

Reflections on the Metaphysics of Sex and Gender by Jim Stuart

Background

In this introduction, I shall be looking at two concepts: those of sex and gender. These are currently hotly disputed concepts in philosophy and society at large, and a number of passionate, and sometimes nasty, political disputes have emerged between feminists, progressives, conservatives, biodeterminists and social constructivists.

Before I continue, I wish to issue a disclaimer. I am no expert on this subject, and there are likely to be people in this room who know more about these matters than I do. So I hope to learn as well as passing on the basic knowledge I have gained. For the record, I have formulated my views mainly on a careful reading of the book *Beyond the Binary: Thinking about Sex and Gender* by Shannon Dea. I also benefitted from studying Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* in the Nottingham Philosophy Reading Group a few years ago.

Let me make some preliminary remarks about the concepts 'sex' and 'gender'. 'Sex' has two meanings – it can mean the activity of having sex or it can mean the sex type of the animal – usually male or female. In this talk I am only interested in sex as a category and not as an activity. Sex is a biological category involving reference to chromosomes, hormones, and anatomical features. Gender is a socio-cultural and psychological category involving matters of dress, behaviour, and identity. Both concepts were originally conceived as binary concepts. Sex has the binaries male and female, gender has the binaries masculine and feminine. It is now generally agreed that neither concept is a pure binary.

Consider sex first. The category sex is associated with four component features:

- (1) Genes and in particular chromosomes (xx for women, xy for men)
- (2) Appearance and function of both internal and external sex organs (penis, vagina, testicles, ovaries, womb)
- (3) Secondary sex traits such as beards and breasts
- (4) Production of and response to sex hormones (testosterone, oestrogen)

Generally (1) is one's genotype, whereas (2), (3) and (4) are phenotype categories. As I expect you are aware, these four components do not always go the same way. Some people do not fit either the Platonic ideal of one hundred percent maleness or of the Platonic ideal of one hundred percent femaleness. In fact rather than a pure binary in which every human being is either one hundred percent male or one hundred percent female according to these four criteria, we all fit a continuous spectrum.

Anne Fausto-Sterling, a biologist at Brown University, writes (in collaboration with Michelle Blackless):

Complete maleness and complete femaleness represent the extreme ends of a spectrum of possible body types. That these extreme ends are the most frequent has lent credence to the idea that they are not only natural (that is, produced by nature) but normal (that is, they represent both a statistical and social ideal). Knowledge of biological variation, however, allows us to conceptualize the less frequent middle spaces as natural, although statistically unusual. (Melanie Blackless et al., "How Sexually Dimorphic Are We? Review and Synthesis", p. 76)

Shannon Dea writes:

Blackless et al. use the term "intersex" to refer to any "individual who deviates from the Platonic ideal of physical dimorphism at the chromosomal, genital, gonadal, or hormonal levels". Defined in this way, intersex has an incidence of about 1.7%.

Others argue this figure of 1.7% for intersex people is too high as the criteria includes people who look identical to the male and female ideals. These critics argue that criteria for intersex should reflect visible distinctions, and if this is done, the intersex category comes down to around 0.02% of live births.

We generally defer to medical experts who pronounce on the sex of the person: whether they are male, female or intersex. This contrasts with the concept of gender where the emerging consensus view is that gender is something we decide for ourselves. Whilst a gender assignment to newly born babies is made shortly after birth ('male' or 'female' is written on the birth certificate), it is now widely recognised that some children and young adults think of themselves as having a different gender to the one assigned to them around the time of their birth. We call such people 'transgender' or 'trans' people and such people see themselves as making (or having made) a journey from male to female or from female to male, or sometimes they prefer to view themselves as non-binary. On their journey, they may request and receive surgery to change their sex organs.

It is essential to recognise that there is a world of difference between intersex people and trans people, although both groups are often subject to similar prejudices. Intersex people are born physically atypical. By contrast, trans people are born physically typical with respect to sex, but develop gender identities which are misaligned with their gender assignment at birth.

The term 'transgender' has come to operate as a kind of umbrella term for a range of different sexual identities that in one way or another resist the gender binary. In the broadest terms, to be transgender is for one's gender identity to fail to align with one's gender assignment or phenotypic sex, either because one identifies as the 'opposite' sex, or because one's gender identity defies binaristic classification.

For years, 'transsexual', as opposed to 'transgender', was the usual term for someone who identified as the gender opposite to their sex at birth and who had undergone, or was

undergoing, medical interventions to transition to the sex corresponding to their identity. In this context, 'MTF' is the short form for male-to-female transsexual, while 'FTM' stands for the female-to-male transsexual. However, more recently, trans people have challenged the inappropriate emphasis that others often place on their private medical histories, including details about whether or not they have undergone sex reassignment surgery or 'SRS'.

Finally in this background section before I move on to some philosophical issues, a word about some different cultures. Whilst our Western culture has traditionally just had two genders, some cultures have been based on three genders. I give two examples.

The Inuit culture seems to recognise three genders for both culture-religious and economic reasons. The Canadian anthropologist Bernard Saladin d'Anglure reports that in families with a gender imbalance among offspring (i.e. all girls or all boys), it is common for one child to be raised as a member of the opposite gender in order to perform the duties associated with that gender – the girl-raised-as-a-boy to help with the hunt, the boy-raised-as-a-girl to help with food preparation and clothing manufacture. One can understand this for economic reasons. The other situation occurs when a dead ancestor appears in a dream to a parent expecting a child. The parents interpret this to mean that the forthcoming child will be the dead ancestor reincarnated, and they will bring up that child with the gender of the dead ancestor, regardless of its sex.

Secondly in the Indian subcontinent there is a widespread recognition that hijras belong to a third gender. Traditionally this group have a role in certain cultural ceremonies like weddings. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal all allow for three genders on their passports.

Philosophical and political issues

Question 1: Should we distinguish between the terms 'sex' and 'gender'?

There are two advantages for the feminist of treating gender as distinct from sex. First, the expression of gender varies more broadly over time and from place to place than sex traits do – this would be impossible if sex and gender were the same thing. The second advantage of treating sex and gender as distinct is practical, rather than empirical. For a long time people thought of sex as fixed and inevitable. Detaching gender from sex opens up the possibility that gender is not fixed and inevitable but rather fluid and changeable. Built into the very concept of gender (as distinct from sex) is the notion of 'gender bending' – the phenomenon of resisting gender norms.

Kessler and McKenna, by contrast, give three reasons for using the same word 'gender' for both sex and gender: (1) they wish to emphasize "that the element of social construction is primary in all aspects of being female or male; (2) they regard the distinction between sex

and gender as “a technical one, applicable to scientists in the laboratory and some text books, but little else”; and (3) they worry that in common usage most people don’t draw the distinction between sex and gender, using both terms inconsistently and confusingly.

Judith Butler emphasizes Kessler and McKenna’s first reason here. On her account, just as it makes sense to regard gender as malleable, contingent and socially constructed, so also we should regard sex in the same way. She argues that when we perform a Foucauldian genealogy of sex, we discover that the so-called biological facts about sex are “discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of other political and social interests.”

Question 2: Should we be biodeterminists or social constructivists regarding the categories of sex and gender?

Social constructivists about sex and gender regard the categories male and female as reflecting prevailing social values rather than simply being a matter of biological facts. Social constructivism is always more or less at odds with biodeterminism, the view that ‘biology is destiny’. If you take the view that genetics entails that “men are men and women are women” – that is, that one’s gender-associated behaviour is a matter of genetics – then you are a biodeterminist about gender. If, on the other hand, you think that many women behave passively and that many men behave aggressively because both groups are socialized in these ways, then you are a social constructivist about (these alleged aspects) of gender.

Judith Butler is an example of a social constructivist. She conceives gender (and possibly sex as well) not as something we *are* but as something we *do* – we do gender by performing our gender identities. For Butler, gender is a highly regulated, culturally-significant repetition of acts. These acts include such mundane things as wearing a skirt or taking up less space on a subway seat. Importantly she contrasts performing gender with expressing it. For Butler, we do not ‘have’ underlying genders that we express in one way or another. Gender is nothing more than our performance of it. Put differently, gender is constituted by performance. For most of us most of the time, the various ways we perform our genders feel very natural, unconscious even. However, on Butler’s account they feel this way because we repeat them over and over, not because they express our underlying nature. The core aim of Butler’s project is to reveal the system of power that produces the performative repetition of gender.

At the opposite end of this dispute is a biodeterminist such as David Buss who is an evolutionary psychologist. On Buss’s account, differences in adaptive demands on human’s evolutionary forebears resulted in the following modern differences between men and women: men enjoy casual sex more than women do, women are more selective about short-term romantic partners than men are, women more than men are attracted to

prospective partners with material wealth and ambition, and men are more distressed by sexual infidelity than emotional infidelity whilst the converse is true for women.

Question 3: Should we junk the idea of gender altogether?

For Judith Butler to regard sex as socially constructed, just as gender is, is to pull the biological rug from under gender norms. When we see that the underpinnings of our ideas about both sex and gender are social, not biological, we can better envision the possibilities for alternative, liberatory gender norms. On her view, the very notion is primarily oriented towards controlling and limiting people. We can no more liberate ourselves through alternative gender norms than we can through a different configuration of chains and locks. For this reason she advocates the radical view that we should 'junk' the idea of gender altogether. The result, she predicts would be a more curious, more creative culture that resists hasty categorisations and places more emphasis on the specialness of individuals.

Question 4: Are the concepts male and female natural and symmetrical?

On Simone de Beauvoir's account the telltale sign that 'woman' is not a natural kind term like 'horse' is that we are "exhorted to be women, stay women, become women." No one would think to urge a horse to be a horse, remain a horse, or become a horse. No one worries that a horse might at some stage not really be a horse anymore, but we occasionally do hear such worries about women. If females can stop being women, if they need to remain women by some kind of active exertion, then this would suggest that they are not naturally women – that someone must be raised to be a woman just as one must be trained to be a violinist, and they must be raised or trained to cooperate in this endeavour.

'Woman' and 'man' are not symmetrical terms, continues Beauvoir. They are understood not as two poles, but rather as a centre and a bias. The masculine is regarded as the absolute, neutral human type, while femininity is regarded as a kind of peculiarity – a deviation from the norm. Put simply, Beauvoir argues we treat man as the One and woman as the Other. Beauvoir argues that the Other is a primordial category. "No group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself," she writes.

Question 5: Is the recognition that people can decide on their own gender a threat to women and the feminist movement?

Whilst the movement to recognise trans people as self-defining in terms of their gender has grown to the point of becoming the new orthodoxy, there has grown up in recent years a backlash to the trans movement by some, usually older, radical feminists. This group of feminists who take their ideas from the 1970's radical feminist movement which emphasized the need for 'women only' spaces where women could raise their awareness of the destructive influence of patriarchy and misogyny and could feel safe without the threats and bullying of aggressive males, claim that their women only spaces are being compromised by MTF trans people.

These radical feminists argue for spaces for 'women born as women', implying that MTF trans people are, in some sense, not real women, and, as such, retain the destructive patriarchal and misogynist attitudes of men. These radical feminists who are referred to as TERF's (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists) argue that part of being a woman is to have grown up as a woman and faced all the discrimination and hurt that that upbringing involves. They argue that if trans people infiltrate all feminist groups, then the distinctive feminist voice of women will be lost. They also argue that women will lose their safe spaces.

Those who promote the trans movement often accuse these radical feminists of being 'transphobic'. This term of abuse is often used to silence the radical feminists. This political dispute has caused much heartache and soul-searching amongst progressives, feminists and socialists and currently shows no signs of compromise or resolution.

Finally, the TERF activists may align themselves with a variety of feminism that has emerged in recent years – feminist essentialism. Feminist essentialists maintain that there really are essential differences between men and women. They argue that womanly traits are insufficiently valued due to society's bias towards men. They urge feminists to cultivate and celebrate these womanly virtues and to work to increase the esteem in which they are held in society. Two figures working in this tradition are Carol Gilligan, who argues from a psychological perspective that women are naturally more nurturing and other-focused than men, and Luce Irigaray who argues that women both perceive the world differently and communicate differently than men do. Feminist essentialism seems inconsistent with the type of feminism put forward by Judith Butler.