Introduction

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Purple Brains, the surreal connotations of this title are not lost on us. It saved us from the first title that popped up during a casual brainstorming: "Pink critical brains." Feminists today are engaging with contemporary prominent investigations into "brains" and "evolutionary structures", demanding both attention to new relevant material *and* critical caution. Both imperatives are exemplified in the contributions of our colleague Veronica Vasterling, who recently retired and to whom this volume is dedicated. Veronica worked in the philosophy department at Radboud University Nijmegen, for over a quarter of a century, most of the time being the only female academic staff member. Over the years, she has inspired many colleagues with her style of thinking, but also a large number of Bachelor, Master, and PhD students, some of whom also contributed to this volume.

Veronica's work is broad in character, encompassing not only the exploration of neuropsychology through a feminist lens but also extending into domains like the critical phenomenology of gender and race, critical hermeneutics,[1] and subjects including sexual difference, the philosophical oeuvre of Hannah Arendt,[2] and that of Judith Butler.[3] In her 1993 dissertation on Heidegger's critique of metaphysics, titled *Truth and Time in Heidegger's Thought*,[4] Vasterling posited that, with Heidegger, being emerges not as absolute essence but rather, as time, a perspective that involves the contingency of all things, including truth. Her subsequent work in the field of philosophical anthropology has remained profoundly influenced by this outlook, consistently maintaining a strong linkage with political philosophy. As one of the pioneering women philosophers active in Dutch academia since the mid-1980s, she explicitly expanded her outlook to encompass feminist themes and authors.

Over the past four decades, and particularly from the 1990s onwards, an increasing number of women have entered the realm of academic philosophy – a domain hitherto predominantly inhabited by white males. It

is no coincidence that since that time situatedness, body, emotion, and the link with literature as a source for hermeneutic and practical philosophy became important themes. Other ways women philosophers influenced the discipline was by introducing authors, such as Arendt and Beauvoir, into the philosophical canon, and critically rereading the canon, articulating thoughts and views of earlier philosophers that were backing their new perspectives.

Although feminist approaches found a foothold within the field, they also encountered hostility and resistance. Many feminist philosophers have reflected upon these hostilities, often characterized by a dismissal of feminist approaches as philosophy proper ("yes, that is interesting – but it is not philosophy!"). Veronica Vasterling notes: "For example, in 2000, people still thought Beauvoir was not a philosopher. Arendt was also seen as a maverick at the time because of her narrative writing style, and her use of many different sources."[5] Since then, things have slowly improved. Students became interested in the work of female and feminist philosophers, and female – and some male – philosophers started to teach on Beauvoir, Arendt, Butler, and Nussbaum.

Over the years, feminist philosophy has gained recognition as a field in its own right. But what exactly characterizes that field is not so easy to define or pin down. Feminist philosophy seems to always exceed its own limits – it is dynamic, shifting, and in dialogue with other academic disciplines. The – controversial – adjective "feminist" marks not so much a specific *subfield* of philosophy or *topic* that is studied, but instead designates a specific sensibility – an orientation or approach to practicing philosophy. A feminist lens can – and should – be brought to bear on any philosophical topic. But what this feminist lens then consists of and how it is mobilized is not self-evident or uncontested. Many may agree that it departs from a critique of hegemonic norms and oppressive power structures and aims towards changing society and creating a more just world. But what that means and how to practice it may mean something different for different people. For instance, when it comes to gender: feminist philosophers share a critique of dominant societal understandings of gender, which are often highly biologizing and essentializing (the idea of "pink brains" that the title subverts). But it is heavily contested what feminist conception of gender to put in its place. How to keep open the concept of gender and how to not fall into the trap of giving another stable definition? And how to do so in a way that remains grounded in the messy and imperfect reality?

This volume embraces cross-fertilizing approaches as a legitimate method for feminism. The key to philosophy, Veronica Vasterling emphasized more than once, is "the matter" (*de zaak*): "If the matter requires you to explore areas with which you are not yet familiar, you are to follow its lead." This dedication to the matter prioritizes experiences and issues we are struggling with, rather than fidelity to any one theoretical framework. This unsettling commitment to the matter is crucial to understanding the fate of feminist thinkers, as well as the connection shown in this volume between feminist thought, phenomenology, and hermeneutics – philosophical schools that return to the matter itself and warn against idolizing a theory. Now, what is the matter at hand in this book? We are concerned with the difficulty of finding one's place and the development of ways to understand and overcome discrimination and exclusion. Situated within a world we want to change, feminists cannot afford to reject out-of-hand unlikely interlocutors or to challenge interdisciplinary and intergenerational dialog. Such is the overarching approach that binds the 19 articles in this volume, as they engage in a dialogue with Veronica Vasterling's work.

The articles are categorized into four sections:

I

The first section, **Rethinking Feminism**, discusses some major feminist philosophers, such as Christine de Pizan, Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Angela Davis, in line with Veronica Vasterling's intense work in favor of women philosophers, their spaces, and feminist theory, among others in relation to antiracism. This section goes into the difficulties women have finding their place and explores the ways to understand and overcome women's discrimination and exclusion.

María Isabel Peña Aguado, in her article, "Room for Thought: Symbolic Space and Narrative Experience," argues for women to develop their own narrative and symbolic space, while recognizing their differences. At the dawn of the fifteenth century, Christine de Pizan dreamed about a "city of ladies." Almost five hundred years later, Virginia Woolf asserted women's right to "a room of one's own." Both authors believed that the time had come for women to have at their disposal a space of their own. Space, having a place of one's own, is not just a physical or geographical question. As the women of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective pointed out, this space must be understood in its symbolic meaning. In their testimony, it

quickly becomes obvious that the creation of such a space is essentially a question of voices, experiences, interrelations, and differences between women.

Beata Stawarska, in "Vulnerability and Violence: Transgressing the Gender Binary," discusses how the Black Lives Matter movement provided an opportunity for racial reckoning and spurred a timely debate about police abolition and/or reform. The feminist movement against gender-based violence and the feminist ethics of vulnerability are to be critically assessed from this perspective. The goal is not a dismissal of feminism *tout court,* nor does it underestimate the pandemic of interpersonal gender, sexual, and other forms of violence against women, accompanied by the potential or real threat of feminicide. Rather, the goal is a continued rapprochement between feminism and antiracism, Black empowerment, and de-policing; this integrated approach avoids the twin dangers of criminalization and carcerality and it confronts the pandemic of gender-based violence more effectively than the classical feminist approach. Stawarska follows the lead of contemporary Black feminist theory and practice, especially Beth Richie and Angela Davis, that better serve the intertwined emancipatory goals of empowering women and gender nonbinary individuals, *and* of de-policing.

In "What do Women Have to Do with It? Race, Religion, and the Witch Hunts," **Anya Topolski** argues that scholarship on the European witch-hunts, which occurred across Europe from approximately 1450-1650, exposes centuries of patriarchal violence, empowered by capitalism and colonialism. Topolski presents several race-religion constellations from the early modern period in which the newly established European Christian States sought unity and global supremacy through expulsion and colonization. She argues that this is the same historical space and place – or stage – upon which women were burned as witches. It is shown how the early modern witch hunts in Europe played a central, if often forgotten, role in this project of forming Europe as White Male and Christian. European Christianity, by way of colonialism, provides a blueprint for the exclusionary dehumanization that now serves as an epistemic and political foundation for much of the globe.

Karen Vintges, in her contribution, "Power, Sex, and Myth: Beauvoir, Paglia, and Peterson," compares the work on myths of the art historian Camille Paglia and the psychologist Jordan Peterson with Simone de Beauvoir's work, *The Second Sex*, a large part of which is on myths as well.

Whereas, according to Beauvoir, dominant myths about power, sex, and gender are historically determined, and therefore changeable, according to Paglia and Peterson, these myths are timeless and inescapable, constituting the "truth of history." Contrasting Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* with Paglia's and Peterson's approaches, Vintges evaluates to what extent this work still provides us with concepts that help us to better understand today's world. Finally, the author evaluates to what extent the work of Peterson can be seen as exemplary for current right wing populist parties and movements, showing us what their connecting principle is.

Christina Schües, in her chapter, "In Praise of Ambiguity," goes into the concept of ambiguity in the work of Simone de Beauvoir especially, building on Vasterling's work, which demonstrates that interrelating the work of Arendt, Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty enriches phenomenological and hermeneutic research. Schües argues in line with Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty that human existence is inherently ambiguous. She understands ambiguity as a non-universal ontology between self and other, deception and freedom, immanence and transcendence, and non-knowledge and knowledge. Her aim in the essay is to show that this irreducible ambiguity is also found in cases of inhibited intentionality and transgressive intentionality. The former is related by Iris Marion Young to women who have internalized the rules of not taking their space, while the latter is ascribed, for instance, to persons with dementia whose so-called "challenging" behavior may transgress their own space, intruding upon someone else's. An understanding of these different ways of embodiment and interactions with the person's environment requires a phenomenological approach that recognizes and explores the fundamental ambiguity of the human condition.

In her article, "The Gender that is None: Some Daring Reflections on the Concept of Gender in Beauvoir, Irigaray, and Butler," **Silvia Stoller** discusses three classics of feminist research. She aims to shed light on little-noticed parts of the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, and Judith Butler. Although all three are considered different theorists, they overlap at one point: one finds in their writings the idea that gender is basically not fully determinable, as in Irigaray and Butler, or that gender is basically not that important, as in Beauvoir. Whereas one expects gender theorists to foreground gender unequivocally, gender instead seems to somehow disappear, as is shown by three selected passages from their major works.

II

The second section, **Redefining Sex, Gender, and Intersectionality**, extends Veronica Vasterling's critique of the often essentializing neuropsychological or biological approaches of current research into brains and evolutionary structures. It confronts these approaches with a perspective rooted in deconstruction, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and existentialism. From this vantage point, any reference to "sex" in terms of a different set of biological and physiological characteristics of males and females is questionable and open to discussion. Following in the footsteps of Judith Butler's theorization of gender, this section also delves into an intersectional approach to understanding gender dynamics and illustrates, among other aspects, how queer feminist philosophy and hermeneutic phenomenology can have cross-fertilizing discussions with the life sciences.

Rose Trappes, in "The Easy Difference: Sex in Behavioral Ecology," questions the way "sex" features in behavioral ecological research as a standard explanatory variable. Researchers often use sex to explain variation in a trait or phenomenon that they are studying. This practice is widespread, partly because sex is often easy to identify and often explains some variation, thus making it easier to discover and test other causal patterns of interest. Yet, sex also frequently fails to explain variation. Using a couple of recent examples, it is shown how the pervasiveness of sex as an explanatory variable is partly due to the structure of scientific research, including the use of data from large longitudinal studies, and generalization from previous studies. Researchers should more carefully assess and justify the relevance of sex to each new study, to avoid overgeneralization and the perpetuation of assumptions about sexual difference and its importance in biology.

Alex Thinius, in "Sex-Gender in Life-Science Research: Conceptual Renegotiations and an Enactivist Vision," discusses how researchers are increasingly acknowledging the urgency that the concept of "sex" be redefined. In contrast to concepts of sex-gender differences as stable and dichotomous, in current research on sex-gender, there is a growing consensus that sex is far more nuanced, variable, and interacting with gender in complex ways. The article aims to open up a research horizon for pluralist and dynamic concepts of sex, by looking at a family of theories that mediate between gender theories and the life sciences, potentially integrating complex systems theory and critical phenomenology: enactivism.

While endorsing the strength of this constructive integration, the author stresses that there is still great unexplored potential for reconceptualizing the sexes beyond grounding it on a sex/gender or male/female binary.

In her contribution "His and Hers Healthcare? (Strategic) Essentialism and Women's Health," **Annelies Kleinherenbrink** shows how mainstream policies, research, and campaigns that are focused on women's health have constructed and reified womanhood as a universal medical category, such that health disparities between women and men are assumed to be binary differences and to override, or at least precede, any other inequalities. In line with feminist theories that critique such appeals to universal womanhood, Kleinherenbrink argues that this strategy, while perhaps initially effective in creating a research agenda and gathering wide support for it, is ultimately likely to benefit only *some* (relatively privileged) women. More acknowledgement of intersectionality needs to be incorporated not as a disclaimer or future goal, but as a primary theoretical and methodological commitment.

Elaborating on Vasterling's articulation of a phenomenological notion of embodiment in Judith Butler's work, **Annemie Halsema**, in her article, "Cis- and Transgender Identities: Beyond Habituation and the Search for Social Existence," argues that Butler's theory of gender performativity is a starting point in need of supplements. One of these supplements is the phenomenological notion of bodily habit formation, another is an account of psychic gender identity. Performativity is not only linguistic but also habitual. Prior to the awareness of assuming a gender identity, the individual repeats movements and forms a bodily memory. Because habit formation allows for variance, just like performativity, gender – both in the case of cis and in the case of trans – is variant. In order to account for the experiences of transgenders, merely considering gender constitution in terms of repetition of social norms and bodily habit, however, is not sufficient. Another element needs to be taken into consideration, the "psychic" gender, which is the gender a person identifies with.

Finally, **Katrine Smiet**, in her article, "Light and Dark: Intersections of Race and Gender in Butler and Lugones," calls attention to the fact that an intersectional perspective on gender is widely supported, but often in an additive sense – looking at gender *and* race, or recognizing the different experiences of white and racialized women, for instance. While these approaches are important, actually recognizing the mutual constitution and co-construction of gender and race seems to demand a different

approach altogether. Where does this leave – or take – the theoretical apparatus developed in feminist philosophy? While race and coloniality do not feature prominently in Judith Butler's early theorizations of gender, her framework in many ways is compatible with the work of postcolonial author Maria Lugones. Butler's thinking, on the other hand, goes a step further than Lugones' in the questioning of biological essentialism.

III

For Veronica Vasterling, Arendt is "one of the most inspiring philosophers of her time, if not the very best." Her love for the work of Arendt is especially motivated by the way Arendt was able to synthesize all kinds of non-philosophical sources, including detailed historical research, into a philosophical perspective, rather than presenting an abstract or (quasi-) universalistic point of view. The third section, **Thinking about Ethics, Love and War with Arendt**, illuminates this special fecundity of Arendt's work with a particular focus on her concepts of plurality and natality.

Hannah Marije Altorf, in her contribution, "Rereading *Eichmann in Jerusalem,*" tracks the dispute that emerged on Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), one of the most controversial works of the twentieth century. The focus of the dispute has changed over time, though one constant is the accuracy of the facts presented. Whereas the debate of the facts is important, it will not take away the controversy, because facts never appear in isolation, but are always part of an arrangement or larger story. What is more, such a dispute can hide some causes of the controversy. Altorf offers a reading of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* that considers two stories as pivotal, namely the stories about two Germans, Feldwebel Anton Schmidt and Probst Heinrich Grüber. The reading shows that Arendt's primary focus is on moral questions and moral collapse.

Desiree Verweij, in her chapter "'Amor Mundi' Threatened? War and the 'Darkness of the Human Heart,'" discusses what Hannah Arendt's concept of thinking means in a military context, as opposed to thoughtlessness in a military context, of which Eichmann, according to Arendt, was an infamous example. His inability to think will be contrasted with the ability to think of the – almost unknown – American soldier John Glenn Gray, as discussed in his book *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (1959), to which Arendt wrote a laudatory introduction. What did this mean in the context Gray found himself in? And what does this mean regarding Arendt's concept of "amor mundi," as the love and responsibil-

ity for a common world? Doesn't the deployment of military means, which, by definition, makes room for the destructive forces of the "homo furens", as Gray suggests, threaten this "amor mundi"?

Marli Huijer, in her article, "At Home in the World: Hannah Arendt's Transposition of Saint Augustine's Concept of Love," relates Hannah Arendt's dissertation on the work of Saint Augustine with her later works. Huijer highlights the incongruities Arendt found in Augustine's love concept, and how she developed her own thinking of love for the world in response to it. Augustine distinguishes between *cupiditas* and *caritas*, disordered love for worldly things and well-ordered love for the eternal. Arendt, however, points out that, in search for the future *summum bonum* of eternal life, we turn away from the present and become disconnected from the world in which people live together. How can a person in God's presence, and separated from the mundane world, love their neighbor? Huijer furthermore explains why Arendt, in her later works, keeps on referring to Augustine while distancing herself from his ideas, and how she reinterprets Augustine's *initium*. Huijer argues that important Arendtian notions, such as plurality and natality, find their origin in her critical reading of Augustine.

Aoife McInerney, in her article, "Feminism and Understanding: An Arendtian Account," discusses Hannah Arendt's concept of understanding in light of how it addresses experiences of being alienated from the world and helps to overcome those experiences. Understanding to Arendt is an unending activity by which we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, and try to be at home in the world. This is the existential and alienating condition of those who recognize themselves as the victims of – and even the unwitting perpetrators of – systems of oppression. Arendtian understanding means to reconcile one's self to the times in which one lives *without* having to accept them and, as such, aligns with the experiences of feminists.

IV

The articles gathered in the fourth section, **Reconsidering the Political**, continue a long tradition emphasizing the necessary intertwining of morality and politics to bring about tangible change in an age marked by ideological manipulation and the loss of political categories and moral standards – a cause to which Vasterling has made an important contribution through her research on Arendt, Beauvoir, and Fanon. This section

discusses the contours of an emancipatory and meaningful politics based on an existentialist and hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective. This section investigates imaginative political means of emancipation and shows how Arendt's work can contribute to ecological thinking today.

Marieke Borren, in her article, "From the Politics of Compassion to Imagination: Hannah Arendt on Collectivized Affect," goes into Arendt's belief that compassion is a bad counselor in political affairs, especially when it comes to refugees, the poor and low-skilled workers. Today, many theorists of affect are committed to progressive politics and do not just *analyze* the affective dimensions of collective political action, but moreover, *valorize* the "collectivization" of emotion as serving emancipatory causes. In stark contrast, affects, in Arendt's view, are a poor ground for solidarity, engagement with one's fellow citizens or human beings – who typically are "anonymous" others most of the time – and for political community. This reticence has caused many readers to accuse Arendt of either heartlessness or rationalism. However, instead of loving or pitying human beings or the Other – *amor homines* – Arendt advocates a much cooler and distant care for the *world* – *amor mundi*. Imagination, representative thinking and care for the world are Arendt's timely alternatives for the politics of compassion.

Cris van der Hoek, in her chapter, "From *Animal Laborans* to *Animal Agora*: Hannah Arendt and the Political Turn in Animal Ethics," goes into how Arendt's political-philosophical thinking can be a source of inspiration for the so-called "political turn" in animal ethics that is advocated by many animal activists and eco-philosophers. At first sight, such inspiration is not at all evident. In Arendt's *The Human Condition*, the animal is only addressed in relation to the (biological) activity of (reproductive) labor. Political action is the sole preserve of human beings, as the ability to act is explicitly related to plurality and the public sphere, in which humans appear to each other and disclose themselves in word and deed. In Arendt's later work, however, plurality is no longer merely conceived as a human condition. Rather, as Arendt writes, it constitutes the law of the earth itself. Reading Arendt's thinking alongside the work of Donna Haraway and Sue Donaldson, it could be deployed to enrich and deepen our thoughts concerning both the encounter between human and non-human animals and the appearance of animals in the public space.

Johanna Oksala, in her contribution, "Climate Change as an Existential Threat: Environmental Politics in the Shadow of Nihilism," argues that climate change is not only a political problem in the obvious sense that it cannot be solved without profound transformations in political and economic practices and forms of global governance, but also a political problem in a deeper, existential, and ontological sense: responding to the climate crisis adequately requires a politics that is able to confront and work through the nihilism that this crisis generates. Oksala suggests that Veronica Vasterling's reading of Arendt brings to the fore the specific meaning of "politics" at hand here. Considered through an Arendtian lens, climate change is a political problem in the sense that it fundamentally threatens current modes of life, and thus calls for the creation of new meanings which can sustain our world. Hence, environmental politics should not be reduced to pragmatic problem-solving; it should be understood as an existential project of safeguarding the stability and dignity of the common world.

Annabelle Dufourcq, in her article, "Puppets' Uprising: Passive Active Ethics Within the Trap of Play," argues that, given the all-pervading structure of play, it is impossible to break away from play, and yet, trying to put a halt to play is actually key to morals. This is also a major political issue at a time when play has become a patent and constraining social structure: adaptability, malleability, and distance are encouraged in the covertly highly oppressive society of "coolness" (Baudrillard). How can we make room for ethics in the framework of an ontology of play? Dufourcq discusses Sartre's idea that love for (or resignation to) play is the scantiest and most ineffective response of the oppressed to oppression. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty presents irony, distance, and vulnerability as virtues and, under certain conditions, the only possible source of genuinely effective *and* meaningful actions.

Notes

1 Cf. Vasterling, V. 2003. "Postmodern Hermeneutics? Towards a Critical Hermeneutics." In *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer*. University Park, edited by L. Code, 149-80. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

2 Cf. Vasterling, V. 2007. "Cognitive Theory and Phenomenology in Arendt's and Nussbaum's Work on Narrative." *Human Studies* 30, no. 2: 79-95.

3 Cf. Vasterling, V. 1999. "Butler's Sophisticated Constructivism: A Critical Assessment." *Hypatia*, 14, no. 3: 17-38.

4 Vasterling, V. 1993. "Waarheid en tijd bij Heidegger," Dissertation, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Open access: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/241866825_Waarheid_en_tijd_bij_Heidegger

5 This quote, along with subsequent quotes, has been extracted from an interview with Veronica Vasterling d.d. 24-03-2022.