

Q&A: JENKINS ON GENDER AND IDENTITY

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On the implications of Haslanger's analysis

If my understanding is correct, in this reading, why they argue/investigate 'what is a woman' or 'what makes one woman' is because of discriminations which, in practice, occur. People are discriminated against just because they are considered as "women." Therefore, to see what is the border/factor to be seen as "women" which gives rise to discrimination, and to solve such discrimination, they try to see the distinction. That is to say, what kinds of people suffer from gender/sex discrimination. As the author maintains, we should not overlook people who also suffer from that, but not paradigmatic types/traits. So, extremely speaking, in this particular context, is it correct that it would not be their concern at all that people who are very women from many aspects but not having any trouble like, super-rich, high social status, and being able to do whatever they want? —Chateldon

Haslanger says that her analysis makes it at least possible for there to be adult human females who don't count as women because they are not oppressed because of their actual or perceived sex features. However, she says that she doubts that any such people actually exist. Even people like the ones you describe may in some ways be oppressed in the way that she describes, even if this kind of oppression doesn't seem all that bad when compared to people who are also disadvantaged in other ways.

Question about Jenkins' objection to Haslanger

Jenkins takes issue with Haslanger's social concept of a woman's subordination because she feels that transwomen are excluded. In the text, Jenkins presents four different scenarios that a transwoman may find herself in at one point in her life. According to Jenkins, the four scenarios show why Haslanger's concept of a woman being a subordinate class is problematic. However, I don't understand why scenario four is problematic to Haslanger's concept of a woman (400-401). Why does having perceived features of a woman, like long hair, not make a transwoman a woman? Jenkins explanation: "this is because being perceived as having bodily features associated with a female's role in biological reproduction plays no role in how she is viewed and treated by others and therefore cannot be the basis for the subordination she experiences" (401). I don't quite understand Jenkins explanation for scenario four because a transwoman could face subordination for being a woman, being transgendered, or being both. Furthermore, perception and outward appearance seems to have a lot to deal with why women are subordinated, so why do "perceived bodily features" not matter? —Aanisah

On Haslanger's definition, being a woman means being subordinated because of one's actual or imagined "bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction". In scenario 4, since the people interacting with the trans woman in scenario 4 know that her appearance is not evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction, she doesn't count as a

woman by Haslanger's definition. In other words: Haslanger's definition has the surprising consequence that if people know that someone is a trans woman, she can't count as a woman.

I don't understand something in scenario 3 on page 7. What is the point made there? Why would Haslanger's definition be a problem? It doesn't matter whether it's right that 'women' identity should be based upon bodily features associates with cis women or not. In this case, as long as she is perceived as a woman the subordination becomes the background in which she walks through. How is this example telling anything else?' —Loreta

I think Chelsea gives a pretty good answer to this question in the opening part of her response to this reading:

She then goes and provides us with four different scenarios of trans women and its concluded that trans women will only be categorized as women by Haslanger if they fit scenario 3. Under this scenario a trans woman public gender presentation is accepted and respected as she is perceived as female for having bodily features associated with a female. However, there's only two ways for this scenario to be possible, either the trans woman is understood to be cis or she's understood to be trans and is perceived as a woman that has the body features associated with female reproduction, which implicates that there's been some sort of body alteration (surgery, hormones, etc.) that she's gone through. However, the problem comes with the fact that many trans women will most likely never find themselves in this specific scenario, therefore and according to Haslanger, they basically can't be counted as women. —Chelsea

I'll just add that there is something tragic about the idea that the only way that a trans woman could function as a woman, by Haslanger's definition, is if people are actively mistaken about whether she is a trans woman. In order to be a woman, someone would have to successfully hide some of the truth about themselves and their personal history from others. Contrast this with scenario 4, in which a trans woman is accepted as a woman by people who aren't lacking information about them. That sounds like a nice option for trans people who want to have close relationships and share details of their lives with others. But in scenario 4, the person doesn't function as a woman by Haslanger's definition!

I think my main problem with Haslanger's definition is the fact that it's so restrictive. Sadly we live in a world where not fitting in is costly both literally and figuratively. Trans people in this case trans women don't always have the means to be able to take the steps necessary for them to change into their truth selves. At the same time some trans women also don't want to take those certain step, which is also totally fine. Moreover, my dissatisfaction came when it was mentioned that ameliorative inquiry "invites feminists to consider what concept of woman would be most useful in combating gender injustice." To me personally, ameliorative inquiry marginalizes not only trans women but also may other women who mostly belong to other oppressed social groups. —Chelsea

I think that Haslanger would defend herself against this criticism by saying that it misses the point of her project, which is not to formulate a concept of woman that she then endorses. Her point is to come up with a definition of "woman" that allows us to better understand the ways that women are

oppressed. Her end goal, of course, is to eliminate that oppression (and so, as she says, to eliminate women). But, she thinks, in the mean time we'll need a concept of women that doesn't hide the ways that women are currently oppressed, so that we can get a clear picture of what we're trying to fight against. Of course, one of the ways that transwomen are oppressed is by not being allowed to live in accordance with the norms that our society associates with being a woman. So I think Haslanger could say that it is a good thing about her theory that it captures this problem. (And of course, that's why Jenkins basically keeps Haslanger's definition and then argues that we also need another one too.)

Does Jenkins Reinforce the Gender Binary?

I would say Jenkins put out some great points towards 'twin' target concept of woman. She is able to provide various accounts or circumstances a trans woman may 'function' as a woman'. At the same time, I sense she is going in a circle or at least reinforcing the popular binary gender of 'man' and 'woman.' A trans identity should be their own choice- conventional gender or a new identity may even be a third or fourth gender. It seems Jenkin is converting or placing trans woman to a conventional category by assumption. Or did I read it wrong? how is her argument useful or "improved ameliorative analysis" then? —Syeda

This is a common criticism of some strains of trans feminism—that by emphasizing the importance of allowing people to define as either a man or a woman, we reinforce the importance of these categories when we should be downplaying them. Haslanger says that it is her goal to eliminate women, for example. How is that compatible with fighting for trans women's right to be women?

However, there are more expansive strains in trans feminism that celebrate various categories beyond the gender binary, including non-binary, genderqueer, and genderfluid identities. A good thing to read on this topic would be Robin Dembroff's paper, "Beyond Binary: Genderqueer as Critical Gender Identity" ([link here](#)).

Overall I find putting gender as class and gender as identity forward as a twin concept more satisfying than relying on class as primary. Still, I feel more could be said about the nature of identity. While the case of completely misidentifying aspects of female gender identity, like green socks, is brought up and addressed, I feel there needs to be more explanation given to how identity is formed and how it relates to societal norms and what the consequences are when there are disagreements between the two. —Matt

I think Jenkins would totally agree with this, but that it's just not something that she thought that she could fit into the paper. Still, I think her theoretical framework makes space for us to give more of an explanation of the kind you want, because of the way that it links gender identity to social norms. And there is some great work on how social norms arise and evolve out there. (My favorite writers on this topic are Brian Skyrms and Christina Bicchieri.)

Objection to Jenkins

I was thinking about the class of trans-people in general. Although people who are trans want to change their gender identity to belong to either being a man or woman, I think they face unique challenges that aren't present for cisgender people. I think this stigma comes from the fact that they are actively changing their birth gender to become the other, and even if current medical procedures allow a transperson to appear and be recognized as their desired gender, if it were to be revealed, it would cause a different public reaction. In that sense, transpeople never fit exactly into the classes of cis gender men and women, and the challenges might be centered more around the fact that they are trans people.

I think that this is a good point, and one that has sometimes been lodged against transfeminist analyses like this one. It may be that understanding the oppression of trans women requires thinking of trans women as a class that is distinct from the class of women. On the other hand, we should be careful about how far we take this line of thought. For example, black women also face different forms of oppression than white women, but we wouldn't want to conclude that they therefore aren't women. Intersectional feminism is an attempt to understand some of these nuanced complex identities and social classes in ways that don't marginalized sub-groups.

Sex vs. Gender

I thought Jenkins was correct in attempting to define woman in a way that is inclusive to people that identify as trans woman, however, like my issue with Haslanger, both of them did not distinguish between what a female and woman is. I think this may be helpful in inclusion. If we are to model our perspective of what a woman is by Haslanger's criteria, then the social aspect is the highlight and even if that is the main thread through womanhood, it still excluding certain identity groups. I would think that she excluded trans women because of whatever fundamental basis is for being female. I agree with Jenkins that Haslanger's model of womanhood is ambiguous, but I think Jenkins did not consider that inclusion on the basis of identity is sort of subjective like Jenkins's second scenario. Jenkins classifies some trans women in this category as their identity not being respected because they are seen as "a man pretending to be a woman". In this case, is this trans woman oppressed or subjugated because of the fact that she wants to identify as a woman or rather, is she oppressed because she is a man who wants to be identified as woman? This scenario is not justified to me as a reason to be included in the concept of woman.

I think both Haslanger and Jenkins are trying to focus only on gender and bracket issues about the metaphysics of sex because they can't fit a theory of both of those things into a single essay. As I have been advising people about their term papers, it's important not to try to solve every problem in a single essay!

You make a good point about Scenario 2. It does seem a bit strange to say that the person in that situation is oppressed in anything like the ways that women are oppressed.

The nature of identity

I was likewise wondering what makes people feel they are women/men or girls/boys. When we look at our bodies, except for the androgynous or female/male pseudohermaphrodites (Fausto-Sterling) cases, it is easy to see our physical/biological features. Is there any person who is considering if they are humans or lions/dolphins? —Chateldon

This is a good question, although it is somewhat taboo to ask it in certain circles. Jenkins seems to want to avoid it, for example. She says this on p.399:

The thought here is emphatically not that a feminist analysis of woman must “explain” this range of identities, for trans women’s identities do not stand in any special need of “explanation.”

Her worry, I think, is that the things that normally stand in need of explanation are things that are unexpected or peculiar, and she wants to disabuse us of the idea that trans gender identity should be thought of as unexpected or peculiar.

But I take it that your point is that *all* gender identities stand in need of explanation. Why do we have them at all? Why do men’s gender identities work the way that they do, and where do they come from? And trans gender identities are just a special case of this broader question, and not necessarily one that is more confusing or more in need of explanation than the others. I think this is a great point.

I thought the distinction between ‘functioning as a woman’ and ‘being a woman’ to be interesting and imperative to the argument (397). I agree with Jenkins in that Haslanger’s definitions of these concepts lack specific detail. According to the scenarios regarding trans women on 399, ‘functioning’ as woman seems only to mean as being perceived as one by others. This raises a question on the nature of identity itself, as sex/gender/race are all concepts of its regard: is our ‘identity’ a result of our own doing, or is it molded by others/outside events? Where does one’s brain end and others’ projections begin? —Ksenia

I think functioning as a woman, on Haslanger’s definition, requires more than merely being perceived as a woman, although that is an important part of it. It also requires being subject to norms, being treated in certain ways, and so on. By analogy: one can’t be a member of a certain social class merely by being perceived as such. If Leonardo Di Caprio prepares for a role as a homeless person by dressing in a costume and walking through skid row, he might be perceived as a member of the class of homeless people, but that won’t make him one. Haslanger would say the same sort of thing about being a woman, I think.

Your question about where identity comes from is of course a good one (as I just said to Chateldon), and I won’t pretend that I have an answer for you.

How should we interpret people’s gendered physical traits?

Jenkins points out how Haslanger has marginalized trans women to be women only in a secondary or peripheral sense, Haslanger’s definition for women is fitting to look like women on the basis of social gender roles. Not all trans women abide by Haslanger’s notion of women for

they all do not look like socially acceptable women. With this additional spectrum of trans women, it is also part of the spectrum of women. Based on Jenkins's inclusive Amelioration, should society override the notion of assuming someone to be either male or female just by their physical traits, since Jenkins claims that someone who identifies having a female gender identity is a woman? —Raima

I think that both Haslanger and Jenkins (and nearly every other feminist) would agree that we should stop caring so much about people's gendered appearances, and that we should stop making assumptions about people's gender on the basis of their appearance, and that we should give up on the need to constantly organize everyone we see according to their gender.

In a way, the person who made this point most clearly was Frye. For her, the compulsion to constantly advertise one's gender via physical appearance and behavior, and to categorize others on the basis of these things, is literally part of her definition of sexism.

The experiential aspect of gender identity

Are there other philosophers who focus in the experiential aspect of gender identity? I didn't find it here as much as I hoped at the start. Even though gender identity was a big part of the reading (maybe even the main goal), it is somehow logicized so much, it obscures that individual, personal angle. It is constantly put in comparison to/within the social context - which although important, takes something away from it. —Loreta

Right, I think Jenkins is interested in developing a theory and not necessarily focusing on the qualitative aspects of being gendered. There is definitely a lot of philosophical work that delves more deeply into the experience of having a gender identity, though. Perhaps the all-time classic is *The Second Sex*, by Simone de Beauvoir. (It's a bit dated now, given that it was written, but incredibly influential.) de Beauvoir is interested in theorizing too, of course, but as a phenomenologist she is also interested in explaining what it's like to be a woman. (There are many other more contemporary examples too. I can suggest some things if you would like.)