PERFECT AND IMPERFECT CHARACTER IN PLATO AND DERRIDA: A DISTINCTION WITH RESPECT TO “UNIVERSALS” AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR FEMINIST THOUGHT

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Introductory Section

This paper has two main goals. The first is to identify and analyze two different ways of understanding what I here call the character of universals. The second is to demonstrate the relevance of this difference with respect to some problematic aspects of contemporary norms of femininity, and also to thereby suggest its more general importance to ethical, social, and political matters.

What is meant throughout this paper by a universal is very broad, yet not imprecise, and might be defined as: anything that is predicable of more than one (other) thing. Justice, for example, would be a universal, as it can certainly be predicated of more than one thing, e.g. such and such is just, so and so is just. Or more mundanely, dog-ness, what it is in general to be a dog, is a universal, as it can be said, with the same sense, of both Fido and Spot, that each “is a dog.”¹ Now traditionally, universals have been understood to have two characteristics besides being predicable of more than one thing, and we must review these in order to clarify what we mean and what we do not mean by universals.

Firstly, universals have been understood to be something “real,” something “external” to the mind – or at least to the human mind. This has led some to argue that there are no universals but only concepts, or indeed only names, and that it is concepts or

¹ In ordinary discourse the sense of this is usually conveyed by expressions such as ‘dogs’ or ‘a dog’, and perhaps sometimes by ‘the dog’ used as an abstract noun; but all these expressions are ambiguous when taken out of context, and may mean this or that dog, rather than dog-in-general. Hence with great reluctance I have used the contrived and rather awkward term ‘dog-ness’.
names which truly play the role others assign to universals. These sorts of claims that there are no universals are based on the opinion that things such as justice and dog-ness are not real or mind-external, together with the understanding that if something is a universal, then it is real or mind-external. Such debates over the “reality” or mind-“externality” of universals, however, have no place within the present investigation, as what we mean here by a universal makes no claim one way or the other as to whether or not a universal is “real” or else is merely a concept or predicate.

Secondly, universals have been understood to have a certain sort of unity, a certain sort of logical structure. A certain sort, that is, of what we mean here by character, although the term ‘character’ has not traditionally been used in this way. Indeed there has not, so far as I know, been any traditional debate concerning this character, although 20th century thinkers such as Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, though without using the terms ‘universals’ and ‘character’, have criticized the traditional view of what a universal’s character is and proposed alternative understandings. Despite these recent contributions, the concept of character I wish to develop here is perhaps too new to be clearly defined at the outset, although I will attempt to give some idea of what it is. Whatever these attempts leave unclear should become apparent as we proceed.

One sort of character that universals may be taken to have, and the first to be discussed below, is drawn here from Plato’s work, or at any rate from relevant parts of certain of his writings. This character, which I will eventually be terming perfect, is therein articulated clearly, concisely, and to all appearances, for the first time. As we will
see, this understanding of a universal’s character is that of a unity according to which every instance of given universal is, insofar as it is an instance of that universal, entirely the same. Subsequent to Plato – indeed, even subsequent to the Socratic dialogues – this sort of character seems largely to become taken for granted, or is perhaps at most reiterated without much deviation from its original idea. But this claim about the lasting influence of Plato’s articulation of this character falls well outside the purview of the present paper, and so must be left as no more than a motivating hypothesis.

The dialogues I have selected to focus on are three thought to be from Plato’s “early” period, *Laches, Meno*, and *Euthyphro*, along with one “middle” dialogue, *Phaedo*. As to why I have selected the dialogues that I have, the main reason is that it is primarily in early, or “Socratic” dialogues, where this idea, that universals have what we will end up calling a perfect character, is articulated. I have chosen not to discuss all of the Socratic dialogues which articulate this because that seemed unnecessary, given the close similarities among them with respect to that which concerns our discussion here. I have on the other hand opted not to discuss fewer than three of these dialogues, both in order to show that the universals which Plato, or Socrates, is referring to, are not unique to a certain dialogue, as well as simply to provide the reader with an understanding of such universals not limited to the context and examples of a single dialogue. Besides these Socratic dialogues, we will also pay some attention to *Phaedo*, in order to establish without doubt the characteristic of the changelessness of universals, which seems only implicit in the other dialogues considered here. We will also make use of a definition
from Plato’s *Sophist* and, in the concluding section, will make mention of Plato’s *Republic*. 2

The other sort of character that universals may be understood to have is drawn here from the philosophy of Jacques Derrida, and will be referred to as *imperfect character*. This understanding of a universal’s character is more difficult to specify than the more traditional understanding found in Plato. Part of what it means to be a universal with an imperfect character – or to be an *imperfect universal* – is to have multiple *essential possibilities for instantiation*. In contrast, perfect universals – universals having perfect character – have only one essential possibility for instantiation. This concept of *essential possibility for instantiation*, which will be abbreviated “EPI,” will be explained in detail further on, as it is something of a new concept and will take some time to develop. Besides having multiple EPIs, imperfect universals are characterized by changing in response to their instances, as will be explained in some detail later on. We might also remark that what we mean by *imperfect character* is a kind of unity very much like the sort of unity that Heidegger refers to as *appropriation*, to the sort of unity that Wittgenstein refers to as that of *family resemblances*, and to the sort of unity implied in Levinas’ claim that being is fundamentally plural. We have chosen, however, to develop this concept of imperfect character on the basis of Derrida’s thought, because it seems that he articulates it far more thoroughly, directly, and emphatically than either

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2 Unless otherwise indicated, translation of *Laches* are by Lamb, of *Meno* by Anastaplo and Berns, of *Euthyphro* by West and West, of *Phaedo* by Brann, Kalkavage, and Salem, of *Sophist* by Cornford and Jowett, and of *Republic* by Sachs.
Heidegger, Wittgenstein, or Levinas. Moreover, Derrida incorporates the thought of Heidegger and Levinas (if not Wittgenstein) into his own thinking on this matter, and so in a way, by turning to Derrida’s work we likewise turn to that of Heidegger and Levinas.

We will focus primarily on certain passages from one of Derrida’s more recent writings, an article called “The Other Heading,” wherein he discusses the sort of self-unity, or self-identity, which cultural identity has. This provides us with an example of Derrida dealing with what is clearly a universal: cultural identity, and specifically, European cultural identity – the universal, that is, of Europe or “European-ness,” of being-European. Our consideration of “The Other Heading” will require a brief excursion into two of Heidegger’s texts, “Letter on “Humanism” ” and “The Principle of Identity.” We will also consider, more briefly, a passage from Derrida’s essay “Differance,” in order to obtain a more general account of the structure of the character of self-identity as Derrida describes it.

Having identified and explained these two types of character, I attempt to show the implications of each, and hence the relevance of the distinction between the two, with respect to certain aspects of contemporary norms of femininity – which is to say, the contemporary universal of femininity – which function oppressively. On this topic, we will be turning to an article by Sandra Lee Bartky, “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power.” This text identifies a number of characteristics that are generally recognized as essential to femininity. It discusses how these norms are enforced, how this enforcement is a problem, and how these norms themselves are a

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3 Derrida is, however, greatly indebted to Heidegger’s thinking with respect to this matter, and similarly indebted to Emmanuel Levinas.
problem. Drawing primarily on Bartky’s analysis, and with some attention to other feminist thinkers, I will attempt to show the relevance of the difference between universals understood according to the character articulated in Plato, on the one hand, and universals understood according to the character articulated by Derrida, on the other hand. As we will see, the enforcement of such norms depends upon or necessarily involves an understanding of femininity as having a *perfect* character, whereas to understand femininity as having an *imperfect* character would work to undermine or neutralize their enforcement. Besides contributing to our understanding of sexist oppression, this analysis should suggest that the distinction between perfect and imperfect “character” might be relevant to other topics such as racism, justice in general, and even environmental problems. The present work also leaves us with the concepts that would be employed in subsequent investigations into those other topics. It also – perhaps most unusually – provides a rudimentary logical analysis of important aspects of the thought of Heidegger and Derrida.

In connection with this last point, it should be mentioned that symbolic logic will play a role in the analyses that follow. We make no attempt to *reduce* what we mean by *character* to a formal logical structure, especially because in the case of what we will call *imperfect* character, there seem to be aspects of *character* that go beyond what is ordinarily understood by logical form and what can be modeled by symbolic logic. But this sort of logical analysis, while not necessary to our investigation, can help by bringing a certain kind of clarity and rigor. The symbolic formalizations, moreover, along with

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4 Namely Judith Butler, Anne Fausto-Sterling, and Jane Flax.
Venn diagrams, will serve as a helpful visual aid, enabling one to simply look and see (to some extent) the structure of each sort of character, and the contrast between the two sorts of structure.
Chapter 1

The concept of perfect character.

Section 1.a: Characterization of universals in Plato’s *Laches, Meno, and Euthyphro.*

The term ‘universal’ is not Plato’s. I don’t mean simply that whereas Plato wrote in a form of Greek, ‘universal’ is a Latinate, English word; I mean rather that there is nothing in the Greek text which would be obviously translatable by this term, ‘universal’. Or at the least, this is the case with those passages which I have examined. Even so, in dialogues such as *Laches, Meno, Euthyphro,* and others, various universals – according to the sense defined above – are clearly under discussion: universals such as courage, virtue, and piety. The topic of universals is approached in a more general way in *Phaedo.* In all these dialogues, universals are characterized in ways which are considerably more specific than our own definition (that which is predicable of more than one thing). In order to see what these ways are, we will consider some passages from each of these four dialogues, beginning with the early, “Socratic” dialogues *Laches, Meno,* and *Euthyphro,* and following this up with the middle dialogue *Phaedo.*

In Plato’s *Laches* two Athenians, Lysimachus and Melesias, wish to decide whether they should have their sons trained in the skill known as “fighting in armor,” in order that they should grow up to be virtuous men. To this end, they seek the advice of Nicias and Laches, both Athenian generals, as well as that of Socrates. Although Nicias
and Laches disagree with respect to this question, Socrates refuses to cast a tie-breaking vote, arguing that Melesias and Lysimachus should not go with the opinion of the majority but rather should follow the judgment of whoever is most expert in the topic at hand, viz. the acquisition of virtue. Socrates proposes a method of inquiry for determining who among the three consultants (Laches, Nicias, and Socrates) may rightly claim such expertise.\(^5\) It is based on the principle that

> If we happen to know, concerning anything whatsoever, that when present it makes better that person or thing in which it is present, and if besides this we know how to cause it to be present in that person or thing, then it is clear that we know this thing itself, concerning which we might become advisors, in the wish that someone or something might most easily and excellently acquire it.

\(^{(189e)}\)

Socrates illustrates this principle with the example of sight. If someone knows, that eyes are made better when sight is present in them, and if that person also knows “how to cause [sight] to be present in the eyes,” then that person must also “know whichever something sight is [ἡπατικήν ἔστιν ὁ τί ποτ’ ἔστιν]” (190a).\(^7\) The corollary, as Socrates points out, is that if someone does not know “whichever something sight is [ὁ τί ποτ’ ἔστιν ὁπτις],” then they must also not know how sight might best be acquired for the

\(^5\) Socrates, however, immediately declares himself to be without such knowledge, even before he finishes proposing the method of investigation to be followed (186c).

\(^6\) Trans. mine. Published translations of *Laches* are in some places (such as this passage) quite free. I have translated certain passages myself so as to stay closer to Plato’s language.

\(^7\) Trans. mine. Throughout this paper, I attempt to translate Greek expressions that begin with ‘ὅ’ and end with ‘ἔστιν(ε)’ by English expressions that begin with ‘which’ (including ‘whichever’) and end with ‘is’, for reasons that will become apparent when we discuss *Phaedo*. 
eyes \((190a-b)\). The corresponding corollary to Socrates’ general claim would be that if one does not know the “something” in question, then one also does not know how that thing can be best acquired by the person or thing that would be improved by acquiring it.\(^9\)

Having explained this general principle, Socrates relates it to their current discussion, proposing that whoever knows how best to acquire virtue must also know “whichever something virtue is \([\ddot{\omicron} \; \tau \; \pi\omicron\tau\; \dot{\epsilon}\sigma\tau\nu\; \acute{\alpha}r\epsilon\tau\acute{\eta}]\)” \((190b)\).\(^10\) Yet in order to make the inquiry less difficult, Socrates also suggests narrowing the inquiry down to the virtue of courage, which fighting-in-armor is supposed to impart. Laches, Socrates’ primary interlocutor at this point, agrees with the proposal, and furthermore claims to know what courage is. Socrates then puts the question to him: “What is courage?” \((190e)\)

Laches’ answer – that “anyone who is willing to stay at his post and face the enemy, and does not run away, you may be sure, is courageous” \((190e)\) – fails to satisfy Socrates. The problem is that Laches’ answer, while true, covers only one case (or rather, one type of case) of courage, that which is proper to “men-at-arms” \((191a-e)\). The principle of the inquiry, as Socrates had explained, is that in order to be qualified to advise about how to acquire something, one must know what that thing is. Socrates’ question to Laches had thus been about courage in general, not in the particular case of courage for men-at-arms. He had meant, that is, for Laches to tell him what courage is for

\(^8\) Trans. mine.

\(^9\) There is perhaps also an implicit claim at work, that if someone does know what the “something” in question is, then they also know how it might best be acquired; considered deductively, this would be a fallacy, although perhaps as an abductive line of reasoning it would be valid, or cogent.

\(^10\) Trans. mine.
every case of courage, such as that of cavalrymen and of every sort of warrior, of sailors, of those who face illness and poverty, of those who engage in public affairs, and of those who face pain, fear, desires, and pleasure (191d-e). But this does not mean an enumeration of courage for this case, courage for that case, and so forth, as Socrates makes clear by the example of quickness. Socrates says that if someone were to ask him what quickness was, quickness being found “in running and harping, in speaking and learning, and in many other activities”, he would reply that “the faculty that gets a great deal done in a little time is what I call quickness, whether in a voice or in a race or in any of the other instances” (192a-b). Courage, then, as Socrates asks Laches to tell him of it, is something that can be defined by the same expression for every case of it.

We turn next to Plato’s *Meno*, a dialogue which opens with Meno, a visitor to Athens, asking Socrates whether or not virtue can be taught. Socrates replies that no one in Athens, including himself, knows this, and that he himself doesn’t even know “whichever something virtue is [ὁ τί ποιτ’ ἐστὶ ... ἀρετῆ]” (71a).¹¹ Meno is taken aback by this answer, and Socrates takes the opportunity to put to Meno the question: what does he “declare virtue to be?” (71d).

Meno’s confident reply is to tell Socrates what a man’s virtue is and what a woman’s virtue is, and to say that there are many more kinds of virtues for various kinds of persons: “For according to each activity and each time of life relative to each task for each of us there is a virtue” (72a). Unlike Laches, Meno gives more than one case; indeed

¹¹ Trans. mine.
as Socrates puts it, Meno give him a “swarm” of virtues (72a). Yet even as Laches does, Meno answers in terms of cases of virtue, and thus like Laches’ answer, Meno’s answer fails to satisfy Socrates. In order to explain to Meno what sort of answer he had hoped for, Socrates employs the example of bees. First he gets Meno to admit that bees “do not differ, one from the other, in that by which they are bees” (72b). He then explains that “were he to ask, concerning a bee’s being [οὐσίας], whichever something it is [ὁ τί ποτ’ ἔστι],” he would want Meno to tell him what that “by which bees in no way differ but rather are every one the same” is (72b-c). Similarly with virtues, claims Socrates, “they all have some one form [εἴδος] in common, through which they are virtues” (72c). And it is this, which is common to all virtue, and not various cases or kinds of virtue, which Socrates means when he asks Meno to tell him what virtue is.

Finally let us turn to Plato’s Euthyphro, which begins with a chance encounter between Euthyphro (a younger Athenian) and Socrates, as Socrates is making his way to the courthouse because he has been indicted for impiety, and Euthyphro is returning from the courthouse, as he is prosecuting his own father for murder. In the interest of brevity, let us simply say that in the passage with which we are concerned, Socrates, all the while claiming that he himself does not know the answer, has maneuvered Euthyphro into attempting to tell him what piety, or the pious itself, is. Despite his claim to ignorance, Socrates does suggest – and Euthyphro agrees – that “the pious itself [τὸ ὥσιον αὐτὸ]” is

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12 Trans. mine.
13 Trans. mine.
“the same as itself in every action,” before requesting (or demanding) that Euthyphro tell him what the pious is (5d).

Euthyphro’s unsatisfactory reply is that piety is what he is doing at that moment, “to proceed against whoever does injustice regarding murders or thefts of sacred things, or is doing wrong in any other such thing, whether he happens to be a father or mother or anyone else at all” (5d). But as Socrates points out, Euthyphro has not sufficiently answered the question, viz. to tell him “whichever something piety is” [τὸ ὀσίον, ὁ τι ποτ’ εἶν] (6d). As Socrates explains, he had not asked Euthyphro to tell him what are “some one or two of the many pious things” – which is what Euthyphro has done – but to tell him what is “that form [εἴδος] itself by which all the pious things are pious” (6d). For as Socrates reminds Euthyphro, Euthyphro had previously agreed that pious things are pious by one form [ιδέα] (6d-e). So Socrates repeats the request, that Euthyphro now teach him “what ever this form [ιδέα] itself is” (6e). Similarly to the previous two cases, the problem here is that Socrates’ interlocutor, in this case Euthyphro, answers Socrates’ request to tell him what something is – in this case, piety – with only certain cases of this, whereas Socrates wants an answer that will cover all cases of what is in question – here piety.

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14 Trans. mine.


16 Euthyphro’s previous agreement is at 5d.

17 Trans. modified. Original: “ἀυτὴν ... τὴν ἰδέαν, τίς ποτὲ ἐστίν” (6e).
In every one of these three dialogues, the universal under discussion is said to be the same in every case. This characterization is put most explicitly in *Meno*, where every bee is said to differ not at all from every other bee, insofar as they all are bees. Anything which is not the same in every case cannot be the universal, as we saw in every one of Socrates’ rejections of his interlocutors’ initial attempts to tell him what courage is, what virtue is, and what piety is. This complete sameness in every case is an extremely important point for our investigation. Furthermore, it would perhaps seem to imply that the universal could not change over time. But since the question of changelessness is not directly addressed in any of the dialogues we have considered so far, we will turn to Plato’s *Phaedo* for confirmation.

**Section 1.b: Changelessness of universals in Plato’s *Phaedo*.**

Now in *Phaedo*, universals are not simply that which is the same in all cases of, for example, courage. Instead the universal is clearly differentiated from the many things that share its name; “the beautiful itself [αὐτὸ τὸ καλὸν],” for example, is distinguished from “the many beautiful things, such as human beings or horses or cloaks or any other such things of that sort” (78d-e). The many things are said to fall short of the universal whose name they share, yet strive to be as much like it as possible (74aff.). Equal sticks and equal stones, for example, do not always appear equal from different points of view, and thus differ from the equal itself [αὐτὸ τὸ ἴσον] (74b-c). Even so, equal things (such as sticks and stones) “strive to be like” yet “fall short of” equality itself (74e-75b). And the universal is even said to be the cause of the particular things being what or how they are. The cause of beautiful things being beautiful, for example, is said to be beauty itself
These changes, however, between the earlier dialogues and the *Phaedo*, are not directly relevant to our present inquiry, as they do not have to do with the character, the logical structure, of the universal. (Just what this term ‘character’ means here may not yet be clear, but will become increasingly so as we proceed.)

Thus in *Phaedo* there is a somewhat different, more developed account of universals than in the dialogues we have considered so far. This should not surprise us, as the conversation portrayed in *Phaedo* is one between Socrates and other sympathetic philosophers, whereas in *Laches, Meno*, and *Euthyphro* the conversations are between Socrates and people who are either unfamiliar with or who do not agree with his particular ways of thinking. Perhaps in part as a result of this higher level of discourse, there are not explanations of the sort found in *Laches, Meno*, and *Euthyphro*, where Socrates explains that such and such universal is the same in every case. But what he does seem, in the *Phaedo*, to make clear, is that universals do not change whatsoever. At the very least, Socrates proposes the claim to his friend Cebes, apparently expecting Cebes to agree; Cebes indeed readily agrees, and Socrates does not subsequently call the claim into question. In the following passage, Phaedo, the namesake of Plato’s *Phaedo*, is in the midst of recounting to a man named Echecrates this conversation between Socrates and Cebes, at which Phaedo had been present.

“Then let’s go,” he [Socrates] said, “to the very things we were talking about in the earlier argument. Does being itself [αὐτῷ ἔσθε] – of whose definition we say “to be” in our questioning and answering – always keep to the self-same condition, or does it vary from one moment to another? The equal itself [αὐτῷ τὸ ἴσον], the beautiful itself [αὐτῷ τὸ
καλόν], each which-it-is itself [αὐτὸ ἐκαστὸν ὁ ἔστιν], being – do these ever admit of any sort of change whatsoever? Or does each which-it-is [ὁ ἔστιν], being of single form [μονοειδές] when taken itself all by itself, always keep to the self-same condition and never ever in any way whatsoever admit of any change at all?”

It’s necessarily in the self-same condition, Socrates,” said Cebeš.

(78c-d)¹⁸

Each which-it-is [ὁ ἔστιν] – each universal – “never ever in any way whatsoever admit[s] of any change at all.” These are strong words indeed by which Socrates and Cebeš, as portrayed here by Plato, articulate an understanding of the universal as unchanging. Yet before adding this to the articulation we saw earlier of the universal as entirely the same in every case, we should perhaps confirm that this sameness in every case still holds for universals as they are discussed in Phaedo.

The clearest confirmation of this are Plato’s rhetorical or lexical indications that the universals under discussion in Phaedo, despite the changes we noted, are otherwise the same things discussed at a less advanced level in dialogues such as Laches, Meno, and Euthyphro. In order to avoid a lengthy discussion of what is likely an entirely uncontroversial claim, I will give but a partial sketch of a few examples, and since the point is more readily apparent in Greek I include the Greek expressions. To begin with, consider that in the above quoted passage, Socrates refers back to the “earlier argument,” and indicates that the things under discussion in that earlier argument were “being itself [αὐτῇ ἡ οὐσία],” “[t]he equal itself [αὐτὸ τὸ ἴσον], the beautiful itself [αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν], each itself which-it-is [αὐτὸ ἐκαστὸν ὁ ἔστιν],” which is to say: universals. And indeed if

¹⁸ Translation modified in order to translate ‘ὁ ἔστι’ phrases as ‘which [it] is’ phrases. Unnecessary capitalizations were also removed in the interest of maintaining consistency with the translations of Laches, Meno, and Euthyphro. The Greek interpolations are also added.
we turn to that “earlier argument” (which has to do with whether the soul exists before
birth), we find the following passage.

Then isn’t this the case [Socrates is speaking]: if we grasped it and were
born having it, we had knowledge both before we were born and right at
the moment we were born, not only of the equal [τὸ ἴσον] and the greater
[τὸ μεῖζον] and the less [τὸ ἔλαττον] but also of all such things? For our
present argument isn’t about the equal [τοῦ ἴσου] any more than it’s about
the beautiful itself [ἀνταπὸ τοῦ καλοῦ] and the good itself [ἀρετὸ τοῦ
ἀγαθοῦ] and the just [δικαίου] and the holy [ἁγίου] and, as I say, about all
those things upon which we set the seal: ‘which-it-is’ [ὁ ἔστιν],19 in the
questions we ask as well as in the answers we give; so we must necessarily
have grasped the various knowledges [sic] of all these things before we
were born.

(75c-d)20

The point I want to take from this passage is that universals in general are referred to as
“all those things upon which we set the seal: ‘which it is’ [ὁ ἔστι].” Now one sees a good
deal of such seal-setting in the Laches, Meno, and Euthyphro, where the expressions
‘which ever something it is’ [ὁ τί ποτ’ ἔστι] and ‘which something it is’ [ὁ τί ἔστι] occur
repeatedly as references to various universals.21 Other commonalities of expression also
link the discussion of universals in Phaedo to the discussion of universals in the earlier
dialogues. For example, in passage at 78c-d quoted earlier, universals in general are
referred to as ‘being’ [οὐσίας], in connection with the “earlier argument” and thus in
connection with ‘which it is’ [ὁ ἔστι] expressions, and in the context of questioning with

19 The full phrase is actually “τὸ ὁ ἔστι.” I read the ‘τὸ’ as functioning to mark ‘ὁ ἔστι’ as mention rather
than use – hence I have rendered ‘τὸ ὁ ἔστι’ as ‘which-it-is’ rather than as ‘that which it is’ or as ‘which-
it-is’.

20 Trans. modified, again for capitalization and ‘ὁ ἔστι’ phrases.

21 In Laches, see 190a-c; in Meno 71a, 72a-b; in Euthyphro 6d. Many very similar expressions are to be
found as well, in the vicinity of these passages.
respect to various universals. And this is just what we saw in *Meno* in the example of bees, where Socrates refers to the universal of bee as “a bee’s ‘being’ [ὀūσίας],” immediately following this with a ‘which it is’ [ὁ ἐστι] expression referencing that universal, and in the context of a questioning concerning the universal of bee. Another example: in the above quoted passage universals in general are characterized as “being of single form” [μονοειδές], just as in *Meno* the universal of virtue is the “one form” [ἐν ἕλθος] which all cases of virtue have in common, and in *Euthyphro* the universal of piety is “the form itself [ἀπὸ τὸ εὐθείας] by which all the pious things are pious” (cited above). A great deal more could be said in this sort of direction, but I don’t wish to belabor the point any more than it already has been.

Even so, we should also look quickly at one more point in *Phaedo* besides the continuity of its expressions with the earlier dialogues. Universals, as we saw already, are in this dialogue characterized as being entirely without change. But things that are without change, in turn, are characterized as being “the most likely to be non-composite[ ]” (78c-d). And it would seem that if a universal should not be entirely the same in every case – if, for example, bees sometimes did differ even insofar as they were bees – then such a universal would be of more than one part, as it would require at least one “part” for each way in which a bee (for example) might differ from other bees even insofar as it is a bee. Thus a non-composite universal, as described in *Phaedo*, would need be the same in every case, just as described in the earlier dialogues *Laches*, *Meno*, and *Euthyphro*. (In fact we will revisit this point, in a way, further on.)
The foregoing should suffice to confirm that the characteristic of being-not-at-all-different-in-every-case, i.e. of being entirely the same in every case, is retained within the more robust understanding of universals discussed in *Phaedo*. We can therefore say that in Plato’s writings, as we have reviewed them, there is articulated an understanding of the universal as something which is entirely the same in every case, and which is entirely without change. In other words, it is exactly the same, in every case, at every time. This describes one sort of what I am calling character. I wish to term this sort of character ‘perfect’.22 We may in accordance with this terminology speak not only of a perfect character, but of perfect universals (those universals whose character is perfect) and of perfect unity or perfect oneness (the sort of unity or oneness possessed by perfect universals).

**Section 1.c: Initial logical analysis of imperfect character.**

Now in order to better understand this perfect character, I wish to raise the question of how we must understand its logical structure. (That is to say: the logical structure of any given perfect universal, the logical structure of any perfect unity.) In attempting to answer this question, let us begin by considering what it must not be. It must not, first of all, have the sort of logical structure which characterizes Meno’s first attempt to tell Socrates what virtue is, which we earlier described in brief. Now let us give it more fully. “[I]t’s not hard to tell [what virtue is],” says Meno:

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22 The term ‘perfect’ is intended to suggest both the lack of ambiguity in the identity of what a universal having perfect character is, and the being-completed of its identity since it is without change.
The virtue of a man [is] to be sufficient to carry on the affairs of the city and while carrying them on to do well by his friends and harm to his enemies and to take care that he not suffer any such thing himself. And . . . the virtue of a woman [is] . . . to manage the household well, conserving what is inside and being obedient to her man. And the virtue of a child is different, both female and male, and of an elderly man, and if you want, of a freeman or, if you want, of a slave. And there are a great many other virtues, . . . [f]or according to each activity and each time of life relative to each task for each of us there is a virtue, . . . ."

(71e-72a)

This is the “swarm” of virtues, according to Socrates’ jesting metaphor. And the trouble with such a swarm, the reason why it fails to answer Socrates’ question is, as we said earlier, that it does not give an answer which is for every case of virtue the same. For example (and perhaps to belabor the point), what Meno says is the virtue of a man – to carry on the affairs of the city etc. – is quite different from what he says is the virtue of a woman, and in general, as Meno claims quite explicitly, virtue differs according to a great variety of factors.

Symbolized very closely to the form in which he gives it, Meno’s reply would run something like:

\[
\forall x \forall y ((Vxy \land My) \leftrightarrow (Cx \land Fx \land Ex \land Ax)) \land
((Vxy \land Wy) \leftrightarrow (Hx \land Ix \land Ox)) \land \text{[etc.]} .\] 23, 24

23 I have omitted, both here and in subsequent symbolic expressions, a number of parentheses which, while being required in all strictness, would be arbitrarily placed and superfluous to our present purposes, and which would have made the symbolic sentences and forms more cluttered and less easy to read.

24 Vxy = x is the virtue of y. My = x is a man. Cx = x is sufficient to carry on the affairs of the city. Fx = x does well by their friends. Ex = x does harm to their enemies. Ax = x takes care not to suffer any harm from their enemies. Wy = y is a woman. Hx = x manages the household well. Ix = x conserves what is inside the household. Ox = x is obedient to their man.
But this reply does not answer the question. When Socrates asked Meno what he declared virtue to be, Socrates had meant the *one form* that *all* virtues – not the virtue specific to this or that sort of person – “have in common, through which they are virtues” (cited above). Socrates did not, that is, ask after “Vxy” – virtue in relation to something, the virtue of some y – but after what we will shortly symbolize as ‘Vx’ – virtue *simpliciter*, virtue in general, without specificity to this or that sort of person or to anything else. Now when we preserve the content of Meno’s answer, yet adjust its form so that it is an answer to what Socrates intended, we find it must be symbolized something like:

\[
∀x ∀y (Vx ↔ ((Cx & Fx & Ex & Ax & Sxy & My) ∨ (Hx & Ix & Ox & Sxy & Wy) ∨ \[etc.\]))\].

And indeed if we omit Meno’s specifications as to whose virtue it is, we obtain

\[
∀x (Vx ↔ ((Cx & Fx & Ex & Ax) ∨ (Hx & Ix & Ox) ∨ \[etc.\]))
\]

an answer whose *general form* remains unaltered. This general form – in terms of the *definiens* – may be characterized as a disjunction of conjunctions; of conjunctions, moreover, whose constituent sentences are entirely different.\(^{26}\)

That logical structure whose definiens consists in a string of two or more unrelated conjunctions (each conjunction involving any number of sentences) – a definiens, in other words, like that given by Meno, a series of conjunctions that have no

\(^{25}\) ∀x = x is virtue. Sxy = x is specific to y. For the other predicates, see the preceding footnote.

\(^{26}\) I am employing here a terminology used, somewhat commonly, to distinguish the two parts of a definition: the *definiendum*, that which is being defined; and the *definiens*, that which does the defining. (A more precise distinction would actually involve three terms: the *definitum*, that which is being defined; the *definiendum*, that expression including the thing being defined; and the *defininens*, that which does the defining. But as we are really only concerned here with *definientia* (plural of *definiens*) it matters not.)
terms in common – thus cannot be the logical structure of the universal as articulated by Plato in the passages we have considered. But what about a logical structure which is also a disjunction of conjunctions, but whose conjunctions, instead of having nothing in common, instead share many of their sentences with each other? More specifically, each disjoined conjunction would share some but not all of its sentences with some but not all of the other disjoined conjunctions. (In fact, each such disjoined conjunction is what we will later be calling an essential possibility for instantiation, or EPI; so the sort of sentence about which we are now asking is one that describes multiple EPIs, and thus describes a unity that might be what we will call an imperfect character.) Examples of this sort of logical structure are not to be met with in Plato’s writings, so let us offer an abstract example. Consider the sentence

$$\forall x \ (Ux \leftrightarrow ((Ax \& Bx \& Cx) \lor (Ax \& Bx \& Dx) \lor (Ax \& Cx \& Dx) \lor (Bx \& Cx \& Dx))).$$

It defines an unspecified universal, U, according to some combination of three out of the four unspecified predicates A, B, C, and D. But the same argument which rules out Meno’s initial answer would seem to rule out this logical structure as well. For according to this definition, if some object $a$ were A and B and C and not D, then $a$ would be an instance of U. Yet if some object $b$ were A and B and D and not C, then $b$ would be an instance of U as well. But then, what it is to be U would not be the same in every case – as it would be different in the case of $a$ and in the case of $b$ – and thus this sort of logical structure would not pass muster, according to the requirements laid out in Meno or in Laches or Euthyphro.
Now since the foregoing discussion was entirely abstract and formal, and since it is also, as we will see, extremely important, it behooves us to attempt a more concrete variation of it. For this we turn to Ludwig Wittgenstein, who may provide us with an example of a universal proposed as having this sort of logical structure. I say “may” because he tends to speak in terms of similarity of features, whereas we are here considering properties, or defining sentences, which are the same. In any case, what he proposes is near enough to what we have abstractly proposed that it may at least loosely be used to provide a more concrete illustration of what we have said in the abstract. I am thinking here of Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblance.

In his Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein claims that the unity of games, as games – in other words, of the universal of game – does not have the form of a traditional essence, wherein there would be some one thing common to all games. Instead, claims Wittgenstein, there are among games “a whole series” of “similarities” and “relationships.” In our own vocabulary, this would amount to some but not all defining properties being shared among some but not all of the disjoined conjunctions of sentences which go to make up the definiens of some universal. Allow me to quote Wittgenstein at some length.

Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost.—Are they all ‘amusing’? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball-games there is winning and losing, but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the
element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; can see how similarities crop up and disappear.

(27)

Although this is not the place to attempt an ontology of games, the foregoing should go some way toward illustrating what we at first said so abstractly. Between board games and card games, there are many characteristics in common, but many characteristics that are common among board games are not held in common with card games, and vice versa. So too between these types of games and ball-games, and so on and so forth. A web, a network, a fabric of genuine unity deserving a common name is at work here in the case of games, and yet no features are shared among every case or instance of games, i.e. of the universal of game. (Presumably, there could well be types of games which share no features in common with each other, but which are linked or unified with each other, as games, through the mediation of other types of games which do share features.)\(^{27}\) Wittgenstein calls these similarities and relationships “family resemblances” because family members – humans who form a family in what we might call the usual, literal sense of the term ‘family’ – tend to share many but not all of their features (physical and otherwise) (27-28). Games, he claims, also possess such a unity, and so may be said to form a family (28).

It would seem, however, that the logical structure of family resemblances cannot be the same as that of the universals articulated in the passages we examined from Plato.

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\(^{27}\) As to how many features it takes to form a direct unity among games, this sort of question is presumably and empirical or phenomenological one; there might even be no general answer to it, but different numbers or ratios in different cases. But in any case, it cannot be specified a priori.
The reason is the same as the reason that Meno’s initial answer was incorrect. Despite the considerable overlap among games or types of games, what defines a card game is not the same as what defines a board game, etc. Therefore a unity of family resemblances, such as the unity obtaining among games, cannot be what is articulated by Plato’s Socrates, as a unity of family resemblances allows for different cases of universal, e.g. games, to be not entirely the same, whereas Socrates had specified that the universal must be not at all different in every case.

The possibility we appear to be left with is a unity definable as a conjunction of some number of sentences. More precisely (in the idiom of predicate logic), the definiens of a perfect universal must not be logically equivalent to any sentence whose main operator is ‘∨’, disjunction. I would thus like to term this type of unity non-disjunctive unity, and to oppose it to the sort of unity that we illustrated using Wittgenstein’s account of games, which I wish to term disjunctive unity. We would seem therefore to have identified the logical structure of perfect character, the logical structure of the perfect universal and of the sort of unity it possesses.

Section 1.d: Consulting Plato’s definitions.

28 Excluding from consideration redundant sentences, e.g. ((Ac & Bc) ∨ (Ac & Bc)).

29 The terms ‘non-disjunctive unity’ and ‘disjunctive unity’ refer specifically to logical structure, which is more narrow and also more exact than character. These two terms are thus themselves more narrow and more precise than the terms ‘perfect unity’ and ‘imperfect unity’ – this last term being one we have yet to use or explain.
But perhaps in our reasoning we have begged the question. The understanding of universals that we have drawn from Plato’s dialogues does indeed describe the universal as being entirely the same in every case at any time. Yet in our discussion so far, we have been operating with certain unstated assumptions concerning what it means to be the same. Let us return to Plato’s *Meno*, to the passage where Socrates attempts to explain what he had meant when he asked Meno to tell him what virtue is. Recall that Meno admits that bees “do not differ, one from the other, in that by which they are bees” (in other words, that all bees, insofar as they are bees, are the same as each other); that Socrates explains that if he were to ask Meno concerning “a bee’s being [ουσίας], whichever something it is [ὁ τί ποτε ἕστι],” he would mean “this very thing in which they do not differ but are all the same thing”; and that with respect to virtues it is the same, there being “some one form [εἴδος]” that all virtues have “in common” and “through which they are virtues”; and that it is this one form which he wanted Meno to tell him about, when he asked Meno what virtue is (cited earlier). Generalizing from this, we can say that all cases of a given universal share a single form, insofar as they are cases of that universal, and that this form is exactly the same in every case. This “form,” this “whichever something it is,” is what is held not to differ at all among various individual bees, virtues, etc. With this in mind let us review our earlier reasoning. We had illustrated disjunctive unity using Wittgenstein’s example of games and his notion of family resemblances, but we also illustrated disjunctive unity using the abstract example of a universal, U, definable as

\[
\forall x \ (Ux \leftrightarrow ((Ax \land Bx \land Cx) \lor (Ax \land Bx \land Dx) \lor (Ax \land Cx \land Dx) \lor (Bx \land Cx \land Dx) \lor (Bx \land Cx \land Dx))),
\]
A, B, C, and D being unspecified properties or predicates. We had said, quite correctly, that an individual being would qualify as an instance of U if it had the properties A, B, and C, but not D, yet also if it had the properties A, B, and D, but not C. On this basis, we claimed that what it is to be U is not the same in every case. Yet perhaps this last claim is not correct. For if being A, B, and C is sufficient to qualify as being U, then so too is being either A, B, and C, or A, B, and D. And if some individual being has the properties A, B, and C, without having D, then strictly speaking that same individual being has the properties A, B, and C, or A, B, and D, or whatever other properties or combinations of properties we might care to specify.

In other words, if it is that case that (Aa & Ba & Ca), then it is also the case that

\[(Aa & Ba & Ca) \lor (Aa & Ba & Da) \lor (Aa & Ca & Da)\].

And if it is the case that (Ab & Bb & Db), then it is also the case that

\[(Ab & Bb & Cb) \lor (Ab & Bb & Db) \lor (Ab & Cb & Db) \lor (Bb & Cb & Db)\].

And so forth. Therefore if what is the same in every case is this full disjunction – or that which the full disjunction of conjunctions characterizes – then the fact that being either A, B, C, and not D, or A, B, D, and not C, both qualify an entity as U, this fact does not after all mean that U is not the same in every case. So it might seem as if what we have called disjunctive unity is not ruled out by the descriptions of the universal in *Laches*, *Meno*, and *Euthyphro* after all, and the question as to the logical structure of the universal as it is articulated in these dialogues remains open.
Fortunately, a number of Plato’s dialogues provide us with examples of how to define things, examples, that is, of how to answer the sort of question we have seen Socrates asking. Below are given formalizations of six such definitions. The first two are from *Euthyphro*, the next three from *Meno*, and the last from a dialogue we have not discussed, the *Sophist*. Each of these six is seemingly approved of, at least in form if not necessarily in content, by Plato. Or to be more cautious, not necessarily by Plato but by the character of Socrates or, in the case of the *Sophist*, by the Eleatic visitor.\(^{\text{30, 31}}\)

(from *Euthyphro*)

1. $\forall x \forall y (Uy \iff (Gx \& Hxy))^{\text{32}}$

2. $\forall x \forall y (Hy \iff (Gx \& Lxy))^{\text{33}}$

(from *Meno*)

3. $\forall x \forall y (Sx \iff (Axy \& Cy))^{\text{34}}$

4. $\forall x \forall y (Sx \iff (Lxy \& Ty))^{\text{35}}$

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\(^{\text{30}}\) The definitions, in terms of their general logical form, are to my knowledge representative of other definitions found in Plato, with the exception of those whose form is explicitly rejected, as in the case of each rejected attempt we discussed above.

\(^{\text{31}}\) The definition from *Sophist* is included for two reasons. One is the great number of sentences involved in it. The other is that, being one of Plato’s late dialogues, it suggests that the form common to all these definitions should be considered as illustrative of Plato’s middle dialogues such as *Phaedo* as well, thereby bolstering our confidence that the logical form common to all these definitions should be taken to hold over time.

\(^{\text{32}}\) From *Euthyphro* 9d. Ux = x is unholy. Gx = x is a god. Hxy = x hates y.

\(^{\text{33}}\) From *Euthyphro* 9d. Gx = x is a god. Lxy = x loves y. Hx = x is holy.

\(^{\text{34}}\) From *Meno* 75b. Sx = x is shape. Axy = x always accompanies y. Cx = x is color.
5. \( \forall x \forall y \forall z (Cx \leftrightarrow (Exy \& Sy \& Dyz \& Pyz)).^{36} \)

(from Sophist)

6. \( \forall x \forall y \forall z (Ax \leftrightarrow (Bx \& Cxy \& Dy \& Ey \& Fyza \& Fyzb \& Fyzc \& Fyzd \& Fyze \& Gz \& Hz \& Iz)).^{37} \)

These formalizations are intended primarily as a visual aid, although they also function to add a certain rigor. Let us therefore isolate the definiens of each definition,\(^{38}\) and let us align the components of each definition with the components of the others. Doing so yields the following:

1. \( \forall x \forall y \ (Gx \& Hxy) \)
2. \( \forall x \forall y \ (Gx \& Lxy) \)
3. \( \forall x \forall y \ (Axy \& Cy) \)
4. \( \forall x \forall y \ (Lxy \& Ty) \)
5. \( \forall x \forall y \forall z \ (Exy \& (Sy \& Dyz \& Pyz)) \)
6. \( \forall x \forall y \forall z \ (Bx \& (Cxy \& Dy \& Ey \& Fyza \& Fyzb \& Fyzc \& Fyzd \& Fyze \& Gz \& Hz \& Iz)). \)

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\(^{35}\) From Meno 76a. Sx = \( x \) is shape. Lxy = \( x \) is the limit of \( y \). Ty = \( y \) is a solid.

\(^{36}\) From Meno 76d. Cx = \( x \) is color. Exy = \( x \) is an effluence from \( y \). Sy = \( y \) is a shape. Dyz = \( y \) is commensurate with \( z \). Pyz = \( y \) is perceptible by \( z \).

\(^{37}\) From Sophist 218e-221c. Ax = \( x \) is an angler. Bx = \( x \) is a man. Cxy = \( x \) has \( y \). Dx = \( x \) is a power. Ex = \( x \) is an art. Fxyz = \( x \) acquires \( y \) by \( z \). Gx = \( x \) is living. Hx = \( x \) swims/flies. Ix = \( x \) is aquatic. a = conquest. b = secrecy. c = striking. d = daylight. e = hooks.

\(^{38}\) By specifying the domain as all possible instantiations of the universal being defined in each case.
The same definitions may be schematized by Venn diagrams, as below.  

Fig. 1

Note the commonality of form in these definitions, which the formalizations and diagrams should make visually obvious. In every definition, the defining sentences are related only by ‘&’, conjunction. Each definiens is nothing other than a universally quantified conjunction of sentences. Each definition has, that is, a non-disjunctive unity. Now of course these could be rearranged into other forms. The first definition, for example – considering the version where the definiens has been isolated – might just as well be represented by the sentence

$$\forall x \forall y \neg (\neg Gx \lor \neg Hxy),$$

or by the sentence

$$\forall x \forall y \neg (Gx \to \neg Hxy).$$

But each of these would be logically equivalent to the initial sentence,

$$\forall x \forall y (Gx \& Hxy).$$

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39 The area not shaded in represents the universal that is marked off, i.e. defined. Each circle represents one of the defining sentences. The leftmost diagram depicts the first four definitions, the middle the fifth, and the rightmost the sixth.
And importantly, no sentence of this sort of form – no sentence having a non-disjunctive unity – is logically equivalent to any sentence having a disjunctive unity.\textsuperscript{40} As the definitions sharing this non-disjunctive logical structure are illustrative of how to answer Socrates’ questions as to what such and such a universal is, this further confirms our suspicion that the logical structure of any perfect universal is this non-disjunctive logical structure. Yet for Plato to show us that the sort of universal articulated in those of his works we have examined, the sort that is the same in every case at every time, \textit{can} be defined according to a non-disjunctive unity, perhaps does not, strictly speaking, amount to Plato showing us that the same sort of universal \textit{cannot} be defined according to a disjunctive unity.

Yet Plato \textit{has} shown us that this sort of universal – what we call the perfect universal – cannot be defined by a disjunction of otherwise unconnected series of conjunctions. He shows us this in the various failed attempts to answer Socrates’ questions, attempts which we discussed earlier such as the variety of virtues described by Meno. For if we were to allow that a universal, whose logical structure is that of a disjunctive unity, may be characterized as \textit{that by which its instances in no way differ} – if we were to allow, in other words, that a universal which is completely the same in every

\textsuperscript{40} We are excluding from consideration redundant sentences such as $\forall x ((Ax \& Bx \& Cx) \lor (Ax \& Bx \& Cx))$, as well as those such as $\forall x (((Ax \& Bx \& Cx) \lor (Bx \& Cx \& Dx) \lor (Ax \& Dx \& Ex)) \& ((Ax \& Bx \& Cx) \lor (Bx \& Cx \& Dx) \lor (Ax \& Dx \& Ex)))$; for while on purely syntactic grounds the former might be considered a non-disjunctive unity and the latter a disjunctive unity, we are not really concerned with syntactic form but with the “character” of what different syntactic forms would describe or refer to.
case at every time may have a disjunctive unity – then it seems we would must allow something similar for that described by any string of disjoined sentences at all. But in that case, Meno’s swarm of virtues would have qualified as the sort of thing that Socrates had asked for, when he asked to be told what virtue is (for Meno did provide an answer equivalent to a string of disjoined sentences). And Laches’ initial answer as to what courage is, while still incorrect, could have been rectified by elaborating a different account of what courage is in every case – men-at-arms, cavalry, public affairs, etc. – an answer much like Meno’s multitude of virtues. Yet when Socrates elaborates those cases of courage which Laches’ initial answer fails to capture, he does not ask Laches to specify what courage is separately for each case, but says that a satisfactory answer must be found to apply in every case. And again, Socrates does not suggest to Euthyphro that he elaborate various pious things in addition to his initial answer – that “the pious is just what I [Euthyphro] am doing now: to proceed against whoever does injustice regarding murders or thefts of sacred things, or is doing wrong in any other such thing, whether he happens to be a father or mother or anyone else at all” (5d-e) – but instead that he come up with a single answer for all pious things. Indeed Socrates in all three dialogues rejects every answer which defines only cases of what is in question, regardless whether the rejected answer defined many such cases or instead only one.

Furthermore, nowhere in Plato’s writings is the possibility of a disjunctively unified universal – in which, as distinguished from any old disjunction, there would be multiple disjoined conjunctions, each sharing some but not all of its sentences with some

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41 For example, being either a groundhog, or orange and round and inflated, or located in Monaco sometime during 1978, would count as a unity whose instances in no way differ.
but not all of the other disjoined conjunctions – mentioned or discussed. Nowhere in Plato’s writings do we find a definition whose logical structure is one of disjunctive unity, although we do find definitions, presented as being at least the correct way of defining a universal, i.e. of answering the question, What is x? Furthermore we find definitions – or attempted definitions – whose logical structure is that of a series of unrelated disjunctions, which are explicitly rejected as being an incorrect way of defining a universal, and whose rejection is logically inconsistent with the acceptance of disjunctive unity as the logical structure for a universal. We would seem then to have established the character of the universal, as articulated in Plato’s Laches, Meno, and Euthyphro, as well as Phaedo, not only in natural words but according to logical analysis as well. The universal’s character is that of a perfect unity, a unity that is entirely the same in any case at every time, and the logical structure of this sort of unity is that of a non-disjunctive unity, a series of predicates related only by conjunction (or a logically equivalent form), over time as well as at any given moment.

42 A (complex) sentence not logically equivalent to any sentence whose main operator is that of disjunction.
Chapter 2

The concept of imperfect character.

Section 2.a: Characterization of universals in Derrida’s “Differance” and “The Other Heading.”

Having elaborated the concept of perfect character (of universals) and its associated ideas on the basis of certain of Plato’s works, we turn now to the thought of Jacques Derrida in order to develop a sort of counter-concept, which we will term imperfect character. Let us begin with a passage from his essay “Differance” (“La Différence”), a passage which very succinctly gives a (perplexing) characterization of self-identity in general. This characterization is presented as an account of the implications of what Derrida calls “differance”. However, we are not interested here in differance – at least not as a theme – and so we won’t attempt to explain it, but will focus only on the characterization of self-identity given in the following passage.

Differance is what makes it the case that, if the movement of signification is possible, then each element which is referred to as “present,” and which appears on the stage of presence, relates itself to something other than itself, keeping within itself the mark of past elements and allowing itself, by way of the mark of its relation to future elements, already to become hollow, the track or trace [made by or comprised of these marks]\(^{43}\) relating

\(^{43}\) The French word ‘\textit{la trace}’ may carry at least three senses, expressible respectively by the English words ‘track’, ‘trace’, and ‘mark’. As Levinas and, following him, Derrida use the term, it is usually translated as ‘trace’. The French word ‘\textit{la marque}’, translated here as ‘mark’, also expresses the sense of the English word ‘mark’. This allows Derrida, writing in French, to move rather seamlessly from speaking of \textit{la marque} to \textit{la trace}. In English, however, the connection of ‘mark’ with ‘trace’ is somewhat weaker. I have therefore ventured the interpolation ‘made by or
no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and constituting what is called the present by way of this same relation to that which is not it: absolutely not it, which is to say, not to a past or a future which is a modified present. In order to be itself, an interval must separate it from that which is not it, and this interval which constitutes it as present must also, by the same stroke, divide the present in itself, in this way dividing and distributing, along with the present, all that one can think on its basis, which is to say, in metaphysical terms, every being, especially substance and the subject.

(51-52)

Without attempting to explicate every detail of this remarkable passage, I wish to draw attention to two points made therein. First, everything present, everything that is, is, and is what and how it is, only through being dependent on and determined by that which it is not. Such relations somehow divide every being from itself, within itself, even as they allow it to be, giving or lending it its own distinctive being, its own identity. Second, the relations of that which is present to what-it-is-not, which allow it to be and determine its being, leave that which is present “hollow,” internally marked, by relations to that which is not even a modified form of presence. In other words, that which is present, that which is, is always radically incomplete, being essentially determined (necessarily but not sufficiently) by a certain otherness that never was and never will be present.

Applying these to the universal, we have a universal that, in order to be itself, must differ from itself, within itself, and also be “hollow” in virtue of a relatedness to an

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44 Due to (admittedly minor) misgivings I have about the published English translations of this passage, I have opted to give my own. However I should note that other translations of this passage may be found on pages 142-143 in David B. Allison’s translation, and on page 13 in Alan Bass’ translation.
absolute non-present or absolute non-being. We might say that the universal, according to this kind of self-identity articulated by Derrida, is both essentially self-different and essentially incomplete. I say ‘essentially’ because the self-difference and incompleteness are necessary in order for the universal to “be itself”, which is to say, in order for it to have its self-identity.

Let us consider the first point, that of essential self-difference. In order to be identical with itself, a universal must be different from itself. For a perfect universal, this would be an impossible feat. As we saw at great length, the universal whose character is perfect is that by which all of its instances in no way differ. The universal of bee is that by which all bees are entirely the same, the universal of virtue is that by which all virtues are entirely the same, and so forth. We can see this more precisely if we consider the logical structure of a perfect universal, which as we saw is that of a non-disjunctive unity. Take the abstract example of an unspecified universal, U, which is defined non-disjunctively by three unspecified predicates A, B, and C.

∀x (Ux ↔ (Ax & Bx & Cx))

Any being which instantiates this universal will have the properties A, B, and C, and insofar as it is an instantiation of this universal, it will have no other properties. But were the universal to differ from itself, seemingly (at least some of) its instances would not, insofar as they are instances of it, in no way differ.

Any universal which differs from itself would instead need to have the logical structure of disjunctive unity. As we saw earlier, this sort of unity allows for the instances of a universal to differ from each other, even insofar as each is an instance of that
universal. The universal whose logical structure is that of disjunctive unity would therefore not be described as that by which all its instances differ not at all, insofar as they are instances of it. It might instead be described as that by which each of its instances, insofar as it is an instance of it, is the same in many ways with many other instances of it – although just how many ways, and just how many other instances, cannot be specified a priori in such a description. The logical structure of any self-different universal would thus seem to be that of a disjunctive unity.

The claim, however, that the logical structure of any self-different universal is that of a disjunctive unity, is at this point rather conjectural, based as it is only on inferences from a very short and very general passage. Moreover we still have not explained the second point drawn from the above passage, that concerning essential incompleteness. In order to confirm what we have suggested about self-difference, and in order to understand the characterization of incompleteness, we will turn to another of Derrida’s texts, a much later work called “The Other Heading” ("L’autre cap"). In this essay he discusses cultural identity, that is, the self-identity of any culture, although he does this in the interest of understanding European identity. Now any cultural identity is of course a universal, being predicable of more than one thing. There are, for example, certainly more than one person of whom we may quite correctly say “they are European.” Here, then, we are dealing not with a general account of self-identity which we then must apply to the case of the universal, but with a discussion of a type of universal.
In “The Other Heading” we again find the claim that a kind of self-difference is essential to self-identity, although in this case it is the self-identity of a culture. Derrida puts it down as “an axiom,” that “what is proper to a culture is not to be identical to itself” (9). He goes on to say that what he means by “not to be identical to itself” is not “to not have an identity, but not to be able to identify itself, [not] to be able to say “me” or “we”; to be able to take the form of a subject only in the non-identity to itself” (9). We will return to what this explanation means, noting for now firstly that the “axiom” is not a denial but a characterization of the self-identity of a culture, and secondly that what we have here is indeed a claim concerning essential self-difference. A little further on, Derrida writes that culture is to be understood here “as a culture of the other, a culture of the double genitive and of the difference to itself” (10). The self-identity of a culture is thus explained – allusively – by way of reference to this “double genitive,” consideration of which will allow us to confirm what we suggested earlier about the logical structure of an essentially self-different universal.

Section 2.b: The double genitive and belonging in Heidegger’s “Letter Concerning Humanism” and “The Principle of Identity.”

This double genitive, or as Derrida calls it in the next sentence, this “grammar of the double genitive” (10), is introduced by Martin Heidegger in his “Letter Concerning Humanism.” Therein, Heidegger is concerned to think the relation between human beings and being, as well as the role played by “thinking” in “accomplishing” this

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45 Trans. modified. ‘difference to itself’ renders ‘différence à soi’, which Naas translates as ‘difference to oneself’. The original passage is on pages 16-17 of “L’autre cap.”
Heidegger writes that “Thinking is l’engagement par l’Être pour l’Être [engagement by being for being]” (239). This expression ‘par ... pour ...’, which translates into English as ‘by ... for ...’, is what our attention should most focus on here. After writing the just quoted statement, Heidegger suggests that a genitive expression, ‘de l’...’ – in English, this would be either ‘of ... ’ or ‘of the ... ’ – might perhaps be employed to express this ‘par’ and this ‘pour’, this ‘by’ and this ‘for’, at once, although he also expresses uncertainty as to whether it is grammatically permissible. The statement ‘Thinking is l’engagement par l’Être pour l’Être’ – ‘Thinking is engagement by being for being’ – would thus be expressed as ‘penser, c’est l’engagement de l’Être’, or ‘thinking is the engagement of being’ (239-240). This is the grammar of the double genitive. What it means is that in thought, human beings are engaged by being, and that this engagement is for being. The double genitive indicates a relation between human beings and being such that human beings are engaged by being for being. But just what does this double sense of by and for mean, in terms of logical structure?

For a precise answer to this question, we turn to a later work of Heidegger’s, “The Principle of Identity.” Here again he addresses, in the context of what thought is, the relation between the human being and being. Instead, however, of employing the grammatical device of a “double genitive” expression to get across his meaning, he turns to the word ‘belonging’, in the sense of a mutual belonging, and the expression

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46 The English translation I cite actually has ‘man’ rather than ‘human being’. But as ‘man’, there, translates ‘Menschen’ and ‘das Mensch’, and as “Letter on “Humanism” ” translates this same word as ‘human being’, I have chosen to maintain consistency of expression by using the expression ‘human being’ in the case of “The Principle of Identity” as well.
‘belonging together’. The meaning of ‘belonging’, that is, in “The Principle of Identity,” is intended to get across the same sense as the expression ‘de l’ ... ’ as Heidegger attempts to use it in “Letter Concerning ‘Humanism’” (and has the advantage of avoiding the rather dubious grammatical innovation of using ‘de l’’ to convey the sense expressed by ‘par et pour’).

In order to specify just what sort of mutual belonging he means, Heidegger presents a contrast between two ways of understanding belonging. One way, belonging-together, emphasizes what is expressed by ‘together’. In this sense of belonging, explains Heidegger, the things which are related, the things which belong together, are, insofar as they belong together, “assigned and placed into the order of a “together,” established in the unity of a manifold, combined into the unity of a system, mediated by the unifying center of an authoritative synthesis” (29). This way is “the customary way,” according to Heidegger, and it can also be expressed by saying that it understands belonging in terms of the unity of the things that belong together, a unity which is understood as being “merely a coordination of the two,” and where the things coordinated are what they are prior to their coordination, their relation, their belonging-together (29-30). Heidegger seems to have in mind, for example, the sort of belonging together that bees, as discussed in Meno, would have. As we saw earlier, different bees belong together, as bees, in virtue of their each instantiating what-it-is-to-be-a-bee. Thus the individual bees belong together as bees only through the mediation of what-it-is-to-be-a-bee. Each individual bee is a bee because it instantiates what-it-is-to-be-a-bee, and not because other individual bees also instantiate what-it-is-to-be-a-bee. Each individual bee thusly is what it is (a bee) in a way
that is logically prior to its coordination – via what-it-is-to-be-a-bee – with other individual bees. We might similarly consider the various kinds of virtue described by Euthyphro, along with Socrates’ suggestion that virtue itself must be something common to all kinds of virtue. Each kind of virtue would thus belong together with the other kinds of virtue only through what might be called the “unifying mediation” of virtue itself.\(^{47}\)

The other way of understanding belonging, \textit{belonging}-together, emphasizes what is expressed by ‘belonging’. Here the relation, in this case between human beings and being, is not thought as derivative with respect to that which it relates. It is \textit{not} merely a unity produced as the coordination of what belong together; the things that belong together thus are \textit{not} what they are without their mutual belonging. The things that belong together are also \textit{not} “established in the unity of a manifold,” etc. (29ff.) What then is a \textit{manifold}?

Heidegger’s mention of a manifold \textit{[eines Mannigfaltigen]}\(^{48}\) here seems an allusion to Husserl’s concept of a manifold \textit{[Mannigfaltigkeit]}\(^{49}\). As David Woodruff Smith explains, a manifold, according to Husserl, is the \textit{form} – not the content – “of a field of knowledge,” and a field of knowledge is “a domain of objects to which a theory applies” (105). A theory, in turn, is a \textit{deductive} theory, a theory which “characterizes its field of objects by virtue of the system of \textit{deductive relations} among its propositions

\(^{47}\) In Plato’s \textit{Philebus}, Socrates gives a general, schematic account of this sort of unity, beginning at 16d.

\(^{48}\) See page 92 of \textit{“Der Satz Der Identität.”} for the German.

\(^{49}\) Smith includes the German \textit{‘Mannigfaltigkeit’} in a long quotation from Husserl on page 104 of \textit{Husserl}. 
about said objects, relations that hold by virtue of the logical form of these propositions” (104). The formal structure which is a manifold is thus definable by a general formula, by some finite series of statements or propositions, which are able to determine in advance whether any possible object is or is not a member of that field, that domain of objects, whose form the manifold is. “If the field,” for example, “is that of the positive integers, then the form of the field” – its manifold – “is represented by the axioms and theorems of number theory for the [positive] integers” (105).

Section 2.c: The disjunctively structured universal and essential possibilities for instantiation (EPIs).

Let us return now to Derrida’s claims about cultural identity being structured in accordance with the double genitive, keeping in mind these two points about what this “double genitive” means: 1) it is a mutual belonging whose unity is not that of a manifold, and 2) the things that belong together are not what they are independently of their mutual belonging. Recall that earlier, I suggested that the unity of any universal, understood in accordance with Derrida’s articulation of self-identity as something essentially self-different, could only be that of a disjunctive unity. Let us test this, asking first whether a non-disjunctively structured universal – the sort we found in various passages from Plato – could be characterized by this belonging-together. But in such a universal, the only things that might belong together in any fashion are its defining sentences, and we are not interested in these singly, or in groups, but only in the combination of them all, since only all of them in combination function to define what
separates things that instantiate the universal, on the one hand, from things that do not, on the other.

In the case of disjunctively structured universals, it is not so simple. Here too we are not interested in the defining sentences singly, and for the same reason. Yet in the case of disjunctive unity, it is not the case that only a combination of all of the defining sentences can separate what are and what are not instantiations of a specific, disjunctively structured universal. For as we have seen, the instantiations of any disjunctively structured universal are defined according to various combinations of various defining sentences. Such a universal, we might say, has various essential possibilities for instantiation. These are to be distinguished from non-essential, or accidental, possibilities for instantiation. A spherical object, for example, may be red, blue, or any other hue, yet such differences in color among spherical objects do not amount to differences insofar as each is a spherical object. Those differences are but accidental, and disjunctively structured universals, just like perfect universals (all of which are non-disjunctively structured), do have accidental possibilities for instantiation. But unlike perfect universals, non-disjunctively structured universals also have these essential possibilities for instantiation. Think back to Wittgenstein’s discussion of games, which we (tentatively) used earlier as an example of disjunctive unity. Board games are a kind of game that require a board, card games are a kind of game which do not, and as these are united, as games, by family resemblances, there is no single feature or group of features, common to both these kinds of game, which marks them off as games rather than non-games. Whatever conjunction of sentences we may suppose to define board games, it will
thus include sentences specifying the use of a board, whereas whatever conjunction of sentences we may suppose to define card games will not include sentences specifying the use of a board, but *will* include sentences specifying the use of cards. We thus have at least two different series of conjoined sentences, each of which suffices to define something as a game. Every such defining conjunction of sentences thus specifies an *essential* possibility for instantiation. Indeed, we might even define non-disjunctive universals as those which have only one essential possibility for instantiation, whereas disjunctive universals are those which have two or more.

Disjunctive unity, we can now say, characterizes the logical structure of universals whose self-identity is of the sort articulated by Derrida only if the essential possibilities for instantiation of such universals are unified, in and as the universal whose possibilities they are, in accordance with the sort of mutual belonging that is a belonging-together and not a belonging-together. Recall that there are two requirements for a mutual belonging to qualify as such a belonging-together: 1) the belonging must not have the sort of unity that characterizes a manifold; 2) the things related in the belonging must not be what they are independently of their being-related, their mutual-belonging. Let us consider first whether the essential possibilities for instantiation (EPIs) of a disjunctive universal do or do not have the unity of a manifold.

A manifold, as we said before, involves only form, and is definable by a deductive theory. It can be defined, that is, by some finite series of propositions, which propositions have nothing to do with the content of the field whose form the manifold is.
Were the EPIs of a disjunctive universal to have the unity of a manifold, then the
definition of that universal would be a deductive theory, a finite series of propositions,
having nothing to do with the content of the universal or its EPIs. Now it might seem at
first that such a theory could be specified, by stating what a non-disjunctive universal is
not. A non-disjunctive universal is one whose definiens is not logically equivalent to any
expression whose main operator is that of disjunction, so a disjunctive universal would be
one whose definiens is not logically equivalent to any expression whose main
operator is that of disjunction. That is, (assuming a double negation to be equivalent to no
negation,) a disjunctive universal would be one whose definiens is logically equivalent to
some expression whose main operator is that of disjunction. But in fact, this would not be
a definition of any disjunctive universal, since it fails to distinguish between disjunctive
universals, on the one hand, and disjunctions that are not universals – such as Meno’s
attempt to say what virtue is – on the other.

A disjunctive universal’s EPIs share some of their sentences with some other EPIs
of that same universal. Yet it seems there is no way to determine any general rules for
how many sentences will be shared with how many other EPIs, not even in relation, say,
to how many EPIs there are for a given disjunctive universal. In the case of each
particular universal, if one knows what its EPIs are, it would of course be possible to
specify, in formal language, these numbers. But specification of this sort would neither
provide any sort of theory for disjunctive universals in general, as it is done on a case by
case basis, nor would it give a theory for that particular disjunctive universal, since
without reference to the content of the EPIs (i.e. the semantic meaning of their
sentences), it would fail to distinguish that specific universal from any other universal which might happen to have the same purely formal characteristics. On this point, then, concerning the sort of unity possessed by manifolds, the EPIs of disjunctive universals qualify as belonging-together.

The second requirement to qualify as belonging-together, that each thing related not be what it is independently of its relations to the other related things, may be dispatched more quickly. True, each sentence, considered merely as a sentence, may well be what it is independently of its involvement, and so too may be each combination of sentences with which the various EPIs are defined. Yet this does not matter. For we are not speaking of sentences, nor of combinations of sentences merely as combinations of sentences. We are concerned here with EPIs, with essential possibilities for instantiation of a universal. EPIs, as EPIs, can of course not be EPIs without the universal of which they are EPIs, and the universal cannot itself be what it is without its EPIs. Hence no EPI, insofar as it is an EPI, can be what it is without its relations to the other EPIs of its universal. The disjunctively structured universal, therefore, is characterized by what Heidegger attempts to expresse with the grammar of the double genitive: the mutual belonging which is not a belonging-together but instead is a belonging-together.

The logical structure of a cultural identity, as described by Derrida in “The Other Heading,” in terms of its self-difference, thus seems to be that of a disjunctive unity. This in turn supports our inference that the more general description of self-identity in “Differance,” again in terms of its self-difference, must have this same sort of logical
structure. We now almost have an account, in terms of logical form, of what it would mean for a universal to be, as we said earlier, essentially self-different. But there remains a final point to consider with respect to this self-difference.

In addition to being disjunctively structured, the kind of self-identity described by Derrida is one that changes over time, as can be easily seen in “The Other Heading.” There, Derrida is particularly concerned with the question of what European identity will become, even suggesting that its future identity is to some extent unanticipatable. What it is to be European, the universal that is European identity, is thus itself understood to be something that changes with time. In other words, it differs from itself not only at a given moment, but over time as well. The disjunctive structure we have been exploring can accommodate this. Just as a disjunctively structured universal has various EPIs at any given time, so too its EPIs vary over time. If there could be a full definition of a disjunctively structured universal, the definitions of its various EPIs would must be time-indexed. Although this variance over time seems fairly straightforward, it might be worth illustrating with some generalized Venn diagrams. The below diagrams depict the same universal at four different times.\(^{50}\)

Fig. 2

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\(^{50}\) The shaded spaces are the space of the universal. The darkly shaded regions show which four sentences are active in defining it at the indexed time. The lightly shaded regions show sentences which at other times function to define the universal.
As one can see, the spaces of the universal in question, its proper boundaries, shift gradually with time, and hence are disjunctively structured over time just as they are disjunctively structured at each moment. What could bring about such changes is another question, one that will be answered shortly.

**Section 2.d: The incompleteness of imperfect character.**

Now we must consider that the self-identity of universals, as we have found it articulated by Derrida, involves not only essential self-difference but also essential incompleteness. “The Other Heading” helps us to make sense of this aspect as well. A culture’s self-difference, let us recall, according to Derrida, lies in its being “a culture of the other, a culture of the double genitive and of the difference to itself” [emphasis mine] (10). Now this word ‘other’ may be read in multiple ways, and is intended, I believe, to be so read. To understand what these ways are, let us consider the relation of universals...
to three ideas discussed in “The Other Heading”: that of a *heading* [*un cap*], that of the *other heading* [*l’autre cap*], and that of the *other of the heading* [*l’autre du cap*].\(^{52}\)

A *heading*, as Derrida tells us, is a destination, the planned or expected destination of a vessel; or rather, it is that vessel’s directedness toward such a destination (15-16). Yet this is something of a metaphor, as Derrida is concerned not with the heading of what is literally a vessel, but with a specific cultural identity: that of Europe. What is meant by ‘heading’ therefore has to do with where Europe, as a cultural identity, is headed, with what it is going to be in the future. Generalizing from this, we might say, with respect to universals, that a *heading* is a universal’s present orientation toward that which it would be planned or expected to be in the future.

Still, even though one may have a heading, it is always possible for a heading to change (15-16). This possibility of changing headings is what is meant by the *other heading*. Such change would of course not be possible for a universal of perfect character; what a perfect universal is, at any moment, is also what it is at every moment. Hence what it is expected to be in the future, what it is headed toward being, its heading, can never be anything other than what it happens to be at the present moment, which is also to say that no change, and hence no change of heading, is possible for it. But Derrida, as we have already seen, is not writing about a perfect universal, but rather about a universal – (European) cultural identity – whose logical structure would be that of a disjunctive unity. And as we noted earlier, disjunctive unity allows for change over time, given only that its “disjunctivity” be diachronic, extending disjointedly over time. Yet

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\(^{52}\) See pages 19-21 of “*L’autre cap*” for the French expressions.
what might lead to a universal’s changing over time, what might bring about a change in heading for it, remains unclear. To understand why such change comes about – and what it means for a universal to be incomplete – we might consider what is meant by the other of the heading.

The other of the heading is the future cultural identity which “[r]efuses itself to anticipation” (5). It is “a relation of identity with the other that no longer obeys the form, the sign, or the logic of the heading” (15). It is the “irruption of the new” which “should be anticipated as such,” which is to say “as the unforeseeable, the unanticipatable” (18). This “other,” in other words, is that aspect or dimension of the future which cannot be anticipated. There are always some things, in our expectations of the future, which turn out other than as we expected. And there is also always a great deal that we did not expect, in the continuous becoming-present of the future; as the present moment changes, there is always much in the change that we did not, and could not have, anticipated. This dimension of unanticipatability is the other of the heading, since it is neither an actual nor a possible heading; that is, as unanticipatable, it is not a “destination,” an anticipatable future being, that someone or something could be oriented or directed toward.\

53 This “other of the heading” is very much like what John Caputo, in On Religion, calls the absolute future. In contrast to the future-present – that part or aspect of the future that is foreseeable – the absolute future is the part of the future that cannot be foreseen (7-10). Yet the trouble with this comparison is that Caputo frames the absolute future in terms of knowledge, whereas the other of the heading seems more like a matter of being than of knowledge. Then again, it is also troublesome to consider the other of the heading as an aspect of being, as it seems to be an otherness which is not an otherness of something. Happily, such questions lie beyond the scope of the present work.
In the case of the universal as Derrida describes it, the *other of the heading* forms part of the universal’s self-identity; the other of the heading is “a relation of identity with the other” within the self-identity of a culture that is “a culture of the other” (cited above). This means that within the self-identity of a universal, in its passage through time, unanticipated (and unanticipatable) things arrive or arise. Sometimes these might be unanticipated instantiations. And what it means to be an “unanticipated instantiation” means that the instantiation, while appearing or coming into being as an instantiation of some specific universal, nonetheless does not correspond – at least not entirely – with any current EPI for that universal. It is, we might say, a sort of deviant repetition. In such a case, the universal itself becomes altered: a new EPI emerges.

It is also the case that old EPIs might disappear, might pass out of being. How this is brought about, however, will need to be left to another investigation, and for two reasons. First, it does not directly bear on the arguments we will make shortly, wherein we will attempt to contrast, in terms of certain ethical implications, the sort of universal described by Derrida with the sort of universal articulated by Plato. Second, such an explanation would require much wider inquiries than we have so far attempted, inquiries which would need to address a number of complex issues such as the relations between various universals and their changes, knowledge of universals versus the being of universals, inter-subjectivity and inter-cultural variances among universals, differences between phenomenological and speculative perspectives, and the interdependencies between universals and their instantiations.
Now in terms of our attempt at logical analysis, we are at this point, in a way, out of luck. This dimension of indeterminacy cannot be contained within any logical form. Strictly speaking, then, it does not even belong to logical structure, but is a point where there is not logical structure, the point from or at which alterations to the logical structure arrive. But this does not mean that the universal as described by Derrida has no logical structure; it means instead that the universal is open to alteration, open even to deviant repetitions. This openness or indeterminacy is what we meant earlier when we said that the self-identity of the universal (and indeed of self-identity in general), as described by Derrida, is essentially incomplete.

We are now in a position to explain what Derrida means when he says, in explaining his “axiom” that “what is proper to a culture is not to be identical to itself,” that this does not mean “to not have an identity,” but rather “not to be able to identify itself, [not] to be able to say “me” or “we”; to be able to take the form of a subject only in the non-identity to itself” (cited above). We now understand what this “non-identity to itself” is. It is the merely imperfect co-incidence of various essential possibilities for instantiation, along with the openness to alteration, to change. A culture cannot “identify itself” in the traditional sense of identifying what it is, the sense we found articulated in Plato, where identifying what something is means identifying what is entirely the same, in any case of it, at any time. And this is because having various EPIs means it is not entirely the same in that traditional way. Thus it cannot say “me” or “we,” unless it does so without knowing unambiguously what this “me” or “we” is; it therefore can “take the
form of a subject only in the non-identity to itself,” only, that is, in this somewhat and irreducibly ambiguous self-identity. And even beyond this, the openness to change, to alteration, at any moment, makes the self-identity of a culture not only ambiguous, but also unknown. To be open in this way is not, to be sure, to be entirely unknown, but just what is known and just what is unknown is not itself entirely anticipatable; the unknown (and hence the known as well) is one whose boundaries are not entirely certain. This openness is, or results in, the inability to definitively “identify itself,” the uncertainty of what is said in saying “me” or “we.” And we can say something similar with respect to any universal whose character is of that sort which Derrida has described.

Together, the sort of incompleteness and self-difference we have described make for a kind of character that I wish to call imperfect. In accordance with this, we may also speak of imperfect universals (those universals whose character is imperfect) and of imperfect unity (the sort of unity possessed by imperfect universals).
Chapter 3

Sexist oppression and the character of universals.

Section 3.a: Femininity as a category of everyday life.

We have at this point established two different sorts of character that a universal might be taken to have: perfect character, which we explained on the basis of a reading of Plato, and imperfect character, explained through a reading of Derrida. Now it is time to attempt to apply this distinction, contrasting the implications of each sort of character in relation to the universal of femininity, and specifically in relation to certain problematic aspects of the contemporary understanding of this universal. In this undertaking, we will rely primarily upon Sandra Lee Bartky’s article “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” wherein she identifies and analyzes a number of problematic aspects of femininity. But as ‘femininity’ is not an unambiguous term, we should begin by clarifying what we mean by it, and by motivating this use.

Many feminist thinkers make a fine distinction between gender, on the one hand, and sex, on the other. Sex refers to the strictly physical aspects of being female or male, or perhaps more precisely, to those physical aspects of being a woman or a man that are determined biologically, which is to say by one’s DNA. In contrast to this, gender refers

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54 We might just as well say: the contemporary state of this universal, as there really is no universal beyond the understanding of it.
to those aspects of being a woman or a man that are learned, conditioned, habituated, acculturated, performed. Gender, therefore, is not determined by sex, but by various social causes and conditions. The terms ‘female’ and ‘male’ are used to refer to sex, while the words ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ (and sometimes ‘woman’ and ‘man’) are used to refer to gender. Since in this section we will be dealing, from a feminist standpoint, with feminist theory and concerns, one might expect us to begin our analysis from this distinction between sex and gender, and thereby treat of femininity as something entirely separate from being-female. But this will not be the case. While I regard the sex-gender distinction as generally correct, it is somewhat inappropriate to begin our analysis from this distinction, as will be explained shortly. Moreover, there are certain complications involved which we ought to mention before proceeding.

To begin with, not all humans are, in their natural physical appearance (phenotype), distinctly male or female. There exist, in other words, hermaphroditic persons of various sort, and even if these individuals were all classed simply as “intersex,” sex would still thus be something more than a simple binary distinction between male and female. Indeed, even were one to appeal to sex chromosomes as determining a person’s true and natural sex, XX and XY are not the only possible combinations for humans. In some cases a person has two X and one Y (XXY), and there are other cases where a person has one X and no Y (XO).\textsuperscript{55} It is perhaps worth noting that these are not philosophical claims, but merely facts of human anatomy, physiology, and genetics. Yet as Judith Butler has argued, such facts do suggest a philosophical claim,

\textsuperscript{55} Fausto-Sterling discusses these sorts of cases throughout \textit{Sexing the Body}, but see her “Table 3.1 Some Common Types of Intersexuality,” on page 52 of that book.
viz. that although sex may not be learned in the same sense that gender is something learned, still the categories by which sex is understood, indeed the category of sex itself, are themselves cultural artifacts (6-7). She also points out that if there is no natural or otherwise necessary connection between sex and gender, then there is no need for the number of genders to equal the number of sexes (6). Hence even were there only two sexes, there might still be any number of genders. And in any case, the distinction between sex and gender means that “a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way” (6). For example, a person who is feminine, i.e. who is a woman, need not also be female, but might be intersex or even male instead.

In what follows, however, we wish to analyze femininity as what might be called a “category of everyday life.” This accords with Bartky’s claim that femininity, as well as masculinity, “are critical elements in our informal social ontology” (105). They are, that is, among the most important of those “categories that structure everyday life” (105). The predominant categories of everyday life do not readily distinguish even between sex and gender, but tend to conflate the two. This is not to say that there is no distinction at all. The entry on ‘gender’ in the Concise Oxford English Dictionary (one must remember that dictionaries today aim to track, not prescribe, the meanings of words), for example, includes the following note on usage. “Although the words gender and sex both have the sense ‘the state of being male or female’, they are typically used in different ways: sex tends to refer to biological differences, while gender tends to refer to cultural or social
ones” ("gender"). There is, then, some difference in usage between the two words in the larger Anglophone social world. Yet this note on usage claims that ‘gender’ refers to the “cultural or social” differences of “the state of being male or female.” This indicates that whatever difference in usage might sometimes occur, there remains an “everyday” conflation of sex and gender, wherein gender is reduced to an aspect of sex. We may further note that appearing to be female, or appearing to be male, seem generally to be encountered and referred to as ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ (respectively), as evidenced for example in expressions such as ‘feminine bone-structure’ and ‘masculine bone-structure’. At the same time, the term ‘gender’ seems to have been widely adopted as little more than a synonym for ‘sex’, as on surveys and various forms, for example, the question labeled ‘gender’ almost always lists the possible answers as ‘male’ and ‘female’ (which options are perhaps followed by an option ‘other’ or ‘prefer not to answer’). The larger point here is that if we are to analyze that conception or notion of femininity – the universal of femininity – that predominates, for the most part, in most areas of life, we must take it to somehow include being-female.

Now Bartky’s analysis, despite what she says about femininity being a category of everyday life, might at first glance seem not to account for this conflation of sex and gender in everyday categories. She does, after all, declare (with reference to Simone de

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56 Two definitions are given for ‘gender’. The first to do with the grammatical notion of ‘gender’. The second reads: “the state of being male or female (chiefly in cultural or social contexts). > the members of one or other sex: differences between the genders.”

57 Emphasis mine.
Beauvoir) that one is “born male or female, but not masculine or feminine,” and that any embodied femininity is the result of certain “disciplinary practices that produce a body which in gesture and appearance is recognizably feminine” (95). But the point of this claim is not to obscure the commonplace conflation of being-female and being-feminine. Rather, it is to establish that most feminine characteristics, even with respect to a feminine bodily appearance, must be learned and practiced. They are the result, that is, of what might be called bodily disciplines of femininity. In contrast, being female, male, or some other sex-determination is not – if separated strictly from gender – so learned or practiced. This is so even if sex categories are themselves products of culture, for one is born into them nonetheless, and they apply to aspects of one’s body that are largely outside of one’s control. Yet these bodily disciplines of femininity are expected only of humans deemed to be female – they “construct a feminine body out of a female one” (101). Bartky’s analysis thus recognizes that its analysis is of everyday categories which conflate sex and gender, even if she employs the term ‘feminine’ in accordance with the theoretical, non-everyday distinction between sex and gender.

Section 3.b: Disciplines of femininity and their enforcement.

As to these bodily disciplines of femininity, Bartky identifies three overall categories. The first consists in practices “that aim to produce a body of a certain size and general configuration” (95). These practices are mainly various regimens of dieting and physical exercise, whose goal is the achievement and maintenance of a certain type of figure; such exercises can even go so far as to include maintaining a non-expressive face, so as to avoid the development of wrinkles (95-97). The second category of practices are
“those that bring forth from the body a specific repertoire of gestures, postures, and movements” (95). These include the practices of moving about and working with restricted movements, such as walking with small strides; of holding oneself in a constricted posture; of directing one’s eyes deferentially, i.e. looking down or away rather than meeting the gaze of others, especially male-masculine others; to smile often (i.e. more than men do); of displaying a certain grace and a “modest eroticism;” and allowing oneself to be steered about or guided by male-masculine companions (97-98).

The third category consists in “those [practices] directed toward the display of this body as an ornamented surface” (95). These include the acquisition and the use in prescribed ways of a vast arsenal of products and procedures to ensure that one’s skin is “soft, supple, hairless, and smooth,” along with comparable arsenals for hair care and for making-up the face (98-100). Bartky notes that while the practices of this third category are, to some extent, creative and expressive, the use of these products is nonetheless highly constrained by current fashions, as well as being nearly mandatory, at least for many “social and professional contexts” (100). For our present purposes, what is most important is the question of how such practices, such disciplines of femininity, are enforced, and the way in which this enforcement effects a certain oppression.

In attempting to understand the enforcement of these bodily disciplines of femininity, one may point to the influence of parents, teachers, and other authorities for children, who may “admonish[] girls to be demure and ladylike, to “smile pretty,” to sit with their legs together” (102). One may point as well to “the media,” in constructing “an
image of the female body as spectacle” (102). And there is also the threat of the “refusal of male patronage,” whether professional or intimate (104), or indeed professional patronage generally, as can be seen by the more or less mandatory use of certain styles of makeup “in most social and professional contexts” (100). But as Bartky points out, the enforcement of the disciplines in question is not simply bound to any particular institutions, as evidenced by the fact that women who are “regarded as overweight ... report that they are regularly admonished to diet, sometimes by people they scarcely know” (103). The enforcement is thus anonymous in that it may issue from anywhere or anyone, yet not from anyone or anywhere in particular (103). Any “random” stranger, that is, might very well offer such admonishment, and there is no way to anticipate which stranger might do so. Shame, too, plays a significant role, as a kind of self-punishment, which is to say self-enforcement, whose sources are “internalized” “standards of bodily acceptability” (104). Bartky thus suggests that such disciplines play a role in structuring the self, “allow[ing] a self to distinguish itself both from other selves and from things which are not selves,” and that they even function – as we mentioned earlier – as “critical elements in our informal social ontology” (104-105).

Such enforced disciplines are problematic in several ways, firstly in that many, perhaps most, people who attempt to conform to these disciplines and their expected results fall short. This, of course, is because the expected results are hardly attainable for most people. The almost inevitable failure results in shame, the efforts to attain the ideal may lead to poor health, and any falling short of the ideal – the expected result of the
discipline – ends in being discriminated against. Secondly, there are those people who identify as feminine, but who don’t identify with all of the disciplines commonly expected of women. Athletes, for example, may identify as women, as feminine, yet perhaps not as people who maintain a constricted posture or who generally move in a restricted fashion. They may as a result be subjected to shame and discrimination. A closely related case would be those who would like to become athletes, but who decline to do so out of fear that shame and discrimination might result from their abandoning characteristics of femininity such as constricted posture and restricted movements.

Thirdly, there are those who, while female, do not identify as feminine. They either suffer shame and discrimination if they do not conform to expectations that they appear feminine, or else they are prevented, by fear of such shame and discrimination, from appearing and publicly identifying as they would wish (as non-feminine).

Lastly – and it is this which Bartky most emphasizes – there is the matter of power relations. The demands made on women to in effect disguise (with make-up and so forth) their appearance are not only far more severe than those made on men, but the very demand for disguise suggests that the way one would otherwise appear is itself deficient (100). The demands of these disciplines of femininity are also, as Bartky puts it, a “set-up,” whose demands are so great as to ensure failure in the vast majority of cases. The inevitable failure then adds, as we mentioned above, a sense of shame; moreover the extent of such failure tends to be greater for poor women, and is an economic as well as a psychological burden, “since conformity to the prevailing standards of bodily acceptability is a known factor in economic mobility” (100). Another point is that, as
Bartky claims, these disciplines are ultimately carried out in relation to the perceived judgment of a kind of generalized male-masculine other; moreover this is done not only out of psychological need, but out of economic considerations, a fact which underlines the economically subordinate status of feminine subjects (101). The particular qualities demanded of a feminine body, and not only their relative severity in comparison to those made of men, also put women at a disadvantage. The “aesthetic of femininity ... that mandates fragility and a lack of muscular strength produces female bodies that can offer little resistance to physical abuse, and the physical abuse of women by men, as we know, is widespread” (101). Bartky also points out that an ideally feminine-appearing face, in comparison to a masculine-appearing face, is far more like that of a child, thus carrying “the theme of inexperience” and lacking any “marks of character, wisdom, and experience that we so admire in men” (101-102). Moreover, the very efforts that are demanded of women, in order to attempt to practice these disciplines effectively, are also ridiculed as frivolous (102). Finally, the comparatively “restricted motility and comportment” demanded of women provides the most overt signal of inferior status. For as Bartky points out, “women’s typical body language, a language of relative tension and constriction, is understood to be a language of subordination when it is enacted by men in male status hierarchies” (102). In all these ways, conformity to the disciplines that Bartky describes, indeed even attempted conformity, tends to produce “a body on which an inferior status has been inscribed,” and an embodied subject who is generally at a disadvantage in relation to male-masculine subjects (100).
It is a curious fact that these norms of femininity, toward which all these bodily disciplines, these practices, aim, are often enough in conflict with the actual characteristics of persons identified as feminine. This conflict has been shown clearly enough in Bartky’s discussion of their enforcement. Perhaps this curiousness is easily overlooked, if only because we are so used to these norms. But if we step back from this familiarity for a moment, we might find ourselves wondering: on what grounds might femininity conflict with the characteristics of actual, feminine persons? Shouldn’t femininity – what it is to be feminine – consist in those qualities or characteristics that are proper to feminine persons? And if so, mustn’t it, femininity, accord with what various feminine human beings are actually like? If it did not so accord, it would seem not to be what is proper to feminine persons, but rather to be something else (although what that something else might be is another question). Even so, femininity (as commonly recognized or encountered, i.e. as a category of everyday life) does seem to some extent to conflict with many, perhaps even most or all, feminine persons. Stranger still, it seems to be these persons who are themselves called into question and judged to be wanting, rather than (the common understanding of) the universal of femininity; it seems to be the persons who are expected to conform themselves to the universal, rather than the universal of femininity (or our understanding of it) being brought into conformity with those persons whom it is supposed to characterize.

We see thus that there is an ought-ness, a normativity, at work in the notion of femininity. In fact this was already apparent in our summary of Bartky’s discussion, as the “bodily disciplines” she discusses are imposed not on all bodies, nor arbitrarily on
some bodies and not others, but rather on bodies recognized as female; or more accurately, on persons / human beings who are regarded as female. This is to say – as we are treating of the “everyday life” category that tends to conflate sex and gender – that these disciplines are imposed only on those persons who are identified as feminine. The person whose bodily form and performance are recognized as feminine is subjected to these disciplines, in order that their form and performance conform as fully as possible to very specific determination which, as we have seen, position one at a disadvantage in various ways. Although this attitude or assumption ought to be criticized, what is most important for the sake of the present argument is to recognize that it continues to be widespread and powerful, and that it produces asymmetric power relations between masculine and feminine subjects, as well leading to the other problems mentioned above.

Section 3.c: Femininity as perfect universal and as imperfect universal.

In this curious normativity, in the enforcement of these disciplines, the logic of perfect universals is at work. To see this, let us first grant or at least suppose that Bartky’s analysis is correct with respect to at least one bodily discipline of femininity, say, maintains-a-constricted-posture. That is, let us assume that maintaining a constricted posture is indeed generally recognized (or encountered, or given) as feminine. Let us treat maintains-a-constricted-posture as a universal, and treat this universal, at least symbolically, as a predicate and name it ‘C’. Then let us suppose that the universal of femininity, i.e. the predicate ‘is-feminine’, F, is structured in accordance with six

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58 At birth, of course, it would seem that the only feminine or non-feminine characteristic present is sex, hence the recognition of femininity or masculinity does begin, in the chronological development of a human being, with determination of sex.
predicates (or properties), C, G, H, I, J, and K (although in reality their number would be far greater). C, as we have already specified, is maintains-a-constricted-posture. G through K we will leave unspecified, although for convenience we will treat them all as one-place predicates.

Now suppose that F, ‘is-feminine’, is a perfect universal, i.e. that the character or logical structure of F is what we have called perfect. Then consider the case of a person who is considered to be feminine, and yet who does not maintain-a-constricted-posture. In other words, it is the case, with respect to this person – let us call them ‘a’ – that ~Ca: they do not maintain a constricted posture. Now given that femininity is perfectly structured, it must be defined as \( \forall x (Fx \leftrightarrow (Cx \& Gx \& Hx \& Ix \& Jx \& Kx)). \)\(^{59}\) Therefore if ~Ca, then it is the case either that ~Fa – this person, a, is not feminine – or that ~\( \forall x (Fx \rightarrow Cx) \) – maintaining-a-constricted-posture is not after all essential to (definitory of) F, femininity.\(^{60}\) The Venn diagrams below illustrate this, the unshaded region in the left diagram representing the universal of femininity, and the darkly shaded region in the right diagram showing the disappearance of this universal when C (maintains-a-constricted-posture) is negated.

Fig. 3

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\(^{59}\) Or else in some way logically equivalent to this definition.

\(^{60}\) To say the same thing without symbols: if any female person does not maintain-a-constricted-posture, then it is the case either that she is not feminine after all, or else that maintains-a-constricted-posture is not after all essential to femininity.
It should therefore be impossible for C to be essential to femininity given that it does not characterize some feminine people.

But C (maintains-a-constricted-posture), I would suggest, is too firmly established as feminine to simply cease to be recognized as feminine, and so, strange as it may seem, the feminine person who does not maintain-a-constricted-posture must somehow not be feminine, even though it be widely thought that she ought to so be. But contradiction must be avoided, and such avoidance is accomplished by the sense or judgment that such a person is not so much not-at-all feminine, but rather is inadequately feminine. People may thus be more and less feminine. In extreme cases, such as that of a female person who does not otherwise appear feminine, the ought is retained, in a moralizing fashion, while the is is largely abandoned; it is thus judged that although such a person might not in fact be feminine, still they ought to be. Thus we can see how on the supposition that the universal of femininity is perfect, the sorts of enforcement which Bartky writes of may be motivated, brought about, or justified.
Now suppose instead that the universal of femininity has a structure, a character, not perfect but rather imperfect. Its definition would then not need to be defined, as above, in a way logically equivalent to $\forall x (Fx \leftrightarrow (Cx \& Gx \& Hx \& Ix \& Jx \& Kx))$. It would not, that is, need to be defined in a way logically equivalent to the conjunction of its six defining sentences. Since there are many ways in which it might, as an imperfect universal, be defined in accordance with those six sentences, let us suppose for simplicity’s sake that it is defined by the disjunction of every possible conjunction of four out of the six defining sentences. Femininity would then be defined as:

$$\forall x Fx \leftrightarrow \{ (Cx \& Gx \& Hx \& Ix) \vee (Cx \& Gx \& Hx \& Jx) \vee (Cx \& Gx \& Hx \& Kx) \vee (Cx \& Gx \& Ix \& Jx) \vee (Cx \& Gx \& Ix \& Kx) \vee (Cx \& Ix \& Jx \& Kx) \vee (Cx \& Hx \& Ix \& Jx) \vee (Cx \& Hx \& Ix \& Kx) \vee (Cx \& Hx \& Jx \& Kx) \vee (Gx \& Hx \& Ix \& Jx) \vee (Gx \& Hx \& Ix \& Kx) \vee (Gx \& Ix \& Jx \& Kx) \vee (Gx \& Hx \& Jx \& Kx) \vee (Gx \& Ix \& Jx \& Kx) \vee (Hx \& Ix \& Jx \& Kx) \}. \quad ^{61}$$

On such a definition, it is not the case that if $\neg C a$ then $\neg F a$, since $F a$ may still be the case given only that $(Ga \& Ha \& Ia \& Ja)$, or $(Ga \& Ha \& Ia \& Ka)$, or $(Ga \& Ha \& Ja \& Ka)$, or $(Ga \& Ia \& Ja \& Ka)$, or $(Ha \& Ia \& Ja \& Ka)$ is the case. In other words, there is still plenty of “room” for someone to be feminine – adequately – even without

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^{61} Or by some logically equivalent expression.

^{62} $\neg C a$: this person, a, is does not maintain a constricted posture. $\neg F a$: this person, a, is not feminine.
maintaining-a-constricted-posture. The Venn diagrams below illustrate this. As before, the unshaded space in the diagram on the left, and now also in the diagram to the right, represents the universal of femininity. And again as before, the darkly shaded circle in the right diagram represents the negation of C (maintains-a-constricted-posture). In this case, however, the universal of femininity does not disappear with the negation of C.

Fig. 4

This demonstrates that where femininity is understood as an imperfect universal, a feminine person who does not possess some characteristic recognized as feminine, such as maintaining-a-constricted-posture, would not, merely on that basis, be judged as un- or inadequately feminine.

Moreover, even if some feminine person did not, even on the disjunctive sort of definition portrayed above, accord with the universal of femininity, this would not in and of itself make her non-feminine or inadequately feminine, supposing femininity to have the character of an imperfect universal. This is so because as we said, to be an imperfect universal means not only to be disjunctively structured, or essentially self-different, but also to be essentially incomplete and open to re-determination by novel and
unprecedented iterations of itself. Thus a person who were feminine and did not fit the
established universal of femininity might very well alter that universal by her own being,
granting that femininity were an imperfect universal.

Here we should digress briefly, in order to consider the question as to *which*
individuals might alter a given universal. What determines what it is to be a non-
conforming instance whose existence effects the emergence of a novel EPI? This
question really demands a separate work. Nonetheless, some words about it seem to be
owed here, although I hasten to add that what is said about it must be only tentative and
highly incomplete. It would seem that if an individual emerges who nearly fits an EPI of
a certain universal, and who does not fit any EPI of any contrary universal, then the
universal whose EPI the individual nearly fits may be altered in such a case. The
alteration would consist in the emergence of a new EPI, only slightly different from that
EPI which the individual in question nearly fits. I am not sure whether a single
individual, nearly fitting a single EPI, is enough to effect the emergence of a new EPI.
But I rather suspect there are a few general factors which influence whether or not a new
EPI emerges. One of these is how many individuals nearly fit the EPI in question; the
more there are, the more likely a new, similar EPI will emerge. Another is the extent to
which multiple, nearly-fitting instances nearly fit the EPI in question in the same way; the
more they nearly-fit in the same way, the more likely the emergence of a new EPI. A
third factor is how many EPIs (of the same universal) the nearly-fitting individual or
individuals nearly fit; the more EPIs that nearly fit, the more likely the emergence of a
new EPI. A fourth is the divergence of the nearly-fitting individual(s) from the EPI; the more nearly they fit, i.e. the less they diverge from the EPI, the more likely the emergence of a new EPI. Obviously, these factors may overlap in various ways.

There must also be other, less formal factors. For one, it may not only be actual nearly-fitting individuals which effect the emergence of novel EPIs; representations of such individuals, fictive or otherwise, whether in imagery or narrative or expository prose, may also effect or contribute to effecting the emergence of new EPIs. Another not-so-formal factor is how threatening the emergence of a particular new EPI would be; the more threatening, the less likely it is to emerge. Lastly, in the case of universals that are often an integral part of a person’s self-identity – and femininity is of course one of these – there is the factor of whether or not a person self-identifies as being or as not being an instance of the universal in question. This factor is perhaps to some extent a moral consideration. If, for example, some person’s status as feminine, masculine, or otherwise (i.e. as being a woman, a man, or otherwise) strikes us as otherwise dubious, still we may be influenced by their self-identification as feminine, masculine, or otherwise, by their assertion of this identification, and by their desire that others recognize as instantiating the universal in question.

Our primary argument concerning the universal of femininity should now be complete. The enforcement of the disciplines of femininity as discussed by Bartky is, as we’ve seen, essentially bound up with the understanding of femininity as a perfect universal, whereas were femininity understood as an imperfect universal such
enforcement would, even if not entirely eliminated, at least be significantly, perhaps even severely, minimized. Without the understanding, even if only implicit, of femininity as a *perfect* universal, the ubiquitous enforcement of disciplines and norms of femininity, as described by Bartky, seemingly could not occur. The widespread understanding of femininity as a perfect universal thus facilitates the four problems discussed earlier: the shame and discrimination of those who do not achieve the ideals these disciplines aim at; the stigmatizing of those who identify as feminine but who do not identity with of the disciplines or their aimed-at ideals; the mistreatment of those who are identified as female but who do not identify as feminine; and the tendency of these disciplines to produce feminine subjects who are at a general disadvantage, in terms of power, in relation to masculine subjects. But were femininity to be understood widely as an imperfect universal, the enforcement of these disciplines would be undermined, as there would be no expectation that all feminine persons conform to a single set of disciplines, a single set of appearances and gestures; instead it would be expected that femininity would consist in varied sorts or appearances, corresponding and conforming to the various ways in actual feminine persons are. To understand femininity as a universal whose character is imperfect rather than perfect is thus to neutralize the asymmetrical power relations produced between feminine and masculine persons by the disciplines discussed by Bartky, as well as to neutralize the other problematic results of those disciplines.

**Section 3.d: Related matters.**
Although they fall somewhat outside our focus on the disciplines identified by Bartky and their connection to power relations, there are at least four additional virtues to understanding femininity as an imperfect universal, and it may be worth taking a bit of time, before concluding, to point these out. First, to understand being-feminine as an imperfect universal would effect a certain separation of being-female and being-male from other feminine or other masculine characteristics. It would therefore allow for a person to be feminine without being female, and to be female without being feminine, as there could easily be one or more EPIs of femininity which do not include being-female as a defining characteristic. Yet at the same time, other EPIs that do include being-female could remain in place, and so this “allowance” could be accomplished without denying the complicity or conflation of sex and gender in the predominant everyday conceptions of femininity (and masculinity as well). So to consider femininity as being an imperfect universal might have a certain descriptive advantage over the more usual tactic of separation according to sex and gender. It might also have an ethical advantage, in that while it does undermine the exemplarity of those EPIs of femininity which include being-female as definitory of femininity, still it leaves them in place as EPIs of femininity, thereby respecting the self-identification of those whose understanding of their own

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63 In saying that being-female and being-male are among other feminine and masculine characteristics, we are referring to femininity and masculinity as categories of “everyday life.”

64 The goal here is not to advocate or excuse the conflation of sex and gender, but to be able to account for the social reality of their frequent conflation, while at the same time being able to account for the less predominant, but just as genuine, social reality in which female persons are not necessarily feminine, and feminine persons not necessarily female. Similar comments would apply to the social reality of masculinity and being-male.
femininity includes this. And there would be, of course, analogous advantages with respect to masculinity.

A second additional virtue is that to sunder being-female from femininity, and being-male from masculinity, by means of understanding femininity and masculinity as imperfect universals, would not require that sex be treated as something merely natural and pre-cultural. This treatment of sex has been key to the distinction between sex and gender, a distinction which, as Butler puts it, was originally “intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serving the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed” (6). The distinction between sex and gender, assigning sex to nature or biology and gender to culture and to socialization and social regulation, allows for analyses such as Bartky’s, which critically investigate the construction of gender categories, while also serving as a bulwark against anti-feminist claims that women (or men), “by their nature,” are or should be such-and-such way. So there is a need, for feminism and feminist theory, to maintain a distinction between sex and gender – or at least, to somehow maintain that being-female or male does not determine whatever other feminine or masculine characteristics one possesses or ought to possess. Yet as Jane Flax writes in “Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory,” feminist theorists now understand “that such an (apparent) disjunction [between sex and gender], while politically necessary, rested upon problematic and culture-specific oppositions, for example, the one between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ or ‘body’ and ‘mind’ ” (177). At least
part of what makes this dependence upon oppositions such as nature/culture problematic, is that the assignment of sex to nature obscures the possibility that what we think it is to be female or male may itself be socially constructed on the basis of gender relations, thereby limiting the critical project of feminist theory and the political aims of feminism (177). Indeed as we discussed earlier, Fausto-Sterling and Butler call this distinction into question, suggesting that sex itself is in some way really a part of gender. To treat femininity as an imperfect universal might help with this dilemma, promising as it does a way of separating being female or male from being feminine or masculine, and thereby enabling the arguments that depend upon this distinction, yet without requiring that sex be considered as simply given by nature.

Third, to thusly avoid the assignment of sex to nature and biology would also not entail the reification (as natural or biological) of the currently dominant understanding of sex as a simple binary distinction between female and male. It should thereby avoid complicity in the social out-casting of intersex persons caused by treating sex as simply natural and pre-cultural. Now one might wonder why treating sex as natural-biological “reifies” the binary notion of sex, reasoning that even if sex is not in fact binary, it might still be natural and biological. Fausto-Sterling’s view, however, is not that the form of a

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65 “We live in a world in which gender is a constituting social relation and in which gender is also a relation of domination. Therefore, both men’s and women’s understanding of anatomy, biology, embodiedness, sexuality, and reproduction is partially rooted in, reflects, and must justify (or challenge) preexisting gender relations. In turn, the existence of gender relations helps us to order and understand the facts of human existence. In other words, gender can become a metaphor for biology just as biology can become a metaphor for gender.” (Flax 177)
body is not at all a biological matter, but rather that the merely biological body does not always offer very clear distinctions among sexes. She does suggest, after all, that a categorization of three sexes (female, male, and intersex) would be more accurate than the currently predominant binary categorization (female and male), and that a five-sex distinction would be more accurate still. Yet her larger point is that differences among sexes are not simply there for the finding, but are always a cultural interpretation of vague and ambiguous biological variations, a supplementary social determination to otherwise underdetermined facts. To understand this would indeed help make way for more accurate sex categorizations, but more importantly, it helps prevent the deeming of anyone as being “unnatural” in their sex-determination, since sex would not be understood as something simply natural in the first place.

Lastly, there seems to be a certain political advantage to understanding femininity as an imperfect universal. This can be understood in relation to Butler’s claim that there is no single conception of “women,” and that an insistence on acting as if there is one,

66 Moreover, broadly “environmental” factors affect the development of bodies, e.g. the ratio of protein-to-fat deciding whether or not menstruation takes place (in a body potentially capable of menstruation) (Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing*, 242), and surgery is sometimes used to alter sex-characteristics for various motivations.

67 The claim that there are five sexes is made on page 21 of Fausto-Sterling’s article “The Five Sexes,” and it should be noted that in *Sexing the Body* she says that she “was writing tongue in cheek” when she made that specific proposal (78).

68 Consider, for example, this passage near the outset of *Sexing the Body*. “Our bodies are too complex to provide clear-cut answers about sexual difference. The more we look for a simple physical basis for “sex,” the more it becomes clear that “sex” is not a pure physical category. What bodily signals and functions we define as male or female come already entangled in our ideas about gender.” (4) See also pages 75-77, although the same point is made throughout the book.
actually undermines feminist causes. In Butler’s words, “the premature insistence on a stable subject of feminism, understood as a seamless category of women, inevitably generates multiple refusals to accept the category” (4). There is, that is, a “paradoxical” resistance to feminism by many women whom feminism claims to represent, which resistance suggests that there is more than a single conception of what it is to be a woman, and that feminist claims to represent all women thus actually alienate many women. Butler suggests “free[ing] feminist theory from the necessity of having to construct a single or abiding ground which is invariably contested by those identity positions or anti-identity positions that it invariably excludes” (5). I take it that this means, at least in part, that feminist theory should not consider femininity to be what we have called a perfect universal. Where femininity is understood as an imperfect universal, after all, there is not the same inevitable exclusion of large groups of women, as various EPIs are possible and may account for various understandings of femininity. But Butler also seems to advocate doing away with gender identity altogether, since gender identity functions, as we have seen in Bartky’s analysis, to create and sustain uneven power relations (5). Yet this seems infeasible. Fortunately, as we have seen, to understand sex-gender universals as imperfect might neutralize much of the ability of gender relations and identities to produce and sustain such oppressive power relations. Of course, the feasibility of the transformation of sex-gender identity into things understood as imperfect universals might itself be put into question. Still, it is at least an alternative option to the elimination of sex-gender identity, an option that might have wider appear given the attachment many people feel to their own sex-gender identity.
Concluding Section

In this work, we attempted to identify and explain two different ways of understanding what we have called the character of universals, and to at least indicate the relevance of the distinction to feminist thought. We defined a universal as that which is predicable of more than one thing. Character, we said, is something akin to logical structure, although not entirely reducible to it.

One sort of character we called perfect, and we drew the concept of this perfect character from Plato’s early dialogues Laches, Meno, and Euthyphro, along with his middle dialogue Phaedo. A universal whose character is perfect, we said, is one every instance of which, insofar as it is an instance of that universal, is entirely the same as every other instance of that same universal. In terms of logical structure, this amounts to a universal that is definable by a definiens comprised of a single string of conjoined atomic sentences. By hypothesis – since to justify such a claim would require a separate work – most philosophers since Plato have tended to understand universals as having this perfect sort of character.

The other sort of character we called imperfect. This concept of imperfect character we drew from primarily from Derrida’s essays “Differance,” “The Other Heading,” with some attention to Heidegger and Wittgenstein as well. A universal whose character is imperfect, we said, is in one in which not all instances, insofar as they are instances of that universal, are entirely the same as every other, although every instance is
at least very similar to some of the other instances of that same universal. In terms of logical structure, this means that an imperfect universal is not definable by a definiens comprised only of a single string of conjoined atomic sentences. Indeed, the exact form of the definition for an imperfect universal could not be determined a priori, and there might be no overarching logical form common to all imperfect universal. The logical form for an imperfect universal – to the extent that there is such a logical form – could, however, be indicated by a definition that consisted in multiple strings of conjoined atomic sentences, each string connected to the others by disjunction, and each string having some atomic sentences in common with some other strings. Moreover, an imperfect universal is subject to alteration in response to what we have called “deviant instances,” instances that both seem to instantiate the universal and to fall outside of the then-current state of that universal.

Having developed these concepts of perfect and imperfect character, we then tried to show that the difference between these two sorts of character can have consequences in the realm of ethics and politics. To do so we consulted Bartky’s essay “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” with some attention to other feminist thinkers. We showed that certain disciplines of femininity, which function in our society to produce feminine persons who are at a disadvantage, in terms of power, in relation to masculine persons, rely for their enforcement on an understanding of femininity as a perfect universal. The character of an imperfect universal, requiring as it does that all instances of it be entirely the same insofar as they are instances of it, allows for a uniform set of norms to be imposed on all persons identified as feminine, that is, as
women. In contrast, were femininity understood as an imperfect universal, then various versions of femininity might circulate, and it would be difficult to impose a single set of norms on all persons identified as feminine, since there would be no reason to expect that all feminine persons, insofar as they are feminine persons, should possess the same set of characteristics. Thus to understand femininity as an imperfect universal should work to neutralize the enforcement of those disciplines of femininity identified by Bartky, and thus should work against the continued production of a society where to be feminine is to be generally subordinated and disadvantaged in relation to masculine persons.

It seems important to take a moment to reiterate and clarify what I have not attempted to claim with respect to Plato. I have not, first of all, advanced the claim that Plato ultimately advocates the view that universals should be understood to have a perfect character. To make such a claim would require an extensive study of its own. I claim only that this understanding of universals is articulated, is portrayed, in his works. (I also suggest, but do not attempt to defend, that this articulation or portrayal has proved influential throughout Western philosophy’s history, and that it is also the first known articulation of such a view.) Secondly, I claim neither that Plato treats femininity as this sort of universal, nor that Plato portrays femininity as being correctly understood as involving the sorts of characteristics or disciplines identified and discussed by Bartky. Indeed in the Book V of the Republic, women and men are portrayed as being essentially the same in their abilities, and in the best city they would be treated, regarded, and expected to behave not in accordance with their sex-gender, but in accordance with their
strengths as individuals (451c-457b).\textsuperscript{69} Thirdly, the point must be made that even \textit{were} Plato to advocate that universals be understood as perfect, he might advocate this only with respect to some, but not all, universals.

This brings us to the interesting question as to whether some universals might be best understood as perfect, and others best understood as imperfect. Now I have at least implicitly suggested that being-feminine, or the universal of femininity, would be best understood as an imperfect universal, due to what seem to be the morally undesirable implications of understanding it as a perfect universal. Even so, I also think that at least some types of universals are indeed best understood as perfect. The clearest example would be that of the objects of geometry, and probably most – perhaps all – other mathematical objects as well. Now I do suspect that most non-mathematical universals would be best understood – or at least most accurately modeled or described, on empirical or phenomenological bases – as having, at least potentially, an imperfect character. This suspicion is based on a view that I cannot defend here, to the effect that non-mathematical universals do not function as if they were entirely independent of the world of becoming, but that their being is to some extent a result of their instances. Granting that the instances of non-mathematical universals vary sufficiently that no single defining characteristic or set of characteristics can be found common to all

\textsuperscript{69} It’s not quite what we would consider a feminist portrayal, as it regards women as generally less able at everything than men – although the point is made (by Glaucon) that “many women are certainly better than many men at many things” (455d) – but it does suggest that the difference in proper roles and behavior does not in any way run along lines of sex and gender; hence this portrayal seems contrary to our current “everyday” understanding of femininity (as well as contrary to the predominant views of Plato’s contemporaries).
instances, any honest and thorough investigation of such universals could only determine that their unity falls short of perfection, and is a case of what we have called an imperfect unity. Of course, this is ultimately an empirical or phenomenological question. Hence although my critical view of understanding femininity to be a universal of perfect character is primarily a normative assessment, I would hypothesize that most non-mathematical universals could be best understood as imperfect, on the basis of primarily descriptive considerations.

Yet even though descriptive grounds alone (to the extent that there are such grounds) might be enough to justify a preference for considering most universals to be imperfect, there is still, I believe, further normative relevance to the distinction between perfect and imperfect character with respect to universals. I cannot enter into any analyses here, but will only mention a few promising directions for further inquiry. One is the topic of race and racial oppression. Cornel West, for example, has detailed a genealogy of European and American anti-black racist ideology, wherein a key feature of this ideology seems to be the positing of an ideal from which any variation can only be an inferior aberration. And Jacqueline Scott, in her “The Price of the Ticket: A Genealogy and Revaluation of Race,” has criticized current understandings of race as something “monolithically thick,” where by monolithic she means that there is little variation permitted in the understanding of what it means to be a member of this or that racial

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70 In the second chapter of his *Prophesy Deliverance!, “A Genealogy of Modern Racism,”* pages 47-65.
Another topic is one that we have discussed briefly above, namely the issues of the widespread conflation of sex and gender, and the understanding of sex as something merely binary; these might be pursued in far greater detail. Thirdly, imperialist ideology seems likely to function in ways similar to sexist and racist ideology, and so there may be some relevance of the distinction between perfect and imperfect character to post-colonial thinking. Fourthly, going beyond group oppression to oppression or violence in general, I believe there to be a close connection between the distinction between perfect and imperfect character and Levinas’ and Derrida’s thinking about violence and hospitality. Finally, I believe there to be a close connection between this distinction and the problem of environmental/ecological degradation.

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71 This phrase is explained on page 161 of “The Price of the Ticket.”

72 Among the many works in which these authors discuss violence and hospitality are Levinas’ *Totality and Infinity* and Derrida’s *Of Hospitality.*
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