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What Is Misogyny?

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The term *misogyny*^[1] refers to systems that uphold gender-based oppression against women and girls.

What those systems are, and how they operate, is a subject of philosophical debate.

Here we explain two prominent accounts of these systems and discuss whether misogyny can be understood independently of broader systems of oppression.

1. Misogyny as Dehumanization

According to the *dehumanization* theory of misogyny, misogynistic actions, behaviors, institutions, and practices are those that treat women as less than full persons.^[2]

The root of misogyny is the *objectification* of women: instead of being treated as persons, women are treated as mere objects,^[3] in many cases, *as* bodies—or worth no more than their bodies—and their bodies as mere instruments for ends other than their own.^[4] The *Handmaid's Tale*, e.g., depicts a world in which women's social value is wholly tied to their reproductive utility.^[5]

2. Misogyny as Enforcement

According to an alternative theory from contemporary philosopher Kate Manne, misogyny is the systemic social *enforcement* of patriarchy^[6]—the attitudes (i.e., anxieties, commitments) and actions that maintain or reproduce a social order of women's subordination to men.^[7]

Specifically, misogyny enforces social expectations about entitlement, or lack thereof, to certain moral goods and services. Manne calls this the “moral economy of gender,” which includes:

- what *women owe men*:
 - respect, love, nurturing, safety, acceptance, security;
 - kindness, compassion, moral attention, care, sympathy; and:
- what *women cannot take from men*:
 - positions of leadership, authority, influence, money (forms of power, status, prestige);
 - pride, reputation, social standing (freedom from shame or public embarrassment).

Misogyny primarily involves punishing “bad women”—women who fail to provide what the moral economy of gender dictates they owe or cannot take. Think of the hostility women face when they refuse to smile when catcalled on the street,^[8] or the guilt felt by women who are primary wage-earners and the related shame felt by their male partners.^[9]

According to the dehumanization theory, misogyny involves treating women as less than fully human. The enforcement theory, however, understands misogyny as treating women as fully human, and *as such* appropriately subject to anger, hostility, and resentment when they “act badly.”

3. Naming Misogyny

Naming something ‘misogynist’ identifies it as behavior that perpetuates women's subordination or as influenced by attitudes that do.

On both the dehumanization and enforcement theories, “misogynistic” is used to describe particular actions (e.g., slut-shaming) and attitudes (e.g., hostility to women with authority), as well as broader social practices and institutions (e.g., Title IX processes^[10]).

On both theories, people who hold misogynist attitudes often love and care about individual women. In fact, someone who acts misogynistically, enforcing women's subordination, is likely to love “good women” who act in accordance with the moral economy of gender or do not resist such subordination. You can love women—or even *be* a woman—and be a misogynist.

4. An Objection to Accounts of Misogyny

The dehumanization and enforcement theories both acknowledge that different people experience misogyny differently. But, both aim to articulate a singular conception of misogyny and assume that it can be understood apart from other forms of oppression.

Some object to attempts to define misogyny in this way on the grounds that it cannot be isolated from other systems of oppression:^[11] e.g., Linda Martín Alcoff writes: “Abolishing the patriarchy can’t solve gender-based discrimination or subordination because the patriarchy isn’t the root of the problem.”^[12] Patriarchy—the order enforced by misogyny—always functions alongside other forms of oppression (i.e., white supremacy, ableism, heterosexism, colonialism).^[13] Focusing on any one system independently of the others will not adequately describe the phenomenon in question.

Moreover, one may think that attempts to define misogyny lead to wrongly treating the experiences of relatively privileged women (i.e., straight, white, cis, wealthy) as paradigmatic: e.g., Manne’s moral economy of gender focuses on *moral* rather than *physical* labor. She excludes women’s physical bodies and sex, childcare, housework, childbearing, and child-raising from the list of relevant goods and services.^[14] This makes central and definitional the experience of white, wealthy cis women, as much of this domestic labor is demanded of women of color.

Similarly, enforcing norms about the physical body is imperative to understanding trans women’s experiences; trans people are over four times more likely to be victims of violent crime than cisgender people.^[15]

This concern is reflected in language used to describe gender-based oppression. The widespread use of terms like misogynoir^[16], and transmisogyny^[17], indicate that “misogyny” is viewed by many as an inappropriate label for their experiences.

Rather than attempt to analyze each dimension of oppression individually, an intersectional analysis insists that all systems of oppression operate concurrently and interrelatedly. Each person is subject to intersecting forces that lead to distinctive experiences based on their multiple social identities. So, e.g., Black women’s experiences are not complications of or mere aggregations of the “primary” oppressions faced by (white) women and Black people (men). Instead, an intersectional analysis insists that our many social identities all

together shape how we operate within broader social contexts.^[18]

Intersectional analysis starts from the context of one’s identity. As such, it also takes into account historical and broader social contexts, recognizing that ending oppression will require different things in different times and places.^[19]

Some Latina feminists argue that pursuing justice requires tackling the accumulation of all systems of oppression taken together as a whole.^[20] They argue that rather than focusing on misogyny, the primary object of analysis and political resistance should be *oppression*. This approach envisions feminisms^[21]—not a single universal feminism—as localized practices that are sensitive to particular social and historical conditions.^[22]

5. Conclusion

Naming when, where, and how misogyny occurs can help us make sense of our experiences and to see how those experiences are related to those of others. This serves broader political organizing and social movements to end gender-based oppression.

Whether this can or should be done by identifying a general conception of misogyny, or is better done by embracing localized analyses of oppressive conditions that include gender-based oppression, remains a matter of philosophical debate.

Notes

[1] The term comes from the Greek words meaning “hatred of women” (Greek: *misein* = to hate; *gynē* = women). “Misogyny,” Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.).

[2] Yap, Audrey. “Misogyny and Dehumanization,” *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (2019); David Livingstone Smith’s work develops the notion of dehumanization as central to oppression. Smith, David Livingstone. *Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others* (New York: St. Martins Press, 2011).

[3] Nussbaum, Martha C. “Objectification.” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 24, no. 4 (1995): 249–91; Langton, Rae. “Autonomy Denial in Objectification.” *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Martha Nussbaum identifies seven ways “to treat a person as a thing”: (1) instrumentality, (2) denial of autonomy, (3) inertness, (4) fungibility, (5)

violability, (6) ownership, and (7) denial of subjectivity. Langton adds to the list: (8) 'reduction to body', (9) 'reduction to appearance', and (10) 'silencing.' What each of these have in common is understanding, treatment, or representation of women as not-persons, as mere things rather than subjects.

[4] Kelland, Lindsay. "Conceptually Situating the Harm of Rape: An Analysis of Objectification." *South African Journal of Philosophy* 30, no 2 (2011):168-183; Papadaki, Lina. "What is Wrong About Objectification?" *Current Controversies in Political Philosophy*, Thom Brooks (ed.), London: Routledge (2015): 87-99.

[5] Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985).

[6] Manne, Kate. *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 33.

[7] Misogyny has a partner in this enforcement: *himpathy* – the positive, seemingly sympathetic reaction to men in situations in which they have been denied the goods to which patriarchy determines they are entitled. Manne (2019): 196-205.

[8] Bosman, Julie. "A College Student Was Killed by a Man Whose Catcalls She Tried to Ignore, Prosecutors Say." *The New York Times*. November 27, 2019.

[9] Syrda, Joanna. "Spousal Relative Income and Male Psychological Distress." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 46, no. 6 (June 2020): 976-92.

[10] MacKinnon, Catharine A. In Their Hands: Restoring Institutional Liability for Sexual Harassment in Education. *The Yale Law Journal*, Vol. 125, No. 7 (MAY 2016), pp. 2038-2105.

Hänel, Hilke C. "#MeToo and Testimonial Injustice: An Investigation of Moral and Conceptual Knowledge." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 48, no. 6 (July 2022): 833-59.

[11] Yap, Audrey. "Misogyny and Dehumanization," *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (2019).

[12] Alcoff suggests that we embrace an anti-imperial approach. This "requires a genuine reorientation of feminist theory toward the quotidian or the everyday, toward a democratic epistemology that takes the activist oppressed as the ultimate makers of their own liberation. Intersectional approaches will

necessarily lead to pluralist feminist conclusions; since forms of oppressions and identities are varied, their solutions must be as well." (p. 12)

Alcoff, Linda Martín. "Decolonizing Feminist Theory: Latina Contributions to the Debate," *Theories of the Flesh: Latinx and Latin American Feminisms, Transformation, and Resistance*. Oxford University Press (2020).

[13] E.g., Sally Haslanger writes both: "society's oppressive social system is patriarchal," and, there is "no such thing as patriarchy." We do not live in a patriarchal system, full stop. We live in a racialized-capitalist-heteropatriarchy. Haslanger, Sally. "Why I Don't Believe in Patriarchy: Comments on Kate Manne's *Down Girl*." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 101, no. 1 (2020): 220-229.

[14] Although Manne mentions reproductive and domestic labor (p. 110-111), she does not include them in her account of the moral economy of gender on the grounds that they are now not as expected from women or are "more evenly divided in some heterosexual relationships." Her aim in doing so is to expand our understanding of labor; but one may contend that this exclusion privileges as paradigmatic or central to the analysis of the experiences of a very small subsection of women.

[15] Flores, Andrew R, Lynn Langton, Ilan H Meyer, and Adam P Romero. "Victimization Rates and Traits of Sexual and Gender Minorities in the United States: Results from the National Crime Victimization Survey, 2017." *Science*, October 2, 2020.

Alam, Adnan. "Transgender Sex Workers Vulnerable to Violence, but When Is It a Hate Crime?: Cronkite News." Cronkite News – Arizona PBS, November 5, 2019.

[16] Moya Bailey and Trudy contributed to coining (2008) and proliferating (since 2010) the term misogynoir, which refers to the ways anti-Black racism and misogynistic attitudes and cultural representations shape ideas about Black women. Bailey, Moya and Trudy. "On Misogynoir: Citation, Erasure, and Plagiarism." *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 762-768.

[17] Matsuzaka, Sara, and David E. Koch. "Trans Feminine Sexual Violence Experiences: The Intersection of Transphobia and Misogyny." *Affilia* 34, no. 1 (February 2019): 28-47.

[18] Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Policies." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139-167.

[19] Notice that this does not require abandoning, philosophically or otherwise, all talk of race, gender, class, sexual identity, etc. Instead, as Haslanger (2020) explains, we can "see the social order as "cooking together" a set of ingredients, resulting in a *capitalist white supremacist nationalist ableist ageist heteronormative ...etc.... patriarchal order*, and to treat the mentioned elements as analytical categories that can be used to explain certain features of the system. We can explain why the dough rises because of the yeast, even if the yeast cannot be separated out in the bread. Different elements have explanatory priority in response to different questions." (p. 229)

[20] Alcoff, Linda Martín. "Decolonizing Feminist Theory: Latina Contributions to the Debate"; Lugones, María "Revisiting Gender: A Decolonial Approach"; Méndez, Xhercis. "Decolonial Feminist *Movidas* A Caribeña (Re)thinks "Privilege," the Wages of Gender, and Building Complex Coalitions" *Theories of the Flesh: Latinx and Latin American Feminisms, Transformation, and Resistance*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[21] Feminism, then, is not aimed narrowly at realizing the social or political equality of women to men. Feminism, as a framework and practice, attempts to eliminate oppression, full stop.

[22] An example of local feminisms involves the relative importance of eliminating "the gender binary." In the Global North, the gender binary, itself, is often taken to be the root of patriarchal oppression, and thus, eliminating the binary is often taken as a central political goal. Whereas, in the Global South, the gender binary is understood by many to have been part of colonial domination, replacing Indigenous gender systems that did not operate in the same ways and may not have been, inherently, oppressive. Alcoff references Nkiri Nzegwu's work (2006) who, "argues that, in the case of Igbo families, the subordination of daughters and wives was a historically specific practice that developed only after the colonial takeovers." Alcoff, Linda Martín. "Decolonizing Feminist Theory: Latina Contributions to the Debate," *Theories of the Flesh: Latinx and Latin American Feminisms*,

Transformation, and Resistance. Oxford University Press (2020): 14.

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