

The Age-Old Question: What is a Woman?

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Motivation for the Paper is the Following Puzzle

Gender accounts (Butler-Witt-Hale-Haslanger-Dembroff-Ásta to name a few) when dealing with the question of what a woman is face the problem of “managing the body” and they try to solve it by incorporating the body in a way that it becomes either insignificant or not significant enough.

Sex accounts (Byrne, Bogardus, Stock, Gender Critical Feminists aka TERFs to name a few) when dealing with the question of what a woman is face the problem of “managing the social” and they try to solve it by incorporating the social in a way that it becomes either insignificant or not significant enough.

The sex/gender distinction accounts (Stone, Mikkola, Beauvoir to name a few) when dealing with the question of what a woman is face the problem of managing the body and social at the same time and they often end up favoring one or the another in a way that either social or body becomes either insignificant or not significant enough.

Puzzle

So, whose account of a woman is correct or is there any way to reconcile them?

Solutions of the Past

There are no women (just ideological constructions), there are too many women (pluralist accounts), the aim should be the eradication of women (gender abolitionists accounts), we do not need to define women (Mikkola, Barnes, Dembroff), Let’s do feminism without the metaphysical account of women (deflationary accounts: Louise Antony)

My Solution

There is no retreat. The woman kind is a contested kind (like some other kinds such as citizen, patriot, soldier) where there is always a conflict between sex/bodily conditions and gendered/social conditions.

Method

Focusing only on the membership conditions of being a woman on an entrance level to the kind woman and on the treatment level.

Whose Work I am Drawing On?

Jules Gill-Peterson’s *The Short History of Transmisogyny*, Elizabeth Reis *Bodies in Doubt*, Kath Weston’s *Do Clothes Make the Woman?* My personal lived experience observed experiences of women and men around me in a Pakistani lower middle class social milieu.

Possible Objections (That I Think I Can Answer?)

What about oppression? Passing? Why not say interdependent, why use the phrase “conflicted” or “contested”? What about the self-identity accounts of what a woman is?

Possible Objections (That I am Looking for Answers)

Why just not say social? Is there really a difference between sex/body and gender condition of a woman on my account? Or is it just the return of the prodigal son (essentialism/anti-essentialism/constructionism debate) without repentance in feminist philosophy? Or I need to read this or that philosopher’s account? Or my intuitions are misguided on this issue or are the result of living in oppressive/conservative (at large a Muslim society)?

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If you want a copy of this handout you can reach out to me at: sbaloch@ucsb.edu sbaloch[at]ucsb[at]edu or if you think I was too ableist, too ageist in making of this handout, you can also complain to me and I promise, I will work on it and share the accessible version of it.