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

Anna Gullickson '00
Illinois Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev/vol12/iss1/7

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.
©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.
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 by expounding a feminism of equality. According to this view, equality claim the equality of males and females (for example, a claim like 'women are just as equal as men') also in terms of sameness. The equality/sameness claim that there is no significant difference. The difference is biology and biology does not point out three assumptions she finds implicit in the consciousness are separate, (2) the body is neutral at birth, and (3) the consciousness is not. So, males and females are different at birth, but the body is neutral, it cannot affect the consciousness of males and females very similarly; that is, by anything that is in us. However, it does exist. So, it must be something outside the body, something social/cultural. Culture is something contingent could not create something that is essential, too, must be contingent. Thus, the reason we exist is not that there is an 'essence' to the sexes, but because the construction applied continually to the natural body.

Gatens finds the scientific support for this work of Robert J. Stoller, a psychoanalyst. As Gatens puts it, "gender identity is primarily psychological influences" (141-42). This firmly suggests that the feminists of equality were fighting against something that is not observable, something social/cultural. Culture is something contingent could not create something essential.

Millett is given by Gatens as a representative of this view. Millett states: "Psychosexuality and feminine, and in contradistinction to masculinity, is a construction applied continually to the natural body; therefore, the result would be an androgynous..."
The Sex/Gender Distinction," Moira Gatens states theorists accept the “unreasoned, unargued that the body and the psyche are post-natally pas- t. Gatens believes the claim is false and failing to ill lead to naïve theories that resocialization or listically attain woman’s liberation. If the body ed passive mediators of cultural inscriptions, archy’s arbitrary and oppressive codes” could pression. If femininity is oppressive and learned, be unlearned. Yet, Gatens will claim that there ection between sex and gender and that there is e sexes, and, consequently, she will firmly deny erder. I will outline how Gatens does this and ot she is successful.

Gatens’ claim, we must first understand the cur- around her argument. Gatens is a feminist of dif- nts of equality. The feminists of equality, in turn, of essentialism, especially naturalism and biolo- fixed essences, most importantly for our purposes, naturalism and biology are forms of essentialism. ology is what fixes the essence of men and women. It fixes the essence of the sexes in the ‘nature’ This is often seen as biology, but can also be seen ology, for example. It is not difficult to see how is been used to oppress women. Essentialism is ed 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 gend- ers, 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 differ- entiation between the sexes at birth. Psychosexual personality is there- fore postnatal and learned.” 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.

https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev/vol12/iss1/7
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)

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 tow 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 is distinct from each other in their forming of the which we cannot escape, constantly affects us means to be the person we are, and is necessary. As a result, the same gender behaviors acted on separate sexes have different significances both to Everything we do and think is drenched in t' means to be sexed. As Gatens puts it, “Each that enters human consciousness, does so ch: relate to all that has gone before” (145). We ‘unlearn’ the past, and this is precisely what we do. They plan to erase these social and perso: sexed subject. Gatens believes this is impossible. The development of the identity happens in con: sciousness is embodied, and that the body h.

This is a compelling critique of degender: prising: androgyny for the masses is not exa: feminisms of equality. In fact, I would sugge: tent would agree with Gatens that it would not: the sources Gatens highlights that are prop: enthusiastic about the idea as Gatens makes: she says Stoller thought that a person’s gen: result of post-natal psychological influences: line the ‘primarily’ was forgotten or ign.: Gatens' choice to present of the resocializat: suggest degendering in the quote that Gate: some cause to admire’ it. Perhaps our gen: influences. Perhaps we do have some cause: does not disprove these claims—she doesn’: successfully against the practical applicati: do as good a job arguing against its theoretical: proving that the underlying assumptions b: she can make any headway in explaining th: is this distinction for which she titles her place her emphasis.

For example, she states that feminists of: slate unwittingly accept the mind/body dis:

This leads to a conception of the sub...
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 says '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:
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

BIBLIOGRAPHY
Hawkesworth, Mary. “Confounding Gender and Judith A. Howard. 22. 3. (Spiritually...
d by biological forces, i.e. heredity or predomi-
determined by the influence of social or familial
environment. Both these positions, the latter being the
st characterize resocialisation feminists, posit a
on between either the body and the mind or the
mind which commits both viewpoints, as two
oin, to an a priori, neutral and passive conception

ain why they are committed to this conception of
ere is nothing in a blank slate philosophy that
ction between the body and mind, and Gatens
She also does not explain why accepting a distinct-
would be a bad thing. Apparently, she
ot explain why. She also does not defend her
is naïve.
these theorists are mistakenly accepting the
see no reason that they will think that either the
ominantly or wholly constituting the subject. It is/
body distinction would lead one to believe that
body is especially dominant.
ently, Gatens does not develop a counter theory
an the ones against which she is arguing.
comes down to this: We're not a blank slate at
ere, then we are lead to behaviorism, and ultimate-
e shown, I am not convinced by her arguments in
if she is not totally convincing in her criticisms,
e by offering a theory that appears more plausi-
es only a vague and incomplete job of giving her
sex/gender distinction. She alludes to psycho-
ere intriguing, but she simply does not develop
reader to judge them fairly. It is impossible to
ormation that Gatens provides in the article,
the reason that she doesn’t offer a positive
she is unsure and that her hunches are leading
which is very hard to defend. So, instead of tread-
he evades the question.

NOTES
1 Grosz, Elizabeth, “A Note on Essentialism and Difference,” Feminist
Knowledge: Critique and Construct. Sneja Gunew, ed., London/New York:
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

BIBLIOGRAPHY
Alexander, Sally. “Women, Class and Sexual Differences.” Feminism and
The Signs Reader: Women, Gender & Scholarship. Eds. Elizabeth
and Emily K. Abel. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago

Diamond, Milton and H. Keith Sigmundson. “Sex Reassignment at Birth:
A Long Term Review and Clinical Implications.” Archives of
Gatens, Moira. “A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction” A Reader in
Feminist Knowledge. Ed. Sneja Gunew. London/New York:
Glanton, Nuala. “Different Equality: An Interpretation of the
Equality/Difference Debate based on an Alliance between
Postmodernism and Feminism.” Thesis in Women’s Studies.
University College Cork, 1994.

Grosz, Elizabeth. “A Note on Essentialism and Difference.” Feminist

Hawkesworth, Mary. “Confounding Gender.” Signs. Eds. Carolyn Allen
and Judith A. Howard. 22. 3. (Spring, 1997).

https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev/vol12/iss1/7


---

Hasidism: A Study of an American Religious Mover

By Jessica L. Munds

In the early part of this century, Orthodoxy Judaism continues to thrive in America. Many ideas have been of this movement within the Jewish faith. S Wertheimer and Shubert Spero, discuss matters right in American Judaism. Spero concentrates on the yeshiva movement, schools teaching behavior and convey strong ideological indoctrination. Orthodox Jew (88). Wertheimer finds other right, such as the post-World War II economic downturn for Jews to move out of the poorer neighborhoods to be properly educated. During upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, Orthodox Jew because of its strict adherence to traditional values cannot adjust to the changes of society.