

## AMC Louise Antony's *Only Natural* (Oxford, 2022)

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### Introduction

It gives me immense pleasure to be here to comment on Louise Antony's new book, *Only Natural*. I've been eager to have Louise's work more easily available, especially her feminist work which I rely on in my teaching and I am delighted that we now have this collection of her essays. As the collection illustrates well, Louise is an extremely broad and versatile philosopher and the range of the topics she has worked on during her long career is nothing short of extraordinary. The collection we have here concerns feminist topics in one way or another. What I will do here today is to give you a brief overview of the book, its central themes and Louise's distinct voice. As any friend of Louise's will know, she will not be happy if I don't find anything to disagree with her about and I will certainly pick a bone to gnaw on. This is Louise's view of metaphysics, of feminist metaphysics in particular, and her theory of gender.

### Overview of the book

The book is divided into three thematically organized parts. The first part includes her classic essay on Quinean naturalized epistemology and its usefulness for feminist ends. There we also have her defense of individualism in epistemology and her criticism of the use of Austin in feminist philosophy of language. A central theme in this first part is Louise's engagement with other feminist philosophers and her disagreement with some over the usefulness of various parts of analytic philosophy for feminist philosophical ends. If the feminist philosophical community were a party, Louise would certainly not be towing the party line. One of her essays in this part is even entitled: "sisters, please, I'd rather do it myself" which both illustrates her fierce independence and her commitment to individualism in epistemology, where the party line would be a clear rejection of such.

Louise's engagement with other feminists here is invaluable and brings out the diverse stances that feminists take, both towards the content and heritage of analytic philosophy and towards the institutional structures of academic philosophy. Louise's work in philosophy, and within the institutional structures of philosophy, has paved the way for us who come after her: Can you be a feminist and disagree with other feminists? Can you do ana-

lytic philosophy and be a feminist philosopher? Can you be a feminist philosopher and work within a mainstream philosophy department that produces the next generation of philosophers? Louise has not only shown us that this can be done; Louise has worked tirelessly to change the mainstream of philosophy so it is a hospitable place for us who come after her. Thank you, Louise.

It is in this first part of the volume that we are also introduced to the bias paradox: “if it is wrong that objectivity consists in the elimination of bias, then what is wrong with masculinist bias?” (P.5) Her answer involves acknowledging that bias plays a constructive role in many contexts and part II of the volume contains essays that explore the consequences of that thesis. Part III is then devoted to debates involving innateness and natural or essential characteristics, including debates over natural differences between men and woman or people of different races, which Louise is, of course, passionately against. These essays are a great resource, and I myself use them in teaching and mentoring whenever supposed natural differences between populations are brought in to explain injustices observed.

In this part is also Louise's more recent essay on the possible explanation for why so few women are in philosophy: is it because of innate differences or is there a confluence of forces, a “perfect storm” as she calls it? There Louise argues convincingly that the hypothesis that there are innate mental or psychological differences between men and women is not supported by the empirical evidence. I was also tickled to read in that part an old essay from 1998 about sex or gender segregation in bathrooms where she argues that bathrooms should be organized around functional differences: do you need to be standing up or sitting down to do your thing? Even though I agree with Louise's claim in that essay that we as a society should be working to diminish the social significance of bodily difference, I think that a central justification of sex or gender segregation in bathrooms is the reduction of harm, specifically sex and gender based violence. This is the central justification in the societies we live in today—not the ones that future people will live in after the revolution that gets rid of gender and sex oppression. I think that any discussion of the segregation of bathrooms needs to place the current vulnerability to gender and sex based violence at the center. The populations vulnerable to such violence are women of all stars and stripes as well as genderqueer and gender nonconforming people, whether cis or trans. This is missing from Louise's discussion.

But this is not the bone I want to pick today. Let me dig it up. The last essay in the volume is Louise's view of gender in an essay entitled “Feminism without Metaphysics: a deflationary account of gender”. This is today's bone.

## Feminist Metaphysics and Louise's account of gender

I will make two surprising claims: 1. that Louise misrepresents what feminist metaphysicians such as Charlotte Witt, Sally Haslanger, and others are doing when they offer a metaphysics of gender; 2. and that the account she herself offers is best understood as a marriage between Haslanger's account and Witt's.

I think that Louise misrepresents recent work in feminist metaphysics. She attributes a methodological approach to feminist metaphysicians that is simply incorrect and claims that they suffer from certain weaknesses that they don't in fact suffer from. That's my first claim. My second claim is that Louise's positive view of gender is not easily distinguished from a combination of the views of Sally Haslanger and Charlotte Witt, views of Louise's own old friends. This is indeed surprising, if true, as Louise is at pains in describing her theory as deflationary, and not a metaphysics of gender. But, I submit, it is. So, let's start.

## Louise's criticism of feminist metaphysics is incorrect

On giving a substantial answer to the woman question

Louise maintains that feminist metaphysicians are reviving the discarded doctrine of essentialism when they give a metaphysics of gender. Essentialism about gender, in this context, is the three pronged thesis that

1. all and only women share some property P in virtue of which they are all women
2. This property P is essential to the individual who has it
3. this property P is explanatory of the individual's behavior

Louise also adds the thesis that P is a biological property, but that I take to be an extra thesis that essentialism need not include, and we can put it aside for now.

The woman question in feminism is the question "what is a woman?" A substantive answer to that question is: to be a woman is to have some other property P. What sort of property could P be? Is to be a woman to have a vagina? Or be nurturing? Or to identify with feminine norms? Or something else? All substantive answers to the question are plagued by the same problem. A philosopher recognizes that the problem is that each proposed definition is neither necessary nor sufficient and is therefore inadequate. However, because we are dealing with people such inadequacy is not innocent, but involves potential harms: the proposed answers exclude people who should count, and they generalize from a limited case in politically and morally harmful ways. As feminist theory has given up on giving substantive

answers to the woman question, Louise is surprised that the recent work in feminist metaphysics is reviving that project.

Thankfully for everyone involved, this is just not the case. All the culprits Louise mentions, including Charlotte Witt, Sally Haslanger, Elizabeth Barnes, and I are very explicit that that is not what we are doing. Charlotte Witt even devotes a substantial amount of her book distinguishing her uniessentialism from the kind essentialism Louise fears.

What is more: none of the philosophers in question offers a substantive answer to the woman question. They all offer a positional answer: to be a woman is not to have some property P; it is to have a certain social position or social role. What exactly that means and how one comes to occupy that role varies.

One crude way to describe the difference is to say that the substantive answer involves an intrinsic property P and the current feminist metaphysicians all think it is a relational property.

There is one thing that could be leading Louise astray here. There has been a discussion in the literature about whether the debates in feminist metaphysics regarding gender are what are called "substantive". Elizabeth Barnes and Mari Mikkola object to influential conceptions of metaphysics (Schaffer, Sider, and others) that they rule feminist metaphysics out as not really metaphysics because they don't concern "fundamental" phenomena. Barnes and Mikkola contend that that shows that these conceptions of metaphysics are themselves inadequate, given that they rule out feminist metaphysics. However, the use of "substantive" in this discussion is that there is a real disagreement and the accounts of that part of reality differ. Barnes and Mikkola claim that feminist metaphysics is substantive in that sense. The debates in feminist metaphysics are substantive although they don't concern the base building blocks of reality, according to some influential conceptions of metaphysics. But that just shows the limits of those conceptions.

However, debates over gender and other social phenomena by feminist metaphysicians can be substantive in that sense without anyone offering a substantive account of gender. And that is precisely what is the case.

## What is metaphysics?

Louise wants to offer a theory of gender without giving a metaphysics of gender. What is it to give a metaphysics of gender? In my view, asking the question "what is the nature of x" for any x, is going to be asking a metaphysical question. What is justice? What is knowl-

edge? What is gender? What is a woman? All of these are metaphysical questions. Metaphysics is everywhere.

It seems that Louise does not count *answering* these questions as *doing* metaphysics unless the answer is of a certain kind, namely, that one gives an essentialist answer of the sort mentioned in the beginning. So unless one says that to be a woman is to have some property P which is essential to the bearer such that it would cease to exist were it to lose it, and which explains their behavior, one is not giving a metaphysics of gender. And then, conversely, since now we have all these feminist metaphysicians, that must be what they are doing. But this is just not correct. Louise's conception of metaphysics is a particular conception of metaphysics, which is not shared by any of the feminist metaphysicians she mentions: Barnes, Haslanger, Witt, or me. And I can add that Alcoff, Bettcher, and Butler are also not engaging in this sort of project either.

So, not only is Louise wrong in describing the projects we engage in, she is also wrong in describing some of the problems our theories supposedly face. For example she says that my conferralist account faces the problem that trans women who don't pass as ciswomen don't count as women (p.397), the implication being that my account of gender must be incorrect because this is unjust.

But it is here that Louise mistakes a feature of a theory for a bug. Mine is a descriptive account, and it is deeply contextual. We all have various features and not all of them have social significance in a particular context. With regard to gender, the base property for the conferral of gender in different contexts varies. In some contexts, people are trying to track self-identification with a social role, in others sex assignment or presence of certain body parts. In such contexts a pre-operative trans woman may not have the status of woman. And that may be unjust, but a descriptive metaphysics should reveal that injustice, not pretend it ain't there. And the aim will then be to make future contexts different and more just.

And here we have an important point: should your view about how gender ought to function constrain your descriptive metaphysics of gender such that it is a condition of adequacy for your theory that your descriptive account of reality reveal it to be just? I say NO. If reality is unjust, your theory of reality should not show it to be just, but instead reveal the injustice.

## Louise's proposal

Let us now look at Louise's positive proposal. I am going to suggest that Louise shares more with Haslanger and Witt, than she admits. (She also shares certain commitments with Alcoff, but let us leave that aside for now)

What is gender for Louise? On p. 387 she says that systems of gender are, and I quote, "systems of social roles assigned on the basis of actual or presumed biological roles in reproduction". What is the relation between sex and gender? Louise says that *sex is the material ground of gender*.

What does that mean? Louise starts with the observation that all known human societies have gender. What explains that fact? What explains it is that humans reproduce sexually and are sexually dimorphic. Roughly half of the population has the capacity to conceive, bear, and suckle children (let's call them the "Bearers"), and the other half to impregnate the first, the Impregnators. The Impregnators came to gain power over the Bearers and exploit their reproductive powers. However it came into being, a system of domination where women's reproductive capabilities are controlled called for the articulation of gender roles. This is Louise's explanation for, and I quote, "the existence of systems of gender—systems of social roles assigned on the basis of actual or presumed biological roles in reproduction".

Does this sound familiar? We are told that gender is a social role that is assigned on the basis of actual or presumed biological role in reproduction. We are also told that the gender system is a system of domination.

Here is another philosopher who has suggested something that on the surface looks very familiar. Here is Sally Haslanger:

- *S is a woman* iff
  - (i) S is regularly and for the most part observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction;
  - (ii) that S has these features marks S within the dominant ideology of S's society as someone who ought to occupy certain kinds of social position that are in fact subordinate (and so motivates and justifies S's occupying such a position); and
  - (iii) the fact that S satisfies (i) and (ii) plays a role in S's systematic subordination, that is, along some dimension, S's social position is oppressive, and S's satisfying (i) and (ii) plays a role in that dimension of subordination.

It seems that Louise agrees with Haslanger that gender is a social role assigned on the basis of presumed role in biological reproduction and that it is a system of domination, and thus hierarchical. The claim that sex is the material ground of gender suggests that gender practices came into being because of the need for humans to reproduce. This also sounds remarkably similar to what another feminist metaphysician holds, Charlotte Witt.

The chief motivation behind Charlotte Witt's metaphysics of gender in the book of the same title is to offer a theory of gender that can explain the ubiquity of gender and its almost bizarre pull on us. What explains it is the human species' need to reproduce biologically. And just as we have the need for nourishment and dining practices develop to fulfill that need, so we have the need to reproduce and reproduction practices, ie gender practices, develop to fulfill that need. The texture of our gender practices are not determined by the biological need and not everyone participates joyfully or fully in those practices, just as not everyone participates fully in highly ritualized dining practices.

Now, to be clear, I am not endorsing Witt's or Haslanger's theories here. But they are important and powerful attempts at making sense of our gender practices. And here we have an origin story of our gender practices that seems remarkably similar to what Louise wants when she says that sex is the material ground of gender. Neither Haslanger nor Witt is offering an essentialism of the kind Louise detests nor the kind of metaphysics Louise seems to dislike.

So, Louise, it seems to me that your friends have already offered the theory of gender that you want. I think it is ok to join a party if the company is good.

This may be a good note to end on. *Only Natural* shows off Louise's remarkable breadth, incisive mind, and passionate independence. The book takes us on an extraordinary journey through issues in philosophy of mind, epistemology, philosophy of language, evolutionary biology, and, yes, a bit of metaphysics. Thank you for sharing it with us, Louise. And thank you for giving me the opportunity to engage with it. I look forward to continuing to engage with your work —and of course disagree with some of it.