

Shannon Dea

Beyond the Binary: Thinking about Sex and Gender

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For those of us who have had the opportunity to teach an introductory course in women's studies or feminist philosophy, the experience of attempting to guide students through their initial attempts to deconstruct sex/gender binaries--and the many difficult challenges such an exercise evokes--will surely resonate. And while getting predominantly first-year students to interrogate and challenge the gender binary itself is no easy task, in my experience, students are at least more willing to accept that *gender* is fluid, flexible, shifting, and nonbinary. When it comes to "biological sex," however, I am often met with a more committed resistance: students take for granted that *sex* is fixed, stable, and binaristic, and are generally uncomfortable having those assumptions called into question. In *Beyond the Binary: Thinking about Sex and Gender*, Shannon Dea has provided educators, scholars, and even those who are brand new to feminist and gender scholarship a significant resource, replete with the tools necessary to critically examine the (often taken for granted) binarism of "biological sex." Dea's text is surprisingly accessible, given the impressive breadth of scholarship she has drawn on in its creation. She surveys a vast history of thinking about sex and gender and incorporates diverse theoretical perspectives, while never compromising readability. Additionally, Dea makes use of helpful analogies and recent examples from contemporary popular culture, which make complex and nuanced ideas more easily understandable to new readers. At the end of each chapter, Dea includes thoughtful questions and additional resources to spark deeper thinking about the issues explored in that chapter, which allow readers to take up the concepts presented in further detail. The book as a whole concludes with a glossary of terms, as well as an annotated bibliography, which add to its utility as a teaching or research tool. Given the helpful resources that Dea has compiled, the book is a great selection for use in introductory courses that deal with sex and gender issues, while also having something to offer even the most advanced feminist scholars.

Dea introduces the volume by stating her aim, which is to "provide students with a multi-disciplinary background to current debates about sex and gender in the life sciences, medicine, and public policy" (xi). To meet this aim, she organizes the book around the following questions: What is sex? What is gender? What is the relationship between those two categories? How many sexes are there? How many genders? Are sex and gender categories biological inevitabilities or historically contingent (xii)? Dea contends that the relationships between the biological domain of sex and the sociocultural domain of gender are surprisingly complicated--more so than commonly thought. The divisions between sex and gender, and between biology and culture/society/psychology, Dea argues, are neither tidy nor intuitive (1). Her text, then, attempts to make sense of these complexities, and specifically the interrelations between the various features that must be taken into account when we classify people on the basis of their "biological sex": genetics, hormones, gonadal tissue, primary anatomical sex traits (like penises and vaginas), secondary sex traits (like square jaws and wide hips), reproductive functions, and more. In addition to considering the multiple dimensions of so-called "biological sex," Dea also aims to examine the category of sex itself, by asking what *kind* of category "sex" is: is it a natural kind (like lead or gold)? Or a convenient heuristic for sorting organisms based on loosely related but distinct properties (2)? In addition to questioning the nature of the category, Dea also pushes the reader to consider what the category of "sex" is *for*, namely, how the category is used and what it is doing when it is applied to people (7).

In chapter 2, Dea introduces "Methodology and Terminology" for analyzing sex and gender. Naturally, her discussion here begins with the work of Michel Foucault, particularly his *History of Sexuality*, to introduce readers to the notions of power, ideology, and the organization of society through social norms (11-16). She then complicates this understanding of the organization of social life through norms and power by introducing the concept of "intersectionality"--the understanding that we are all differently located within social systems of power, as a result of various overlapping aspects of our identities (17). Finally, she introduces the concept of "gender attribution," or the idea that we make rapid decisions about someone's gender upon meeting them (that is, we constantly attribute genders to people) (19). Taking cues from various observable features of others' physical bodies and aesthetic presentations, we make choices about how to interpret their respective genders. The gender ascription we make to any particular person may or may not match the gender that person has been assigned, or the gender with which that person identifies (20-21). Furthermore, the gender we attribute to a particular person may have very little to do with their biological sex, that is, their various physical and physiological sex characteristics.

With concepts like "social power," "social norms," "intersectionality," and "gender attribution," in hand, Dea has provided the reader with the analytical tools to begin querying commonly held assumptions about sex and gender. Furthermore, she has given preliminary reasons for seeing sex and gender as separate (or at least separable) aspects of one's identity. Finally, in the conclusion of chapter 2, Dea has given the reader an early glimpse into the idea that sex, like gender, is more complicated than we might intuitively think. And, although there very well may be objective or material "facts" about the body, there nonetheless is a social (read: subjective) dimension to how we interpret (and ascribe unequal value) to various aspects of the physical, sexed body. Dea goes on to give weight to this contention by giving a historical overview of how sex and gender have been theorized from ancient Greece to the present, across various cultural

landscapes. Her aim is to show that these interpretations of biological sex (and the normative values attached to them) are not stable, but rather shift in response to various cultural and historical trends.

Dea begins this historical survey in chapter 3, "Aristotelian and Judeo-Christian Models of Sex Difference," in which she traces historical thinking about sex and gender back to Aristotle's (somewhat inconsistent) treatment(s) of biological sex taxonomies, as well as the developments made by his interpreters and followers. She also connects these historical developments to their contemporary counterparts, particularly feminist metaphysician Charlotte Witt, showing how similar ideas transform over time and space (38). She then moves, in chapter 4, to more contemporary philosophical developments, including the work of existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (49). Beauvoir helps us make sense of how women, as a class, are *created* in relation to men; they are, she argues, constructed as "Other" in relation to men (52). The analysis of Beauvoir helps move the reader from an understanding of the construction of taxonomies, dating back to Aristotle, to an understanding of how sexed bodies and gendered identities are constructed relationally. In chapter 4, Dea examines Freud's psychoanalytic reading of sexual development (55), as well as Luce Irigaray's analysis of distinctively feminine modes of communication and being. Reading Beauvoir, Freud, and Irigaray together helps readers understand the hierarchical nature of sex and gender categories (as a result of the unequal social value placed upon each of those categories), but also helps them consider why it would be a mistake to aspire to simply invert the current power structures (a move that still presupposes the sex/gender binary, as well as the binary of self/other). Rather, reading these theorists together helps the critical reader consider the need to work to eliminate these binaries altogether. This is no easy task, of course, given the long historical tradition of deploying the binary, as evidenced by the historical treatment she has discussed up to this point.

In chapter 5, Dea probes the inevitability of "the two sexes" by looking at other species, as well as historical and cultural accounts that have posited more than two sexes in humans (61). She develops this line of thought in chapter 6, where she turns to historical/cultural theories that have posited more than two genders (71). In particular, Dea looks at two cultures (and one "subculture") that are committed to the existence of two sexes, but three genders. She uses the existence of these cultures (Inuits, Hijras, and "aggressives") to challenge the idea that two is a "magic number" when it comes to gender; rather, it is culturally contingent (81). This overview also helps readers start to challenge the assumed link between dimorphic sex and necessarily related dimorphic gender.

In chapter 7, Dea introduces the reader to the multiple possibilities of intersex identities (83), showing that in all of the indicators that are used to demarcate sex in medical and scientific contexts, human beings occur in more than two stable varieties. These deviations from typical human sexual dimorphism occur in three broad classes: 1) one or more reproductive organs are ambiguous as a result of underlying mechanisms involving sex chromosomes or sex hormone production or reception, 2) reproductive organs are ambiguous but without sex chromosome or hormone irregularities, and 3) reproductive organs are not ambiguous, but a chromosomal or hormonal irregularity is present (84). The multiple and diverse intersex conditions are often subjected to unfortunate pathologization and subsequent (often extremely invasive) medical interventions aimed at "correcting" the conditions, which often lead to adverse psycho-social

effects, or even long-term loss of sexual sensation or gratification (92). For this reason, Dea is pushing readers to question what the motivations are for these clinical interventions, often performed in the intersex person's infancy, and thus obviously without their informed consent: are these interventions really designed to improve the health outcomes or overall well-being of intersex patients, or are they intended to reinforce the rigid social ideology of sexual binarism?

To highlight the likelihood that the selective pathologization of this particular sort of biological diversity is more ideological and social rather than rooted in anything properly medical, Dea draws the reader's attention to the stark arbitrariness of the stigma around sexual variations by way of comparison to other biological variations and statistical "abnormalities." Specifically, Dea uses popular examples from the domain of sport to show that although intersex variations are widely and heavily stigmatized, society simultaneously praises and rewards other biological deviations that are taken to be advantageous, particular within athletic contexts (89). As an example, Dea highlights the unequal treatment of Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps, who has a statistically abnormal lung capacity and arm-length to torso-length ratio, to South African elite runner, Caster Semenya, who was found after deeply invasive testing to be intersex. Semenya, who possesses female-typical external genitalia and was raised "as a girl," was discovered to have male-typical chromosomal makeup. As such, she was discounted as a highly successful Olympic athlete. Few, however, have similarly questioned the "biological advantages" brought about as a result of Phelps's own biological "abnormalities," possibly because they are not rooted in deviations from the sexual dimorphism to which society is still overwhelmingly wedded (89).

The discussion of intersex conditions in chapter 7 offers a nice transition to Dea's discussion of trans issues in chapter 8--and she is careful to explicate the differences between the two, while leaving open the possibility that they are not mutually exclusive identities (that is, that intersex people can be trans and vice versa). "Intersex people are born physically atypical," Dea writes, where "physically atypical" is meant in a statistical/descriptive sense, not a normative one. "By contrast," she writes, "trans people are born physically typical with respect to sex, but develop gender identities that are misaligned with their gender assignment at birth" (99). Again, Dea does not intend to be making normative claims about physical normalcy or ideals, but instead is referencing statistical averages found at the population level for various biological markers taken to be part of one's sexual makeup, both genotypic (genes and in particular, chromosomes) and phenotypic (observable physical characteristics) (83).

A reader familiar with the diversity of trans experiences might worry that Dea's language in the introduction of chapter 8 oversimplifies the range of trans identities and experiences. For instance, trans scholars have worked to undermine the pervasiveness of the "wrong body narrative," when such a narrative is taken to be the singular experience of all trans people (see Bettcher 2014; Engdahl 2014). Dea seems to invoke this "wrong body" model of trans experience, at least in the beginning of the chapter when she writes that trans people "develop gender identities that are misaligned with their gender assignment at birth" and that trans people are those for whom their "gender identity does not match their phenotypic sex" (99). Given that part of Dea's project in *Beyond the Binary* is to deconstruct the rigid dimorphism of biological sex, this view of trans experience seems unduly limited. Although Dea's characterization of trans experience surely reflects *some* trans experiences, it is not true that all trans-identified people experience this sort of divergence between their gender and "phenotypic sex," or that all trans

people would accept "phenotypic sex" as something fixed/stable with which to compare one's gender identity, or that gender identity is itself stable and supposed to link up with "sex" at all. She does seem to suggest this at other points in the chapter, such as when she suggests that trans people are those whose identity doesn't match their phenotypic sex *or* whose gender identity "defies binaristic categorization at all" (100), but she should be more careful and consistent with this language throughout the chapter in order to avoid erasing possibilities of gender nonconformity or gender queerness, or reinforcing the pervasive "wrong body" narrative's monopoly on understandings of trans experience. This critique aside, I think Dea has done a lot of important work in this chapter, which will ultimately help those who have never been exposed to trans theory begin to conceptualize (albeit in a limited way if it is not their firsthand experience) the array of lived trans experiences, many of which depart from the limits of the "wrong body" model.

One important clarification Dea makes is that although trans identities are often included under the umbrella of LGBTQ communities, research, and activism, it is important for readers not to conflate gender identity with sexual orientation (100). Dea reminds readers that just as cis-gender folks experience multiple and diverse sexual interests and desires, so do trans and gender-nonconforming folks. There is no essential link between how people experience their own gender identity and what sorts of sexual desires they experience, or what sexual activities they choose to engage in. Dea also exposes the reader to distinct harms faced by trans folks, such as "mispronouncing" or "deadnaming," which enables cis-gender readers who have never thought critically about their own language-use to begin to understand (again, in a limited way) the ways in which our language-use can in fact cause serious harm (103). Dea also gives a helpful breakdown of diagnostic terminology, with attention to the "DSM debates" and harmful histories of the treatment of trans folks by the institutions of medicine and psychiatry. She introduces the idea of medicine and psychiatry as "gatekeepers" for the process of medical transitioning, where seeking the medical resources they might need in order to undergo transitioning in the way they desire are often withheld and selectively provided to folks who are labeled with "gender dysphoria" (105-6). Dea pushes the reader to think about how the requirement of a potentially stigmatizing mental health diagnosis might be particularly troubling for already vulnerable groups. Furthermore, if gaining access to medical resources requires having a diagnosis of gender dysphoria (which tends toward the exclusionary "wrong body" model of trans experience), trans folks whose firsthand experiences do not reflect that model might feel compelled to alter their own narratives in an attempt to break through the medical gate and obtain the resources they want or need (see also McKinnon 2013).

The discussion of trans folks offered in chapter 8 offers a contrast to the discussion of "Biodeterminism" offered in chapter 9. Up until this point, Dea had presented primarily social constructionist arguments. In chapter 9, however, she turns our attention to the opposing view: the idea that "biology is destiny" (115). Surveying the views of Charles Darwin (116), his feminist critics (121), and his descendants in evolutionary psychology and "brain sex" (124), Dea ultimately pushes the reader to challenge the seemingly timeless "nature or nurture" dilemma, suggesting that this apparent dilemma is actually a false dichotomy, best dealt with by dissolving it outright and instead recognizing the complex and bidirectional interaction of biology and environment (128). The material realities of our biology affect our social lives and relations, which simultaneously affect our biological makeup.

In chapter 10, Dea gives readers a helpful visual exercise by having them begin to appreciate the role of social location on scientific interpretation and representation (131). Dea reminds us that when we are seeing--when we are interpreting sex characteristics, for instance--we are always deploying assumptions resulting from our particular sociocultural locations. More precisely, we are all trained by our cultural-historical contexts to *see in particular ways* (142). This has an impact on how we see (and consequently interpret) sex and gender. As Dea notes, "we may tell ourselves that biology is stable and objective and culture is evanescent and subjective, but the latter continues to shape the former, and it is therefore difficult to maintain any view of biology that sees itself as insulated against the influences of cultural context" (145).

In chapter 11, Dea surveys a debate between Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Mary Wollstonecraft (149) on issues of difference and equality. Presenting a very charitable picture of the historical development and giving sympathetic presentations in light of historical context, Dea highlights what is helpful in both views, while also acknowledging criticisms of each. What we are left with at the chapter's conclusion is a reminder that "equality among human beings is a long journey, in which each small step puts us further ahead" (158). In other words, although we are a long way from fully making sense of the way society operates with respect to sex and gender, we must still take (even imperfect) progress seriously, and appreciate "wins" as they come.

Dea's last chapter, "Sex/Gender as Social Construction," ties together the themes that have been developed throughout the preceding chapters. Specifically, Dea sets out what it means for something to be socially constructed, and why it matters that sex and gender are thought of as social constructs. Drawing upon the important work of Ian Hacking, Dea helps readers achieve clarity on what it means (and, equally important, what it *doesn't* mean) to identify something as a social construct. She pushes the reader, then, to consider the ways in which the body itself is constructed in various ways (168). Entertaining the social constructionist hypothesis about sex and gender, Dea contends, "allows us to question the inevitability of binaristic categories in a way that clears a space for the real-life untidiness of sex and gender" (173). Dea's conclusions leave readers with the opportunity to critically examine the role sex and gender play in their own lives, and the structural and systemic forces that structure that relation.

Dea's text offers several important tools for readers to begin deconstructing sex and gender. She introduces the reader to the descriptive/normative distinction (116), the "seeing" vs. "seeing as" distinction developed by philosophers of science (131), as well as several logical fallacies, including the naturalistic fallacy (116). Overall, Dea has provided an important and comprehensive text, which will surely be an invaluable resource to anyone interested in beginning to unpack the concepts of "sex" and "gender." Although there are some areas where I believe Dea's work would benefit from a bit more nuance, and a more substantial treatment of the contemporary literature (specifically in her discussions of intersex and trans people), her treatment--which amounts to more of an overview, albeit a comprehensive and expansive one--was strategic, aimed at making her work widely accessible, specifically to audiences new to sex and gender scholarship. I commend Shannon Dea for providing educators, thinkers, and the casual reader with such an accessible (yet expansive!) text, and I would strongly recommend this book for anyone teaching introductory-level courses that span the areas of critical sex and gender studies, or for anyone who wants a thorough introduction to the theories behind sex/gender

scholarship and the concepts, tools, and methodologies needed to begin examining and interrogating the operations of sex/gender in our lives.

References

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