

The sex-gender debate in feminist philosophy and social science essay sample



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Feminism is said to be the movement to end women's oppression. One possible way to understand 'woman' in this claim is to take it as a sex term: 'woman' picks out human females and being a human female depends on various biological and anatomical features (like genitalia). Historically many feminists have understood 'woman' differently: not as a sex term, but as a gender term that depends on social and cultural factors (like social position). In so doing, they distinguished sex (being female or male) from gender (being a woman or a man), although most ordinary language users appear to treat the two interchangeably.

More recently this distinction has come under sustained attack and many view it nowadays with (at least some) suspicion. The term 'sex' and 'gender' mean different things to different feminist theorists and neither is easy or straightforward to characterize. Sex is a prominent feature in the organization of society. The degree and nature of separation between male and female character, role and activities vary from one society to another, but some degree of separation is a feature of all. The differences and inequalities in society can be seen, somewhat simplistically to involve 'nurture' as opposed to a 'nature' interpretation.

The nurture analysis argue that such phenomena have bases and social origin, not natural or biological ones and even that how we ordinarily understand 'nature' and biology is itself a social construction which changes over time. In arguing this, three main kind of evidence tend to be used:- Variation between different cultures- sex forms a universal categorization in all known societies and in all known societies it also involves a hierarchy in

which it is men and men's activities and attributes which are the more highly valued.

This also implies that gender is a lot more complex than it at first may appear, it is variously constructed and that even the same behaviour may be seen and understood very differently in different cultures. Variation in one culture over time- the key discipline involved here is history and in particular both social and economic history. The central Marxist tenet that in a sense 'gender' as a hierarchy of social value is a product of capitalism. It is concerned with the changes brought about by capitalism in the economic and social role of women and men.

Variation in one culture at one point in time-The idea that there is sharp biological demarcation of males from females with an associated and automatic segregation of the behaviour patterns has come into question. Women and men are not always nor emphatically distinguished from one another either biologically or psychologically, though social structure may treat people as though they must be distinguished from one another in sharp and discontinuous ways. Example intersexuality. (Stanley ; 1984)

According to Liz Stanley, the basic argument is whether sex causes gender or whether and to what extent gender is socially constructed. Two polarized positions on this can be described as 'Biological Essentialism' and 'Social Constructivism'. Biological essentialism argues that the social roles and psychological attributes of females and males in relation to a whole range of behaviour and personality traits are biologically determined. And natural

science is very well involved in the maintenance of 'biology is destiny'.

(Stanley; 1984)

Most people ordinarily seem to think that sex and gender are coextensive: women are human females, men are human males. Many feminists have historically disagreed and have endorsed the sex/ gender distinction.

Provisionally: 'sex' denotes human females and males depending on biological features (chromosomes, sex organs, hormones and other physical features); 'gender' denotes women and men depending on social factors (social role, position, behaviour or identity). The main feminist motivation for making this distinction was to counter biological determinism or the view that biology is destiny.

Typical example of biological determinists view is that, in western societies, the accepted cultural perspective on gender views women and men as naturally and unequivocally defined categories of being with distinct psychological and behaviour propensities that can be predicted from their reproductive functions. Competent adult members of these societies see difference between the two as fundamentally and enduring-differences seemingly supported by division of labour into women's and men's work and often elaborate differentiation of feminine and masculine attributes and behaviour that are prominent features of social organization.

Things are the way they are by the virtue of the fact that men are men, women are women- a division perceived to be natural and rooted in biology, producing in turn profound psychological behaviour and social consequence. (Zimmerman; 1987). To counter this kind of biological determinism, feminists

have argued that behavioural and psychological differences have social, rather than biological, causes. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir famously claimed that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, and that social discrimination produces in women moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to be caused by nature.

Commonly observed behavioural traits associated with women and men, then, are not caused by anatomy or chromosomes. Rather, they are culturally learned or acquired. (Hughes; 1997) In order to distinguish biological differences from social/psychological ones and to talk about the latter, feminists appropriated the term 'gender'. Psychologists writing on transsexuality were the first to employ gender terminology in this sense. Until the 1960s, 'gender' was used solely to refer to masculine and feminine words, like *le* and *la* in French (Nicholson 1994, 80; see also Nicholson 1998).

However, in order to explain why some people felt that they were 'trapped in the wrong bodies', the psychologist Robert Stoller (1968) began using the terms 'sex' to pick out biological traits and 'gender' to pick out the amount of femininity and masculinity a person exhibited. Although a person's sex and gender complemented each other, separating out these terms seemed to make theoretical sense allowing Stoller to explain the phenomenon of transsexuality: transsexuals' sex and gender simply don't match. Along with psychologists, feminists found it useful to distinguish sex and gender.

This enabled them to argue that many differences between women and men were socially produced and, therefore, changeable. Gayle Rubin (for instance) uses the phrase 'sex/gender system' in order to describe "a set of

arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention”(Rubin; 1975). Rubin employed this system to articulate that “ part of social life which is the locus of the oppression of women” describing gender as the “ socially imposed division of the sexes”.

Rubin’s thought was that although biological differences are fixed, gender differences are the oppressive results of social interventions that dictate how women and men should behave. Women are oppressed as women and by having to be women. However, since gender is social, it is thought to be mutable and alterable by political and social reform. In some earlier interpretations, like Rubin’s, sex and gender were thought to complement one another. ‘ Gender is the social interpretation of sex’ captures this view. That is, according to this interpretation, all humans are either male or female; their sex is fixed.

But cultures interpret sexed bodies differently and project different norms on those bodies thereby creating feminine and masculine persons.

Distinguishing sex and gender, however, also enables the two to come apart: they are separable in that one can be sexed male and yet be gendered a woman, or vice versa (Haslanger 2000b; Stoljar 1995). So, this group of feminist arguments against biological determinism suggested that gender differences result from cultural practices and social expectations. Nowadays it is more common to denote this by saying that gender is socially constructed.

This means that genders (women and men) and gendered traits (like being nurturing or ambitious) are the “intended or unintended product of a social practice” (Haslanger; 1995). One way to interpret Beauvoir’s claim that one is not born but rather becomes a woman is to take it as a claim about gender socialization: females become women through a process whereby they acquire feminine traits and learn feminine behaviour. Masculinity and femininity are thought to be products of nurture or how individuals are brought up.

They are casually constructed: social forces either have a causal role in bringing gendered individuals into existence or (to some substantial sense) shape the way we are women and men. And the mechanism of construction is social learning. For instance, Kate Millett takes gender differences to have “essentially cultural, rather than biological bases” that result from differential treatment. Social learning theorists hold that huge arrays of different influences socialize us as women and men. This being the case, it is extremely difficult to counter gender socialization.

For instance, parents often unconsciously treat their female and male children differently. Some socialization is more overt: children are often dressed in gender stereotypical clothes and colours (boys are dressed in blue, girls in pink) and parents tend to buy their children gender stereotypical toys. They are also intentionally or not tend to reinforce certain appropriate behaviours. (Renzetti and Curran ; 1992). According to social learning theorists children are also influenced by what they observe in the world around them. Also the books and television play a vital role.

Socializing influence like these are still thought to send implicit message regarding how females and males act and are expected to act shaping us into feminine and masculine person. Nancy Chodorow has criticized social learning theory as too simplistic to explain gender differences. Instead, she holds that gender is a matter of having feminine and masculine personalities that develop in early infancy as responses to prevalent parenting practices. In particular, gendered personalities develop because women tend to be the primary caretakers of small children.

Chodorow holds that because mothers (or other prominent females) tend to care for infants, infant male and female psychic development differs. Crudely put: the mother-daughter relationship differs from the mother-son relationship because mothers are more likely to identify with their daughters than their sons. This unconsciously prompts the mother to encourage her son to psychologically individuate himself from her thereby prompting him to develop well defined and rigid ego boundaries.

However, the mother unconsciously discourages the daughter from individuating herself thereby prompting the daughter to develop flexible and blurry ego boundaries. Childhood gender socialization further builds on and reinforces these unconsciously developed ego boundaries finally producing feminine and masculine person. Gendered personalities are supposedly manifested in common gender stereotypical behaviour. Chodorow thinks that these gender differences should and can be changed.

This can be done through both male and female parents should be equally involved in parenting. Chodorow 1995) Catherine MacKinnon develops her

theory of gender as a theory of sexuality. Very roughly: the social meaning of sex (gender) is created by sexual objectification of women whereby women are viewed and treated as objects for satisfying men's desires. Masculinity is defined as sexual dominance, femininity as sexual submissiveness: genders are "created through the eroticization of dominance and submission. The man/woman difference and the dominance/submission dynamic define each other.

This is the social meaning of sex". For MacKinnon, gender is constitutively constructed: in defining genders (or masculinity and femininity) we must make reference to social factors. In particular, we must make reference to the position one occupies in the sexualized dominance/submission dynamic: men occupy the sexually dominant position, women the sexually submissive one. As a result, genders are by definition hierarchical and this hierarchy is fundamentally tied to sexualized power relations.

So, gender difference for MacKinnon is not a matter of having a particular psychological orientation or behavioural pattern; rather, it is a function of sexuality that is hierarchal in patriarchal societies. This is not to say that men are naturally disposed to sexually objectify women or that women are naturally submissive. Instead, male and female sexualities are socially conditioned: men have been conditioned to find women's subordination sexy and women have been conditioned to find a particular male version of female sexuality as erotic – one in which it is erotic to be sexually submissive.

For MacKinnon, both female and male sexual desires are defined from a male point of view that is conditioned by pornography. Bluntly put: pornography portrays a false picture of ' what women want' suggesting that women in actual fact are and want to be submissive. (Mackinnon ; 1989) The crux of Butler's argument in Gender trouble is that coherence of the categories of sex, gender and sexuality- the natural seeming coherence for example, of masculine gender and heterosexual desire in male bodies is cultural construction through repetition of stylized acts.

These stylized bodily acts in their repetition establish the appearance of essential ontological " core" gender. This is the sense in which Butler famously theorized gender along with sex and sexuality. Butler holds that distinguishing biological sex from social gender is unintelligible. For her, both are socially constructed. If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called ' sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.

Butler is not alone in claiming that there are no tenable distinctions between nature/culture, biology/construction and sex/gender. Butler makes two different claims: that sex is a social construction, and that sex is gender. To unpack her view, consider the two claims in turn. First, the idea that sex is a social construct, for Butler, boils down to the view that our sexed bodies are also performative and, so, they have " no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute their reality. Butler; 1990).

This implausibly implies that female and male bodies do not have independent existence and that if gendering activities ceased, so would physical bodies. This is not Butler's claim; rather, her position is that bodies viewed as the material foundations on which gender is constructed, are themselves constructed as if they provide such material foundations (Butler; 1993). Cultural conceptions about gender figure in the very apparatus of production whereby sexes themselves are established. (Butler ; 1990).

For Butler, sexed bodies never exist outside social meanings and how we understand gender shapes how we understand sex (1990). Sexed bodies are not empty matter on which gender is constructed and sex categories are not picked out on the basis of objective features of the world. Instead, our sexed bodies are themselves discursively constructed: they are the way they are, at least to a substantial extent, because of what is attributed to sexed bodies and how they are classified. Sex assignment (calling someone female or male) is normative (Butler 1993).

When the doctor calls a newly born infant a girl or a boy, she/he is not making a descriptive claim, but a normative one. In fact, the doctor is performing an illocutionary speech act. In effect, the doctor's utterance makes infants into girls or boys. We, then, engage in activities that make it seem as if sexes naturally come in two and that being female or male is an objective feature of the world, rather than being a consequence of certain constitutive acts (that is, rather than being performative).

And this is what Butler means in saying that physical bodies never exist outside cultural and social meanings, and that sex is as socially constructed

as gender. She does not deny that physical bodies exist. But, she takes our understanding of this existence to be a product of social conditioning: social conditioning makes the existence of physical bodies intelligible to us by discursively constructing sexed bodies through certain constitutive acts. For Butler, sex assignment is always in some sense oppressive.

Again, this appears to be because of Butler's general suspicion of classification: sex classification can never be merely descriptive but always has a normative element reflecting evaluative claims of those who are powerful. (Butler; 1993). Feminists should examine and uncover ways in which social construction and certain acts that constitute sex shape our understandings of sexed bodies, what kinds of meanings bodies acquire and which practices and illocutionary speech acts 'make' our bodies into sexes.

Doing so enables feminists to identify how sexed bodies are socially constructed in order to resist such construction. However, given what was said above, it is far from obvious what we should make of Butler's claim that sex was always already gender. (Butler; 1999). Stone takes this to mean that sex is gender but goes on to question it arguing that the social construction of both sex and gender does not make sex identical to gender. According to Stone, it would be more accurate for Butler to say that claims about sex imply gender norms.

That is, many claims about sex traits (like 'females are physically weaker than males') actually carry implications about how women and men are expected to behave. To some extent the claim describes certain facts. But, it also implies that females are not expected to do much heavy lifting and that

they would probably not be good at it. So, claims about sex are not identical to claims about gender; rather, they imply claims about gender norms (Stone; 2007).