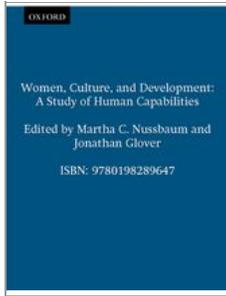


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Women, Culture, and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities

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Note on the Value of Gender-Identification

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Abstract and Keywords

Engaging with Susan Wolf's question of what role the concept of gender ought to play in an ideal world, Korsgaard argues that gender does not and should not be a deep fact about the identity of human beings. Presumption of shared attributes, shared history, and shared fate, according to Korsgaard, regards where we, as human beings, stand in history, not about our nature. While it is especially difficult to not identify as women and men in a time when feminism is a central part of recent history, Korsgaard believes that with the achievement of equality, human beings will move on and share in non-gender-identified tasks.

Keywords: attributes, equality, gender, history, identity, nature

In the course of this conference Susan Wolf raised the question of what role we should like to see the concept of gender playing in an ideal world, perhaps the future world. Could the fact of gender play a far more restricted role in our lives than it does now? As Cass Sunstein put it, could being male or female matter as little to a person as having blue eyes or brown ones? And if it did, would we have lost something of value? Would it be better or worse to live in a world where gender mattered little to the sense of one's identity?

Martha Chen and Margarita Valdés reminded us that such questions, almost science-fictional in their remoteness from the situation even of 'developed' nations, have little to do with the problems of women in the Third World. For these women, progress often depends on getting those in power to focus on the differences between men and women, and on drawing attention to the special features of women's lives. Ruth Anna Putnam reminded us that this is true even in our own society: medical research, for instance, in taking men's bodies to be the basic human bodies, has neglected women's health. But this of course is not because either developing or developed societies have ignored *gender*. It is because they have ignored *women*. That is another matter altogether.

Despite its remoteness, Susan's question is an important one for anyone considering the situation of women anywhere because it gives voice to a concern that so many people feel. In seeking absolute equality, are feminists seeking the elimination of differences? This is not just a worry on the part of men with vested interests. Many people of both genders feel as if their gender were a deep fact about their identities, as if being male or female were something important to them, and therefore as if feminism might be asking them to give up something important.

I do not believe that gender has to be or should be a deep fact about the identity of a human being. To see why, we need to consider what is involved in having a gender. As far as I can see, there are five aspects to gender-identity as it has traditionally been conceived. (1) One is supposed to share certain qualities or attributes with the other members, or at least most of the other members, of one's gender. (2) The members of a gender are assigned certain tasks, for which these attributes supposedly make them especially well suited. (3) The members of a gender are subject to a certain gender ideal. Gender ideals are supposed to be associated with gender-correlated attributes: a perfect woman is a woman who exhibits the special (p.402) attributes of women (or at least the positive ones) to a high degree. It will follow that she is especially well suited for the tasks assigned to women. (4) Gender is supposed to be a determinant of sexual orientation, and also to define what it is that one is oriented towards. And (5) because of all these things, the members of a gender have a shared history and shared experiences, creating special bonds among them.

It all starts with the presumption of shared attributes. Many differences in physical, mental, psychological, and moral attributes have been correlated with differences in gender. Popular discussions of feminism have focused very heavily on the question whether any of these correlations actually exist, and, if they do, whether they are natural or the product of socialization. Although I think that many of the claims about natural correlations are nonsense, I also think that for most purposes it is not important to establish this point. Even if there are differences naturally correlated with gender, they are so correlated only statistically and on the average. No one can deny *or ever has denied* that there are *some* women who are physically large and strong, talented at mathematics or political leadership, hopeless at dealing with children, or tasteless in matters of appearance. No one can deny *or ever has denied* that there are *some* men who are sensitive to the feelings of others, naturally inclined to nurture, mechanically inept, or devoid of physical courage. The rough statistical character of the correlation of other attributes with gender holds even for the one kind of correlation that we know exists naturally, the correlation between gender and other physical differences. There are after all flat-chested women, and men with ample hips; there are women with moustaches, and men without body hair; there are very tall women and very short men. Even if there are norms of gender, there are individuals who deviate from those norms.

According to an old quip, Christianity has not been tried and found too difficult, but rather has been found too difficult and so not tried. Despite some currently popular claims about the bankruptcy of the Enlightenment, I believe that this is true of Enlightenment ideals. Communitarians, champions of the family, and the promoters of ethnic and gender-identification may suppose that they have somehow discovered that the ideal of the sovereign individual is inadequate for human flourishing. But the truth is that many of them have simply balked when they realized how different a world that respects that ideal would have to be from the one we live in now. The centrality of gender is one of the things that would have to go.

Even if members of genders do tend to be alike, there are individuals who are different. If the genders are treated differently, these individuals will be treated wrongly. By Kantian standards the argument is over: it does not matter whether these individuals are many or few. No important attributes other than the biologically definitive ones are universally shared by the members of a gender: the tasks of life therefore cannot properly be distributed along gender lines. Tasks can be distributed according to taste and (p.403) ability directly; there is no need for gender membership to mediate that process. And whenever individuals deviate very far from gender norms, gender ideals become especially arbitrary and cruel. Human beings are fertile inventors of ways to hurt ourselves and each other, and gender ideals are one of our keenest instruments for the infliction of completely factitious pain. People are made to feel self-conscious, inadequate, or absolutely bad about having attributes that in themselves are innocuous or even admirable. Of course this is by no means all that is wrong with gender ideals. As they stand they contain elements that are not just difficult for some to live up to but impossible for anyone to meet. Women are supposed to have an almost magical ability to comfort the afflicted, to say the right words or make the right gesture. Men are expected to possess a high degree of completely instinctive sexual know-how. The absurd idea that people are supposed to be born knowing how to handle some of the most delicate and complex matters of human life creates a lot of unnecessary anxiety. It also stands in the way of people making the needed efforts to learn.

Shared history and the sense of a shared fate is another matter. This is the feature of gender-identification that many people find most attractive. Indeed, human beings will always both identify with and value the company of those whose lives are like their own. Perhaps the experiences of pregnancy, giving birth, and early child-care will always be a bond among women who have children, as Nancy Chodorow suggested in our discussion. But these are bonds among mothers, not among women, and not every woman is a mother. The shared history of women is largely a product of growing up under the same oppressive gender ideals, being assigned the same tasks, and having the same presumptive sexual orientation. The identification produced by this shared history will disappear to the extent that more arbitrary features of gender-identification are abolished from our lives.

I say 'to the extent' because I do not want to make assumptions about whether all of the features of gender-identification can or should be abolished. One feature of gender-identification about which I have said little so far is the familiar pair of assumptions that there is such a thing as sexual orientation towards one of the genders and that it is determined by the gender that one has. Homosexuals accept the first of these assumptions but challenge the second; theoretically it is possible to challenge them both. What would our social world look like without them? Lately we have made some progress in our treatment of homosexuals, in the sense that enlightened people are now committed to putting an end to the grosser forms of discrimination against them. But certainly their condition is still treated by society as deeply exceptional. To speak rather abstractly, our social world has mechanisms intended both to facilitate erotic life and to keep erotic forces from breaking out in the wrong place. The public culture of romance, the practices of dating, engagement, and marriage, our gender-based (p.404) traditions in clothing and cosmetics, and the restrictions on who can share washrooms, public dressing rooms, and dormitory rooms are all institutions designed to handle eroticism, with the double aim of making it possible while regulating its form. And all of our institutions for handling eroticism do so on the assumption that people, or most people, are heterosexual, and that therefore that is the form of eroticism which is to be facilitated and where necessary contained. One worry that is sometimes rather apologetically voiced by heterosexual men is that if gender plays a diminished role in human life, eroticism may play a diminished role as well. It is hard to believe that there is any serious danger of that, but there is a related worry which is real. One might well wonder whether and how we can create a public culture of eroticism that depends less than the one we have now on rigid assumptions about gender itself, and perhaps also about the relationship between gender and sexual orientation. No one yet has a concrete picture of institutions which could provide erotic life with a public surface that does not depend heavily on gender, and this blank spot in the imagined scene may well induce a certain fearfulness. But after all, it is not as if our old institutions have been doing a *good* job either at curbing unwanted erotic aggression or at facilitating erotic flourishing. At present we know little about these matters. That may well be a reason for optimism.

The sense of a shared history with the members of one's gender will disappear only if and when other features of gender-identification are long gone. It is the remoteness of this prospect that makes the diminishment of gender-identification seem so science-fictional. As long as the recent history of the two genders is different, gender will of course remain an important part of our identities. And feminism itself is a central part of our own recent history. What woman, living now in the parts of the world where feminism is taking hold, could say that it is unimportant to her sense of herself that she is a woman? The adventure of making changes, breaking down barriers, being the first to penetrate various inner sancta, creates a strong bond among contemporary women. This may make it *especially* hard for us to imagine a world in which gender is not deeply constitutive of identity. But this is a fact about where we stand in history, not about our nature. There are other tasks for human beings to perform and so to share. With luck we will move on.

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