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The Significance of Sexed Bodies: An Analysis of Moira Gatens' "A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction"

By *Anna Gullickson*

In "A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction," Moira Gatens states that some gender theorists accept the "unreasoned, unargued assumption that both the body and the psyche are post-natally passive tabula rasa" (139). Gatens believes the claim is false and failing to recognize its falsity will lead to naïve theories that resocialization or degendering could realistically attain woman's liberation. If the body and mind are considered passive mediators of cultural inscriptions, then unlearning "patriarchy's arbitrary and oppressive codes" could obliterate women's oppression. If femininity is oppressive and learned, then it can and should be unlearned. Yet, Gatens will claim that there is a fundamental connection between sex and gender and that there is a difference between the sexes, and, consequently, she will firmly deny the possibility of degendering. I will outline how Gatens does this and then assess whether or not she is successful.

To fully understand Gatens' claim, we must first understand the currents of feminism that surround her argument. Gatens is a feminist of difference replying to feminists of equality. The feminists of equality, in turn, are responding to claims of essentialism, especially naturalism and biologism. Essentialism posits fixed essences, most importantly for our purposes, for females and males. Naturalism and biologism are forms of essentialism. Biologism claims that biology is what fixes the essence of men and women. Naturalism is similar, but fixes the essence of the sexes in the 'nature' instead of their biology. This is often seen as biology, but can also be seen through theology or ontology, for example.¹ It is not difficult to see how essentialism could and has been used to oppress women. Essentialism is limiting and has been used as an excuse to limit women in unfair ways

throughout time and throughout the world.

One way of rebelling against essentialist claims that oppress women is by expounding a feminism of equality. According to Gatens, feminists of equality claim the equality of males and females not just in terms of equal value (for example, a claim like 'women are just as intelligent as men') but also in terms of sameness. The equality/sameness is secured in this view by claiming that there is no significant difference between men and women. The difference is biology and biology does not affect the subject. Gatens points out three assumptions she finds implicit in this claim: (1) the body and the consciousness are separate, (2) the body and the consciousness are neutral at birth, and (3) the consciousness is what constitutes the subject. So, males and females are different at birth, but only bodily. Since the body is neutral, it cannot affect the consciousness. There is no way, then, that the consciousness of males and females would become different 'naturally;' that is, by anything that is in us. However, observable gender differences do exist. So, it must be something outside of us that forms gender differences, something social/cultural. Culture is certainly contingent and something contingent could not create something necessary, so our genders, too, must be contingent. Thus, the reason that gender differences exist is not that there is an 'essence' to the sexes. Instead, it is a cultural construction applied contingently to the naturally occurring sex differences.

Gatens finds the scientific support for this view coming mainly from the work of Robert J. Stoller, a psychoanalyst. After research with biologically anomalous and 'psychologically disturbed' people, Stoller concluded that, as Gatens puts it, "gender identity is primarily a result of post-natal psychological influences" (141-42). This firmly denied the essentialist claims that the feminists of equality were fighting against. Stoller's research suggested that there is no *one* way women *are*. Whatever gender behaviors women take on are, at the very least, culturally tainted. Probably, and according to these feminists, they are totally determined by culture. Kate Millett is given by Gatens as a representative of these feminists. In her *Sexual Politics*, Millett states: "Psychosexually (e.g. in terms of masculine and feminine, and in contradistinction to male and female) there is no differentiation between the sexes at birth. Psychosexual personality is therefore postnatal and learned."² This belief, coupled with the disadvantage the current arbitrary arrangement of gender identity gives to women, leads Millett to suggest resocialization, according to Gatens. To escape patriarchy's artificial application of gender identities, we should 'unlearn' gender; therefore, the result would be an androgynous people.

Yet, Gatens firmly rejects 'degendering' as a valid strategy. In her opinion, it could never work and the reason these theorists think it will is that their theory is based on a confused distinction and characterization of the body and consciousness. In Gatens' opinion, this confusion underlies all the work of the socialization theorist on sex and gender. Gatens disagrees with two of their first three assumptions—that the body and consciousness are separate and that they are neutral at birth. Gatens' response is that the body and consciousness are neither neutral nor separate in the simple ways the socialization theorists claim and that their account results in behaviorism, which is unacceptable.

The socialization theorists take the sex/gender distinction to be a distinction between the body and the mind/consciousness. Gatens argues that if the subject is split like this into body and consciousness, then how the subject is determined is seen as either by the body or the consciousness, or a mixture. However, both the body and the consciousness are assumed neutral in socialization/equality theory. So, these theorists are left with the cultural environment working on the passive consciousness connected to a passive body. Gatens find the view that the consciousness of the subject is determined by environment to be naively causal. She states, "If we conceive of the body as neutral and passive and of the consciousness as socially determined, then we are at least halfway to a behavioral conception of subjectivity," which is inadequate to account for human behavior (144). Though Gatens does not seem to have a clear picture of what does account for our behavior, she finds the theory of Deutsch promising, which posits:

There is one unitary reality underlying two (or more) distinct levels of theoretical abstraction and that the 'mysterious leap' [from the mind to the body] is actually a leap from one kind of discourse, say the psychological, to another, the physiological. (144)³

Gatens does not develop this idea here and even hints that she wouldn't know how to, but she clearly favors this view over prospects of behaviorism.

Gatens also assures us that the body is not neutral, and she does this without employing essentialism. She does not claim that there is any essence to what it is to be a woman, but she does think that there is something that it means to be a woman. We cannot escape our sex: "Concerning the neutrality of the body, let me be explicit, there is no neutral body, there are at least two kinds of bodies; the male body and the female body.... The subject is always a sexed subject" (145).

We cannot escape our sex because the body and the mind are not distinct from each other in their forming of the subject. The body, from which we cannot escape, constantly affects us. It is embedded in what it means to be the person we are, and is necessarily bound up in our gender. As a result, the same gender behaviors acted out by two subjects of different sexes have different significances both to us and to those around us. Everything we do and think is drenched in the cultural meaning of what it means to be sexed. As Gatens puts it, "Each gesture, attitude, perception, that enters human consciousness, does so charged with significance that relate to all that has gone before" (145). We cannot simply forget or 'unlearn' the past, and this is precisely what resocialization theorists aim to do. They plan to erase these social and personal significances of being a sexed subject. Gatens believes this is impossible. We cannot claim that the development of the identity happens in consciousness and ignore that consciousness is embodied, and that the body has a sex.

This is a compelling critique of degendering. However, this is not surprising: androgyny for the masses is not exactly the most popular tenet of feminism of equality. In fact, I would suggest that most feminists of equality would agree with Gatens that it would never work. It seems that even the sources Gatens highlights that are proponents of degendering are not as enthusiastic about the idea as Gatens makes them out to be. For example, she says Stoller thought that a person's gender identity was *primarily* a result of post-natal psychological influences. It seems that somewhere along the line the 'primarily' was forgotten or ignored. Even Millett, who is Gatens' choice to present of the resocialization theorists, doesn't explicitly suggest degendering in the quote that Gatens offers. Millett say 'one has some cause to admire' it. Perhaps our gender *is* primarily a result of outside influences. Perhaps we *do* have some cause to admire degendering. Gatens does not disprove these claims—she doesn't even attempt it. Gatens argues successfully against the practical application of degendering, but does not do as good a job arguing against its theoretical underpinnings. It is only by proving that the underlying assumptions beneath degendering are false that she can make any headway in explaining the sex/gender distinction, and it is this distinction for which she titles her article and presumably wants to place her emphasis.

For example, she states that feminists of equality that assume a blank slate unwittingly accept the mind/body distinction:

This leads to a conception of the subject of either predominantly (or

wholly) determined by biological forces, i.e. heredity or predominantly (or wholly) determined by the influence of social or familial relations, i.e. environment. Both these positions, the latter being the one that would best characterize resocialisation feminists, posit a naïve causal relation between either the body and the mind or the environment and the mind which commits both viewpoints, as two sides of the same coin, to an a priori, neutral and passive conception of the subject. (144)

But she does not explain why they are committed to this conception of the body and mind. There is nothing in a blank slate philosophy that implies a spurious connection between the body and mind, and Gatens seems to think there is. She also does not explain why accepting a distinction between the body and mind would be a bad thing. Apparently, she finds it naïve, but does not explain why. She also does not defend her claim that behaviorism is naïve.

Even if we accept that these theorists are mistakenly accepting the mind/body distinction, I see no reason that they will think that either the mind or the body is predominantly or wholly constituting the subject. It is not apparent why a mind/body distinction would lead one to believe that either the mind or the body is especially dominant.

Perhaps more importantly, Gatens does not develop a counter theory that sounds any better than the ones against which she is arguing. Basically, all her criticism comes down to this: We're not a blank slate at birth. If we say that we are, then we are lead to behaviorism, and ultimately, that is naïve. As I have shown, I am not convinced by her arguments in this vein. However, even if she is not totally convincing in her criticisms, she could still be persuasive by offering a theory that appears more plausible. Unfortunately, she does only a vague and incomplete job of giving her readers an account of the sex/gender distinction. She alludes to psychoanalysis, and these ideas are intriguing, but she simply does not develop these ideas enough for her reader to judge them fairly. It is impossible to say for sure with only the information that Gatens provides in the article, but it seems possible that the reason that she doesn't offer a positive account in any depth is that she is unsure and that her hunches are leading her toward essentialism, which is very hard to defend. So, instead of treading in essentialist waters, she evades the question.

NOTES

- ¹Grosz, Elizabeth, "A Note on Essentialism and Difference," *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct*, Sneja Gunew, ed., London/New York: Routledge, 1990: 333-335.
- ² Millett, Kate, *Sexual Politics*, London: Abacus, 1971: 30. As quoted by Gatens, op. cit.: 142.
- ³ Ibid.: 144. From Deutsch, F., ed., *On the Mysterious Leap from the Mind to the Body*, New York: IUP, 1973.

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