

Christian Feminism, Gender, and Human Essences

Toward a Solution of the Sameness and Difference Dilemma

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ABSTRACT Christian feminist theory faces many stresses, some due directly to the apparent nature of Christianity and its seeming patriarchy. But feminism can also be thought inherent in Christianity. All people are made in God's image. Christians should view women and men as equals, just as they should see people of all races as equals. The basic question discussed, within a biblical and philosophical framework, is if it possible for Christian feminist theory to hold that there is an essence to being a woman, being a man or being human all the while recognizing vast differences among women, among men and among human persons? I propose a beginning solution to this problem.

KEYWORDS Christian; essence; feminism; human; men; women

Christian feminist theory faces many stresses, some due directly to the apparent nature of Christianity and its seeming patriarchy. But feminism can also be thought inherent in Christianity. All people are made in God's image. Christians should view women and men as equals, just as they should see people of all races as equals. I assume the latter view below when dealing with a central stress found in Christian feminism: essentialism. This is a large stress, not easily summarized or described. The problem will be spelled out more clearly below, but the basic question is, is it possible for Christian feminist theory to hold that there is an essence to being a woman, being a man or being human all the while recognizing vast differences among women, among men and among human persons? The question is cast in terms of essences understood as capturing *kinds* of things rather than individual essences or unique essences. For Christian feminists, es-

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sentialist questions are motivated by theological concerns rooted in the nature of the image of God, original sin, and God's nature. Christian theology, however, always makes philosophical assumptions, in this case about essences. In mainstream or secular feminism,¹ the same issues *sans* theological concerns arise. Indeed, worries about, and challenges to, essences are many in mainstream feminism. Nevertheless, where I discuss mainstream philosophical positions below, my eye is on Christian feminism.

Section I calls attention to a biblical tension between essentialism and anti-essentialism about gender. The following two sections (II–III) introduce various concepts and summarize the argument of a mainstream feminist theorist, laying out the specifics of the philosophical problem of concern. Section IV explains a theistic irrealist approach to the essentialist tension in feminist theory. Section V returns to the biblical text for a final, if brief, reflection.

I

To begin, I want generally to introduce why the problem of essentialism is a Christian problem. As already noted, the issue is not unique to Christian feminism but shared with mainstream theories. Thus, much of the argument below applies equally well to both secular and Christian feminisms. Why then write an essay from the vantage point of Christian feminism? Why not tackle the problem *sans* Christian concerns? First, the problem is not simply found in the feminist-theoretic component of Christian feminism as if the issue for Christian feminism were really just a problem for feminism and the Christian aspects merely “tacked on.” I believe the tension emerges within the Christian tradition itself. Indeed, many assumptions made by Christians about gender essences are problematic independent of the arrival of feminism in history. In particular, the essentialism stress is embedded in the Christian scriptures and therefore needs a response. Christian feminists bear a special burden since arguably the theme picked up in mainstream feminist thought is predated in Christian texts thousands of years old. So not only must feminists respond to the challenge from within feminist theory, but Christians must explain how

1. I hesitate to use the term “secular” in this context because a good deal of feminist scholarship is informed by religious considerations of a variety of sorts. Also, my own view of the so-called “integration” of faith and learning balks at separating so-called “secular” and “religious” or “Christian” scholarship from each other. But that is a subject for another essay. I will sometimes use the term “secular” in this paper to ferret out the point that the problem I wish to concentrate on is not unique to Christian feminism.

the text of scripture can be made consistent, if it can. Second, the response to the problem of essentialism developed here is deeply informed by theism, something many secular feminists may be initially inclined to reject. Nevertheless, I hope secular feminists can hear the proposal and that it opens doors to further dialogue on the plausibility and truth of theism, and in particular the plausibility and truth of Christian theism.

Now to the problem. The Christian scriptures suggest essentialism about the human person and women and men. Human-kind essentialism is rooted in the creation story which says God created humans in the divine image. Human-kind essentialism is also the philosophical basis for the doctrine of original sin. After all, through one man (אָדָם, *adam*)² sin entered the world. It is henceforth, in Western theology, up to some sort of human-kind essentialism to explain why everyone is born into sin *simply by being human*. Gender-kind essentialism, in contrast, is often traced to the notorious household codes of the Pauline corpus, as well as the numerous passages suggesting a universal difference of role for women and men, women being excluded from leadership and teaching positions in the church.

My goal is not to provide exegesis for all scriptural passages relevant to sex and gender but rather simply to illustrate the essentialist tensions found in the Bible. At the risk of seeming to proof text, I list just two verses central in regard to the tension: "So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (Gn 1:27, NIV) and "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28, NIV).

Note that both passages (in English translation) refer to females and males rather than women and men. In much feminist work, the sex / gender distinction plays a large role. If we read these passages through the lines drawn with that distinction (with "female" and "male" picking out the sex rather than the gender), then perhaps most feminists will find no issue here. The female / male language tends to fall on the biological side of the

2. The term אָדָם is not a proper name early in Genesis but rather a generic term "the human." It's not entirely clear, before Eve is created, that "the man" would have been gendered or perhaps even sexed. Also, there is a difficulty with understanding sin as being Adam's fault alone (which the New Testament seems to affirm), leaving Eve free of responsibility. On the one hand, that reduces Eve's role in the first sin to ignorance while Adam is somehow "in the know." Yet ironically we also have the sexist history in Christian scriptural and theological work, viz., where Eve is blamed exclusively for sin even though Scripture nowhere indicates that she was responsible. But those are topics for another essay.

discussion rather than the cultural. But reasons exist not to be too closed about the terms “male/female” in these passages. It would not have occurred to the writer of Genesis or to Paul that they were describing only the biology of human persons. The sex/gender distinction would not have occurred to them. So it would be anachronous to side step issues about gender in the Bible by retreating to the view that the authors were only speaking of biology. Nor would it be fair to read these passages simply in terms of what we now think of as culturally created gender. Just as the authors would not have thought strictly of biology, neither would they have thought strictly of gender. How, then, should we proceed? I take the texts to refer to an amalgamation of sex and gender. Indeed, recent discussions of the sex/gender distinction have not drawn a hard and bright line between the two and the distinction may not be as clear as some feminist theorists suggest.³

Of course, much theological controversy still surrounds these passages. Is the first teaching that the image of God is constituted by an inclusive notion “female/male” so that to be the image of God humans (taken as a group) must be both female and male? That seems to imply that neither females nor males by themselves are fully in God’s image. It also implies real differences (essential differences?) between women and men. Or does this passage suggest that to be fully in the image of God, males and females individually must be androgynous, taking the best of both female and male characteristics in order to be fully human, that is, fully in the divine image? Jesus may be androgynous in this way.⁴ A third option: does the passage teach that the image of God is fully in the female as it is in the male (even though the text has God presented as male)?

Let’s take up the second verse, in Christ there is no male or female. Does that situation arise in the current age or the eschaton? Furthermore, what does it mean to say that all are one in Christ? Is this an essentialist claim, a positional claim, or something else again? Also, how should one understand this claim in contrast to other Pauline proposals about women not being permitted to teach or wives being subordinate to their husbands? If we put the Galatians passage into the eschaton *alone* then no problem arises with the other apparently anti-woman passages. Such a move, however, seems disingenuous to many other things Paul is doing

3. See, for example, discussions by Christine Battersby (cited below) and Charlotte Witt, *The Metaphysics of Gender*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199740413.001.0001.

4. Susan McLeod-Harrison made this point in conversation.

in Galatians. Galatians is about freedom in Christ now and is not merely an eschatological book.

The point to emphasize is this. In Genesis, God makes humans both female and male. Following later, we are told that God creates each kind after its own. Horses do not beget cows, and mosquitoes do not beget snakes. Humans, likewise, do not beget anything but humans. Such talk appears essentialist. No possibility exists of crossing the lines of natural kinds. But then being male or being female is required, for humans do not come any way but gendered.⁵ In other words, so long as there are humans there will be females and males. Thus to be human is to be, essentially, either male or female, whatever else goes into making humans in the image of God.⁶ But then one suspects that genders themselves have essences in virtue of which women and men are forever distinct (so long as humans abide, which in Christian theology is forever).

Galatians is a lot less affirming of essentialism about gender in connection to being human. Being Jewish and Greek are cultural creations. More so being a slave. Does this not imply that being female and male are cultural creations? If so, should we not think of gender divides as wrong as slavery and racial divides? Thus, just as there is no essential ontology to slavery or race, so there is no essential ontology to female or male.

What are we to make then of Genesis where male and female are bound up with the image of God, that is, bound up with being essentially human? Furthermore, what of each gender having its own essence? Here I return to my comments about the sex/gender distinction. Reading the "male/female" language of Galatians in terms of sex rather than gender is problematic for, on a typical understanding, to be human is to be either female or male *biologically*.⁷ It would seem odd indeed for God to bring humans into the kingdom of God *sans* either the male or the female sex and yet have us remain human. Gender does not face the same problems, given that it is a cultural construct.⁸ But if we read the scriptures with an amalgamated notion of sex/gender, what are we to make of these puzzles?

5. Some important questions arise here about the apparent dichotomy of the categories "male and female" assumed in these texts. What are Christians to make of true hermaphroditism or intersexuality and other aspects of the human condition—transsexuality, for example? I will not discuss these issues here.

6. Later when the Platonic/Aristotelian framework becomes so central to the interpretation of the Christian scriptures, it was an easy move to understand the image of God in terms of philosophical essences.

7. Again setting aside the issue of other genders and sexes.

8. Of course, there is much to be said on how sex and gender may or may not be related.

The Christian scripture is in tension with itself on the question of essentialism about being a woman, being a man and being human. How should this tension be resolved?

II

The conflicts are not merely Christian, for much secular feminist theory decries essentialism. Arguably the two recent centerpieces of the discussion are Elizabeth V. Spelman's *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.⁹ Many others, however, take up the banner of anti-essentialism. There are several sorts of arguments supporting the anti-essentialist view:

- (1) Since (male) philosophers have (historically) defined humans strictly in terms of maleness and/or male qualities, women have been excluded from being truly human. Hence, women should be suspicious of essentialist accounts of women or men.
- (2) Women have been defined as less significant in essence than men and such accounts of women have been used to oppress women.
- (3) Women have simply been thought of as "other" than men. Since the "other" cannot be understood, the "other" can be disregarded or ignored. Of course, something binds the "other" together, viz., the essence of women. Tied to this sort of argument is that the male self needs the "other" against which to define or even to create itself.
- (4) Essentialism ought to be rejected because essentialist accounts of women exclude too many women from the feminist discussion. Women are, in fact, too diverse a group to be described via essentialism.

So feminist theory raises many challenges about essences. First is whether any human essence exists (1). Second is whether a particular essence to women exists in contrast to men (2). If a particular essence to women exists in contrast to men, then a feminist should reject the (supposed) inferiority of woman's essence. Third is the notion of "otherness" itself and how difference and otherness should play in understanding the human person or, more specifically, women. This is initially behind (3) but the issue is quickly

9. Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1988); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

enlarged from women in contrast to men to women in contrast to women. Hence (4) is important.

In addition to extricating women from oppression by freeing them from denigrating essence-mongering, concern also exists to enable men to change so that they will no longer act oppressively. Patriarchy is not identical to being male. One can at least try to reject, as a man, the advantages of patriarchy with a view to helping its undoing.¹⁰ So, questions exist about whether there is an essence to women, to men and to humans.

The tension between essentialism and anti-essentialism arose in the context of the move from the 1960s to the 1980s (and later). During the 1960s and 1970s, much feminist thought promoted a doctrine of sameness. The assumption of much second-wave feminism was that men and women were equal in terms of their shared human nature and, therefore, they should be equal before the law. For example, much liberal feminist thought took rationality as the essential marker of being human. Since women are rational, anything due men was also due women. But before long some feminist critics argued that the notion of rationality appealed to was “male” rationality—disembodied, abstract rationality. Women, it was suggested, were different in their rationality—embodied and concrete. These early questions about rationality were quickly followed by questions about the essence of woman. The 1980s saw a movement toward looking not just at the American legal system and middle-class white women but also women of color and later world-wide situations for women. The concern for differences among not just women and men but among women themselves is central to the work of many feminist theorists.¹¹ Further negative evaluation of essences emerged.

Unfortunately, not everyone uses the term “essence” in the same way and it stands in need of clarification, as do other related terms. The first of these terms arises in the realism/nominalism debate about universals. “Realism” is much used in philosophy and sorting out its uses is important. To begin, the term “realism” oft-times refers to a Platonic account of universals. Thus Spelman claims that much of Western feminist theory is committed to gender realism by which she means the position that particular women are “instantiations of [a] single, non-physical, and un-

10. See Allan G. Johnson, *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005).

11. See the many readings listed in the bibliography for Rosemarie Tong’s chapter “Multicultural, Global, and Postcolonial Feminism” in her *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009).

changing Form.”¹² She criticizes this position at length in her influential work, rejecting it. Mari Mikkola, reflecting Spelman, claims that “gender realism is considered to be something that feminist philosophers should not endorse or even consider as a viable option.”¹³

Mikkola and Spelman are not alone. Platonic realism is rejected by many feminist philosophers. Such realism is a contrast to the nominalism of the Middle Ages in which nothing is universal but the application of the name. On this view, there simply are no universals. In between realism and medieval nominalism is the nominalism of John Locke in which nominal essences are linguistic only and hence one can give definitions of names without characterizing the real essences of things. A fourth position is Aristotelianism. It too is a realist position but not Platonic. Plato held that universals (such as treeness) exist totally independent of either the human mind or the individual things (e.g., this tree). That is, even if there were no trees (and no humans to think about them), there would still be treeness. Aristotle held that there would be no universals were there no particular instances of them. Nevertheless, there is such a thing as treeness; it’s just always found in individual trees.

A second issue is to distinguish talk of essentialism and antiessentialism from realism and nominalism. Natalie Stoljar notes that essentialism in feminist theory is often taken to be a Platonic idea, viz., that there is a property (or properties) that form a common nature to women. This nature forms women into a class as well as provides an essence to their individual identity. Stoljar describes how to unify the class “woman” rather than describe essential properties. Hence her view remains neutral on the realism/nominalism debate (the former affirming universals, the latter denying them). Her view (called “resemblance nominalism”) is akin to Locke’s. The universal “woman” exists but Stoljar rejects (or passes over) the notion that it is rooted in a set of purely natural properties. Rather, she explains and defends a universal that is neither natural nor nonexistent but social. Hence resemblance is important for the class “woman” whereas sameness is not.¹⁴

All this overlaps with the “realist/antirealist” debate. What role does the mind (both human and divine) play in the way the world is? Would stars

12. Spelman, *Inessential Woman*, 2.

13. Mari Mikkola, “Elizabeth Spelman, Gender Realism and Women,” *Hypatia* 21, no. 4 (2006): 78, doi:10.1111/j.1527-2001.2006.tb01129.x.

14. See Natalie Stoljar, “Different Women, Gender and the Realism/Nominalism Debate,” in *Feminist Metaphysics: Explorations in the Ontology of Sex, Gender and the Self*, edited by Charlotte Witt (New York: Springer Publishers), 2011.

exist if no (human) minds exist to make them? This may sound an outlandish question in the context of Christian thought where God is clearly understood to have created the heavens and the earth. Nevertheless, God could be responsible for making the heavens and the earth via the creative work of the human mind. For many philosophers since Kant, the idea that human conceptual schemes are integral to the way the world is, while controversial, is not outlandish. When some talk about the social construction of reality, the framework is often Kantian. We shape the world into what it is. This can take more or less radical directions. In the most extreme versions, the result is an intense nominalism about universals. But there is plenty of middle ground between that and realism.

In summary, confusing issues abound. Are there essences and if so, how should we think of them—as free floating universals in some Platonic realm or in, perhaps, the mind of God? That might work for natural kinds (human, cat, dog, oak tree) but not for social kinds, if there are social kinds. If there are social kinds, how is one to explain membership in them? Is one left only with something like resemblance nominalism where things are unified into a class but where no real essential properties exist to support membership in that class? How is all this related to the realism / antirealism debate? On the extreme antirealist end, there will be no mind-independent kinds at all. Things are not called “red” because they are red. They are red because they are called “red.” This is true for natural and social kinds. On the other (Platonic-Aristotelian) end, kinds are what they are because they have some natural feature in virtue of which they are what they are.

III

By the late-1990s, Christine Battersby wrote:

For some time feminist theory has seemed caught on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, there are those who—recognizing differences amongst women—end by denying any form of female identity. On the other hand, there are those who—supposing male/female difference overrides other differences—look for a female “sameness” or “essence” based either on nature or on shared work or life practices. Although since 1984 a number of the most important feminist theorists have argued that it is worth adopting an essentialist “strategy,” essentialism has continued to be presented in most Anglo-American feminist contexts as a theoretical vice.¹⁵

A tension exists between the need truly to recognize differences among women and the need for some sort of essential account of women to provide for political unity. Some feminists have thus taken up an essentialist “strategy” while continuing in their skepticism about essences themselves. Yet as was suggested above, the challenge is not about women alone. If any hope exists that men can change from partaking of the advantages of patriarchy to helping defeat it, the traditional accounts of male essence must come into question as well. Here another tension arises, viz., between the notion of essential differences between men and women on the one hand and, on the other, the apparent need for a human essence to provide for moral solidarity.

Battersby herself argues for an essentialism for women. Her essentialism is anti-Aristotelian, Aristotelian essences, she believes, being the real problem. Indeed, she illustrates that much feminist-theoretic rejection of essentialism is only of Aristotelian versions. She writes that

from the point of view of feminist theory there are distinct advantages in trying to keep hold of a notion of essence—however radically that notion might seem to depart from standard Aristotelianism. For one thing, we have seen that the notion that there can be no essence of the female has a long and time-honored pedigree in the history of patriarchal thought and has been implicit in western metaphysics at least since the time of Aristotle. We need to explore what happens if we retain the notion of essence, but allow within it the kind of fluidity that can encompass female difference—and also the type of female embodiment in which self can be impregnated with otherness. (*PhW*, 34)

Modeling her suggestions after Bergson, she continues:

Bergsonianism keeps the “real” as a regulatory ideal: a flowing, unstable reality behind the horizons of discourse. Retaining a notion of (fluid) essence also allows a conceptual clarity that is necessary to thinking the non-equivalence of similar concepts when applied to persons of different sexes (and races). This fluid notion of essence is also, I would argue, particularly useful to thinking a female form of embodiment in which identity is established without an oppositional relationship between self and other-

15. Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 15, 16. Hereafter cited in text as *PhW*.

ness, but in which self is (from time to time) permeated by otherness—in pregnancy, for example. (*PhW*, 34)

The fine points of her position, however, are not Bergsonian but Kierkegaardian. A few short quotations show the general direction of her position. She writes that

[i]n a Kierkegaardian world, birth (and radical novelty) is the norm, not a strange barely conceptualized possibility. Indeed, for Kierkegaard identity emerges out of movement; movement is not simply something that “happens” to substances. Furthermore, the complexity of these movements is such that it is “woman”—and not “man”—that provides the key to his new understanding of self. As we will see, Kierkegaard uses “woman” to construct a metaphysics that needs neither underlying substances, nor hylo-morphism. Instead Kierkegaardian reality involves a dynamic interrelation of past and present; self and (symbolic) other. (*PhW*, 151)

After noting various ways in which Kierkegaard’s *Antigone* is quite different from that of Hegel and others, Battersby notes:

For Kierkegaard . . . *Antigone* is a model for a self that is created in the moment: in the “nook” of present, future and past. This self is not created solely by itself, nor is it a passive victim of circumstance or of the “system” as a whole. Political agency is possible, but the agent has to live with radical ambiguities; an infinity of potential “realities”; with power discrepancies; and with relational dependence on others. (*PhW*, 197)

There is much to unpack here, but the basic idea is that a Kierkegaardian ontology based on the notion of repetition where being is birthed from becoming (as opposed to the traditional notion of recollection where being is fixed and knowledge is remembering what is) gives us a “workshop of possibilities” wherein humans are not determined by biology nor entirely created by cultural conditions.

Battersby continues:

Thinking female selves in terms of patterns emerging out of flow and movement does not necessitate giving up a “depth” model of the self. Neither does talk of such a self entail closing down the possibility of historical and cultural singularities, or of new unthought-of possibilities emerging in the future, the present, or even from the past. The specificity of the female

subject-position is neither solely biologically “determined,” nor simply the result of cultural “construction.” Instead, different temporalities of experience (through repetition and habit) “score” women’s lives, as do also the differential positionings of race, class and community. The female sex “is not one”; but neither is it entirely without its own distinctive morphology. Like Kierkegaard’s “alien” wind blowing over a strange landscape, the female self is shaped as it negotiates and renegotiates obstacles, and as it registers the resonances and echoes that its repeated movements produce. Neither totally free, nor totally determined, the Kierkegaardian “woman” opens up a line of flight that escapes the linearities of Hegelian histories and Kantian temporalities—but which also loops in ways that suggest a multiplicity of dimensions that cannot be contained by the thousand temporal territories which mark out the plateaus of thought. (*PhW*, 197)

The female self although rooted to the biology of a body that can give birth is not fixed by that biology nor is it entirely created by culture. In short, it is not a fixed and unmoving essence (as Aristotle might have thought should he have supposed women have an essence at all) but neither is the female self without an essence. Rather it is a Bergsonian river into which one can step many times, anew with the life of culture and history each time one takes the step.

Although Battersby’s attempts at rescuing essences are steps in the right direction, I believe Battersby’s approach is not strong enough to engage what the Christian feminist might want, viz., an account of human essence that positively conceives of both women and men without being open to too much flux. While flux is real and good, too much of a good thing may unroot the human connection to God altogether. Battersby’s position appears not stable enough to connect to the notion of the *imago Dei* central to so much Christian theology and belief. One major problem I see is that while Battersby talks much about the female self and its non-deterministic-but-not-entirely-free creation of itself, it is not clear what it is doing the creating. What is the self that creates the self (in part)? This may seem an unfair question, since Battersby’s whole point is that essences should be understood as fluid but stable. Yet it appears that the stability is at best a biological one. Whence, then, freedom? Whence then creativity? But a little more needs to be said here. Perhaps flux and a continuing metamorphosis is at least part of the image of God in us.¹⁶ While I think this point is right, there is still something missing. What is under

16. Abigail Rine made these observations in comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

the flowing water of the river, something beyond biology? Freedom and creativity, while relational and interactive, need metaphysical grounding. What allows, for example, for the first free choice of an individual human? Or what makes humans truly creative as opposed to merely reactive to their environments? So while I applaud Battersby's attempt at providing for female essences, the notion of the real that lies behind the flux is left quite vague and ultimately unhelpful.

What is very helpful about Battersby's work is its calling attention to the heavy reliance on a certain notion of Aristotelian essences (the root of which is the Platonic framework) against which so many feminists react. Hers is clearly not an Aristotelian notion of essence. But neither does it seem stable enough metaphysically to explain freedom and creativity, let alone an account of the *imago Dei*. There appears to be too much flux and a sort of self-creation that can not ground itself and its abilities. We need a different model.

IV

I propose that the alignment of essentialism with Platonism pure-and-simple is a mistake, albeit a common one. This alignment creates a false dichotomy between realism and essentialism on one side and nominalism and antiessentialism on the other. Attempts such as Stoljars's to avoid the dichotomy by not talking about essences rooted in nature but rather talking about universals created via human attempts to unify a class are, I think, too weak for what the Christian feminist needs. In fact, I think they are too weak to undergird a moral framework sufficient to overcome sexism regardless of one's faith commitments.

My background but focused question thus is this: can one be an essentialist without resorting to mere Lockean nominalist essences or to an extreme Platonism? That is, for example, might color be a universal without it being rooted in a mind-independent, natural (fixed) property but rather in how we use words and/or concepts. Could that be true *yet without giving up on the notion that things really are what they are*? To put that another way, can our conceptual schemes do something more than merely name things or provide definitions but rather *actually make things*? I propose that if a certain sort of antirealism ("theistic irrealism") is the case then there are *actual* ways the world is brought about by our conceptual work (and not merely linguistic "takes" on the world). Those ways contain essences, those essences are not distinct from reality and yet they are formed by humans without being *merely* linguistic. I have devel-

oped and defended theistic irrealism elsewhere.¹⁷ I will briefly describe it in this section.

That is my background question. The foreground question deals with the application of such a view to gender- and human-kind issues. If Christian feminists are to be faithful to scripture, we must be able to have our cake and eat it too. Mainstream feminism also needs a resolution to the tensions surrounding essentialism. Is there a way in which the positives of essentialism are affirmed, thus granting a firm foundation for political and social work toward overcoming patriarchy, and also where the negatives of essentialism are denied, allowing for the wide diversity among women, among women and men, and among humanity *in toto*? In applying theistic irrealism to the question of gender and human being, I believe our cake is consumed and yet it remains on the table.

First, Christians are committed to the view that God created and sustains the world. But how God does those things is far more open to theorizing than is often thought. Theistic irrealism proposes that God creates the *Urstoff* of the world but allows and in fact encourages humans to make and shape the preliminary “stuff” into the way the world is. Humans are made in God’s image and one fundamental way in which that image is exemplified is via human creativity. While typically Christians think the world came into being shaped very much the way in which we experience it, it is plausible to think that the reason our experience “matches” the world so well is that our very thoughts, ideas, concepts and so forth shape the raw material created by God into the way the world is. Stated in other terms, the conceptual schemes found quite diversely among humans actually make the world the various ways it is.

I shifted in the last paragraph from the “way” the world is to the “ways” the world is. This is no slip of the pen. Theistic irrealism proposes pluralism; no mere epistemological relativism but an ontological relativism. In other words, theistic irrealism is not providing for merely Lockean nominalist essences but rather essences that make the world the way(s) it actually is. Many conceptual schemes exist and hence the world is many ways; a theistically rooted, relativized Kantianism.¹⁸ A host of questions need to be answered about this account.¹⁹ Two of the most pressing are: how might this work and does it not simply lead to contradictions? In ex-

17. See my *Make/Believing the Worlds: Toward a Christian Ontological Pluralism* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2009).

18. Substantial aspects of theistic irrealism find their roots in the work of Nelson Goodman and Michael Lynch. See *Make/Believing* for details.

19. Here I again refer the interested reader to my *Make/Believing*.

plaining how the theory works, it should become plain how the problem of contradictions is to be handled.²⁰

It works, in brief outline, as such. First, we must distinguish between necessities and contingencies. God holds the former (such as mathematical and logical truths and God's own necessary existence) in the divine being. These truths hold across all human conceptual schemes. That is, no mere human (or even a large group of humans) is responsible for the fact that $2 + 2 = 4$. That is a truth that holds no matter what conceptual scheme humans contrive. Typically, such truths are considered absolutes where they are thought of as *propositions true independent of all conceptual schemes*. But what is often overlooked is that *absolutes need not be independent of all conceptual schemes but could simply be true in every conceptual scheme*. Michael Lynch calls these "virtual absolutes" to contrast them with the typical way in which absolutes are understood.²¹ All necessities are virtual absolutes according to the present proposal. From a Christian point of view, it is important to note that, so far as necessities go, God too has a conceptual scheme and because God is, so to speak, "in the mix" with us in creating the world in which we live, God's creative consistency supports necessities in the contingent order. Humans, in other words, do not create the necessities whether mathematical laws or God.

Contingencies are more complicated. The created order is not necessary. However, it is initially created, shaped and influenced in substantial ways by God. Christians *qua* Christians would be unorthodox to think otherwise. But the details of how the world is, I propose, are largely up to us. What holds all the worlds together? Postmodern theorists sometimes say that the world is many different ways and those ways contradict one another. The mistake of the more radical postmodernists is the claim that no meta-narrative exists. For Christians (and if Christianity is true, for everyone) there is a meta-narrative, viz., the work of God in creation and redemption. But that meta-narrative is not the whole story. The world is many ways even though a fundamental meta-narrative exists.

Theistic irrealism proposes we think of the meta-narrative in terms of thin properties. Let us take God as an example. God is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent and omnibenevolent. Think of these properties of God as thin properties. That is, when two theologians discuss God, they agree God has those properties and they agree they are speaking of the

20. For a fuller treatment see *Make/Believing*.

21. Michael Lynch first notes this observation. I follow his work here. See Michael P. Lynch, *Truth in Context* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).

same things, viz., God and the divine properties. But those same theologians might understand God and the divine properties quite differently. In other words, the conceptual schemes they use “thicken” up the properties of omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence and omnibenevolence quite differently, perhaps even in contradictory ways. Theistic irrationalism holds that, in fact, taken out of the context of their conceptual schemes, (or put otherwise, in a possible world in which the claims were relative to the same scheme) they would be logically inconsistent. But we do not and cannot live where the claims can be taken out of the context of their conceptual schemes. So there is real inconsistency but it is not a real problem. God is many ways (so far as God allows the divine self to interact with human creativity) in the world in which God created.²²

Here is more detail about the meta-narrative. Let’s say the Nicene Creed summarizes orthodox Christian thought. The creed can be understood as applying thin properties to God and God’s relationship to the world. Those thin properties, however, can be thickened up in a variety of ways and some of those ways conflict (when taken out of the context of their conceptual schemes). So Christ died for sinners, but there are many true (and conflicting) ways the atonement works. For example, both the substitutionary view of the atonement and the moral view of the atonement are true. Yet they are contradictory to one another. Because they *are* contradictory, the world is plural ways. This is possible because God encourages humans to shape, via their conceptual schemes, the many ways the world is.

On the level of thin concepts, God’s existence and the core nature of God are preserved across all conceptual schemes. On the level of thick concepts, however, God is quite different in different theological conceptual schemes. This is no mere epistemological difference but true ontological difference. God is one way in conceptual scheme 1 and God is another (conflicting) way in conceptual scheme 2. But at the divine core, God is not dependent upon human conceptual schemes at all (although logically dependent on the divine conceptual scheme). There is plenty of room for the mystery of God.

God is not contingent but the world is. Had God not created it, no such world would be. Humans, according to theistic irrationalism, play a central role in the world. Indeed, we make the world in substantial ways even though

22. It is important to remember that God is a necessity and therefore God’s thin properties “turn up” in every conceptual scheme. The same need not be true of contingent things and their thin properties.

humans are not necessities. Once made, however, humans contribute in significant ways to the world beyond just changing things within their “designed and fixed” categories. That is, humans do not just make houses out of trees but humans make the trees themselves! (Consider, for example, that what counts as a tree in Texas would merely count as a large shrub in Oregon or that the number of things in a bag changes depending what you mean by the word “thing”). There are limits, however, on what humans can do with their creativity. Humans cannot make the *Ur-stoff*. Furthermore, humans cannot conceptualize God into nonexistence. Nor can they conceptualize each other into nonexistence. We can try to wallpaper over God and other people, but we will not find success. Such conceptual schemes in the end collapse into themselves. God’s existence is necessary and human existence, given God’s creative work, is central to there being the world in which we live and the various ways it is.

Theistic irrationalism is deeply eschatological. God is in the mix with us. God is providential in the divine interaction with human persons and the rest of the created order. All our conceptual schemes are partially constructed, incomplete and wrongly done. But God, who superintends the working and ordering of the world, will bless some conceptual schemes and not others. Or at least God will require some substantial editing work of us when God is fully revealed. Here it is important to note that there will never be a “single, true description” of God that is revealed. Rather, the full revelation of God is God’s own self including a fuller revelation of God’s commitment to human creativity. There will not be a revelation of a singular, true set of propositions about God. In heaven, God will still be many ways, as will the heavenly frameworks in which we will live. God’s self-revelation will still occur within our conceptual frameworks but those frameworks will be more fully and richly developed.

Theistic irrationalism is applicable to many areas of academic study, such as the physical sciences (recall the various paradigms discussed by Kuhn),²³ the human sciences, and the arts and literature. Competing and apparently equally viable and conflicting theories and pictures are present in each of these domains. Could it be that they (or at least many of them) are true or well made?²⁴ But the main question for us is: how does theistic irrationalism apply to the issue of human, male and female essence?

23. See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

24. Not all the important ways the world is are concerned with truth. Rather they are concerned with being “rightly rendered.” Unfortunately, there is not space to explore that broader category here.

Let's start with the human essence. In much contemporary philosophy, but even in parts of Aristotle, the human essence is thought to rest in some natural property or set thereof. The challenge is, how can essences of women and men exist if no natural essences exist beyond the biological? So goes much of secular thought about the matter. However, with God in the mix, human nature need not be merely biological. God creates the *Urstoff*; that is, certain aspects of the human person are supernaturally rooted rather than the result of pure nature or evolutionary biology *sans* God. Some aspects of the raw "material" God creates are more refined than other aspects. Humans in particular have substantial form—this is the image of God in us. That is, humans have thin essences that God shapes more than the essences of other things, such as trees (the latter of which may be entirely left up to us). What are the thin properties—the thin essence, if you will—of humans? That is, in all the conceptual schemes we can come up with, what properties will always be present? Which features of the human person, in other words, are virtual absolutes?²⁵ If we are truly made in God's image, it is natural to think of humans as knowing, powerful, present, and loving. But we are also creative and free. No matter what conceptual scheme we construct, humans (both women and men) have a thin essence. Yet within the conceptual schemes themselves, the thickened up versions of humans might be substantially different, and perhaps even contradictory across schemes (although such contradictions will not and cannot be of a sort that undermine human moral solidarity—God sees to that). Thus, an essence to being human exists but also many different ways humans are across conceptual schemes. Thick versions of humans are cultural constructions. Some better (from an eschatological point of view) than others, some worse. But limits exist on how we can construct the thicker versions of people. Those limits are rooted in the thin accounts of humans, the virtual absolutes that hold in every conceptual scheme and ultimately in the work of God in creating humans in the divine image. That is what I meant when I said some of the raw "material" God creates is more refined than others. So while there is a range of ways humans can be created (thickened up from the thin essences) God puts stricter rules on such constructions than, say, rules that apply to rocks, trees or atoms and their various parts.²⁶

25. A philosophical clarification. It is helpful to understand that properties essential to humans are not instantiated in every possible world because humans are contingent. Nevertheless, the virtual absolutes true of human nature exist in every world. That is, if *x* is a human in a possible world, *x* will have the thin human properties associated with them.

Stated another way, so far as humans go there is a much richer but more “fixed” nature of the human person and hence a richer and more fixed meta-narrative. This narrative provides for the grounding of moral actions and character across human cultures. Little, if any, such meta-narrative exists for things such as trees or stars. Those humans make up nearly out of whole cloth. The closer some thing is to having a substantial shaping character on humanity, the closer it is to having a more fixed and richer essential nature. I think of the moral and theological realms in particular, but the arts are more shaping as well, whereas the sciences less shaping. The sciences, I propose, are less fixed and more malleable than the humanities.²⁷ The combination of human and divine influence on what it is to be human makes us what we are. Again, this is not merely epistemology, a sort of “there are various ways we understand or think of ourselves, but we could be wrong.” Rather, it is the making of actual, concrete human persons with both a human- and a divine-conceptual scheme source.

What of women and men? Recall that God’s creation of humans in the image of God is thicker and more rich and fixed (although still flexible) than other things in creation. Let’s return now to the sex / gender distinction. On the model proposed here, human creativity influences our biological sex. The same is true of gender. I propose that with the creation of the human person אָדָם, and the immensely creative power of language and naming God gave to that person, אָדָם had the ability to create both sex and gender.²⁸ I think that the thin properties of gender are related to our biological sex (and in this way, agree with both Witt and Battersby in seeing the line between sex and gender not to be a brightly lit one). Those thin properties are thickened out into gender (and hence the author of Genesis has the amalgamated view of sex / gender noted earlier). But the thin properties of gender are much thinner than anything that attends to being human. In other words, humans are much more free to create what it is to be men and women than we are to create our humanity. Gender, as such, is not strictly biological nor merely natural. It is, rather, a social creation. But it is vital

26. One advantage theistic irrealism has over secular antirealisms is that the former provides an explanation for why humans exist and have the creative powers they do.

27. The humanities are often called “soft” and the sciences “hard.” But perhaps the reason why the humanities seem so open-ended and the sciences less so is simply the difficulty in actually making the human person come close to the image of God whereas the sciences tend to deal with things the scientist can just more or less “make up.” It’s the image of God in us that “thickens” us out more than, say, the “nature” of an atom.

28. Here I do not mean to imply that the אָדָם was a literal first human. I am a committed evolutionist in regard to human development.

to see that *being more on the social end of the spectrum is not to be less real than things that are natural*. The natural is created via human conceptual schemes as well. Indeed, biological sex is itself, if theistic irrealism is correct, created by human interaction with the *Urstoff*. What results is not fake but actual whether natural or social. This is *ontological* creation and no mere linguistic or (Lockean nominalistic) epistemological work. So unlike with the human essence whose source is firmly and directly rooted in God, I propose that gender essences are truly relative to the conceptual schemes humans invent. In Christ, however, such cultural creations are subject to scrutiny, evaluation, criticism and even outright rejection. So Galatians 3:28 is not merely an eschatological pronouncement (it is that) but also a call to Christians to the hard work of scrutinizing, evaluating, criticizing and sometimes rejecting the inferior ways in which we construct women or men.²⁹

A good deal of feminist theory lives in another tension. On the one hand, it needs to recognize the social construction of women (and men) but also needs a way to proclaim that women (and men) can reject those social constructions. But if we human persons, whether women or men, are socially constructed and that is all, it is hard to see how or why women ever began to be critical of the ways in which they were being constructed in the first place. There needs to be an underlying essence of knowledge, power, presence, love, freedom and creativity that is the core essence of the human person and which in turn enables the cultural constructions to be evaluated and modified or rejected. The solidarity required to discover and reject oppressions must rest somewhere. That is found in the thin essential account of the human person as God created us. But this core nature of the human person is also, I believe, what roots being a woman and being a man. In other words, one can never be a woman or a man without being human but one could be a human person without being either a woman or a man. This pushes, it seems to me, humanity away from the so-called genders and toward more androgyny. As noted above, a case can be made for Jesus' androgyny. He was fully human first and a man second. Thus should we have our humanity first and our gender second. But Jesus' "manhood" was truly androgynous and not caught up in self-serving patriarchal privileges. He was fully androgynous.

A challenger might say that insofar as the theory argues for an essence to human persons, it argues that all humans share the traditionally understood "male" essence of the philosophers and perhaps the Christian scriptures themselves. Thus we recall the argument feminists have used to

29. Susan McLeod-Harrison helped me describe this view more clearly.

defend anti-essentialism, viz., that since male philosophers have (historically) defined humans strictly in terms of maleness and/or male qualities, women have been excluded from being truly human.

The response notes that the thin essence proposed here is indeed *thin*. What counts, for example, as power need not be understood as brute force, nor knowledge as the traditional male “objectivity.” Furthermore, the list of essential features of humans is simply too short. “Embodied” and “socially rooted” should clearly be added as biblical notions. Christian theology provides a good case that both are essential to the human person. Too much emphasis on the abstract, detached mind leads us astray. So the given list of properties essential to being human is not exhaustive. If I understand the Christian scriptures, much is there besides the sometime cultural patriarchy, viz., the truly liberating message of the incarnate God of the universe who came to redeem women and men, both of whom are created fully in the image of the divine lover.

So if my suggestions are correct, an essence of the human kind exists and we have not fully plumbed its depths. As a model for us to live into, a model in which women and men *qua* humans are made in God’s image, there is more in common shared among women and men than there is that is different, a fact evidenced by some psychological research.³⁰ But the idea of two different but eternally unchanging and fixed essences, one for women and one for men, is at best cultural and not absolute. While we need a shared human essence to support solidarity for overcoming patriarchy and oppression against women, women and men need not be understood as essentially different from one another at the thin level of the human being. But differences between men and women, and among women and among men, can be accounted for on theistic irrationalism because the differences are culturally rooted in our conceptual schemes. We have our cake while eating it too.

V

To return briefly to the Christian scriptures, if God created human nature and it is fixed, but not completely, by God, then there is a ground for moral solidarity not only about sexism but about all the challenges facing humankind. But if gender is fundamentally a creation of our human cultures via the free creativity God has given us, then both the Genesis

30. See, for example, Janet Shibley Hyde, “The Gender Similarities Hypothesis,” *American Psychologist* 60, no. 6 (2005): 581–592, doi:10.1037/0003-066x.60.6.581.

and the Galatians accounts are true. Gender has an essence. It is rooted in human conceptual schemes and in our (human-created) biologies rather than in a permanently fixed “nature” or God’s direct making of it. Gender differences and sameness are explained.

At this point, permit another biblical passage. Jesus says: “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven” (Mt 22:30, NIV). Jesus was confronted with a rabbinic challenge to his teaching on the resurrection. Suppose a woman marries but her spouse dies. She marries her husband’s brother. He dies. Suppose this happens seven times. In the afterlife, whose wife will she be? Jesus’ response is direct: resurrected people will not be married nor given in marriage. Probably the “married” refers to men and the “given in marriage” refers to women. In either case, people don’t marry in the afterlife. But Jesus adds “they will be like the angels in heaven” and it appears he assumed the case was closed.

It was probably widely held at the time that angels did not procreate (because they lived forever), hence, there would be no necessity for marriage.³¹ Does this passage say anything about the sex of the angels, or the sex of the resurrected human person? What about the gender? Perhaps not directly. At most one can say that in heaven humans will not marry. Yet it does leave room for speculation. What is Jesus saying? That angels do not have a sex since procreation is not necessary? Are they like God, personal but neither male or female, woman or man? One speculation helps to make sense of both the Genesis and the Galatians passages, viz., that at the resurrection humans become androgynous completely—both biologically and in terms of gender. To be fully human does not require sex or gender but it does require God’s image. That, it seems, does not disappear with gender or sex, for both God and the angels are personal yet without sex or gender. As such, the thin essential properties of humanity, being rooted in God’s creative work, remain forever whereas the human cultural creations of gender and sex do not. In the beginning we are sexed and gendered (Genesis). In the end, neither (Galatians). Hence the solution to the apparent contradiction of the Christian scriptures on gender.³²

31. See Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993.)

32. For an interesting discussion of Maximus the Confessor on the status of gender see Doru Costache, “Living above Gender: Insights from Saint Maximus the Confessor,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 21, no. 2 (2013): 261–290, doi:10.1353/earl.2013.0016. There has been some significant debate about what Maximus thought about spirituality and genderlessness.

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