Mari Mikkola, *The Wrong of Injustice: Dehumanization and its Role in Feminist Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 2016, 285pp., $35.00 (pbk), ISBN 9780190601089.

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Mari Mikkola's book has two parts, one negative and the other positive. The negative part documents the failure of many attempts by philosophers to provide a satisfactory 'thick' account of the concept of a woman. The positive part then argues that the wrongfulness of various actions is owed to the fact that they are dehumanizing. One may ask why these two seemingly disparate projects are juxtaposed in a single book. The answer is that the book as a whole aims to draw feminist philosophers (and maybe feminists at large) away from debates about what it is to be a woman, and towards debates about how we should and should not treat human beings. That shift, argues Mikkola, does not mean paying less attention to the distinctive predicament of women. There can be 'humanist feminism' (44). That is because '[e]very first-order moral theory should be feminist in facilitating the quest for gendered social justice' (178). Placing dehumanization at the heart of moral theory ticks that box for Mikkola. Women tend to suffer dehumanization as a class, *qua* women, and a focus on dehumanization in moral theory helps to bring this fact into sharp relief - without the need to invoke or presuppose any 'thick' account of the concept of a woman.

A 'thick' account is contrasted in Part I of the book with one in which 'thin and superficial extensional intuitions enable us to pick out women's social kind' sufficiently to engage in the feminist moral theory of Part II (142). If Mikkola is right that a 'thin' account will suffice for the purpose of Part II, then for that purpose she did not need to show that attempts to produce a satisfactory 'thick' account have failed. Since the product is not going to be needed, the failure to produce it is neither here nor there. That being so, the case for having compiled Parts I and II

into a single volume is weakened. I think that it was fairly weak anyway. I will accordingly treat the two Parts separately, as if they were two novellas rather than one novel (although I will comment occasionally on discrepancies between them).

Part I

Mikkola divides 'thick' accounts (she often prefers 'conceptions': 2 and passim) of the concept of a woman into 'nominalist' and 'realist' flavours. Segregating the two flavours turns out to be tricky, and the distinction ends up serving mainly a presentational role in the book, allowing a daunting literature review to be spread across two chapters instead of one. The long survey could have been made more useful, more concise, and in its negative verdict perhaps more convincing, by two additions: (a) by a clearer up-front statement of what makes an account of a concept 'thick' in the relevant sense; and (b) by the adumbration of benchmarks for success in providing such an account.

On point (a) one begins with the impression that Mikkola's talk of 'thick social' conceptions of woman (5, 45) is harmlessly pleonastic, i.e. that a conception is thick if and only if it includes social criteria (and not merely, say, biological ones). But this turns out to be quite wrong. Even in some 'thin' conceptions, it turns out, woman is to be cast as a social kind (105). The difference between 'thick' and 'thin' conceptions turns out to rest on philosophical ambition: the 'thin' theorist makes do with common extensional verdicts (shared judgments that this is a woman, that is not a woman, etc.) where the 'thick' theorist looks also for common intensional explanations for such verdicts (shared use of such-and-such as criteria by which this is a woman, that is not a woman, etc.). It seems odd, however, to describe mere extensional commonality as commonality in 'conception', 'thin' or otherwise. How can such commonality even go as far as revealing that woman is a social kind? How can it disclose what is needed for the purposes of Part II, namely that

woman is a human kind? As far as it goes it abjures all kind-specifications, or in other words all conceptualizations. If there is no intensional explanation of our convergence then we have no concept of an A, and there are (for us) no As. In that case we did not after all converge on our verdicts according to which these are As; it was all a big misunderstanding. Mikkola is well aware of the problem that, if we lack the concept of a woman, then for us 'there are no women' (46; see also 94). But I could not see how her settling for a 'thin conception', which is strictly speaking no conception at all, was meant to avoid that pitfall.

Towards the end of Part I, this problem seems to force Mikkola into an equivocation. That we designate someone as 'woman' (or not) 'should not be taken to inform us about some underlying *concept* [of woman] that our language use supposedly expresses' (110, emphasis in original). But weren't we told at the outset that the topic of discussion was going to be 'conception[s] of the *concept* woman' (2, emphasis added) and that only 'thick' conceptions of the concept would be eschewed? Maybe there was a pleonasm after all. Maybe all and only the 'thick' theorists have conceptions. The 'thin' theorists have ... what?

On point (b), Mikkola struck me as setting, *sub silencio*, some excessively demanding benchmarks that stack the deck against the success of 'thick' accounts. In fairness, many of the writers surveyed seem to stack the deck no less effectively against themselves. Mikkola does a good job of exposing some of the millstones (to switch metaphors) that those interested in the concept of woman have hung around their philosophical necks. There is, for example, the obscure imperative to avoid 'essentialism' (28-30). This sometimes inspires a futile search for an account of the concept of a woman that has nothing to say about the nature of a woman - a search, in Mikkola's terminology, for a 'semantics' that does not implicate an 'ontology' (27-8). Mikkola makes short work of this idea. She does a similarly effective job of explaining how analysis of the concept of a woman has been obstructed by the perceived need

to find a role in the analysis for the received and overhyped distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' (125ff). Mikkola has her own interesting proposals for redrawing that distinction to make it less of a millstone for feminist philosophers.

At the same time other millstones go unacknowledged and unchecked, even sometimes made heavier. Mikkola appears to share with some of those whom she criticises, for example, a longing for what might be called 'conceptual parity'. This comes to light most strikingly in her treatment of Natalie Stoljar's 'resemblance nominalism' (65-9). Stoljar lists four sample 'woman paradigms' and has a proposal for classifying other candidates as women according to how closely they resemble the paradigms. My first reaction to Stoljar's list (67) was that, although it was a list of women, it was surely not a list of paradigmatic women. One of the supposed paradigms (of an intersex person who lives as a woman) struck me as falling close to the wide penumbra of the concept, where classificatory indeterminacy reigns. Both that supposed paradigm and another (a male-to-female transsexual who 'attributes womanness to herself') also struck me as derivative (or secondary) cases of womanhood. There must be such a thing as a woman imaginable apart from the attribution of womanness to oneself if there is to be such a thing as womanness to attribute to oneself.

But never mind whether these reactions of mine are sound. The interesting thing is that Mikkola's reactions go the other way. She resists the idea that the concept of a woman has a wide penumbra: 'whether [someone] should resemble a woman paradigm in two or [in] three respects to count as a woman is pivotal' (68). And she denies a Stoljar-style role to paradigm-resemblance in the analysis of the concept of a woman on grounds which, if sound, would also seem to warrant denying a role to my kind of paradigm-dependence (69). It seems to Mikkola, in short, that those who are covered by the concept of a woman must all be covered *alike* by the concept of a woman; central and primary cases of womanhood are not the way

forward (111). That is what I mean when I speak of her attachment to 'conceptual parity'. Inevitably, it creates a severe obstacle to the success of any 'thick' account.

This obstacle may to be connected to another, which plays a more conspicuous role in the book, and not only in Part I. For Mikkola it is required of any successful account of the concept of a woman that it 'serve[s] the goal of fighting gender injustice' (84). This is not, emphasises Mikkola, an invitation to turn 'woman' into a 'feminist technical term' (87, 121). No, she is looking for an explanation of who counts nontechnically as a woman, but one that *also* serves the feminist goal: 'the challenge is not merely to elucidate some ontological parts of reality ... [but] to elucidate parts that serve feminist politics' (101).

The word 'serve' in these formulations is a little misleading. Mikkola is not requiring the proponents of 'thick' accounts to excel (or to help others excel) in vote-winning, propaganda-spreading, or rabble-rousing. By 'serve' she means something more like 'keep faith with' or 'succeed in capturing'; the aim is that, when we call upon a successful 'thick' conception, 'getting the crucial "feminist message" across is [not] compromised' (84). What is this crucial feminist message? That, unfortunately, is not so obvious. If any concept in these parts has a larger penumbra of indeterminate cases than 'woman' it is surely 'feminist'.

Mikkola lists a few aspects of what she takes to be the crucial feminist message, one of which is 'to elucidate how and why patriarchy damages women' (84). That's a good first shot. But it also reveals that the problems with invoking feminist goals in attempting to nail down the concept of a woman do not stop at wild indeterminacy. There is also the problem that, in one way or another, the concept of a feminist, even for Mikkola, passes the buck straight back to the concept of a woman. We need to know what a woman is to know what a feminist is. Does Mikkola ever get past this problem of circularity? Not so far as I could see. Consider Mikkola's regular refrain that a 'thick' account of the concept of a woman 'should be inclusive' (46 and

passim). It is natural to ask: inclusive of what or whom? The answer comes a heartbeat later: the account should 'recognize women's diversity' (46). Recognizing diversity is fine (a decent account of the concept of a haircut or an illness or a holiday also recognizes the diversity of such things) but which diversity, we may ask, counts as *women's* diversity? The buck is passed, once again, back to those attempting to work out what a woman is.

Possibly Mikkola just wants those attempting to work out what a woman is to err on the side of inclusion when they reach the concept's penumbral cases. Before we can do that, however, we need to know where the penumbra is and for that we need to know what makes it the penumbra, i.e. what the criteria of womanhood are such that some cases sit neither cleanly inside nor cleanly outside. We are going to need an unadjusted 'thick' conception, in other words, before we can adjust it in the name of feminist political largesse. Mikkola's insistence that 'thick' conceptions must be inclusive even prior to adjustment may help to explain her attachment to conceptual parity. She takes it that if we allow for penumbral and derivative cases, we somehow make it the case that there are first- and second-class women. Be that as it may, Mikkola's insistence that 'thick' conceptions must be inclusive even prior to adjustment sets all such conceptions up to fail. If she had established more reasonable benchmarks of success, she would not, it seems to me, have been able to point to so much failure among those who came before her. And she would not have been able to get away so easily with her recommendation that we all give up the search.

Part II

Part II of the book, to repeat, heads off in a different direction. It starts with a thought-provoking chapter called 'Dehumanization' (chapter 6). It was reading this chapter in an earlier version, published in article form, that led me to want to read the book, in which I hoped to find the article's ideas developed in greater

depth and detail. Much of the chapter reads like a straightforward exercise in 'first-order moral theory', to borrow Mikkola's own description (2). Mikkola uses rape as her model of a dehumanizing action, and assesses some previous attempts (including my own) to capture what is dehumanizing about it. Her criticisms helped me to see some major flaws in my older views. However the chapter is misleading as an example of what goes on in Part II of the book. For Part II does not, for the most part, develop the first-order ethics of chapter 6. After some sub-classes of dehumanization are explained in chapter 7, Part II turns out to be dominated by a cluster of second-order concerns. Principally: what first-order moral theory, or at any rate what first-order moral ideas, should a feminist embrace?

That is an odd question. Presumably a feminist should embrace the same first-order moral ideas as anyone else, viz. all and only the right ones. Only if the right moral ideas point towards feminist conclusions should she then continue to count herself a feminist. Feminism, in short, surely answers to ethics, rather than ethics answering to feminism. Indeed, in a strange, roundabout way, that is Mikkola's own thesis, and the main basis of her criticisms of some other feminist writers. She wants feminists to do their ethics without specifically feminist inputs. For she thinks that a sound 'humanist' ethics, free of specifically feminist inputs, will still have specifically feminist outputs, or in her words will 'ground feminist ethical and political claims' (147). In the light of this thesis it is curious, bordering on paradoxical, that Mikkola frames the master-problem of Part II as the problem of which actions a feminist should classify as wrong, rather than simply as the problem of which actions are wrong. Her official line is that humanists should be feminists (humanism in, feminism out), but Part II seems much more concerned to persuade those who are already feminists that feminists should be humanists (feminism in, humanism out).

Sticking to the official line, one now expects the same sorts of problems to arise in connection with the concept of a human

as were amply brought out, in Part I, in connection with the concept of a woman. And arise they do. A choice has to be made between 'thin' and 'thick' accounts, between working with paradigms and not doing so, between tolerance of penumbral cases and no such tolerance, and so on (179). Yet the differences between Mikkola's treatment of the two concepts (woman and human) are dramatic to the point of being disorientating. First, discussion of the problem of who is human and why is limited to a few pages (146-8, 164, 179-82), as compared with the upwards of 120 pages that were given over to exposing problems with the concept of a woman. Secondly, the working solutions adopted concerning the concept of a human differ without explanation from those adopted concerning the concept of a woman.

Mikkola claims that she is invoking only a 'thin' conception of 'human being' (179). But according to the distinction between 'thin' and 'thick' that was used in Part I, it is in fact a 'thick' conception. True, it is not an '*ethically* thick' conception; Mikkola 'does not rely on any controversial *evaluative* understanding of humanity' (179, emphases added). Yet she does cast human as a 'biological kind' (147), a position that may be free of evaluative criteria but is obviously not free of criteria with possible evaluative ramifications. Strangely she does not entertain the possibility, central to her discussion of the concept of a woman, that social criteria are needed in addition to or substitution for biological ones. She rules out a 'thick ethical conception' of the human, in other words, but not a 'thick social conception'. And whereas there was a manifest taste for what I called 'conceptual parity' in connection with the concept of a woman, with the concept of a human we are allowed to trade on (unspecified) 'typical paradigm features of human beings' and invited 'not [to] have clear and rigid boundaries' (147). To add to the reader's difficulties, Mikkola borrows Nussbaum's ill-chosen labels 'externalism' and 'internalism' (146-7) for respectively wholly-biological and partly-ethical conceptions of the human,

inviting accidental conflation with Part I's unrelated contrast between the extensional and the intensional.

I just pointed out that an account free of evaluative criteria need not be free of evaluative ramifications. That women's reproductive rights will be put under severe pressure by a view of humanity as a 'biological kind' seems so obvious that, initially, it strikes one as incredible that Mikkola allows the whole subject to pass with the remark that 'these concerns ... do not bear on my argument here' (147), especially when she once again pleads for 'a genuinely inclusive' account (148). What (one may wonder) could be more dehumanising than, say, the disposal of human foetal tissue with general clinical waste? How can one possibly keep this challenge at bay armed only with a biological conception of the human that is favoured for its inclusiveness? So how will such a biological conception possibly serve as 'a tool with which we can advance humanist feminism' (179)? At the very least, how are we going to avoid 'getting bogged down by ... conceptual problems' concerning humanity (149), just as the feminists of Part I did concerning womanhood?

Mikkola has an answer – of sorts. She proposes to shift the argumentative burden from the concept of a human being, or the concept of humanity, to the concept of dehumanization. She aims to 'develop a notion of dehumanization' by (i) taking 'rape as a paradigm case,' then (ii) working out 'what are the key features that make it' dehumanizing, and from there (iii) 'develop[ing] a general account of dehumanization' (147–8). This is not at first sight a promising plan. Surely the 'key features' that make something dehumanizing are going to be closely bound up with the 'key features' that make someone human. Variations in the latter are going to entail variations in the former. Moreover it looks like that relation will not only be one of entailment, but also one of explanation. Variations in the 'key features' that make someone human seem likely to provide the main explanation for variations in the 'key features' that make actions dehumanizing. So it looks like work on the concept of dehumanization may

force us to circle back for a much more detailed re-examination of the concept of a human being, or of humanity.

Does Mikkola manage to make her explanation of the nature of dehumanization independent enough of an explanation of the nature of a human being to avoid this circling back? I am not convinced that she does. She rightly warns against a wooden interpretation of the word in which dehumanizers 'literally turn a someone into a something' (182). Nor is dehumanizing 'about conceiving some individuals as "lesser" persons' (182). In some sense, however, it still seems to be a matter of treating someone as if she were less human or not human. This leads the reader to wonder: Don't we treat someone as if she were not human whenever we treat her in a way that a human being shouldn't be treated? And aren't we faced, at this point, with a large space into which slots the whole of modern moral and political philosophy, or at least that dominant part of it that deals with the question of 'what we owe to each other'? In that case, placing dehumanization at the centre of one's 'first-order moral theory' promises little if any philosophical progress. The word is a placeholder for the whole of interpersonal ethics. Saying 'don't dehumanize me' means, roughly, 'treat me right'.

The sense that such redundancy looms for the concept of dehumanization is reinforced by some things that Mikkola says. Take her canonical formulation: 'An act or a treatment is dehumanizing if and only if it is an indefensible setback to some of our legitimate human interests, where this setback constitutes a moral injury' (164). 'In breach of a moral right' could be substituted for 'dehumanizing' here with and few readers would blink. Mikkola anticipates and resists such a substitution. She is not trying 'to account for moral wrongfulness as such,' she says, but only 'one particular kind of wrongfulness, namely that found at the core of social injustice' (167). What distinguishes this particular kind of wrongfulness is that it 'wrongs everyone *qua* human alike' (151). So, for example, 'rape wrongs everyone *qua* human beings, although individuals are differently harmed' by it,

and members of some groups are more often and more systematically harmed than others (151). From here we get eventually to the conclusion that 'patriarchy is not a problem just for women; it is a problem for everyone' (185).

In spite of some reformulations in the book, I was not totally sure how to interpret the proposal that a dehumanizing act such as rape 'wrongs everyone *qua* human alike.' It could conceivably mean that, whenever someone is raped, that someone is wronged *qua* human. But I think Mikkola intends the syntactically more natural and yet morally more startling reading according to which, whenever someone is raped, every one of us is simultaneously wronged *qua* human. Just one rape is already a wrong against us all. Is that view compatible with the view that the someone raped is wronged in a special way in which the rest of us are not wronged? Does she have a right that is violated by the rape beyond her right, shared with everyone, that there be no rapes? I would like to think so. I am slightly concerned that Mikkola's word 'alike' suggests otherwise.

Be that as it may, the suggestion that we are all wronged whenever someone is raped drives Mikkola into the same knotty set of issues that is faced by those trying to understand what makes a crime into a 'crime against humanity', on which there is a fairly large literature. I did not see her confront these issues squarely, or even show much awareness of them. In general I found Mikkola's attempt to create a 'general account of dehumanization', one that narrowed the relevant class of wrongs down in all and only the ways that it was supposed to do, rather mysterious. I don't mean that her eventual criterion ('the interest violation involves false or unjustified beliefs pertaining to some social identity marker,' 174) is mysterious (although actually it is a bit). I mean that the explanation of why that is the marker of a dehumanizing wrong is mysterious. At times I had the impression that Mikkola began with a list of wrongs or types of wrongs to which she wanted to attach special importance by labelling them 'social injustices', and to which she also wanted to

direct special outrage by labelling them 'dehumanizing', and then crafted her criterion accordingly. For there seemed to be a shortage of argument for the criterion's adoption.

I have persisted in reviewing Part II of the book as if it were a contribution to 'first-order moral theory'. Probably I was looking for the wrong thing. If Part II is really about why feminists should be humanists, and not about why humanists should be feminists, then the shortage of argument that I just noted is perhaps not very surprising and not very troubling. Reading Part II this way would also explain why, when Mikkola comes in chapter 7 to discuss oppression, domination, and discrimination as 'the core forms of contemporary social injustice' (1), she engages only cursorily and selectively with the quite extensive and detailed work in 'first-order moral theory' that exists on each. As elsewhere in the book, her chosen range of interlocutors is skewed towards philosophers who approach their work with a specifically feminist self-understanding, matching Mikkola's own. That, we should perhaps conclude, is because her true topics are not oppression, domination, and discrimination. Her true topic is what feminist philosophers, attempting to 'garner[ ] ... a broader base' (185) and 'make feminism genuinely inclusive' (42), should all be saying about oppression, discrimination, and domination.

Since I don't think that feminist philosophers should aim to agree with each other, but rather to be disputatious and iconoclastic, I find this topic inherently disappointing. To avoid disappointment I should perhaps have paid less attention to the main title of the book, which corroborated my mistaken assumptions about where its arguments would lead. From *The Wrong of Injustice*, alas, one learns surprisingly little about wrongdoing and almost nothing about injustice. A curious exception: 'In order to understand injustice we should not theorize it through the lens of justice' (240). But nothing is said about the criteria by which wrongs are to be classified as injustices or otherwise, or about the criteria by which injustices

in turn are to be classified as social or otherwise. Nor are we told why these classifications might matter. So suppose that I agree that there is social injustice in oppression. Why should that fact make me care about oppression any more, or any differently, than I already do? These are difficult questions of the kind that, lured by the title, I expected to find discussed in the book. I suppose I should have paid more attention to the subtitle – *Dehumanization and its Role in Feminist Philosophy*. Even this subtitle, however, is apt to mislead. Dehumanization, it turns out, has had very little role in feminist philosophy. That is what Mikkola bemoans, and aims to put right with her book. To register her complaint, she spends a lot of the book engaging with feminist philosophers on a range of topics, often seeming to be less interested in the topics (which do not hang together very well) and more interested in the feminism.

Being a feminist and a philosopher, but probably not a 'feminist philosopher', I already adhere to Mikkola's official line that we should try to avoid feminist inputs and instead take comfort in the feminist outputs when they emerge. Already persuaded on that point, I found the book didactic and even a bit patronizing in places. It contains too much sententious declaration and repetition of its author's convictions, too much concern to cement political alliances, and too little actual doing of the thing that the book says should be done, viz. first-order moral theorizing in a broadly humanist vein. It would have served Mikkola better to follow her own advice: get on with the ethics and let the feminist conclusions look after themselves.