



Gendering Before Gender



Plan of Talk

1. A Common Assumption
2. An Alternative to the Common Assumption
3. A Possible Motivation for the Alternative
4. A Possible Drawback of the Alternative

1. A Common Assumption

Common Question:

What does it mean to say 'S is a woman', or 'S is a man', or 'S is nonbinary'?

1. A Common Assumption

'Informative' means going beyond:

'S is a woman' is true if, and only if, S is a woman.

This is true, but doesn't give us any more understanding than we originally had.

The Common Assumption is that we are looking for truth-conditions that explain gender in some sense.

1. A Common Assumption

The Common Assumption implies a certain order of priority:

The act of gendering

= Speaking or thinking of someone as a man, woman, nonbinary, etc.

is to be analysed in terms of the facts of gender

= Individuals having some properties (intrinsic or relational, social or biological) that make certain genderings true

2. An Alternative to the Common Assumption

I'm interested in rejecting the Common Assumption:

- Statements like 'S is a woman' have no informative truth-conditions.
- 'S is a woman' is true iff S is a woman, but that's as much as we can say regarding truth.
- That doesn't mean these statements are meaningless or opaque.
- Their meaning lies in doing something (gendering), not in asserting a truth-evaluable proposition.

2. An Alternative to the Common Assumption

This reverses the priority of gendering and gender:

- Gendering is the primary phenomenon to analyse.
- There is no objective thing in the world called gender.
- There *are* objective facts that explain the gender system.
- But gender talk does not describe them, it participates in them.

2. An Alternative to the Common Assumption

There are still criteria for gendering, like:

- Gender someone as a woman if they identify as a woman
- Gender someone as a woman if they have XX chromosomes
- Gender someone as a woman if they fit enough of the stereotypes associated with womanhood

But these are separate from the meaning of 'woman'.

Different people might use the term with the same meaning but following different criteria.

2. An Alternative to the Common Assumption

The focus of analysis shifts to the act. What is gendering?

- Haslanger says “it is possible to view our gender [terms as] terminological place-holders marking space for the collective negotiation of our social identities.” (2000, p. 48)
- Bettcher situates gender language in “cultural practices [of] interpretation of the body and self-presentation.” (2013, p.242)
- Dembroff says “attributions of gender [...] set up an interpretive lens through which we evaluate a person’s body, social roles, and gender identity.” (2020, p.11)

* Bettcher, T. M. (2013). Trans Women and the Meaning of ‘Woman’ in *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings*, 6th edition, eds. N. Power, R. Halwani, A. Soble: 233-249.

Dembroff, R. 2020. “Escaping the Natural Attitude About Gender.” *Philosophical Studies*.

Haslanger, S. (2000). “Gender and race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be?” *Nous* 34(1): 31-55.

2. An Alternative to the Common Assumption

I'm not trying to offer a full account here.

The point is to centre our analysis on the act of gendering, not the properties of gendered individuals.

(Contra, e.g., Haslanger)

For convenience, I will use the phrase 'socially categorise': gendering someone is a way of socially categorising them.

(I'm attracted to an expressivist-style analysis, but that's for another talk.)

3. A Possible Motivation for the Alternative

Suppose a person (A) identifies as a man, but was assigned female at birth. They say 'I am a man.'

Two observers, B and C, have the following disagreement:

B says 'A is a man', and does so on the basis of A identifying as a man.

C says 'A is not a man', and does so on the basis of A being AFAB.

3. A Possible Motivation for the Alternative

The Common Assumption suggests an approach:

1. We analyse the meaning of the term 'man'.
2. That reveals which facts have to obtain for 'A is a man' or 'A is not a man' to be true.
3. By comparing that with the facts of the case, we determine which statement is true and which false.

3. A Possible Motivation for the Alternative

Problem: this pushes us towards a dilemma.

Option 1: Semantic Incompetence

Either B or C is not a competent user of the word 'man', and is using it in a way that conflicts with its meaning.

- But this is implausible for fluent speakers using a common word.
- (There are ways to contest this by appeal to semantic externalism, but I'm pessimistic about their success.)

3. A Possible Motivation for the Alternative

Option 2: Compatibilism

Both B and C are using words competently, but their words have different meanings.

They are not really disagreeing: each is correct, given their meaning.

➤ But this requires more neutrality than I'm comfortable with.

Cf. contextualist accounts:

Barnes, E. 2020. "Gender and Gender Terms." *Nous* 54 (3):704-730;

Diaz-Leon, E. (2016). "'Woman" as a Politically Significant Term: A Solution to the Puzzle.' *Hypatia* 31 (2):245-258;

Saul, J. (2012). 'Politically Significant Terms and Philosophy of Language: Methodological Issues', in *Out from the shadows: Analytical feminist contributions to traditional philosophy*, eds. S. Crasnow and A. Superson. Oxford University Press.

3. A Possible Motivation for the Alternative

Here's what the gendering-first approach would say:

- B and C are both competent users of 'man', and both use it with the same meaning: they use it to socially categorise someone into the 'man' category.
- They use different criteria to govern their gendering: one genders people based on self-identification, the other based on AGAB.
- This is not a difference in meaning: nobody is redefining a term, nor are they talking past one another.
- It's a difference in social practice. We judge it on ethical grounds, not metaphysical or semantic grounds.

3. A Possible Motivation for the Alternative

What about truth?

The statement 'A is a man' has only trivial truth-conditions: it is true if A is a man, false otherwise.

- I think B (and A) says something true: they are correct that A is a man.
- I think C says something false: they are incorrect in saying that A is not a man.

In saying this, I do not describe a semantic relationship between words and reality.

I am joining the social practice, aligning myself with with A and B and against C.

4. A Possible Drawback of the Alternative

The gendering-first approach is quite anti-realist about gender.

It says that we affirm some gender-ascriptions and not others because of our values, not because of an objective fact.

This might seem invalidating. That's a cost.

It might also face a version of the Frege-Geach problem. That's a cost.

4. A Possible Drawback of the Alternative

But almost all feminist philosophers of gender make our values central, because gendering has massive social significance.

Some (e.g. Haslanger) say that we should give ameliorative analyses, i.e. choose a meaning based on our values.

Others (e.g. Diaz-Leon) say that the meaning is contextual, but our values can determine the relevant context.

The gendering-first approach is just more direct: it defines gender terms by that significance.