proportionate being to be known by uttering the virtually unconditioned yes of reasonable judgment" (*Insight*, 457).

judgment, the intelligibility of being is articulated. The different kinds of intelligibility—for our purposes the differences between experience, understanding, and judgment—correspond to structural differences in the being that is known. So the component of a being experienced is potency, the potential to be understood; the component of a being inquired into is form, formal intelligibility; the component of a being explained and affirmed in judgment is act, actual intelligibility.<sup>40</sup> These relationships are not causal; rather, the metaphysical elements are the objectives of cognitional operations; this means that the metaphysical elements are in a certain sense independent of the cognitional process, finding articulation therein, but existing as structural differences in the objective of cognition, being.

In a certain respect, these metaphysical elements are highly abstract. This is the case because Lonergan recognizes the place of the sciences as cognitive achievements, which, through the abundance of scientific domains, explain regions of being. The role of metaphysics, in Lonergan's philosophy, is to integrate these cognitive achievements through a careful investigation of knowing itself, which is the locus and generative source of science. Lonergan writes, "If one wants to know just what the forms are, the proper procedure is to give up metaphysics and turn to the sciences; for forms become known inasmuch as the sciences approximate towards their ideal of complete explanation."<sup>41</sup> The work of the various sciences corresponds, with respect to the unified being, to conjugate forms, which are what Lonergan calls "schemes of recurrence," the unified intelligible relations which exist under the purview of a single science.<sup>42</sup> These are systems of intelligibility that are flexible and dependent on specific sciences. These conjugate forms are unified in a central form, which is the principle of unity in a being, unifying all the aspects of its intelligibility. It is the work of metaphysicians to articulate the integration

---

<sup>40</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 525-26.

<sup>41</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 521.

<sup>42</sup> It is significant that Lonergan describes these as "schemes of recurrence." Lonergan wants to affirm the reality of form while also acknowledging the variability present in differing contexts.

of the sciences with a view to cognitive operations, according to the “higher viewpoints” of successive sciences. Lonergan provides a provisional example of this kind of integrative metaphysics, moving from laws of physical particles, to the higher level of explanatory investigation of chemical processes, cellular processes, organic, and finally personal, in which the cultural environment comes to bear on the active life of the rational person.<sup>43</sup>

This understanding of metaphysics avoids both unwarranted speculation on unexperienceable objects by focusing on the cognitional process by which the human comes to know, as well as avoiding the problem of grounding metaphysics on a transcendent principle that assures certainty and stops investigation, by focusing on the same process, which, rather than ending investigation, challenges the knowing person to reach wider and more inclusive accounts of being by integrating the entirety of what is known.

There are three interrelated aspects which should be identified in Allen's appropriation of Lonergan. Allen adopts Lonergan's correlation of specific sciences with conjugate forms, his notion of higher viewpoints which transcend and integrate lower levels of forms, as well his notion of organizing central form and vertical finality (a concept which will be explained below) with specific regard to the metaphysical analysis of the person. This results in a layered metaphysical account of the gendered person that evaluates sexual differentiation across multiple ontological regions.

---

<sup>43</sup> As a provisional exercise in this kind of integration, Lonergan writes, “the merely coincidental becomes space-time through the interrelations of gravitation and electromagnetic theory. This displaces the coincidental to the level of physical events, where it is overcome by the higher unities of the chemical elements and their affinities. There follows its displacement to the level of chemical processes, where it is overcome by the higher system of the cell and by the ontogenetic and phylogenetic sequences of the organism, in which each stage is either adapting to environment or circumventing it. On the psychic level, interrelations are transformed into the developing conjugates governing increasing perceptiveness and ever more nuanced aggressive and affective responses. Finally, on the level of intelligence man's relations to the universe are settled by his grasp of the relations of the universe and by his rational choice of his relation to the universe” (*Insight*, 533-34).

## The value of metaphysics for feminism

Allen's appropriation of Lonergan's neo-Thomistic metaphysics is integrated with her extensive thought on the "philosophy of woman and man" and offers a critical framework for evaluating competing accounts of sex and gender. The purpose of suggesting that metaphysics be employed in feminist philosophy is not to claim that something has gone terribly wrong and the movement needs to be resuscitated; rather, a metaphysical perspective, like that of Allen's, can help to organize and integrate the plurality of voices issuing in contemporary feminism, clarifying differences and similarities, shedding new light on certain perspectives, and bringing together what would be very diverse perspectives (e.g., historical, Marxist, biological, etc.).

Although Allen's work has a number of clarifying metaphysical schemas, we would like to focus on two. First is the interpretive framework she provides to compare philosophical positions on gender relationships.<sup>44</sup> This framework is a trifold, distinguishing: *gender*<sup>45</sup> *polarity* (which claims that there are significant differences between the genders and that the male is superior to female) and its close relative, *reverse gender polarity* (which understands the female as superior to the male); *gender unity* (which claims that there are no significant differences between the genders); and *gender complementarity* (which claims that there are significant differences between the genders but that neither is superior to the other). The last position can be subdivided into a fractional form of complementarity in which both genders have different aspects of rationality that must be combined in

---

<sup>44</sup> This interpretative framework is not directly Lonerganian; it is an independent evaluative tool to analyze positions, developed out of Allen's work on historical metaphysical positions on gender, but her interest in developing such a framework has its roots in her conviction that Lonergan is right about the ability to engage in a responsible metaphysics.

<sup>45</sup> In Allen's early work, the term "sex" is used to refer to all differences between woman and man, not only the anatomical (and thus she calls this position "sex polarity"). She revises her terminological decisions after the publication of *The Concept of Woman*, vol. 1, using gender to refer to the entirety of differences between woman and man, and sex to refer to anatomical differences. See Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), xx-xxi; and *The Concept of Woman: Volume II: The Early Humanist Reformation*, 15-16. I will use "gender" here to reflect the change.

cooperation in order to be whole (i.e. individual women and men are thus each halves needing the other gender),<sup>46</sup> and the integral form, in which both genders are considered wholes that, in communion, nonetheless generate what is more than a whole.<sup>47</sup> Through this interpretive framework Allen is able to draw out and compare the discourse on gender that emerges explicitly or develops implicitly in the history of philosophy

For example, this interpretive framework is brought to bear, in Allen's extensive work on the history of the concept of woman, on Plato and Aristotle. Plato is identified as, overall, a philosopher of gender unity. Allen acknowledges elements of gender polarity in Plato's cosmology, in which male and female are considered as cosmic principles (of which male is the superior), and Plato identifies females as inferior bodies, which a soul might inhabit if it was cowardly or weak in a previous life. Yet, from the perspective of the person, Plato's soul/body dualism means that the essential identity of a human person is sexless—the body is a problem that every person, regardless of gender, must overcome. This sexual neutrality of the soul means that every person has identical spiritual capacities (i.e. reason, will, and desire), and with education can achieve philosophic wisdom and release from matter; the gender of the person does not reflect on the essential status of the soul. Thus, despite comments to the contrary,

---

<sup>46</sup> Allen identifies John Stuart Mill as a fractional complementarian, who writes "With equality of experience and of general faculties, a woman usually sees much more than a man of what is immediately before her. Now this sensibility to the present, is the main quality on which the capacity for practice, as distinguished from theory, depends . . . . Women's thoughts are thus as useful in giving reality to those of thinking men, as men's thoughts in giving width and largeness to those of women" (quoted in, Prudence Allen, "Rationality, Gender, and History," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 68 [1994]: 279)

Susan Harding is also considered to be a fractional complementarian, claiming that "gender reveals 'different conceptions of rationality'" (ibid., 281). In a similar move, Catholic writers such as Teilhard de Chardin and Gertrude von Fort, who identify women with intuition and emotions, and men with discursive reasoning, fall in this group (ibid., 280).

These forms of epistemological fractional complementarity are modified by Edith Stein, who similarly differentiates rational capacities according to gender, but suggests that these differentiations capacities can and must develop through education, such that both genders learn the opposite gender's form of rationality (ibid., 280).

<sup>47</sup> For a concise articulation of these terms with minor historical background, see parts I and II of Allen, "Integral Sex Complementarity and the Theology of Communion," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 17, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 523-544.

Plato's metaphysical commitments lead him ultimately to a sex unity position. It is a position that denies the significance of gender in a philosophical account of personal identity, while nonetheless harboring gender polarity as a part of his cosmology.<sup>48</sup>

Aristotle, on the other hand, has a strict and systematic gender polarity in his metaphysics of the person. In what Allen thinks of as an advance over Plato, Aristotle rejects the duality of soul and body, claiming that matter and form make a unity. Once unified, however, the differing physical bodies of women and men become significant for Aristotle in a way they are not for Plato. Aristotle's account of generation or reproduction leads Aristotle to understand the bodies of women to be inferior men's, and Aristotle argues that woman is a privation of man.<sup>49</sup> This privative status is then worked out with regard to generation (women provide the more passive matter, men the active form), wisdom (women's deliberative capacity lacks authority), and virtue (women's lesser rationality leads to obedience as a key virtue). Clearly, gender is philosophically significant here, and women are inferior in nearly all respects.<sup>50</sup>

Allen's categories can illuminate the more explicitly metaphysical positions of Plato and Aristotle; they also provide a way of comparing more contemporary feminists. For example, Beauvoir could be considered to have a strong gender unity position. While it is clear from *The Second Sex* that gender seems to be a formative aspect of a person's identity (one need only read the sections considering biology and bodily experience to see this), Beauvoir seems to consider the distinctive aspects of gendered bodily experience to be either socially constructed means of access or hindrances

---

<sup>48</sup> The centrality of the sex unity position in Plato's thought can explain why, in the *Republic*, Plato affirms the possible of philosopher queens as well as kings and the ability of women to pursue the highest lives.

<sup>49</sup> See especially *Generation of Animals*. For discussion of the ways in which Aristotle presents a theory of *generation*, rather than *reproduction*, see Daryl Tress, "Aristotle Against the Hippocratics on Sexual Generation: A Reply to Coles," *Phronesis* 44, no. 3 (1999): 228-241 and "The Metaphysical Science of Aristotle's Generation of Animals and Its Feminist Critics," *The Review of Metaphysics* 46 (December, 1992): 304-341. For the ways in which women as understood to be a privation of man, see Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution*.

<sup>50</sup> Some commentators have read certain of Aristotle's passages in *History of Animals* 9.1 to indicate at least some degree of superiority in females. Such readings are, however, debatable, and it is certainly not obvious that these passages mitigate his general account of the inferiority of women.

to self-transcendent activity. While it is possible that Beauvoir's account could be expanded to identify gendered types of self-transcendent activity, Beauvoir does not do this in *The Second Sex*. As indicated above, Beauvoir operates with the basic *pour-soi/en-soi* ontology, and gender does not form a significant part of a philosophical account of personal identity. Gender is not relevant to one's experience as *pour soi*. Beauvoir works out this sex unity account of gender in her prescriptive goals, which demand the inclusion of women in traditionally masculine activities, as the region of creative, self-transcendent activity. Beauvoir does refer to a "natural differentiation," (SS, 767), a "special sensitivity" (SS, 766), and a woman's relation to her body that is different than a man's relation to his body, which indicates an element of a gender complementarity position, but Beauvoir focuses primarily on the constitution of a person as an acting, self-transcending agent, which diminishes the import of this differentiation.

Alternatively, Luce Irigaray advances an integral gender complementarity position, with comprehensive consequences. Irigaray recognizes the immense significance of sexual difference for the philosophical consideration of identity, without making either gender inferior to the other. The complexity of her position can be recognized in chapter 2 of *I love to you*. Irigaray claims, contra Hegel, that nature is not one. To be human is to be female or male, and this difference cannot be subsumed and transcended by either subjectivity. This means that there are not two different natures, but human nature diversified into two sexes. Irigaray does not claim that there are certain qualities or aspects of nature that are parceled out between the sexes. Sexual difference does not make a sexed human a part of human nature, which could be made whole and unified through the addition of the other part. This is what Irigaray is arguing against when she writes that nature is not one, but "at least two,"<sup>51</sup> While Irigaray does claim that male and female are "two parts of humankind," she follows this, claiming that

---

<sup>51</sup> Irigaray, *I love to you*, 35.

the two cannot be brought back to one.<sup>52</sup> This is to say that male and female are not parts of a whole, but two wholes already; they are different humans. When Irigaray claims that neither single gender can represent the total humanity, she is trying to capture the reality that women and men are not fractured parts of a whole, but are different humans which are not identical with the other. As a result of this difference, the social world is not homogenous. Irigaray persistently insists on the sexual differentiation of culture and discourse, by recognizing the fundamental difference in self-understanding and bodily lived-experience that complicates a homogenous social world. Neither gender has some kind of privileged access to reality; rather, both gendered existences are different, which means that the way in which both should be represented politically, and the way in which both participate in the social world, are different. It is the differentiated sociality that establishes complementarity in Irigaray. Difference is maintained in equality through dialogue, being two, mutual society. This equality is worked out not in identical political rights and provisions, but differentiated rights, in an equality that allows each gender the freedom to develop its own social forms and cultural activities, to express its gendered experience; this is an equality that safeguards sexual difference.<sup>53</sup> In these ways—that is, in considering sexual difference as a philosophically significant difference that nonetheless does not result in a deficient gender and affirming the independent reality of each person as a whole gendered person but not the whole of humanity—Irigaray can be seen as an integral gender complementarian.

A second important aspect of Allen's work involves the distinctly metaphysical perspective on gender that Allen develops in the essay "Sex Unity, Polarity, or Complementarity," [abbreviated "SUPC"] and through her appropriation of Lonergan, in key essays like "Metaphysics of Form, Matter, and Gender," [abbreviated "MFMG"] and the forthcoming third volume of *The Concept of Woman*, which articulate the ontological dimensions of human constitution. What is at first, in SUPC, an account of

---

<sup>52</sup> Irigaray, *I love to you*, 36.

<sup>53</sup> See Irigaray, *je, tu, nous*, 86-89 for Irigaray's own articulation of what women's sexed rights would be.

some of the contextual elements of human constitution, such as differentiated modes of chromosomal delivery in reproduction, differentiated bodily and cultural experiences, and differentiated contexts for equal moral activity becomes a developed account of the interaction of different formal elements in human constitution, worked out through Bernard Lonergan's metaphysics of conjugate and central form in MFMG.<sup>54</sup>

Allen, using Lonergan's metaphysical framework, articulates a network of interrelated forms that become organized in the human person. Conjugate forms, which are schemes of recurrence (the intelligible relations arising from independent, specific sciences, mentioned above) at different levels of organization, are unified in central forms that organize them. There is a hierarchy of formal elements here, such that the form of the woman or man is the central organizing principle of the various conjugate forms (chemical and biological aspects, cultural accretions, etc.). Gender differentiation is determined on the basis of conjugate forms like biological and chemical forms, as well as the accretions of cultural meaning that create the context in which the central form, that is, the unified person, acts.. Gender, which refers to the entire person, which is the central form, and not any single conjugate form, is now a function of the difference in central form that emerges from the relation between this form and the various conjugate forms which it organizes. Allen takes gender to be fully complementary, not only in the biological complementarity of chromosomes in differentiated reproductive activity, but in the central formal complementarity in non-differentiated capacities acting on conjugate forms that are differentiated in various degrees. What this means is that differences in conjugate forms result in differences in the concrete, actual central form. As Allen demonstrates in SUPC, and as is worked out through the play of similarity and difference in Allen's explicit complementarian appropriation of Lonergan, certain capacities—such as generation, rationality, and virtue—and central form, are equal between genders, but they are differentiated in the manner in which they are enacted (e.g. different

---

<sup>54</sup> The position in SUPC bears resemblances to Lonergan, but the connection is not made explicit, as it is in MFMG.

modes of delivery in procreation), or in the contexts in which such capacities are used. With this kind of metaphysical framework, the kind of socio-historical analysis which discloses oppressive conditions, as well as biological analysis which determines the hard scientific differences between the sexes can be integrated and organized in view of the entirety of the constituted person.

The question has been raised as to the neutrality of scientific investigation and the natural-ness of biological features of persons, notably by Anne Fausto-Sterling. While Fausto-Sterling's work demonstrates clearly that scientific investigation, as a practice, is not without nonscientific, political influences, it is not demonstrated that scientific investigation is irrecoverably lost in cultural prejudices concerning gender. Fausto-Sterling recognizes this, writing, "*Good science*—which in this historical moment incorporates many insights from feminism—can prevail only when the social and political atmosphere offers it some space to grow and develop."<sup>55</sup> Her earlier suggestion of a "feminist science" might obscure the distinction between feminist politics and scientific research. Even if scientific investigation and politics are inseparable, they are not indistinguishable.<sup>56</sup> Insofar as scientific methods are good methods, they will not require separability but will, rather, focus on appropriate ways of isolating and distinguishing that which is most relevant to the particular kinds of questions characteristic of that discipline of study. Feminism has had no small part, as Fausto-Sterling demonstrates, in identifying relevant aspects of research which have been ignored. This is, perhaps, the best way to read "feminist science": there are highly significant phenomena that are misrepresented or ignored in scientific research methods or assumptions, concerning gender and sexuality, and feminism, as a philosophical or political discourse, addresses these problems in investigative science. Despite Fausto-Sterling's ambiguity with regard to sexual differentiation, such differences, scientifically investigated,

---

<sup>55</sup> Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 213. She points to places where sexual differences have been misunderstood, but it is not always clear in her work what we can claim about differences pertaining to sexuality.

<sup>56</sup> Fausto-Sterling, 208.

may have critical significance, in turn, for a feminist politics that seeks to do justice to the biological as well as social and cultural inequalities facing women today.

Allen's distinct metaphysical approach has the nuance and sophistication necessary to make critical distinctions and thus understand the differing ways in which, and levels at which, gender differences might show themselves. Her position cannot be accused of arguing for any simple essentialism. Allen titles her most substantive work "The Concept of *Woman*" (emphasis ours), as if there is a single determinate concept of woman that could be applied universally. There might be a concern that a single concept of woman would reflect an abstraction, misrepresenting the variety of ways in which women exist in concrete circumstances and thereby suppressing or neglecting other aspects of human existence.<sup>57</sup> For Allen, however, there are a number of constitutive moments in the person and the concept of woman does not terminate in a single, definite and determinate concept. Rather, the concept is drawn from the play of historical circumstance and concrete development, and there will be differences in biological-sexual differentiation, etc. When all the constitutive moments are taken into account, Allen understands both women and men to be constituted through a whole variety of relations (to other persons, to cultural forms of life, etc.).

Allen's recognition of the significance of the concrete circumstance is a reminder of Allen's comment on the metaphysician, "he or she must be careful not to give too detailed answers"; questions of concrete detail are outside the domain of this analysis.<sup>58</sup> There is perhaps conceptual relativity with regard to specific aspects of sexual differentiation, but concrete gendered persons considered metaphysically would not be conceptually relative and dependent on the other, in the way specific aspects of sexual differentiation, like sexual organs. If, as Allen writes, "We cannot understand what is

---

<sup>57</sup> See Linda Damico, review of *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution 750 BC—AD 1250*, by Prudence Allen, *Hypatia* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 172-175.

<sup>58</sup> Allen writes this as a gloss of Lonergan's comments on the relationship between metaphysics and the sciences, but it can easily be applied to the relationship between metaphysics and the concrete lived existence of particular gendered persons. See Allen, "Metaphysics of Form, Matter, Gender," 14.

means to be male without understanding what it means to be female,” then this is with regard to the biological aspects of gender such as sexual organs, which are fully intelligible through their conceptual relativity to the opposite anatomical features which allow for procreation.<sup>59</sup> As constitutive moments of the person, the biological analogy between male and female and the cultural analogy between masculine and feminine are taken up into the materially contingent, self-determining person.<sup>60</sup> None of us is simply our bodies or our cultural formation, but—as Beauvoir emphasizes—self-transcending, free persons in (Allen emphasizes) a whole variety of relations with other persons.

If the male-female relation is privileged, it is because this form of human community displays, at the biological level, the “synergetic effect” of proper human community. That is, the act of procreation between the male and female, and the new child displays, analogically, the excess of value in human community; the contributions of this community are greater than the sum of what individuals could accomplish alone. The nuptial relation that Allen privileges<sup>61</sup> is a model of human community in terms of reproduction, but this form of relation need not be determinative for every gendered human. Whether or not one is engaged in sexual activity and whether the sexual relationships are procreative, the concept of vertical finality, developed by Lonergan and adapted by Allen in MFMG,

---

<sup>59</sup> “A Woman and a Man as Prime Analogical Beings” in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (Autumn 1992): 471.

<sup>60</sup> Given the complexities involved in addressing adequately the issue of intersexuality, I will forgo discussion here. Nonetheless, Anne Fausto-Sterling has done extensive work on the issue; see her book *Sexing the Body* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), chs. 3 and 4, especially.

Mary Frolich’s essay “From Mystification to Mystery: Lonergan and the Theological Significance of Sexuality” is a possible account of Lonergan that, utilizing his metaphysics, takes intersexuality seriously, finding resources in Lonergan to revise a strict binary account of gender and sexuality. See Mary Frolich, “From Mystification to Mystery: Lonergan and the Theological Significance of Sexuality,” in *Lonergan and Feminism*, ed. Cynthia S. W. Crysdale (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 181. In this essay, Frolich critiques strict binary accounts of gender differentiation, noting in Lonergan an attention to biological realities, such that ambiguous or intersex sexual differentiation should demand a renewed sense of sexuality that does not cover over or ignore intersexuality.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, “A Woman and a Man as Prime Analogical Beings,” 476-77.

orients all activities towards human perfection.<sup>62</sup> The more general form of human community, of which procreative relation is a model, is what Mary Frolich calls “the orientation of the whole human being towards intimacy and union with an ‘other’.”<sup>63</sup>

The essence of woman is not a closure, but a constitution of moments (levels of recurrence) open to contingent materiality, which act on each other in the concrete reality of a gendered human person. There is a danger of reducing each gender simply to its relation to the other, so that what one gendered person is, is simply how they are different from the opposite gender. (This would end in a fractional complementarity.) This danger is avoided by recognizing the place of relativity at biology, a single moment of the person, which does not compromise the independent reality of the gendered person. What is critical is that, despite differences at the biological, psychic, and cultural levels, these determinate differences do not compose the entirety of the gendered person; rather, specific constitutive moments of difference are taken up as the context in which a gendered person acts. By identifying places of determinate difference, as well as places of similarity (such as in the capacity for intellectual activity, moral activity and freedom, among other capacities), Allen ensures that one is not simply reduced to a series of differences from the other.

### Conclusion

As has been demonstrated above, Allen’s interpretive matrix is helpful in providing terms for considering the differences among various feminist positions; additionally, the metaphysical account of persons that Allen develops may be helpful for integrating the issues mentioned in the opening sections.

Insofar as Gilligan, Belenkey, et al. are making psychological observations, their work presents

---

<sup>62</sup> See Lonergan, “Finality, Love, Marriage,” *Theological Studies* 4, no. 4 (December 1943): 477-510; Allen, “Metaphysics of Form, Matter, Gender,” 20-21, for her discussion of the termination of human perfection in religious devotion.

<sup>63</sup>Frolich, 181.

an analysis of the concrete elements of moral and rational development which are differentiated by the various moments of sexual difference in personal constitution. These developmental insights, as important as they are, are not all, however, that can be said on the matter of reason, rationality, and morality. Through these developmental patterns, reason is cultivated, but reason as the capacity for insight and reflection cannot be reduced to developmental patterns. Gilligan describes moral development ably; because it is still *moral* development, the processes of moral evaluation she describes should be incorporated into a more complete account of what morality is, and how this distinct form of moral development that Gilligan accounts for, is moral. Belenky, et al., where they discuss educational reform and intellectual development, are describing processes by which feminine students develop rational capacities. Again, these are *rational* capacities, and describing the process of development does not account for rationality as a process of insight and reflection; such work is oriented already towards what proper rationality is, either by critiquing predominant, false accounts of reason, or describing how rationality is developed and practiced. As epistemological critique, the division of reason by sexual differentiation (an aspect of Belenky, et al., rather than Gilligan) should be revised into a fuller account of reason as it functions across genders, among humanity; this is the common reason that is qualified in feminine or masculine forms of reasoning. This is the only way that mutual understanding can occur, and different persons can hold each other accountable, morally and intellectually.

Similarly, Allen's categories provide a way of evaluating the differing ontologies of the person developed by Beauvoir and Irigaray. Beauvoir's existentialist ontology, which places predominance on the acting subject, emphasizes the gender neutrality of this self-transcending activity, but the apparent neutrality of the possibilities (that is, the assumption of "masculine" possibilities for the free individual, and the lack of discussion over how gendered possibilities might be different) that the independent acting subject will take up weakens this account of the self. In doing this, Beauvoir downplays the

significance of sexuality in the positive activity of a gendered individual. Irigaray's suggestive social prescriptions are evidence of the significance of sexual difference in her account of the self, in which the differentiated aspects of the person bear on all aspects of their being. Allen's metaphysical perspective allows us to appreciate the work Beauvoir does to articulate and critique the oppressive context in which woman develops and asserts herself, while still maintaining a constitutive difference in all aspects of woman or man, in the way that these differences act on all moments and capacities of a woman's life. By differentiating the constitutive moments of the person, Allen thematizes this element of difference, as an element of sexually differentiated conjugate forms that act on the formally undifferentiated elements of the person (reason or virtue, for example). In this way, the common humanity of woman and man can be asserted metaphysically, while acknowledging the significance of sexual differentiation.

What Allen provides in her work is a distinctive perspective on the modes of being which organize and operate within philosophical accounts of gender. The trifold provides a metaphysical basis that functions as an organization of various perspectives on gender, as well as advancing a position on gender through the analysis of interrelated material and immaterial forms. This meets the requirements of metaphysics outlined above, by describing the mode(s) of access that determine the various ontic investigations into human identity and sexual differentiation. This in no way supplants the work that has already been done, but it provides a viable schema that is open to revision, which may nonetheless provide a means of access and evaluation for the many issues and perspectives surrounding gender and sexual differentiation. This is not a closure on questions related to gender, but an opening, an enabling mediation, which gives us "a reflective exercise in human freedom" by unifying and disclosing the significant hermeneutical regions of human identity and gender.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Catherine Brown Tkacz, review of *The Concept of Woman, Vol. 2: The Early Humanist Reformation, 1250-1500*, by Prudence Allen. *The Review of Metaphysics* 57, no. 1 (September 2003): 135.