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IS CONSCIOUSNESS GENDERED?*

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ABSTRACT

We can ask whether there anything it is distinctively like to be female or male (a question about sex). And we can ask whether there anything it is distinctively like to be feminine or masculine (a question about gender). I think the answer to both these questions is “Obviously yes”. Why yes? And why obviously? Consciousness is gendered, and obviously gendered, because the political realities of what it is like to be masculine, and what it is like to be feminine, are distinctively different. Moreover, consciousness is sexed too, and obviously sexed, because the physical realities of what it is like to be male, and what it is like to be female, are distinctively different. And that is why the answer to our two questions is not just “Yes”, but “Obviously yes”.

Keywords: *consciousness; gender; sex; body; transgender.*

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“What is it like,” a man might ask, “to be a woman?”

“Well, what is it like,” a woman might retort, “to be a man?”

What-is-it-like questions are always intriguing. And, some might add (perhaps the two in this dialogue), impossible to answer. For if a woman could say what it is like to be a man (or vice versa), that would have to mean that she could occupy his very viewpoint on the world. It would mean that his consciousness, his subjective viewpoint, could turn into *her* consciousness.

But how could that happen? My “subjective viewpoint” is not a *literal* viewpoint, like the summit of Arthur’s Seat, that I can occupy, or vacate to let you see the view from there. Nor is consciousness like a virtual-reality headset that anyone can wear. I can’t just hand over to you the eye-goggles and the ear-phones of my experience, so that you can experience as directly as I do what it is like to be me.

But even if my consciousness *was* like a virtual-reality headset that you could just put on, what would you get by wearing it? You wouldn’t get *my* experience. You’d get *your* experience of my experience. But when you asked “what it was like to be me”, that evidently wasn’t what you were after.

“Come to our *musée folklorique* at Artisanal-en-Provence!” say the tourist brochures, “Come and have an authentic experience of life as a French peasant!” “Hmm”, says the philosopher (in her exasperating way). Whatever else a tourist may find to delight her in Artisanal-en-Provence, it seems a good bet that it won’t be *that*. If things go well for her there, she will end up thinking “Wow, so this is what it is like to be an authentic French peasant”. But by definition, this is a thought that would never even occur to an authentic French peasant. At least, not to an *authentic* authentic French peasant.

Despite this line of objection, we should keep hold of an important truth that philosophy has often obscured. This is that at least sometimes others’ consciousnesses, their mental lives, are known to us just by looking and seeing. Since at least Descartes’s time, most philosophers have taken for

granted “the privacy of the mental”. But sometimes mental states are as public as anything else. When you hit your thumb with the hammer I see, directly, that you are in pain. When the cabinet minister staggers out of Downing Street I see, directly, that he is blind drunk. When the school bully humiliates the shy pupil in front of the whole class, her anguished embarrassment is not *private*, as most of her previous mental states were. Being shy, she is a specialist in hiding. But that is precisely her torment as she faces the bully’s jeers: *this* mental state of hers is public, directly visible to everyone.

Connectedly, there is such a thing as vicarious proprioception. As I watch the climber reach for the crucial elusive hold, my finger-muscles clench. When the pianist reaches the last few excruciatingly difficult bars of Chopin’s Nocturne 9.2, I hold my breath in anticipation. When I see a toddler’s parent step on a lego-brick lurking in a patterned carpet, I feel his pain—quite close to literally. In these and many other cases, the mental isn’t private at all; not at least if “private” means “unobservable”. Despite Descartes, when we ask what-is-it-like questions, our questions needn’t always be unanswerable; or even hard to answer.

One classic modern source for what-it-is-like questions is Thomas Nagel’s famous journal article “What is it like to be a bat?” (Nagel 1974). Nagel thinks that it is obviously true that there is *something* it is like to be a bat; there are *facts* about what it is like to be a bat; bats have consciousness, just as we do. But bats and humans have very different kinds of consciousness. So, for example, echolocation plays for bats roughly the function that sight plays for human beings. But even though they are functionally analogous, it seems obvious that there must be differences between the subjective experiences of seeing and echolocating. Or again (I would add; this isn’t in Nagel), bats have a natural urge to take wing and fly through the night sky, scanning it for moths and midges to gobble up as they go. Humans have no such urge; or at least, none of the humans I’ve met have. (Perhaps humans who do feel that urge don’t live long enough to be easy to meet.) Conversely bats, as far as I know, display no natural urge to create works of art, or to fight wars.

These truths about perception (and, as I add, desire) make it a fact that bat consciousness is very different from human consciousness, just as it is a

fact that bat bodies are very different from human bodies. How do the facts about consciousness relate to the facts about bodies? Nagel thinks that this is rather a deep philosophical mystery: a mystery that we might also call “the mind-body problem”. On the one hand, we can’t easily explain how if at all the two kinds of fact are connected. On the other hand, neither can we just deny the existence of either kind of fact. The mind-body problem leaves us scratching our heads. Perhaps it even *should* leave us that way.

Alongside “What is it like to be a bat?”, we might equally ask the two questions I began with: “What is it like to be a man?” and “What is it like to be a woman?” Is there anything that it is *distinctively* like to be a man or a woman, as there is something that it is *distinctively* like to be a bat, or a human (or a dog, or a llama, etc.)? At the level of our consciousness, is there “a man’s world” and “a woman’s world”? Are there two separate realms of consciousness here, each with its own particular flavour?

Sex is distinct from gender; I’ll say how in a moment. So this question also can be divided in two. We can ask whether there anything it is distinctively like to be female or male (a question about sex). And we can ask whether there anything it is distinctively like to be feminine or masculine (a question about gender).

I think the answer to both these questions is “Obviously yes”. Why yes? And why obviously?

There is something it is distinctively like to be male or female, because a crucial—and overwhelmingly obvious—aspect of what it is like to be human is bodiliness. (On this aspect of what it is like to be human, see my *Epiphanies*, 4.4-4.5 (Chappell 2022); on what it is like to be human in general, see the whole of Chapter 4.) Our consciousness of our own bodies is fundamental to nearly all the rest of our consciousness. (There are “out of body experiences”, apparently; but they are exceptional.) The form of our bodies, and our awareness of our bodies from “inside them”, is an essential condition of the form of our phenomenology: *what it is like to be human* is, in key part, *what it is like to have a human body*. (Notice how this point can help us with Nagel’s initial question “What it is like to be a bat?”, and also with Nagel’s further question how facts about bodies relate to facts about consciousness. Notice too how it *can’t* help us with those two questions.)

But male and female bodies differ, and in distinctive ways. As male and female they are typically differently shaped, e.g. in genitalia, in having or lacking breasts, in distribution of body-fat and body-hair, in size, and in musculature. They are subject to different sensibilities: females feel the cold more, males are less good at coping with sleep-deprivation. They are affected by different hormonal secretions, and on different timescales, and these different hormones have different effects on their moods and their inclinations. Very crudely, females (or most of them within a certain age-range) experience the menstrual cycle, while males (same caveat) experience (...) testosterone. Male and female bodies even smell different (I gather this is related to the hormonal differences).

In the case of the sex distinction, male/female, what matters is the physical; in the case of the gender distinction, masculine/feminine, what matters is the political. *Male and female* consciousnesses differ because male and female bodies differ; *masculine and feminine* consciousnesses differ because male and female political roles have differed. So there is something it is distinctively like to be masculine or feminine, because a crucial—and overwhelmingly obvious—aspect of what it is like to be human is political life.

I mean this in a broad sense of “political”. Wherever there are humans, there are power-relations. One foundation of these power-relations is the management of expectation. The task of predicting the behaviour of other humans (whether groups or individuals) is intractably huge. We reduce this task to manageable proportions via conventions and taboos, expectations and reliances, contracts and understandings, traditions and rules. From these, over time, grows ideology.

Central to many of these conventions, etc., is the profiling of other humans. One obvious way to profile them is by their biological sex (actual or perceived). From this, over time, grows the ideology of gender: we build up a story about what kind of social and communal role follows from membership of either biological sex. Our concepts of “masculine” and “feminine” are, precisely, stories of this kind. That such stories can and do encode not only power-relations but also oppression, and that this has been their function throughout history, is obvious from the beginning of our culture.

“But hang on”, some people might object at this point, “consciousness is just subjective awareness of the world! What does *politics* have to do with whether *consciousness is gendered*?” This objection attributes a false—and ideologically-driven—unworldly purity to consciousness. The philosophy of mind is not, *pace* so many of its contemporary exponents, an ethically neutral or ideologically innocent study. The philosophy of mind is a part of “human science”; politics has *everything* to do with it. When Karl Marx popularised the phrase “class consciousness” (ger. *Klassenbewusstsein*), his use of “consciousness” was not a mere homophony. We humans are both physical and political beings: our political condition shapes our awareness of the world as surely as our physical condition.

I remember visiting Bulgaria in the Soviet era, and being forcibly struck by the difference in people’s body-language from how people held themselves in England:² the bowed shoulders, the refusal to meet each other’s eyes, the way even a walk across a railway-station concourse was a kind of furtive sidle, the constant sideways and backwards vigilance for the police—whose body-language was completely different from everyone else’s: it was the strutting, shameless, crotch-first body-language of the cock of the walk, the school bully again. It sounds clichéd to say that when you live under a tyranny you are constantly watching your back; but it is the literal truth. The reality of ubiquitous surveillance charges your whole experience with a sense of vulnerability, exposure, *nakedness*. During my short time passing through communist Sofia, I not only noticed how everyone else was, literally, watching their backs; I found myself doing it too.

² Cf. George Orwell on anarchist Barcelona in 1936, in *Homage to Catalonia*, Ch. 1 (Orwell 1938): “When one came straight from England the aspect of Barcelona was something startling and overwhelming. It was the first time that I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle. Practically every building of any size had been seized by the workers and was draped with red flags or with the red and black flag of the Anarchists (...). Every shop and café had an inscription saying that it had been collectivised; even the bootblacks had been collectivised and their boxes painted red and black. Waiters and shop-walkers looked you in the face and treated you as an equal. Servile and even ceremonial forms of speech had temporarily disappeared. Nobody said ‘Señor’ or ‘Don’ or even ‘Usted’; everyone called everyone else ‘Comrade’ and ‘Thou’, and said ‘Salud!’ instead of ‘Buenos días’. Tipping was forbidden by law since the time of Primo de Rivera; almost my first experience was receiving a lecture from a hotel manager for trying to tip a lift-boy. There were no private motor-cars, they had all been commandeered, and all the trams and taxis and much of the other transport were painted red and black. The revolutionary posters were everywhere, flaming from the walls in clean reds and blues that made the few remaining advertisements look like daubs of mud. Down the Ramblas, the wide central artery of the town where crowds of people streamed constantly to and fro, the loudspeakers were bellowing revolutionary songs all day and far into the night (...).”

Consciousness is not a mere bloodless abstraction: it is, among other things, politically charged. Nor is oppression a mere abstraction: for the oppressed, it shapes every aspect of how they see their environment, the obstacles and the affordances, the threats and the opportunities, in their way. To transpose a remark of Wittgenstein's (*Tractatus* 6.43), the world of the oppressed person *is a different world* from the world of the free person.

All of this applies as much to oppression via the category of gender as it does to class oppression. Consider Homer, *Iliad* 1.431-450 (my translation):

Odysseus came to Chryse with his sacrifice.
Once they were in the deep harbour, then his sailors
took down the sail and stowed it within the black ship (...)
then disembarked and walked ashore through the surf,
bringing the oxen to be offered to Apollo;
and out of the ship there also stepped Chryseis.
Led to the altar by Odysseus of the wiles,
back in her father's hands, she heard him speak:
"Agamemnon lord of men has sent me, Chryses,
to give you back your child, and to sacrifice
a hundred oxen to appease Apollo,
to stop the wide-wept woes he's brought the Greeks."
He spoke and gave her up, and Chryses had back
his daughter, his delight. Swift then for sacrifice
they placed the beasts about the firm-built altar,
with pure hands took the sacred barley up.
And Chryses raised his arms in prayer for them (...).

Chryseis was captured in war by the Greek field-marshal Agamemnon, and became his slave-girl. Her father, the priest Chryses, begged Agamemnon to return her to him. Agamemnon rudely dismissed Chryses' request; the god Apollo disapproved and sent a plague on the Greek army. So now, to appease Apollo and end the plague, Agamemnon sends Odysseus as his envoy to return Chryseis to her father.

The transaction that is going on in the present translation is essentially one between the war-lords Agamemnon and Achilles, neither of whom is even present. The transaction is about Chryseis, but she herself is just a piece

of property; she has no more standing to speak in this transaction than do the oxen that are brought along with her. (We can do the ideology of the “human”/ “animal” distinction another time.) In Homer’s text, she does not even have her own name, any more than do the cattle that she travels with: “Chryseis” is a patronymic not a proper name, meaning no more than “daughter of Chryses” (which in turn apparently just means “man of Chryse (the place)”). It takes a scholiast on Homer (a scholar annotating the margins of the manuscript) to tell us that she even had a name of her own, a name that wasn’t just a derivative of her father’s name, and that her own name was Astynome.³

Before the events described in the quotation, Chryseis (/Astynome) has watched one man, Agamemnon, kill her family and neighbours, burn her city down, rape, enslave, and imprison herself. Now she watches another man, Odysseus, hand her back to a third man, her own father. And through all of this she herself *never says a word*. She does indeed keep what Pat Barker, in the title of a wonderful recent novel about just these Homeric transactions, calls *The Silence Of The Girls*.

This is a world where, on the basis of the masculine/feminine gender distinction, half the human species is treated as subservient to the other half. It is a world where the reality of women as human people, and as conscious experiencers, is close to completely erased. It is a world of war and violence; a world of religiously-sanctioned pillage and rape, and the fetishisation of possession and status. It is a world (as Simone Weil so well sees in her famous essay “*The Iliad as poem of force*”) that is built upon the possibilities for violence that are present in the human body. And I agree with Weil, against Nietzsche, that this vision of the world as a terrible place of violence and oppression, a place where force turns its victim into a thing, is a vision which is to be wept over not (as Nietzsche thought) celebrated.

[U]ne telle accumulation de violences serait froide sans un accent d’inguérissable amertume qui se fait continuellement sentir, bien qu’indiqué souvent par un seul mot, souvent

³ Latinised as Cressida, Chryseis’ name was transferred to a quite different character in the Middle Ages: Shakespeare’s Cressida is drawn, via Chaucer and Boccaccio, from Benoît de Sainte-Maure’s twelfth-century *Roman de Troie*, and has little or nothing to do with Homer’s Chryseis.

même par une coupe de vers, par un rejet. C' est par là que l' *Iliade* est une chose unique, par cette amertume qui procède de la tendresse, et qui s' étend sur tous les humains, égale comme la clarté du soleil.

The *Iliad's* world is the world of the patriarchy. (Or *a* world of the patriarchy, one version of that world.) There is simply no possibility, in such a world, that masculine and feminine consciousnesses, men's and women's subjective experiences of that world, could be *anything but* different.

Consciousness is gendered, and obviously gendered, because the political realities of what it is like to be masculine, and what it is like to be feminine, are distinctively different. Moreover, consciousness is sexed too, and obviously sexed, because the physical realities of what it is like to be male, and what it is like to be female, are distinctively different. And that is why the answer to our two questions is not just “Yes”, but “Obviously yes”.

At this point I predict that I will face two objections: one (so to speak) from the right, and the other from the left. The right-wing objection will be about what I have just said about masculine/ feminine and political oppression. It will be: “But that was *Homer's* time. You can't argue that gender is oppressive *now* by pointing out that it was oppressive *then!*” The left-wing objection, by contrast, will be about what I said earlier about male/female and physical difference, and it will be: “Wow, innate differences between males and females on the basis of their bodies? What a sexist you are”.

To the objection from the right, my answer is that gender is an ideology that oppresses people in our society as surely as it did in *Homer's*—though, to be sure, the oppression is much less extreme now than it was then. The objection is quite right to draw our attention to the fact of historical change: a fact that is always relevant when thinking about politics, but all too apt to go missing when we are doing philosophy. People don't always manage to notice that ethics is a study that is conditioned by history and politics. Even when they do notice that, they are still (as I said before) very prone to make the mistaken assumption that, in contrast to ethics, philosophy of mind is an apolitical study. Our inquiries into a question like “Is consciousness gendered?” can easily be undermined by this mistake.

There isn't a timeless fact of the matter that answers this question: gender is ideological and political, and ideologies and politics change. So even if consciousness is in fact always gendered, there are different *ways* for it to be gendered, corresponding to those different political and ideological possibilities. And since ideology is not always equally bad or harmful—since some ideology, indeed, is not harmful at all—it becomes possible for us to ask the question what a *benign* ideology of gender might look like. Are there ways of keeping the, or a, masculine/feminine distinction in our society that are not harmful, that are perhaps even positively beneficial? Yes, I think so. To ask whether *ideology* is always bad is, in a way, to ask whether *politics* is always bad; whether it is even possible to have a more or less harmless politics. Despite some bitter experience, I am not entirely pessimistic about this possibility. But I just note it; I won't here try to explore it any further.

I turn to the objection from the left. This is the objection that it is sexist to say, as I have said, that consciousness is not only gendered but also sexed, because there are physical differences between males and females. My answer is: Not at all, *provided* we notice that the male/female distinction is not the only axis of physical difference that we might observe among human bodies. As well as distinguishing human bodies as male/female, we can also distinguish them as old/young, well/ill, fat/thin, strong/weak, able-bodied/disabled, and in many other ways as well. If my question had been “Is human consciousness modified by health/illness?”, my answer to that too would have been “Yes, obviously”. If it had been “Is consciousness modified by age?”, the same again. Likewise for fat/thin, strong/weak, and all sorts of other bodily distinctions that we might draw as well.

In all of these respects I am simply following out the logic of my own argument. I started by saying that a crucial determinant of human consciousness or subjectivity is our experience of our own bodiliness: what it is like to be a human being is determined, in key part, by what it is like to have a human body. But there are many different *kinds* of human body. For very many of the particular kinds of human being that we distinguish by reference to their bodies, what it is like to be a human being of that kind has a distinctive nature, determined by reference to the kind of body in question. *One* of the distinctions we make about human bodies is, of course, male/female. But *only* one. What prompts the allegation of sexism here is the perception that I have said that the male/female distinction is

the single key distinction that we make among human bodies. But I haven't said that. I didn't say that at any point; and what I have just said is an explicit denial of it.

Let me say it again: there are lots of ways of distinguishing among human bodies; the male/female distinction is just one of those many distinctions; to take this to be *a* distinction is both natural and reasonable; to take it to be *the only distinction that matters* is neither inevitable nor even correct. It is, in fact, a dangerous piece of ideology, and one that has been absolutely crucial to the process whereby the physical distinction male/female has normally been deployed to rationalise the political distinction masculine/feminine. According to the ideology of gender that still dominates our world today, biology itself vindicates the idea of a world that is and must be *authoritatively and definitively binarily divided* between the masculine and the feminine. But biology itself does no such thing. Biology certainly recognises *a* distinction between the male and the female bodies; but biology also recognises distinctions between rhesus-positive and rhesus-negative bodies, left-handed and right-handed bodies, tall bodies and short bodies, and so on as above. Which of these distinctions between body-types we choose to foreground, and which to pass over as less important or not important at all, is not a *biological* decision; it is a political one.

My question has been: "Is consciousness gendered, differentiated by the masculine/feminine distinction?" My answer is "Yes; and consciousness is sexed too, differentiated by the male/female distinction". But it is also differentiated in lots of other ways by lots of other distinctions. Which of these distinctions we decide to treat as more or less important is not settled by biology. It is settled by us.

As a postscript: there is another distinction that you might expect me to make here, at least if you happen to know a bit about me personally. This is the cis/trans distinction, the distinction between those who are transgender and those who are not. We have been asking whether consciousness is gendered. What about whether it is *transgendered*? Is there, in other words, anything that it's specifically and distinctively like to be transgender?

Speaking as a trans woman, my answer is "Yes, there most certainly is". To be transgender is to stand in a *very* distinctive relation both to the masculine/feminine divide, and to the male/female divide. As I experience

it, it is to find myself at odds with both those classifications. My own story is about finding myself classified both as masculine and as male when what feels right and natural to me, and what I want for myself, is to be classified on the other side of both distinctions—as feminine, and as female. This is certainly a story about finding, among many other things, that my consciousness has a particular and distinctive quality that clearly isn't there in other people's consciousness—except when they too are transgender.

There are other possible transgender stories. (Even for trans women; trans men and gender-non-affirming people are moving in other directions again.) For instance, someone might care only about moving from male to female, and reject the masculine/feminine distinction altogether (i.e. she might regard it as bad ideology that should just be abolished). Or she might care only about moving from masculine to feminine, and reject the male/female distinction more or less altogether (i.e. she might regard it as unimportant biology that should not be foregrounded in the way we organise society or think about ourselves). But at any rate *some* trans women, including me, think that both the male/female and the masculine/feminine distinctions are capable of being given positive and non-harmful political expressions. And we think that we ourselves would do better on the other side of both distinctions from where we started out.

Now on the whole, people (including transgender people) are demonstrably correct in their judgements about what would be better for them. And we live in a society where everyone is supposed to have a wide latitude of freedom to choose what they think is better for them even when they *aren't* correct. So it is not easy to see why anyone would struggle to allow transgender people the same simple right of self-determination that cisgender people take for granted.

However—welcome to the UK, 2023.

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