

Isabel G. Gamero Cabrera
ig.gamero(at)filos.ucm.es

Acknowledging Women. Some Wittgensteinian Ideas to Clarify the Cis/Trans Debate

Abstract

My aim in this paper is to use some contents of the later Wittgenstein's work, and some of its interpreters, to shed some light on the cis/trans debate, in which it is disputed what a woman is and who the subject of feminisms is. There is a stance, called cisfeminism, which do not acknowledge transgender women neither as women nor as subjects of feminisms. I analyse and criticise the main cisfeminist arguments from a Wittgensteinian perspective, taking into account (1) the plausible essentialism of these arguments and (2) the everyday uses of language and its changes. Finally (3), I make some considerations about the effect that theories have in human lives.

Keywords: transfeminism, essentialism, private language argument, blurred-edge concept, everyday language, naturalistic fallacy

In this paper, I will depart from some contents of the later Wittgenstein's work, and some of its interpreters,¹ to shed some light on what I call the "cis/trans debate", which is an open controversy in contemporary feminisms. In this debate it is disputed what is a woman, and who is the subject of feminisms, that is, who is (or can be) an active part of feminist struggles. The main point of disagreement is whether the transition-to-women persons are (or are acknowledged as) women and subjects of feminisms. In general terms, there are two different views that give two different answers to these questions. On the one hand, some feminists (I will call them "cisfeminists") do not

¹ When I began this research, I was convinced that I was writing something new and original; then I started to read and found out that in the 90's, many feminist and Wittgensteinian philosophers (Scheman, O'Connor, Tanesini, Zerilli, Heyes...) have already written about this topic. I am really thankful to them; their work has been very clarifying for me.

acknowledge transition-to-women persons neither as women nor as subjects of feminisms. On the other hand, other feminists (I will call them “transfeminists”) answer affirmatively to both questions. There is barely understanding among these two views, quite the opposite, there are great discrepancies and differences that threaten to tear feminisms apart in two different struggles.

Therefore, my aim is to propose a philosophical critique, based on the later Wittgenstein’s thought (his method, his concepts and his critiques) and on the work of some feminist Wittgensteinian interpreters as well, to analyse this debate and to solve (or dissolve) it, by showing the main difficulties that the cisfeminist arguments entail.

I know that Wittgenstein was neither interested in such debates, nor did he support feminist stances. However, at his point I coincide with Tanesini (2004: 30), who finds in Wittgenstein’s work contents that are helpful to feminist philosophy. I also share Scheman’s conviction, according to which “Wittgenstein and feminist theorists have mutually illuminating and substantively constructive things to say each other” (2002: 1). Therefore, I do not understand Wittgenstein as a (proto)feminist author, however, I find his critiques to essentialism and his interest in everyday uses of language useful and illuminating to get a better understanding about this debate.

In the next two sections, I will examine the main cisfeminist arguments following some Wittgensteinian ideas.

1. First arguments and counterarguments: on essentialism

The main cisfeminist arguments against the acknowledgement of transwomen are two. I will call them the biological and the experiential arguments.

The biological argument states that only born-women (also known as “cis-women”) are women, therefore, transwomen are not (and cannot be) women. Due to their biological origin, cis-women need a specific acknowledgement of their status and a specific legislation to defend their needs, rights and interests, which should not be mixed with transgenders’ claims. This argument is supported, for example, by the *Murray Blackburn Mackenzie Foundation*, a feminist academic collective, based in Edinburgh, whose motto is: “The significant physical, social and economic consequences of being born female

are why women require law and policy to recognise their specific need for safety, privacy, dignity and fairness”.²

The supporters of the experiential argument do not accept, in principle, the biological origin as the definitive reason of being woman. However, they maintain that there is a unique and distinctive experience of being raised as a woman, which defines and determines what women are. This experience is not only individual, but structural: in patriarchal societies, those born, raised and treated as men have undeniable and exclusive privileges. Therefore, the transition-to-women persons’ efforts to be acknowledged as women are not valid because they were raised as men, and have lived most of their lives as men, with all their privileges. They will never fully experience what it is to be a woman. It is not possible to equate these two kinds of experiences. Moreover, the claims, needs and interests of those raised as women should not be mixed with the claims of those raised and treated as men. One of the supporters of this argument is the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie Ngozi. In her words:

I think the whole problem of gender [...] is about our experiences. It’s not about how we wear our hair or whether we have a vagina or a penis. It’s about the way the world treats us, and I think if you’ve lived in the world as a man with the privileges that the world accords to men and then sort of change gender, it’s difficult for me to accept that then we can equate your experience with the experience of a woman who has lived from the beginning as a woman and who has not been accorded those privileges that men are (Ngozi, 2017).

If these two arguments are examined from a later Wittgensteinian perspective, it is possible to argue that both are essentialist. In order to be as clear as possible, I will explain how I understand and use this term. I find two (related) kinds of essentialism:

The first one is the sexual or biological essentialism, which has been defined and criticised, for example, by Toril Moi. According to her, essentialism is the claim that “biological sex becomes an immobile, stable, coherent, fixed, pre-discursive, natural and ahistorical instance” (1999: 4). Specifically, it is the belief that women are women due to their biological sex, to the fact of having been born female, with female organs, XX chromosomes and oestrogen. Those are scientific facts that determine what a woman is, and this cannot change.

The second kind of essentialism is the linguistic or metaphysical one, which has been defined, for example, by Heyes (2000: 200ff.). This idea is based on

² See: <https://murrayblackburnmackenzie.org/>

the presupposition that every object that belongs to a same category (for example, “fruit”) share a common property that justifies their belonging to this category and that fixes the correct use of a term. (Following with the example, apples and cherries seem to share something that justifies that we call them “fruit”, whereas peanuts do not share this feature). In philosophy, this idea is related to the search for the necessary and sufficient conditions that justifies the use of a term (that is, which are the properties that justifies that we acknowledge apples as fruits). These conditions stipulate who belongs (or not) to a category and legitimate the correct use of a term. (Following this idea, it seems to be legit to criticise someone who says that peanuts are fruits). The main difficulty of this idea, and its alleged essentialism, is that (contingent) facts as having a common name or sharing some common features ends to be (necessary) criteria for the inclusion/exclusion in a category. Moreover, the burdens of this category seem to be unavoidable and unchangeable, due to the existence of necessary properties that lay under the use of words.

In the next two subsections I will analyse these arguments.

1.1 Questions about the biological argument: is biology fate?

The biological argument is a clear example of biological essentialism, it is just what their supporters maintain: that the fact of having been born male or female determines what a men or women are, so transgender persons do not belong to a gender different to the one they were born. Moi has criticised this idea for its biological determinism, that is, the “belief that science in general and biology in particular could and should settle questions and statements about social roles of women” (1999: 6).

This leap from a biological explanation to a social determination is determinist, quite reductive and can be criticised for committing the naturalistic fallacy; as it reduces what men and woman are to their sexual difference. It can also be criticised, as Moi does, following *Philosophical Investigations*, for its essentialism.

If it is accepted that “the meaning of a word is its use in language” (PI: § 43), then, the meaning of a word (in our case, “woman”) cannot be reduced to a single use (in this case, to its biological origin). The later Wittgenstein criticised the search of the first or the authentic meaning of a word, which seemed to be more fundamental or essential for being “utterly simple”,

independent from the use, “*prior* to all experience”, or because it ran “through all experience” (PI: § 96-97). He asserted that this search was product of an illusion, which tried to grasp the “peculiar, profound, essential in our investigation”, and “the incomparable essence of language” (PI: § 96). In this illusion, language (in our case, the word “woman”) appears to be “the unique correlate, picture, of the world” (in our case, the unique correlate of biological sex). This illusion is discarded when faced with the “countless different kinds of use” of words (PI: § 23). Moreover, the reduction of the plurality of meanings to a single one (specifically a scientific one) is an understanding of language closer to the *Tractatus* than to the *Investigations*. According to the first work of Wittgenstein, there is a perfect correlation among words and reality. In his words: “The proposition is a picture of reality” (TLP: 4.01), and there is correspondence among propositions and reality (cf. TLP: 4.0621). That is, “reality is compared with the proposition” (TLP: 4.05) and that is how its truth is known (cf. TLP: 4.062). Finally, “the totality of true propositions is the total natural science (or the totality of the natural sciences)” (TLP: 4.11). This Tractarian understanding of the perfect and univocal link among propositions and reality fits perfectly with the biological argument. However, the later Wittgenstein criticised this understanding as essentialist, as a “one-sided diet”, which caused philosophical diseases (PI: §593), and did not take into account the plurality of uses of language.

Therefore, according to Moi (cf. 1999: 8), the biological determination of what men and women are, is not enough to understand what they are. This reduction of a plurality of features to a single one, a biological one, is essentialist because it provides a fixed, immobile and parallel picture about men and women, whose first and last explanation relays just on our biological differences, without taking into account many facts: from biological ones (for example, intersexual persons), to the social, historical and cultural differences among genders.

Moi’s criticism of essentialism only addresses the biological argument and does not seem to affect the experiential one. In the next section, I will maintain that the experiential argument entails another kind of essentialism, a linguistic or metaphysical one.

1.2 Questions about the experiential argument: What is to “feel like a woman”?

As it can be read in Ngozi Adichie’s aforementioned quote, the supporters of the experiential argument may assert that their claim is not essentialist, because they do not maintain that there is a common or prior essence of “womanness”, based in nature or biology, but that in our patriarchal societies women’s experiences differ from those of men. It is possible to imagine no-patriarchal societies where women and men were raised as equals, so there was no sexism (for example, the Anarres society in K. Leguin’s novel *The Dispossessed* or the myths of matriarchal societies³). However, the supporters of the experiential argument maintain that this equal treatment does not happen in our current societies, where men and women are raised differently, so their experiences and privileges differ. Therefore, someone who has been raised as a man in our society can neither experience what it is to be a woman, nor be an active part of feminisms.

Following O’Connor’s and Heyes’ criticisms, I consider that the experiential argument entails another version of essentialism, as it unifies and reduces what women are to a single feature: having a common experience. This reduction is an example of the metaphysical or linguistic essentialism, which has been defined by Heyes as the claim that the members of a particular class “share a common key property by virtue of their common name” (2000: 200). That is just what the supporters of the experiential argument do: they maintain that every person, born and raised as woman, has an experience that cannot be shared by those born and raised as men. Therefore, there are two different kinds of beings (men and women), with different and unshareable experiences.

Heyes (cf. 2000: 200 ff., following PI: § 107-108) maintains that this kind of essentialism is caused by some misguided metaphysical assumptions (certain misunderstandings about reality, knowledge, and uses of words), which creates mistakes, and motivates the rejection of the everyday uses of language, in contrast with the purity of logic. According to Heyes (cf. 2000: 200, following PI: § 65, 92-97), Wittgenstein rejected this notion of a single essence attributed to a class, where “essence” implied a statement of the necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of a particular term, as no one can anticipate which are (or will be) these conditions as it is not possible to say: “It is the last

³ I wrote “myths” because there is no historical or anthropological evidence about the existence of matriarchal societies, see for example: Adovasio *et al.* (2007).

house in this road”, because “one can always build an additional one” (PI: § 29), it is not possible either to establish the “last definition” of a word, or to fix the necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of a particular term, especially when this definition is done independently from the everyday uses of words and its changes. On the contrary, Wittgenstein asserted that the definition of a term also depends on whether “the other person takes the definition otherwise that I wish. And that will depend on the circumstances under which it is given, and on the person I give it to”. Lastly, “how he ‘takes’ the definition is seen in the use that he makes of the word defined” (PI: § 29).

That is, the supporters of the experiential argument reduce the fact of being a woman to the experience of having been raised as woman; in doing so, they commit a metaphysical use of language, which is far away from the everyday uses of language and its changes. Moreover, with this close definition of the term “woman”, they do not answer many questions and neglect actual situations. For example, they do not take into account the everyday experiences of transgender and intersexual people. They do not consider the multiple and different ways in which cis-women can be raised (in different countries, generations, socio-economical levels, etc.). For the experiential argument, it does not seem to matter how, when or where a woman is raised, her experience (at least in patriarchal societies) will be always of “womanness” and different to the cis-men’s and transgenders’ experiences. Besides, the supporters of the experiential argument do not have answers to the question of what would happen if someone (born man) is raised and educated as woman, as it happens in Fernanda Melchor’s novel *Hurricane Season*, or if someone (born intersex) is raised and educated as woman, as it happens in Eugenides’ novel *Middlesex*. These people’s experiences do not fit in the ideal categorisation of the experiential argument. This argument does not have answers either to the stance maintained by most transition-to-women persons who (regardless of how they were raised) maintain that they have always felt women. Here is another case in which some contents of the late Wittgenstein’s work might shed some light to the debate. To clarify this point and ask what is “to feel like a woman”, I will follow O’Connor’s reinterpretation of Wittgenstein’s critiques to the private language argument (cf. PI: § 243ff.).

O’Connor (cf. 2002: 433-435) maintains that the reduction of the use of a term with reference to a unique explanation (which can be objective or subjective) entails essentialism. In the case of the cis/trans debate, she finds

two parallel versions of a same mistake, which is committed by the supporters of the biological and the experiential arguments, and can be solved following some Wittgensteinian ideas. On the one hand (and similarly to Moi), O'Connor criticises the biological essentialism of those who maintain that only those born women are women. This view presupposes the existence of a previous and outer reality that our concepts mirror, being the link among the external reality and our concepts the only way to know the truth. As it has been explained in 1.1, this view is reductive and problematic, due to its biological reductionism. On the other hand (and it is O'Connor's innovation and her main criticism against the experiential argument), she finds a parallel version of this mistake in another kind of essentialism, based on an inner reality of feelings and sensations (cf. 2002: 433). This inner reality brings the idea of a "true self" or "true being", which can only be experienced by oneself and is not shareable with others. To criticise this mistake and prove that there is not an inner and previous reality that defines what we are, O'Connor mentions Wittgenstein's metaphor of the beetle in the box (cf. PI: § 293). I am going to rewrite this remark to apply it to our debate. What would happen if instead of disputing the meaning of "pain", it is disputed the meaning of "feel like a woman"?

If I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the expression "feel like a woman" means -must I not say the same of other people too? And how can I generalize the one case so irresponsibly? Now someone tells me that she knows what "feel like a woman" is only from her own case! – Suppose every woman had a box with something in it: we call it "feel like a woman". No one can look into anyone else's box, and everyone says she knows what "feel like a woman" is only by looking at her feeling. -Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box?. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. – But suppose the word "feel like a woman" had a use in these people's language? – If so it would not be used as the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as a *something*: for the box might even be empty. – No, one can "divide through" by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is. That is to say: if we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of "object and designation", the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant (cf. PI: § 293, adapted by I.G., original italics).

In conclusion, no one is entitled to define the unique or authentic meaning of a term based exclusively on an inner and not shareable feeling. If someone has and understands this feeling, they must concede that other people do it too. Otherwise, it will be a private and not shareable use of language, without application or verification. O'Connor concludes her argument stating that "a

Wittgensteinian account of identity has no ‘essential I’, to which beliefs, values, judgements and concepts attach” (2002: 436). I translate this conclusion to the cis/trans debate to maintain that there is no “essential womanness”, which just can be felt and experienced by cis-women. Quite the opposite, there is a plurality of experiences of feeling like women, which differ and cannot be reduced to a single one in the name of an “inner feeling”.

That is, if “feel like a woman” is an inner and private feeling, how can someone express this idea and be sure that others experience the same? If a cis-woman maintains that she “feels like a woman”, must not she accept that different women feel it too? Which would be her reasons to assure that only born-women feel like women and to neglect the transition-to-women’s experience? How can she be so sure that transgender do not feel the same? Which is the origin of her insistence about the fact that this feeling is exclusive for born-women? Is it possible to maintain this view without committing a reductionism, either biological or experiential?

The reduction of womanness to an inner experience, just shared by born-women, seems to be as empty as the “beetle box” or as the fixation and imposition of an *a priori* conception of what women are. This definition reduces the plurality of women’s experiences to a single one, without taking into account the multiple and different ways which women are and feel. This is an essentialist explanation of womanness.

1.3 Recapitulation: essentialism and reductionism

To put it in a nutshell, both the biological and the experiential arguments entail a reduction and an ontologisation of what women are, due to an essentialist understanding of this term. Following Moi’s, O’Connor’s and Heyes’ critiques, both arguments can be criticised for being reductive “metaphysical statements” (cf. PI: § 58), due to an ontological picture of reality, which reduces women’s plurality and differences to a single entity or a single meaning. In this vein, Lindemann-Nelson maintains (cf. 2002: 232) that the supporters of this kind of explanation are in an “essentialist trap”. Or as Heyes puts it, those who maintain this belief are “held captive by an essentialist picture of womanness” (2000: 201, following PI: § 115).

Heyes finds a common mistake in these reductions of the term “women”, and states that there is not a common property (neither in biology, nor in

experience) that makes women who they are. She rejects then the essentialist and the experiential argument, because both rely on an *a priori* idea of womanness, at the expense of everyday uses and women's experiences. Besides, these arguments do not reflect our actual uses of language, since they are compromised with certain metaphysical assumptions, which entail the presupposition of a nature (biological sex) or a "common experience" that is previous to human practices and thus unmodifiable. Lastly, this ontologisation of the idea of woman has consequences to real, living women. In her words, both arguments are compromised with:

[A]n essentialist ontology [that] takes the use of the word "women" to represent a collection of people with specified characteristics existing prior to the application, [and] erases the diversity of women and the fact that women's identities as women emerge from their particular social locations (Heyes 2000: 200).

Oppositely, she maintains that if it is accepted the Wittgensteinian argument, according to which meaning is constructed through (rather than prior to) our uses of language, then an "antiessentialist method" is required to look at the deployments of uses of the term "women" and their political implications (cf. Heyes 2000: 200). That is, both arguments and their search of the "true essence" or "true experience" of women turn out to be the ontologisation of the experience of a specific group of women (cis-women). In consequence, other experiences or ways of being women have been disregarded. Therefore, on behalf of the diversity of women's identities and experiences, it is not possible to understand the term "woman" as closed and with a unique meaning (due to biology or to a supposedly common experience), but rather it has to be open to a plurality (never closed, never anticipated) of changes.

2. Second arguments and counterarguments: on the uses of language

My first conclusion to this application to some Wittgensteinian ideas to the cis/trans debate is that the fact of being a woman cannot be reduced to biology or experience. There are many and different ways of being woman, and this multiplicity cannot be reduced to a single fact. However, this conclusion is not accepted unanimously. Most cisfeminists do not accept it and (similarly to the logic with whom Wittgenstein dialogues in the *Investigations*) they would reply

that this idea is some kind of postmodern (Butlerish)⁴ statement that erases the possibility of speaking about “women”, and dealing with “real women’s issues”.

A main objection that cisfeminists make in this debate is that if there is not an exact correlate or a common property that allows to use the term “woman”, and that if anyone, (regardless of their biological sex) can self-identify as woman, then the “real women” are erased, and there are no criteria to know the correct use of this word, so anyone can use it as s/he pleases. Someone might say, for example: “Today, I woke up and I am a woman; yesterday I was a man; tomorrow I don’t know yet”. Moreover, there are undesirable consequences of this erasure of women: it prevents from gathering accurate data about men and women to get a better understanding of our different experiences; it also makes impossible any legislation to prevent and punish violence against born-women. For example, the Murray Blackburn Mackenzie Foundation (MBM 2021) states that self-attribution of sex is “incompatible with maintaining legal protections which exist to address the discrimination and disadvantage experienced by women on the basis of sex, including women only spaces and services”.

In the next subsection I will analyse and criticise these arguments following some ideas of the later Wittgenstein’s work.

2.1 Questions about self-attribution and private uses: how do languages change?

The answer to this cisfeminist objection is clear from a Wittgensteinian point of view: nobody can arbitrarily change the meaning of a word, since using words is not a matter of free linguistic (and somehow arbitrary) choice. Wittgenstein coined the concept “language-game” to emphasise “the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (PI: § 23.). That is, languages are shared by different people and linked to their common actions. The argument against the possibility of a private language (cf. PI: § 243 ff.) avoids arbitrary and solipsist uses of words, and isolated self-attributions as well.

⁴ I wrote “Butlerish”, because many cisfeminists attributes to Judith Butler the thesis of the “erasurement of sex”; which I understand to be a complete misinterpretation of Butler’s ideas, who does not refer to the elimination of sex, but to the proliferation and ampliation of gender. To clarify this point, see the 1999 preface of *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1999: xxvii ff.)

Wittgenstein’s example to show the impossibility of a private language is pain: Suppose that someone believes that s/he is special and has a unique kind of pain, one that only s/he can feel and name. Facing this possibility, Wittgenstein asserts that this person “forgets that a great deal of stage-setting in the language is presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense”. The mere act of naming (pain or sexual difference) already presupposes “the existence of the grammar of the word; it shews the post where the new word is stationed” (PI: § 257).

Therefore, nobody can entirely change the use of an already existing word or give to it a completely new meaning, without taking into account previous uses and the practices linked to this word, that is, its grammar. It does not mean that changes in language are not possible, but that they have to take into account the “presupposed stage-setting” to make sense. I will briefly explain some of the features of the stage-setting or grammar, to get a better understanding about the use and change of words.

a. Self-attribution only if it is attributable to others:

Wittgenstein criticised the attempts to give an exclusive and private meaning to a word, which only could be understood by its creator. For example, someone tries to “keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation”. S/he associates this sensation with the sign “S” and writes this sign in a calendar for every day s/he has the sensation (PI: § 258). According to Wittgenstein, with this process the sign “S” is not defined, because its explanation is a private feeling, which is difficult to share or contrast with others’ feelings. Similarly to the case of the beetle in the box (PI: § 293), explained in 1.2, these attempts turn out to be empty meanings. In this scenario (PI: § 258), the only possible definition of the sign “S” is by ostension, that is, by pointing at the sensation. This person can write the sign “S” and focus on the sensation, concentrating his/her attention to it, impressing on him/herself the connection between the sign and the sensation, insisting on the fact that *this* is his/her sensation. Wittgenstein asks if this process is useful to define the sensation and to understand what “S” means. His answer is negative: to get a definition and have a meaning it is required a common criterion of identity, and the emphatic stressing of the word “this” does not establish any criterion of identity (PI: § 253). Moreover, “impressing something on oneself” only means that this process might be useful to “remember the connection *right* in

the future”, but in the present, that is not a correctness criterion (original italics). This attempt is like saying: “Whatever is going to seem right to me is right”. And, according to Wittgenstein, with this expression “we can’t talk about ‘right’.” (PI: § 258).

Since words “belong to our common language”, if someone wanted to create a new meaning or change the meaning of an already existent concept, s/he would need “a justification which everybody understands” (PI: § 261), and an internal criterion is not enough to provide this justification. As I have already explained, the justification for the use of the change of a term cannot be internal (referred to a subjective experience, memory, or imagination), but has to appeal to something independent and shareable (cf. PI: § 265). Therefore, self-attribution is not just a matter of changing words, there is more involved in this process.

b. Regularity, not arbitrariness:

A second condition to set a meaning is regularity. Nobody can arbitrarily use a word (as in the previous example: “Today I am a woman, tomorrow I don't know”), because without continuity and regularity, this expression would not be understandable. Similarly to the previous scenario when someone created a private word, but lacked common criteria and justification to be understandable, someone who changes the use of words without purpose and regularity, also lacks these criteria and turns out to be understandable too. What allows language and communication in human groups is “that there is a regular connection between what they say, the sounds they make, and their actions” (PI: § 207).

This connection is regulated by rules, which are regular uses, *customs* (cf. PI: § 198), which cannot be done just on one occasion, only by *one* person, and only *once* in his life (cf. PI: § 199). This does not mean that rules are compulsory, given that there are always different ways of following them (cf. PI: § 206). However, there are also criteria (not necessary, not sufficient, but for guidance) of knowing if someone understands and follows a rule (cf. PI: § 238). The classic example to explain this point is the impossibility of communication with someone who, like Humpty Dumpty, changes the use of words freely and without purpose. For example, if someone says that s/he has a different feeling every time s/he uses the word “hungry” (sometimes s/he is thirsty, or sad or sleepy...), that is proof that s/he does not understand this word or that is

tricking us. In this case, there are no criteria to know what s/he means or whether s/he is using this word properly, as there is no regularity.

c. Common practices, bedrocks and coherence:

The third condition to make sense facing new words is connection to common practices. Wittgenstein exemplifies this point with an anthropologist who arrives in an unknown country, whose language and rules s/he does not know. How does s/he understand them and learn their language? By looking for common uses and relating sounds with actions. In his words: “The common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language” (PI: § 206).

Therefore, understanding is not just a matter of sharing a common language and its rules, but of sharing actions. According to Wittgenstein, “part of the framework on which the working of our language is based” is formed by some common practices, which are not always explicit. (PI: § 240). These agreements, that lay in the bases of language-games, are “not in opinions but in form of life” (PI: § 241). That is, there are common forms of life and implicit consensus, which allow mutual understanding. Coherence among these dimensions (practices, words, actions) is also required in this process to make sense.

In this framework of language and actions, explanations or clarifications about the changes might be required (for example, questions like: “Why do you act so and so? Why do you use this word in this way?”). However, at some point, there is not a “deeper explanation” (PI: § 209). The exigence of a deeper explanation is another sign of the essentialist attempt of looking for the “*a priori* order of the world: that is, the order of *possibilities*, which must be common to both world and thought” (PI: § 97). On the contrary, in our human forms of life, all the reasons and arguments that we can give to ourselves or to others will soon give out. Then, we will act without reasons (cf. PI: § 211). This is the acknowledgement of the bedrock of agreements and forms of life, where the “spade is turned”, and then, the only thing we can say is “This is simply what I do” (PI: § 217) or what I am, what we are.

It does not mean, however, that bedrocks are pre-discursive or independent from human practices; that would be another version of the essentialism criticised in the first section. As Medina explains: “Agreement in language is not a given but something that has to be fought for, something achieved over

time in and through our negotiations” (2010: 6). Therefore, bedrocks can change and be disputed and nobody (neither individuals nor collectives) is entitled to fix meanings (ibid.:10). Again, those attempts will be essentialist understandings of language-games.

2.2 Moving these conditions to the cis/trans debate

I will apply these Wittgensteinian ideas to our debate: If someone says that she is a woman, in order to understand what she means, it is important to look at the context, her purposes, the regularity of her actions, intentions and attitudes. If there were no regularity in these actions and in this self-attribution, this person and these claims would be incomprehensible. However, if this attribution is extended in time, justified by practices and explanations, with coherence and regularity (as it happens in most transgenders’ cases), and if these claims are supported not just by an individual but by organised collectives, it will be easier to understand these actions and to acknowledge her as a woman.

The supporters of the experiential argument do not consider these conditions and framework when they reject the self-attribution of sex since they imagine a hypothetical and unrealistic situation in which someone arbitrarily and individually changes his/her sex. However, this is not what transgender people maintain, and this is not how changes are made in language-games. Are not cisfeminists committing a straw man (or woman) fallacy? That is, by criticising a humpty-dumpty understanding of the self-attribution of sex and imagining apocalyptic scenarios of “erasure of real women”, they reject and neglect the actual experience of transgenders.

Zerilli’s reinterpretation of some remarks of *On Certainty* might clarify this point. In this work Wittgenstein stated:

That I am a man and not a woman can be verified, but if I were to say I was a woman, and then tried to explain the error by saying I hadn’t checked the statement, the explanation would not be accepted (OC: § 79).

Departing from this remark, Zerilli (1998: 443) argues that our understanding and experiencing of human reality is built (among other things) on the differences among men and women, male and female. This difference is part of the grammar or framework, explained in 2.1, or the “groundless

background of our mutual understanding; which is not true, not false” (OC: § 205). In this background lay the certainties, which have a paradoxical status in the later Wittgenstein work: their immobility assures the working of language (cf. OC: § 152), but they also change (cf. OC: § 96).

Some interpreters (specifically those who maintain political stances after Wittgenstein’s work, such as Medina, quoted above, or Zerilli) focus on the change of certainties. According to Zerilli, certainties are “neither forever beyond doubt nor metaphysically guaranteed” (1998: 446), because their stability “derives from their contingency and relative plasticity” (1998: 451). Therefore, the differences among men and women are part of the grammar of language-games, it is a certainty, but not immutable. Their meaning and scope can change, especially when our practices change. At this point, it is important to remember that language-games are related to human practices and change (cf. PI: § 23).

2.3 The last counterargument: “woman” as a blurred-edge concept

One conclusion of this paper is that being woman cannot be reduced to a single condition (biology, experience or feelings), but there are many ways of being woman, not anticipatable, not predefined, never closed. However, it does not mean (as cisfeminists maintain) that the word “woman” or the experience of cis-women is erased when this term also refers to transwomen. In opposition to this concern, I would like to argue, following Wittgenstein, that the openness of a concept does not entail the impossibility of using it. As he maintained: “‘Inexact’ does not mean ‘unusable’” (PI: § 88). The later Wittgenstein rejected the referential conception of meaning (due to an external or internal reality that gives true meaning to concepts), to propose a notion of meaning based on concepts with blurred edges, family resemblances (PI: § 67) and linked to everyday uses and needs. In his words:

One might say that the concept “game” is a concept with blurred edges. - “But is a blurred concept a concept at all?” Is an indistinct photograph a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn’t the indistinct one often exactly what we need? (PI: § 71).

These inexact and blurred concepts are meaningful, especially when they are connected with everyday uses in ordinary languages, not when “language goes on holiday” (PI: § 38), which seems to be what cisfeminists do with their

concern about the erasure of women. There is no risk of erasing real entities if a concept changes, as there is not a common property or essence that all concepts share, but a “complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail” (PI: § 66). These concepts are like “a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres” (PI: § 67). Thus, similarly to “game” (cf. PI: § 71) or “number” (cf. PI: § 67), Lindemann-Nelson maintains that “woman” also is a concept with blurred edges: although it is not completely closed or determined, we use and understand it in our everyday language-games, because there is not one characteristic that all women share, “even on the crudest physical level” (2002: 222). She gives some examples to show the impossibility of closing this term:

A woman who has undergone a double mastectomy has no breasts (and there are men with breasts). A woman does not stop being a woman when she has a hysterectomy, and some women are born without uterus. Some are born without vagina too. Women have oestrogen, but so do men, and women, like men, manufacture testosterone. Even chromosomal differences aren’t always reliable. Women with Turner’s syndrome have only one X, while men with Klinefelter’s have XXY (Lindemann-Nelson 2002: 222-223).

She also refers to the cis/trans debate: “Consider the case of a person with gender dysphoria, born with penis and testicles and XY chromosomes, but strongly aware from early childhood that her body is the wrong shape” (Lindemann-Nelson 2002: 223). And she assures that this person is a woman too.

At this point, adapting the dialogue that Wittgenstein maintains in the *Philosophical Investigations* with the logic, the cisfeminist might reply that there has to be “something in common” to all the uses of the term “woman”, “namely the disjunction of all their common properties”, otherwise we could not use or understand it. This reply, this search for common properties that allegedly allow using one term, is another example of an essentialist argumentation. The answer that Wittgenstein gives to his stubborn opponent is well-known: “Now you are only playing with words” (PI: § 67).

That is, cisfeminists can act like the essentialist with whom Wittgenstein dialogues and keep searching the common criteria that every use of the term “woman” shares and which, apparently, justifies and explains the meaning of

this word, establishing a perfect correlate among word and reality. It is also possible to enter into endless debates about the authentic meaning of a word, or try to determine what something really is. However, Wittgenstein criticises these kinds of quests because they entail essentialism and are far away from the everyday uses of language, where there are family-resemblances and overlapped uses, without a common property shared by every case. An adaption of the remark 116 of the *Investigations* can be illuminating to show (or dissolve) the mistake that cisfeminists commit when they search the essence or the common property that, allegedly, allows the use of the term “woman”:

When cisfeminists use the word “woman” and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home?— What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use (cf. PI: § 116, adapted by I.G.).

To sum up, there is not a unique and definitive answer to the question about what a woman is, since there is not a unique criterion or property shared by every woman. And it is not a new or postmodern idea: Historically, there have been changes and disputes about the use and the scope of the term “woman”. For example, in the *Valladolid Dispute*, which took place in this city in 16th century, Bartolomé de las Casas (1550) quarrelled with Ginés de Sepúlveda about whether the “Indians” who lived on the recent discovered land were human beings or not: were they men and women, savages or animals? Three centuries later, Sojourner Truth (1851), the only afroamerican and ex-slave attendant to the Akron’s Women’s Rights Conference⁵, asked to the other participants if she was not a woman, pointing at the potentially exclusionary use of the term “woman”, when it was identified with white and bourgeois values, such as the claim for vote, higher education and access to a proper job, when she had been working since her childhood. In a similar vein, bell hooks criticised Betty Friedan for her restricted and exclusive use of this term. According to hooks, when Friedan used the word “woman”:

[She] actually referred to the plight of a select group of college-educated, middleland upper-class, married white women, housewives bored with leisure, with the home, with children, with buying products, who wanted more out of life (hooks 1984: 10).

⁵ This Conference was held in Akron (Ohio) in May 1851 and was one of the the many events in the nineteenth century where advocates (mostly bourgeois and white women) called for expanding the rights of women in the USA. The complete proceedings can be found in the website of the *Library of the Congress*: <https://www.loc.gov/item/93838317/>

Another controversy was opened by Wittig when she stated that “lesbians are not women” (2001), pointing at the heterosexual content of the term. Even in the most biological and scientific studies, there is no consensus about the use of the term. For example, Anne Fausto-Sterling (cf. 1993) maintains that there are not two biological sexes, but five: male (XY), female (XX), merm (male intersex), ferm (female intersex), and herm (intersex).

These examples shed light to the fact that there will always be exceptions, unforeseeable scenarios and grey areas in which it is not known for sure what a woman is. Moreover, the attempts to close the use of this term entail the risk of not acknowledging the experience and difficulties of some women. Maybe, instead of trying to close the meaning of the term, without considering its different uses and changes, it is more fruitful to “go back to the rough ground” (PI: § 197) and see how this word is used in our everyday languages and which are the consequences of these different uses.

3. Conclusion: drawing boundaries with transfeminist purposes

After explaining the term “woman” as a blurred-edge concept, the last question I wanted to formulate is how is the limit of the meaning of a term settled, and who is entitled to draw this boundary. According to Heyes (and here, she separates from Wittgenstein and gets closer to a Foucaultian analysis), this is a political decision, mostly dependent on who has the power and legitimation to settle those limits (cf. 2000: 182).

Changes in language-games do not happen in the void, but they are entangled with our everyday practices and have consequences for human lives. Heyes (cf. 2000:182) understands the debate about the change of a term as political and situated. That is, the decision of where the limit in the use of a term is drawn is a matter of power and has consequences to real people. Thus, the cis/trans debate is not just a theoretical or linguistic debate; it also has consequences in many people’s lives.

Some data can be useful to clarify this point: Carpenter *et al.* (2020) show that transgenders have significantly lower employment rates, lower household incomes, higher poverty rates, and worse self-rated health compared to similar cispeople. Trangenders are 11% less likely than their cis peers to have a job, and cis are twice more likely than trangenders to have access to college

education. The 2011 National Transgender Discrimination Survey (Transequality 2011) showed that 63% of the participants experienced serious acts of discrimination, such as loss of job, eviction, and different kinds of bullying, physical and sexual assaults, including denial of medical service and incarceration due to gender identity/expression.

Facing these data, my final point is that broadening the scope of the term “woman” to acknowledge transwomen and accept them as subjects of feminisms might improve their lives. On the contrary: not acknowledging them will prevent us from having a common goal, a common fight against the patriarchy. Therefore, cisfeminist attempts to circumscribe the term “woman” just to born-women are not only essentialist (as I have argued in the first section) and mistaken, for not understanding the everyday use of words (as I have argued in the second), but unjust and hateful, as it does not allow to make visible, acknowledge and try to avoid the violence that many transgender women suffer.

Lastly, if I had to give an answer to the questions that I formulated at the beginning of this paper, I would say that I do not know what a woman is, especially if this question searches for a metaphysical and closed definition of womanness. Following my argumentation, I would say that “woman” is a blurred-edges concept and that in my everyday life, I don’t need a close definition of the term to understand what a woman is. About the subject of feminism, I would say that it is anyone (regardless his/her biological sex) who fights against patriarchal violence and against discrimination towards women (in a broad sense, cis and transwomen) and who claims to get equality, justice and rights for all mankind.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of the Spanish Government through the Research Project “Institution and Constitution of Individuality: Ontological, Social and Legal Aspects” (PID2020-117413GA-I00 / AEI / 10.13039/501100011033). I want to thank Carmen Amador, with whom I discussed the use of the term “trans”, and Francisco Javier Bran, who helped me to improve and clarify some expressions.

References

- Adovasio, J.M., Soffer, O. & Page, J., 2007. *The Invisible Sex: Uncovering the True Roles of Women in Prehistory*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J., 1999. *Gender Trouble; Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Carpenter, Ch., Eppink, S. & Gonzales, G., 2020. “Transgender Status, Gender Identity, and Socioeconomic Outcomes in the United States”, *ILR Review*. Vol 73.3, 573–599.
- De las Casas, B., 1550. “Disputa o controversia con Ginés de Sepúlveda conteniendo acerca de la licitud de las conquistas de las Indias”. *Cervantes Virtual*, <http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/fray-bartolome-de-las-casas-disputa-o-controversia-con-gines-de-sepulveda-conteniendo-acerca-de-la-licitud-de-las-conquistas-de-las-indias--0/html/>, accessed 27/12/2021.
- Fausto-Sterling, A., 1993. *The Five Sexes*. New York: The New York Academy of Sciences.
- Heyes, C., 2000. *Line Drawings: Defining Women Through Feminist Practice*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- hooks, b., 1984. *Feminist theory: from margins to centre*. New York: Routledge.
- Lindemann-Nelson, H., 2002. “Wittgenstein Meets ‘Woman’ in the Language-Game of Theorizing Feminism”. In: N. Scheman & P. O’Connor, eds., *Feminist Interpretations of Ludwig Wittgenstein*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 213–234.
- MBM, 2021. “MBM response to the Scottish Government data collection guidance on sex, gender identity and trans status”. *Murray Blackburn Mackenzie Foundation*, September 22th 2021, <https://murrayblackburnmackenzie.org/2021/09/22/mbm-response-to-the-scottish-government-data-collection-guidance-on-sex-gender-identity-and-trans-status/>, accessed 27/12/2021.
- Medina, J., 2010. “Wittgenstein as a Rebel: Dissidence and Contestation in Discursive Practices”, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* Vol. 18(1), 1–29.
- Moi, T., 1999. *What is a woman? And other essays*. Oxford: Oxford University.
- Ngozi Adichie, Ch., 2017. “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Clarifies Transgender Comments”. *The Guardian*, March 13th 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/13/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-clarifies-transgender-comments>, accessed 27/12/2021.
- O’Connor, P., 2002. “Moving to New Boroughs: Transforming the World by Inventing Language Games”. In: N. Scheman & P. O’Connor, eds. *Feminist Interpretations of Ludwig Wittgenstein*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 432–450.
- Scheman, N., 2002. “Introduction”. In: N. Scheman & P. O’Connor, eds. *Feminist Interpretations of Ludwig Wittgenstein*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1–22.
- Tanesini, A., 2004. *Wittgenstein: A Feminist Interpretation*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Transequality, 2011. *The 2011 National Transgender Discrimination Survey*, <https://transequality.org/issues/resources/national-transgender-discrimination-survey-full-report>, accessed 27/12/2021.
- Truth, S., 1851. “Ain’t I a Woman?”, *The Sojourner Truth Project*, <https://www.thesojournertruthproject.com/compare-the-speeches/>, accessed 27/12/2021.
- Wittgenstein, L., 1953. *Philosophical Investigations/Philosophische Untersuchungen*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, L., 1972. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Wittgenstein, L., 1974. *On Certainty/Über Gewißheit*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Wittig, M., 2001. *La pensée straight*. Paris: Balland.
- Zerilli, L., 1998. “Doing without knowing”. *Political Theory*, Vol. 26.4, 435–458.

Biographical Note

Isabel G. Gamero Cabrera is graduated in Philosophy and Communication, and has two Master Degrees in Philosophy and in Social and Cultural Anthropology. She got her PhD in Philosophy, at the Complutense University of Madrid, with a thesis entitled “Crossroads of Philosophy. Some difficulties about the notions of transcendentalism and normativity in contemporary epistemology and political philosophy”. Her main areas of research are feminist theory and contemporary epistemology, in the intersection with political philosophy and with a special interest in the work of Wittgenstein. After her PhD, she was a researcher at the TU Berlin (Germany), where she studied and translated Günter Abel’s work into Spanish. She was also a visiting professor at the Autonomous University of Nayarit (México) and a postdoctoral researcher in the Social Sciences and Education Faculty, of La Plata University (Argentina). She is currently an assistant professor at the Faculty of Philosophy at the Complutense University of Madrid, where she teaches Feminist Critique Theory, Feminist Epistemology and Anthropology.