

The Metaphysics of Gender

You're at a restaurant and need to use the restroom. As you approach, you see two doors, labeled 'Men' and 'Women'. Which do you use? What sorts of facts determine which one you will use? Think for a moment about how you would answer, and why.

Now, some possible answers:

- (1) Biological facts – e.g., facts about your physical anatomy
- (2) Social facts – e.g., facts about how you are perceived or treated by others
- (3) Subjective facts – e.g., facts about your beliefs about yourself

Now ask: Are your two choices even any good? Should there be more choices? Fewer? Different ones? Or what? Like the metaphysics of race, the metaphysics of gender is a lot more complicated than you might have thought. So let's ask in detail: What is gender?

(1) **Gender is biological sex?** First, note that biological sex is typically understood as a cluster of SEVERAL biological traits, and not reducible to some single physical trait, e.g.:

- (a) chromosomes (e.g., XX and XY)
- (b) hormones (e.g., levels of testosterone, estrogen, progesterone)
- (c) reproductive organs (e.g., ovaries, uterus, vagina, testes, penis)
- (d) other anatomical features (e.g., certain body hair patterns, or body shapes, or facial shapes, the size of one's Adam's apple, and so on)

Gender: Now, consider gendered terms, like 'man' and 'woman'. Is the fact of the matter about whether or not someone is, say, a woman (assuming there is a fact of the matter at all) reducible to biological traits? The **biological realist** about gender says: Yes. Genders are natural kinds, and one's gender is just a matter of one's biological sex.

(Furthermore, consider: The social constructivist version of morality (cultural relativism) is attractive to some because moral beliefs seem to differ across societies and across times. Similarly, one motivation for social constructivism about race is that racial categories differ from place to place, and from time to time. But, there seems to be a near-universal division into man and woman across all times and places. This unanimity of agreement doesn't make as much sense if gender is merely a social construct.)

Not so fast. Perhaps the *typical* male has XY chromosomes, higher testosterone levels, testicles, a penis, and (after puberty) a prominent Adam's apple, facial hair, and so on, and the *typical* female has XX chromosomes, higher estrogen, ovaries, a vagina, breasts, and so on. However, there is really a wide variety of combinations of characteristics (a) – (d), and many of us do not fall neatly into one of these two classifications.

Take Emily, for instance, whose body is androgen-insensitive. As she describes it in her YouTube video ([here](#)), she has XY (i.e., male) chromosomes, (undescended) testes, high levels of testosterone, and no ovaries or uterus. You may think this is sufficient for being a man. However, she also has breasts, a vagina, no penis, no facial hair, a typical female body shape (e.g., wider hips, no Adam's apple, etc.), and her body, unable to recognize its testosterone, converts it, ultimately resulting in high levels of estrogen instead.

Yet, Emily is clearly *a woman*. If womanhood were biologically grounded, this should be unclear. But, this is not the case. Furthermore, the fact that Emily is a woman seems to have everything to do with the fact that she is socially perceived as, and treated as, a woman; and the fact that she subjectively identifies as a woman. For this reason, it seems that gender cannot be reducible to biological sex. (Nor is biological sex even binary; i.e., composed of only two clear, distinct categories, male and female!)

(2) **Gender is a Social Construct?** So, if gender is not a reducible to some objective, physical intrinsic property of the individual (i.e., if it is not a biological, *natural kind*), perhaps it is something that we constructed. This could happen in one of two ways:

- (a) Externalism: Your gender is determined by your society
- (b) Internalism: Your gender is determined by yourself

[Alternatively, we could also take an error theory here, and claim that there simply is no such thing as gender at all. When we claim that there are, e.g., 'women', we are not really picking out anything at all, and are making a mistake. This would be analogous to eliminativism about race, or ethical nihilism about morality.]

[A Note on Anatomy and Social Perception: How tall are you? What color are your eyes? Is your hair curly, or straight, or what? Most of our physical traits come in a wide assortment of styles. But, these differences are socially insignificant. Contrast this with gender, which differs from most of our other traits in this respect. As Barnes notes,

"If people perceive you as a person with brown eyes, they don't typically make immediate assumptions about your personality, your interests, or your skills. We don't think brown-eyed people are all the same or that brown-eyed people share deeply meaningful traits that green-eyed people lack. But if you're perceived as someone who is female, people will often make significant assumptions about what you're like based on this perception. And even more important, they'll often make significant assumptions about what you should be like. Maybe people will think that you're likely to be nurturing, or likely to talk a lot, or likely to be emotional, or likely to be particularly good at organizing but not that great at abstract reasoning and innovation, and so forth." (583)

So, at the very least, we should agree that HOW you are perceived by others is very socially and morally significant. For, the gender that others perceive you to be will (unlike, e.g., eye color) inform how you are treated, what is expected of you, and so on. *(An ethical question: Does this seem morally problematic to you? Why or why not?)*

This is further reason to think that gender is not purely reducible to biological anatomy, and is rather a function of how one is viewed or treated socially.]

Externalism: So, suppose that gender—e.g., whether or not one is a woman—is socially constructed, and is furthermore defined by how others perceive, and in turn treat, you.

Objections: There are several worries for this sort of view:

You Can Be Wrong About Your Own Gender: On externalism, by definition society can never be mistaken about your gender. Meanwhile, you COULD be! As Barnes notes, “if people are confused enough by your gender, that’s enough to make you not really a woman. And that seems wrong.” (E.g., her example of Chi-ah, a gender-nonconforming woman who is regularly mistaken for a man. On gender externalism, she IS a man!)

Categorizes Some Women As Non-Women: On this view, the last human on Earth would be neither man nor woman. After all, one’s gender is SOCIALLY defined. So: No society, no gender.

[How counter-intuitive are these results? Which of these objections, if any, are successful?]

Side Note: A Particular Version of Gender Externalism: When we think of how women are viewed or treated, socially, what is the common trait that all women share in common? Sally Haslanger’s answer is this: Oppression. On Haslanger’s view:

S is a woman iff:

- (i) S is generally perceived as being biologically female;
- (ii) The social norms or expectations of S’s society are that biological females occupy roles or social positions that are in fact subordinate; and
- (iii) Facts (i) and (ii) are (at least partially) responsible for the fact that S is in fact subordinated or oppressed *along some dimension*.

[The point of adding ‘along some dimension’ is to acknowledge the fact that not all women are more oppressed or subordinated than all men. For instance, a middle-class woman may have more opportunities and advantages than a lower-class man. BUT, in general, she will have more disadvantages than a middle-class man. So, across THAT dimension, she is subordinated.]

In short, as Barnes puts it, on this version of externalism, “to be a woman is to be perceived as female and thereby to be subordinated.”

Objections: The objections above apply here too. (And add to the list of women who would be classified as non-women, those such as the mythical Amazon women—a society of warrior women and no men. On Haslanger’s view, if they existed, the Amazon women would not be women in virtue of the fact that they are not subordinated.)

But, add one more objection to those above: Haslanger appears to endorse a binary view of gender. After all, one is either subordinated (after being perceived to be female), or one is not. Yet, we may have reason to doubt that there are only two categories of gender. (See below.)

Internalism: It seems odd that society gets to decide what your gender is for you, and that there could be situations where—no matter how much you protest that society is mistaken—you could simply be WRONG about your own gender. For this reason, we might think that one’s gender is determined by the individual instead.

Quite simply, there is a fact about what gender you are, and that fact is grounded in YOUR belief about what gender you are. Plain and simple.

Objections: However, there are worries for this view too:

The Genders of Others Are Unknown: On this view, it would be in principle impossible to know someone’s gender without asking them.

Unknown Whether Any Two People Are the Same Gender: Due to the closed nature of each mind, we’ll never be able to compare the “what it’s like” between, e.g., any two women (the qualia of womanhood). If billions of people are women, there ought to be some universal similarities across all women’s subjective, felt experience of womanhood. But, are there? In principle, it seems that we could never know.

[Is this a problem? It doesn’t seem to be unique to the felt sense of gender. After all, it is ALSO in principle impossible to determine whether there is one, shared felt experience of, say, redness. Sure, you CALL ripe tomatoes red. But, for all I know, when you look at them, your color experience is more similar to what I experience when I look at a ripe banana! It is in principle impossible to know whether we have similar color experiences.]

Categorizes Some Women As Non-Women: On this view, the severely cognitively disabled would have no gender. For, they would lack the relevant beliefs to ground any facts about their gender. As Barnes notes, “in effect ... because of their disabilities cognitively disabled women are not really women, they are merely female.”

How Many Genders? The list of reported, distinct, internally-felt gender identities has grown in recent years. So, what genders ARE there? E.g., are genderqueer, nonbinary, gender fluid, pan-gender, etc.*, all real and distinct categories? If so, how are they individuated? By distinct kinds of subjective experience? (But, see second worry, above.)

*** A glossary of some non-traditional gender terms**

- *Genderqueer*: An umbrella term; Not identifying with the traditional binary gender division of 'man' and 'woman' – whether by identifying as both, neither (whether some other gender or none at all), or some combination or gradient of or in between the two. (Note: Some use 'non-binary' interchangeably with this term.)
- *Gender Fluid*: When one's gender identity is not fixed; e.g., fluctuating between genders, or between having a gender and not having one, over time.
- *Pangender*: Identifying with many or all genders simultaneously.
- *Agender*: Having no gender, or identifying as gender-neutral.

Conclusion: This is a difficult topic. What do you think? If you believe that you are, say, a woman, what is the nature of this fact? Is it an objective fact, grounded in certain biological features of yours? i.e., is womanhood a *natural kind*?

Or, if your womanhood is not biologically grounded, but is rather grounded (at least in part) in certain people's beliefs or behaviors—i.e., if womanhood is a social construct—is it something that is determined externally, by how others perceive and treat you, or internally, by how you perceive yourself? Ok, time to go use the restroom. Bye!