

Q&A: BYRNE ON THE SEX VS. GENDER

8 MAY 2020 | PHILO 36000 | HUNTER COLLEGE | DANIEL W. HARRIS

What, exactly, is Byrne's point?

I can appreciate that Byrd makes a linguistic argument for whether women are adult females. I have been waiting for this, but, is this to suggest that female in the biological sense and woman in the social sense is interchangeable? I was a little confused as to why they mean the same thing. On one hand Byrd is saying that the term "female" is the biological term while "woman" is the social term yet, uses both as if one causes the other. If being a female causes an adult female to be called a woman, is she implying that in order to be a woman socially, one must first be female? —Sheana

I think you've misunderstood Byrne's point. He thinks that the category of women is just a biological category—namely, the category of adult human females—not a social category (although, like some other biological categories, it is socially significant). He is basically denying that the sex/gender distinction is a genuine distinction.

This paper is so strange to me. It's essentially arguing that one can 'rightfully' be called a woman if they have a uterus? They're unrightfully being called a woman if they don't, as seen in the CAS example (3.2)? This just shows that the subcategory of 'woman' is fake and kind of.. pointless? Why would anyone want to be called an 'unrightful' woman? Why is it just the uterus that is characteristic of woman/female? The CAS individual bears breasts, another female reproductive trait, how does this not affect their femaleness? —Ksenia

Byrne's question is about the metaphysics of the category of women (and, by extension, girls, boys, and men), not about who gets to be rightfully called a woman. As he says on pp.11-12, "Usually, being an F is neither necessary nor sufficient for being (rightly) treated as one. Even if CAS individuals are not women, only an obtuse moralistic pedant would deny them entry to a space marked 'Woman Only.'" By extension, I think that Byrne would say that it is sometimes the right thing to do to use the word "woman" to refer to some non-women, at least in many contexts.

I should also point out that Byrne definitely would not endorse the idea that having a uterus is criterial for being a woman. He doesn't try to say what is required for being an adult human female in this essay, but I am quite confident that possession of a uterus would not figure in his definition. (After all, lots of adult human females have had hysterectomies.)

In another essay, Byrne does try to say what is required in order to be female ([link here](#)). Roughly, his definition is that "females produce large gametes (reproductive cells), and males produce small ones". (This requires some modification for individuals whose gamete-producing organs have been removed. He explains the longer version in the essay.) As Byrne argues, this is a pretty standard explanation in biology. The reasoning is that although gamete size difference is universal to all species that have males and females, every other sex characteristic (such as possession of a uterus, chromosomes, etc.) varies enormously, as different species have evolved different sexual

reproductive strategies. This makes gamete size the most useful biological way of distinguishing males from females, since biologists need a definition that works for different species.

Of course, it's not hard to find someone smart who disagrees with all of this. But it's important to get clear on what Byrne is actually arguing, because otherwise we wouldn't be able to criticize him in a way that he would find convincing.

I found the reading overall pretty confusing. I'm struggling to understand the point the author is trying to make. The distinction between an Adult Human Female and a Woman? Why and how could someone make the claim that there's a difference, like saying a woman is more of a social category than a biological classification? —Brendan

Since we've just spent two weeks reading things that argue for the distinction between sex as a biological category and gender as a social category, I am surprised by this question and not sure how to respond!

Questions about Byrne's arguments

(Pg 11) "CAS individuals behave and look just like (human) females. But behaving and looking like a female is not sufficient for being one. By any reasonable standard, CAS individuals are not female."

I am confused with the definition of female here. There are women whose uterus and fallopian tubes and ovaries are removed. So, after that act, they are not females anymore? Who exactly determines it? —Syeda

See my answer to Ksenia above, and check out [this essay](#) by Byrne in which he explains what he takes to be the most widely accepted way of drawing the male/female distinction according to biologists. Byrne would say that girls or women who've had their reproductive organs removed are still female because they had previously developed a considerable way along the normal biological pathway toward producing large gametes. His CAS example is carefully crafted to describe hypothetical individuals who don't meet this criterion.

Is an if and only if biconditional enough to indicate identity/equivalence? —Shah

There are various things that one could mean by a biconditional. Although Byrne presents his definition as if it is a material biconditional (which is quite weak, and not enough to indicate equivalence), he says that it "should be understood as implicitly necessitated, with 'S' bound by a universal quantifier within the scope of the necessity operator". So the full version of his definition would be this:

Necessarily, for every x, x is a woman if and only if x is an adult human female.

As he then indicates in footnote 3, we could make a stronger identity claim than this if we say that his biconditional should be interpreted as a “real definition” and not merely as a necessary biconditional. The paper by Gideon Rosen called “Real Definition” that he cites on this topic makes it clear what he is talking about.

Are social and biological categories necessarily exclusive? —Shah

As Byrne is using the terms “social category” and “biological category”, yes they are. He is implicitly using “social category” to mean something like “category needed to understand social phenomena but not needed for any natural science”, or something like that.

Would just creating a new word for the social category resolve this debate? —Shah

Byrne sort of addresses this question in his discussion of ameliorative proposals, like Haslanger’s, at the end. He argues that if Haslanger and others actually did convince us to start using “woman” in their way, we would inevitably come up with a new word to refer to the biological category that “woman” used to refer to.

On the other hand, you might think that the best thing to do would be to just stipulate that “woman” is ambiguous. Woman₁ refers to a biological category of adult human females and woman₂ refers to a social category. (As Jenkins argues, we might need to further divide woman₂ into separate sub-definitions to capture both the social-class meaning and the identity meaning.)

I quite agree with you that this would be a sensible solution to this whole debate, since as long as we were always clear about what we were saying, it’s hard to see what there would be to disagree about anymore. I suspect that many trans activists would be satisfied with this solution. But maybe they should be!

The question, are women adult human females?, first seemed to be a rhetorical question by default but Alex Byrne breaks down what it means to be a woman and an adult female. There are no strict guidelines in being a woman for being a woman is not just a strictly biological and social category. Being a woman is defined by one claiming to be a woman, whether they are born female, transitioned, or does not have a sex. That notion of women being adult human females is not defined by biological and social categories. With this definition for women, how will it be recognized when there are diverse cultures and languages that rely on the biological and social categories of women? —Raima

Although Byrne agrees that female gender roles differ enormously across cultures, he argues in §2.2 that the word “woman” (and the equivalent word in every human language) refers to the biological category of adult human females, and not to a social category. So I think he would have trouble understanding your question.

I can correct her wrong knowledge about sumo wrestlers. She says, “[s]umo wrestlers have a quite distinctive physique—they are, let us say, extreme endomorphs” (5). I do not understand how she could make that mistake though. They are wrestlers, so athletes of one specific sport.

Some wrestlers' body fat percentages are around 10%. No one would say that basketball players are the tall guys. By the way, one of their characteristics is that their bodies are very flexible. Like ballerinas, they have to do stretching exercises every day. —Chateldon

This is interesting, thanks! (I was actually supposed to visit Japan for the first time later this month, and I had tickets to see sumo wrestling while I was there. So all of this talk of sumos is making me sad!) In any case, Byrne's argument only requires that there be some hypothetical possible world in which sumos are all and only the extreme endomorphs, not that this is actually the case.

Criticisms of Byrne's arguments

In the article "Are women adult females?," Alex Byrne tries to defend the statement that "S is a woman iff S is an adult human female" (4). In support of her thesis, Byrne mentions that the dictionary defines a woman as an adult female. Since the dictionary defines a woman as an adult female, it's very unlikely that all of the lexicographers got the definition of a woman wrong (5). However, the meaning of what it means to be a woman and a man has changed considerably throughout the twenty-first century. Gender is no longer thought of just a biological category nor a binary. Therefore, lexicographers could have a wrong definition of a woman because they didn't know any better. How would Byrne's first defense (2.1) account for ideas that change over time like gender? To further support her point, Byrne mentions that sumo wrestlers are "extreme endomorphs" (5). She says that to define sumo wrestlers by extreme endomorphs it would be misleading because it would infer that the only condition to become one is changing your body to gain weight. I'm not sure if the sumo wrestler example is an appropriate comparison because there are not multiple conditions to becoming a woman like there is a sumo wrestler. There is only one condition to a woman and that is being an adult female, which is acquired through age and having a female anatomy at birth or through surgery.

Byrne agrees that the dictionary on its own is not great evidence, since lexicographers are fallible and often do fail to give good definitions. (This is the point of his "soldier" example.)

The point of the sumo comparison is that we all agree that "sumo wrestler" is a social category, and so the dictionary would be making a huge blunder by defining it in biological terms, even if the biological definition was true of all and only the sumo wrestlers. So, Byrne's point is that if we conclude that the dictionary definition is wrong because gender is a social category, then we have to say that the dictionary is making a huge mistake, much like the hypothetical example of the sumos, and not merely that it is miscategorizing a few cases.

On your last point: Byrne's opponents, who think that gender is a social category, would just deny what you say about what it takes to be a woman. That's just the view that Byrne is trying to defend. And so his opponents would say that there are (or may be) multiple, complex social criteria for being a woman, just like being a sumo wrestler.

It seemed to me like many of Byrne's arguments for AHF assume it. For instance 2.3 talks about how "we know" an individual is a woman, which seems to suppose that it is so. Those with another definition of women, would not say that we know. Byrne's evidence from usage seems to go against his earlier statement that we shouldn't put much stock in usage. The hypothetical of 2.5 is used as an argument against AHF in other sources cited in 3.1. I would have expected a conclusion that the case of 2.5 is indeterminate, or an argument that didn't just state it so, but I didn't see one. Perhaps Byrne thinks that because AF is the more intuitive dictionary position, he holds a higher standard of proof for those who dispute it than for those who support it. — Miriam

The charge of circularity is definitely one that Byrne anticipates. He says this on p.3: "Pointless charges of "begging the question" may be anticipated; this paper does not attempt the futile task of convincing everyone." Of course, your point is that the charge may not be pointless, and that a better way to describe the cases he describes is that they are situations in which we form false beliefs that certain individuals are women.

I think it's best to see this argument as part of an overall argument that the best explanation of why we have the concept of woman and how we (including his opponents) use it is that it applies to adult human females. What he is giving is a sort of transcendental argument. He is assuming that we aren't all going around using the word 'woman' and the concept of women in a radically, completely mistaken way, almost all of the time. The only way for this to be true, he is arguing, is if women are adult human females. This is compatible with the fact that people sometimes use words and concepts in misleading ways.

Still, I think I agree that his opponents probably wouldn't find this section too convincing.

While on the surface Byrne's argument seems to be based on a widely held understanding of the definition of the category "Woman" as an "Adult Human Female, I feel like the arguments apparent simple almost matter of fact reasoning based mostly off of linguistic evidence belies the true complexity in coming up with a clearly defined term to apply to "woman". When looking for what makes up the category "woman" beyond the common use definition we find in the dictionary we run into problems and inconsistencies and cases that don't neatly fit with the rigid definition. I feel that in order to be more compelling the argument would need to reach beyond a linguistic approach to better clarify what specifically fills the category "woman" and what doesn't and why not. —Matt

Right, like Miriam, I think you make a good point that Byrne is not all that clear about the status of linguistic evidence for his proposal. He says that usage is not a good guide, but then quite a bit of his evidence seems to be about usage in some way. This is something I would like to ask him about. I suspect he has a nuanced view of how linguistic evidence should be used in metaphysics, but he certainly doesn't make it clear here.

Byrne makes the case that the term woman shouldn't be an exception to gendered animal words but I'd argue that it makes sense for 'woman' to be an exception to the practice. One could say that gender isn't a category for animals at all, and that they simply fulfill their roles as their birth sex into adulthood. She also mentions that 'girl' and 'female' are modally equivalent, but I don't

think this is true either - a male child could easily identify as a girl, which is out of our reach to make assumptions about. So while some humans decide later in life, perhaps after extended socialization that they want to identify as the other gender, I'd say that if the term woman is decidedly a gendered definition, it's entirely dependent on that individual's identification. — Cynthia

(This is similar enough to Loreta's question that I will answer them together:)

page 6: 2.2: "One would expect English to have a word that picks out the category adult human female, and 'woman' is the only candidate- at the end of the page he says " Peacocks have an important role in Hindu mythology—the social/religious significance of the category peacock is not a good reason for denying that it is biological." First of all, when did the existence of words or not become our guide to reality? This, he says is the most compelling consideration.. So, because there is no other word to capture AHF, 'women' must be it. To say I find the last sentence unconvincing or unsatisfying would be the least I can say. What kind of comparison is this? The social/religious significance he mentions is significant to us, to humans, not to the peacocks themselves. The peacocks aren't aware of their importance to us, their lives are not filled with cultural, political, social content. They serve a mere symbolic meaning/role in a belief system and they go about with their peacock lives , being completely out of that system. Women do not. They are there, part of the system which affects them, which sees them one way or another.

Byrne's point about the peafowl is just that biological categories sometimes have social significance to humans. It should not be surprising that biological categories to which we belong would likewise have social significance. I'm not sure why it should matter to this point whether we belong to the categories or not. Of course, that alone doesn't settle the question of whether "woman" refers to a biological category! The point of his analogy to peafowl is just to dispel the idea that if a category has social significance then it must be a social category.

So how about Byrne's actual argument? I suppose I agree with him that this one is stronger than his other arguments. But I take it that your point is the following: humans are not interested in the social relationships of other animals, and so it's not surprising that terms like "peacock" and "vixen" refer to biological categories. But humans are deeply social creatures, and so when we think about ourselves, it is the social characteristics that loom large, rather than the biological characteristics. So it shouldn't be surprising if humans turn out to be the one big exception to the rule that gendered nouns refer to biological categories. And since every human society is interested in the social category of women (and not particularly interested in the biological category), it stands to reason that every word in every human language that would be translated as "woman" would refer to a social category rather than a biological one.

I think that this is a very interesting line of thought. To really support it we would want some anthropological or psychological evidence that humans are way more interested in social categories when it comes to humans, and that this is a basic difference from how we think about other animals. I guess I'm a bit skeptical that this would be *such* a universal fact about humans. But it's certainly plausible, and if it could be supported with evidence it would be a big problem for what Byrne takes to be his best argument.

Is the problem with the difference between a woman and AHF the belief as JTB in the introduction? Why does Byrne mention the difference between women and females? We call 雌 (mesu) what has xx biologically in Japanese, but it is used for plants and animals but not for humans. It is not used when we call someone because it treats the person as an animal rather than as a human. By the way, girls are also called woman children, never young females. Human beings with xx are called women 女性(josei). This word is not used for plants or animals. As Byrne says, it is essential not to confuse congenital biological facts with the social things that are created and can change socially.

This is some very interesting data, and I would love to know what Byrne would say about it. It also goes to Loreta's point above. It may very well be that many human languages give us evidence that humans really do care more about social categories than biological ones, but only when we're talking about ourselves! Perhaps Byrne is just ignorant of the cross-linguistic facts here.

Still, I would also say that the pattern that you describe is not conclusive evidence that 女性(josei) refers to a social category. It could still refer to adult human females. It may just be that there is no word in Japanese to refer to the cross-species biological category "female". But I don't know any Japanese! Here's an analogy in German (which I do know a bit of): in German, 'essen' is the verb that translates the English verb 'to eat' when talking about human eating, and 'fressen' is used to talk about animal eating. If you describe someone's eating using 'fressen', it is insulting, as if you're saying that they eat like an animal. Still, I doubt that we would want to conclude from this that eating is a social category for Germans as opposed to a biological category. It's just that they don't have any one cross-species word for the biological category of eating.

A second thing: Regarding TW. After pointing out that TW is disputed and those who use it in this context don't attempt to prove it, Byrne states that a reasonable source for TW is the testimony of trans individuals. He points out that a problem with this, is that the same testimony can be used to undermine NF. However, I think there is a problem with this. Everyone we've read thus far seems to agree that "female" is a biological category, (I'm referring to the biological / social distinction we discussed from Ney). If someone is mistaken about a biological category, that isn't evidence for anything. If you believe that "women" is a social category, testimony becomes relevant again. Perhaps there is a core underlying difference here, that Byrne thinks "women" is a biological category too, and therefore ignores all testimony. In that case, I would have liked Byrne to state that explicitly. —Miriam

Well, it's not true that everyone out there agrees that adult human female is a biological category. Byrne cites some examples. We've only read a few things this semester, and although all of those have accepted that female is a biological category, that's not an entirely representative sample.

Still, I think you're right that the dialectic is complicated here. If we start out assuming that woman is a biological category (as Byrne thinks), then the fact that someone thinks that they're a woman is not evidence of anything. Conversely, if we start out assuming that the category of woman is a matter of self-identification, then it's pretty obvious that we're not dealing with a biological category. So I think Byrne is saying, "let's start out by not assuming either of those things, and ask ourselves what kind of evidence we get from the fact that some trans women say that they are

women. He says that if we make self-description criterial for a category, then this will make female a non-biological category as well.

Your point, I take it, is that there is considerably more reason to concede that “female” is a biological category than “woman”, and so we probably shouldn’t take self-description to be good evidence about these two categories to the same degree. We should treat it as more convincing evidence in the case of “woman” than in the case of “female”. I think that’s a pretty solid reply to this argument. (Ultimately, though, I don’t think that Byrne really thinks that what people believe about themselves is great evidence about whether they belong to the category woman, however.)

But here's another thing I'm wondering about TW: I actually think a very different argument than TW regarding trans individuals supplies evidence for "women" being a different category than female. TW is about those who don't have treatment. But as I understand (correct me if I'm wrong), trans individuals who have gender dysphoria feel relief from some of these methods. If this is so, then 1. they feel one way because of perception of belonging to a category, 2. they make some change, 3. they feel better because of perception of belonging to a category. So the change would have to somehow change their category (or at least perception thereof). But because this can happen with a range of changes, that would suggest that whatever category trans women want to be in, is one that doesn't require as much change as biological sex. If this category is "women", that provides stronger evidence that women is not the same as sex than TW does. —Miriam

This is an interesting argument, but I think it is compatible with the possibility that the category in question is “people who are (rightly) treated as women for most social purposes”, which, as Byrne points out, is not necessarily the same as the category of women.

Support for Byrne

(pg16) “And in any case—this can hardly come as a surprise—trans women themselves are not of one mind on TW. To take some random examples: I certainly wouldn’t be happy with the idea of being a man, and I don’t consider myself a man, but I’m not going to try and convince anyone that I’m really a woman...I like the idea of accepting the identity of a transsexual, rather than having to be ‘man’ or ‘woman’. (County 1996: 139)”

Exactly, that goes back to my comment on previous reading that Jenkins should not determine if trans should be included into the woman gender. It should be their choice to pick popular genders (man or woman) or choose a new identity or a new gender. By arguing to include transwoman into woman group, it felt like she was robbing them of a ‘free’ choice to determine a new identity. —Syeda

It might be tempting to think of this article by Byrne as being anti-transgender, and many people have certainly interpreted it that way! But this is one reason why I think that would be an oversimplification. It’s not as though all trans people understand themselves in the same way.

I think that this is a key thing to discuss this kind of topic; “there is a difference between being an F and being (rightly) treated as an F” (11). So, mostly the reason why people discuss the topic of 'what women are' seems to be on account of the discriminations. But is it vanished by clearing classification or categorization? I do not think so. People do discriminate among things (not only genders) because there exist differences. —Chateldon

I think you're probably right about this. People are interested in this metaphysical topic because they think it will help to stop discrimination against (for example) trans people. But it would probably be better to work in the discrimination directly, since the metaphysical issues probably aren't nearly as closely connected to the normative issue as people think. From a decision about whether trans women are men or women, *approximately nothing* follows about how trans women should be treated.

Of course, as a matter of fact, many people who want to argue that trans women aren't women would also like to exclude them from women-only spaces, would like to deny them certain forms of health care, and so on. But it would be very useful if we could all recognize and point out that when people argue that these forms of treatment are justified “because trans women aren't really women”, this is just a terrible, no-good argument! And I think that's Byrne's point, even if he doesn't emphasize it as much as would be ideal.

General gender questions/comments

How would you explain masculine and feminine traits? Some seem social constructed, but some are innately biological. For example, Maternal instincts is not social but biological one. —Syeda

I think it's an open question how much of “maternal instinct” is biological and how much is social in origin! Our culture really is full of messages to women that they should be more maternal, for example, and it's not obvious why that would be the case if women all had super powerful maternal instincts that didn't require any cultural reinforcement. It's also worth noting that what counts as “maternal” varies a lot between times and places.

Thinking about the section ‘the swap gender roles’ reminded me of my early childhood story that I would like to share. I was a second child born between two brothers. I have an older brother and a younger brother. In our language, boys/men and girl/woman talk differently. A girl would say, ‘I eat’ (mein khaati hoon) and a boy would say, ‘I eat’ (mein khaata hoon). I always imitated my older brother, so I spoke like a boy. My parents had no problem even dressing me up like my brothers and I had short hair and did not wear those girly frocks and no dolls either. I spent time with my brother and his friends (boys) and did not have friends that were girls. It was all okay until I reached junior high and I was told to conform to the stereotypical role. I was corrected to speak proper like a girl, behave and of course dress like a girl. My freedom became limited and interactions with friends (boys) mindful. In my case, the biological sex determined my category or cultural role. My naïve mind could not comprehend why different treatment but

now I laugh about it. At least I was lucky that treatment was only limited to my appearance and how to behave in my patriarchal society. —Syeda

Right, I think it's common for gender roles to become more restrictive as we approach puberty. There are probably lots of reasons for this, but one possible reason is that the superficial differences between the sexes (normally and for the most part) start to become more pronounced. Another is presumably that reproductive function starts to come online, and that presumably comes with many new taboos, since it raises the stakes of male/female interactions.