2022

Philosophy and Theology: Gender Ideology

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Philosophy and Theology

In contemporary disputes about the treatment of individuals with gender dysphoria, the discussion often focuses on concrete and practical questions: Should children under eighteen years of age receive treatments that render them permanently sterile? What treatments are effective for reducing the mental health problems associated with gender dysphoria? What treatments reduce the likelihood of suicide for those suffering gender dysphoria? Many such questions are empirical in nature, and others are ethical in nature. We can better think through both kinds of questions by examining the deeper philosophical and theological issues in these debates.

In his essay "Evaluating Arguments for the Sex/Gender Distinction," Tomas Bogardus calls into question one of the most fundamental distinctions of what Pope Francis has called "gender ideology." Bogardus writes, "Many philosophers believe that our ordinary English words *man* and *woman* are 'gender terms,' and gender is distinct from biological sex. That is, they believe womanhood and manhood are not defined even partly by biological sex. This sex/gender distinction is one of the most influential ideas of the twentieth century on the broader culture, both popular and academic."[1]

Bogardus evaluates a number of different arguments for the sex/gender distinction. Upon examination, he believes that each of the proffered arguments ends up failing to justify the now-standard distinction between sex and gender. He writes, "upon investigation, the arguments for the sex/gender distinction have feet of clay. In fact, they all fail." Bogardus then points out, "Philosophers should either develop stronger arguments for the sex/gender distinction, or cultivate a variety of feminism that's consistent with the traditional, biologically-based definitions of *woman* and *man*." This conclusion has significant consequences inasmuch as "if any doctrine

1. Tomas Bogardus, "Evaluating Arguments for the Sex/Gender Distinction," *Philosophia* 48.3 (July 2020): 873, doi: 10.1007/s11406-019-00157-6. All subsequent citations appear in the text.

could be considered orthodoxy in feminist philosophy, it is that there is a sex/gender distinction, i.e. that *woman* and *man* are gender terms that are *not* defined in terms of biological sex" (873, 876, emphasis original).

We might qualify what Bogardus says here by noting that two different questions are at issue: Is there such a thing as the distinction between sex and gender? If there is, do the terms *men* and *women* refer to gender but not to sex? The answer to the second question is linked to the answer to the first question because if there is no real distinction between sex and gender, then *men* and *women* cannot be terms for gender as opposed to terms for sex. Bogardus could be interpreted as holding that there is no distinction between sex and gender. But I think a more charitable reading of his thesis is that there are no sound arguments for the proposition that *woman* and *man* are gender terms that are not defined in terms of biological sex.

Bogardus cites Mari Mikkola, who offers this way of understanding the distinction: "Speakers ordinarily seem to think that 'gender' and 'sex' are coextensive: women and men are human females and males, respectively, and the former is just the politically correct way to talk about the latter. Feminists typically disagree and many have historically endorsed a sex/gender distinction. Its standard formulation holds that 'sex' denotes human females and males, and depends on *biological* features (chromosomes, sex organs, hormones, other physical features). Then again, 'gender' denotes women and men and depends on *social* factors (social roles, positions, behavior, self-ascription)."[2] This quotation slightly misrepresents the view it critiques because *women* in the traditional definition does not include all female human beings inasmuch as little girls and female babies are not women. So, the traditional definition of *woman* (as found, for example, in the *Oxford English Dictionary*) is "adult female human being," rather than just "female human being." Mutatis mutandis, the same holds for *man*.

Many feminist authors hold that *woman* does not refer to an adult female human being, but they disagree about which alternative definition is right. Rival explanations include but are not limited to, as Bogardus summarizes, "Butler's performativity view; Burkett's right-kind-of-experience view; Haslanger's subordination-on-basis-of-sex view; Bettcher's sincere self-identification view; and Jenkins' accepting-enough-of-the-right-kind-of-gender-norms view" (883). Bogardus evaluates a variety of reasons why the traditional, sex-based definition is rejected.

The first argument he considers is the Argument for Resisting Biological Determinism. After citing authors holding this view, he summarizes the position as follows:

> 1. If women are adult female humans—if, that is, women are purely biological entities—then biological determinism is true with respect to women: a woman's social, psychological, and behavioral traits are inevitable, being determined by her biological states.
> 2. Biological determinism with respect to women is false.
> 3. So, women are not adult female humans. And similarly with respect to men. (879)

2. Mari Mikkola, *The Wrong of Injustice: Dehumanization and Its Role in Feminist Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 23, emphasis original, cited in Bogardus, "Arguments for the Sex/Gender Distinction," 874.

Bogardus shows that the first premise of this argument is implausible by substituting "adult female humans" for *women* in the argument. That substitution gives us this following argument:

> 1*. If adult female humans are adult female humans, then biological determinism is true with respect to them: an adult female human's social, psychological, and behavioral traits are inevitable, being determined by her biological states.
>
> 2*. Biological determinism with respect to adult female humans is false.
>
> 3*. So, adult female humans are not adult female humans. (880)

The logical form of this argument is valid; the conclusion follows logically from the premises. But the self-contradictory conclusion is obviously false. So, one or both of the premises leading to this conclusion must be false. We ought, Bogardus reasons, reject the first premise and hold instead that to be an adult female human being is not enough to make biological determinism true. But if this rejection of the first premise is good enough for "adult female human beings," then it is also good enough for *women*.

There may be another way of reaching the same conclusion. Human beings are biological creatures, but they are biological creatures of a certain kind. They are not just any kind of animal. Human beings are rational animals. But what makes rational animals distinctive is their reason and will.[3] The reason of rational animals allows them to transcend mere sense perceptions and understand that although steam and ice look to the eyes and feel to the touch as if they were different things, they are actually both forms of H_2O. Likewise, the wills of human persons allow them to transcend mere biological impulses, drives, and desires so that they can fast when hungry. As James Reichmann points out, the human person is among all animals the least determined to a particular mode of life.[4] And so, biological determinism for human beings is false. Indeed, Bogardus notes that feminists rejected biological determinism long before they invoked the sex/gender distinction. Given that we can reject biological determinism on other grounds, we don't need the sex/gender distinction to come to this conclusion.

Taking up another way of critiquing the tradition definitions of *men* and *women*, Bogardus summarizes the views of other feminists in the Argument from Biologically Intersex People and Vagueness:

> 7. If *man* and *woman* are sex terms, then any adult human is either clearly a man or clearly a woman and not both.
>
> 8. But some adult intersex people are neither clearly men nor clearly women.
>
> 9. So, *man* and *woman* are not sex terms. (882)

Bogardus focuses attention on the major premise, "If *man* and *woman* are sex terms, then any adult human is either clearly a man or clearly a woman and not both." But why should we think this is true? We can hold that there is a difference between

3. The question of nonhuman animal intelligence is interesting and important. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).

4. James B. Reichmann, *Philosophy of the Human Person* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1985), 101.

a totally bald man and a man with thick hair without denying that there are some men who fall somewhere between the extremes of balding. Day is not night, and night is not day, but there are also twilight and dawn. Biology, notes Bogardus, is shot through with vagueness.

Moreover, if vagueness is an argument against using *man* and *woman* as sex terms, this critique applies to an even greater extent to using them as gender terms. The ambiguity of sex is modest in comparison to the ambiguity of gender. Bogardus reasons, if greater vagueness does not discredit the revisionist gender definition of *man* and *woman*, why should less vagueness discredit the terms' traditional sex definition? He notes, "In fact, by believing in *both* sex *and* gender categories as distinct, and by adding more gender categories that are less well-defined, gender revisionism piles vagueness upon vagueness. It compounds the problem. So, if vagueness is a cost, gender revisionism has a higher price than do the traditional definitions of *man* and *woman*" (883, emphasis original). Indeed, with a legion of sixty-eight genders and counting, growing vagueness appears to be multiplying the price.[5] So, we should not reject understanding *men* and *women* as sex terms on account of vagueness.

Bogardus considers another justification for rejecting the traditional definition of *women* and *men*, which he calls the Argument from the Normativity of Gender. After citing authors, he summarizes their views as follows:

> 10. Gender properties like *being a man* and *being a woman* entail how one ought to be. They have normative implications.
> 11. Biological properties like *being an adult human male* and *being an adult human female* do not entail how one ought to be. They have no normative implications.
> 12. So, gender properties cannot be identical with biological properties. In particular, the traditional definitions of *woman* and *man* cannot be true. (884)

Bogardus calls into question premise 11, "Biological properties like *being an adult human male* and *being an adult human female* do not entail how one ought to be." Bogardus holds that if we know an individual is an adult male human being, then we know too that we ought not to enslave that individual. If we know an individual is an adult female human being, we can know also that we should not torture her.

Here I think Bogardus's argument needs further support because there are indeed philosophers who think that knowing that an individual is an adult human being tells us nothing about his or her moral status. Consider, for example, the view that for individual human beings to be persons, they must be aware of and value their own existence. The distinction between mere human beings on the one hand and persons with value on the other is a commonplace of defenses of abortion. Biology is indeed no part of morality in the minds of these authors. For reasons I've explored at length elsewhere, I think we should reject these views.[6]

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5. Mere Abrams and Sian Ferguson, "68 Terms That Describe Gender Identity and Expression," Healthline, updated February 9, 2022, https://www.healthline.com/health/different-genders.
6. Christopher Kaczor, *The Ethics of Abortion: Women's Rights, Human Life, and the Question of Justice*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2022).

In fact, the idea that biological properties have no normative implications is rejected even by those who have a Lockean view of persons as constituted by self-awareness. For example, thinkers like Peter Singer hold that the ability to suffer entitles an individual to equal consideration. To be able to suffer is a biological property. A biological property (sentience) has normative implications for the utilitarian; such properties also have normative significance for the Aristotelian.

Indeed, not just biology but the distinct biological realities of males and females may be important for ethics. For example, the evolutionary biologist David Buss argues that men and women differ in terms of the prioritization that they give different characteristics when looking for a mate and exhibit different mating strategies.[7] Men can father children even in old age, so from the perspective of potential fertility, the age of a man is less important than the age of a woman, whose fertility is tied to youth. The facts that women can get pregnant, give birth, and nurse babies are also relevant biological truths that have ethical import. Biological facts such as these shape, through evolutionary pressures, what men and women look for in a marriage partner. Men and women alike value intelligence and friendliness. But on average men and women differ in terms of how they value other characteristics. Authors of an article in the *Journal of Psychological Science* surveyed men and women in forty-five countries and found, "Support for universal sex differences in preferences remains robust: Men, more than women, prefer attractive, young mates, and women, more than men, prefer older mates with financial prospects."[8] Some scholars have theorized that these differences are the result of patriarchal oppression. If this were lessened, they theorized, these differences would be reduced. However, these male–female differences do not in fact lessen in Nordic countries, where there is greater gender equality.[9] These facts are relevant for considering the ethics of various acts, including the ethics of cohabitation.

Imagine the case of Kristi and John. Although they were thinking about marriage, they decided instead to move in together when they were twenty-five years old. They lived together for seven years. At thirty-two they break up, and each begins looking for a new partner to marry. Over the course of these years, John went from being a graduate student making $15,000 a year to a tenure-track professor making $75,000 a year. He is now a more eligible bachelor than he was before, having more maturity, increased stability, and a greater ability to provide for a family than he did seven years ago. He has increased his value on the marriage market. Kristi is not as young and beautiful as she was seven years ago. Given widespread male preferences for youth and beauty in a marriage partner, she is now less eligible. Relative to where

7. David M. Buss and David P. Schmitt, "Mate Preferences and Their Behavioral Manifestations," *Annual Review of Psychology* 70 (January 4, 2019): 77–110, doi: 10.1146/annurev-psych-010418-103408.
8. Kathryn V. Walter et al., "Sex Differences in Mate Preferences across 45 Countries: A Large-Scale Replication," *Psychological Science* 31.4 (April 2020): 408, doi: 10.1177/0956797620904154.
9. See Lingshan Zhang et al., "Are Sex Differences in Preferences for Physical Attractiveness and Good Earning Capacity in Potential Mates Smaller in Countries with Greater Gender Equality?" *Evolutionary Psychology* 17.2 (April–June 2019), 1474704919852921, doi: 10.1177/1474704919852921.

they began in the marriage market before cohabitation, he is better off, and she is worse off. Facts such as these seem relevant for evaluating cohabitation, especially for ethical systems that (claim to) put the well-being of women front and center. Ethics cannot be a fact-free enterprise, and that includes biological facts about sex differences between male and female adult human beings.

What are other reasons given to reject the traditional definitions of *men* and *women*? Bogardus explores the Argument from Thought Experiments, which he summarizes as follows:

> 13. If gender is identical with biological sex, then: if I were to discover that I had XX chromosomes, then I would be a woman [having thought I was a man].
> 14. But I would not be a woman even if I were to discover that I had XX chromosomes.
> 15. So, gender is not identical with biological sex. (886)

One problem with this argument, according to Bogardus, is found in premise 13, which reduces biological sex to chromosomes. The advocate of the traditional definition need not make this reductive claim. Biological sex can be considered in terms of the size of gametes the body is oriented to producing: males produce smaller gametes (sperm) than females (eggs). Or biological sex could be considered to be a combination of factors, including hormone levels, gamete size, chromosomes, primary sex characteristics, and secondary sex characteristics.

But we could also offer another criticism of premise 14, "I would not be a woman even if I were to discover that I had XX chromosomes." Let's assume that we had a more sophisticated and accurate determination of what makes a man or a woman, understood biologically. Why could I not be mistaken about my identity? I may think I am the kind of person who can bench press two hundred fifty pounds, but it could turn out I am mistaken. Premise 14 seems to presuppose that I am infallible in matters of self-identification. But I am not infallible about any matter, including matters of self-identification. Nor am I unique in not being infallible. Most people think that they have above-average driving ability, but this is mathematically impossible. So, identifying as an above-average driver, as the smartest person in the room, or as a person who can bench press two hundred fifty pounds does not make it so. Indeed, the increasing frequency of detransitioning suggests that individuals not only can be mistaken but often are mistaken about their gender identity. Either detransitioners were mistaken initially in transitioning or they are mistaken in detransitioning. But in either case, they were not infallible, and they suffer greatly.[10]

Bogardus offers a significant contribution to ongoing debates about whether *woman* should be defined as "adult female human being" and *man* should be defined as "adult male human being." He examines several arguments against these traditional definitions and finds them all deficient. In so doing, he has called into question a fundamental axiom of gender ideology.

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10. See, for example, Suzy Weiss, "The Testosterone Hangover," *Common Sense*, April 19, 2022, https://bariweiss.substack.com/p/the-testosterone-hangover?s=r.