

Misogyny and Ideological Logic

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Kate Manne's *Down Girl* (2017) offers an 'ameliorative' account, in Sally Haslanger's sense of the term,¹ of misogyny, sexism, patriarchy, and the relations between them. Manne argues that women's essential role within patriarchy is to offer various social goods and support such as recognition, sexual attention, and emotional labor to men. Misogyny enforces patriarchy by keeping women in their proper place, as suppliers of these services, through an elaborate and interlocking set of social images, disciplinary practices, normalizing techniques and bodily habituation, and so forth. Misogyny is a self-correcting system that penalizes and disciplines women who violate the patriarchal order and step out of their proper place,² while promoting special sympathy for men who do not receive the support and recognition from women that they are 'owed.'

One of the compelling dimensions of Manne's account is her reading of misogyny as a structural social system enforcing patriarchy, rather than a set of mental attitudes that men have about women. Misogyny, for her, is a set of practices that put and keep women in their place. Anyone can participate in these practices whether or not we mean to, and whether or not we feel hatred for women. In order to spot misogyny, Manne argues, we should look at what a practice *does to* women, rather than by trying to scrutinize the true inner life of the *doers*. As she puts it, "Rather than conceptualizing misogyny from the point of view of the accused, at least implicitly, we might move to think of it instead from the point of view of its *targets* or *victims*. In other words, when it comes to misogyny, we

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¹As Haslanger coins the term, "Ameliorative projects ... begin by asking: What is the point of having the concept in question? ... What concept (if any) would do the work best? In the limit case, a theoretical concept is introduced by stipulating the meaning of a new term, and its content is determined entirely by the role it plays in the theory" (Haslanger 2012, p. 367). The point of an ameliorative project like *Down Girl* is not to descriptively capture the existing meaning of words like 'misogyny' and 'sexism,' either via conceptual analysis or empirical observation of language use. Rather, the point is to develop meanings for these terms that are maximally productive within a liberatory and theoretical project. Presumably these terms will be more useful if they recognizably make contact with everyday usage, but stipulating new, helpful meanings for them is fair game.

²I would add that misogyny also enforces patriarchy by demeaning women who do stay in their place, as a way of undergirding the idea that they are good for no more than that. Consider, for example, the young sorority women who were widely and publicly mocked a few years ago for their supposedly deeply feminine behavior of taking selfies at a baseball game (riveting and intellectually challenging though I am sure the game was), even though it turned out they were sending pictures as requested by the announcer in order to enter a contest. (See Graham 2015.)

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can focus on the hostility women *face* in navigating the social world, rather than the hostility men (in the first instance) may or may not *feel* in their encounters with certain women” (59).³ And again, “So, as compared with the naïve conception, my account holds that misogyny primarily targets women because they are women in a *man’s world* (i.e., a historically patriarchal one, among other things), rather than because they are women in a *man’s mind* where that man is a misogynist” (64).

I strongly support Manne’s attempt to offer an effect-centered, systems-oriented account of misogyny, for at least three reasons. First, it is more interesting and more politically important to identify systems and structures that hold patriarchy in place than it is to identify individual bad apples. Second, it is epistemically more promising: We never really know what is going on in someone else’s inner, private feelspace, and indeed, much psychological research shows that we don’t even know what’s going on in our own.⁴ So if we understand misogyny as a kind of attitude or emotion, that won’t help us much in identifying it. Third (and growing out of the above two), a focus on individual attitudes almost inevitably leads to politically fruitless arguments about blame and intentions. Arguments over what someone was actually feeling or intending are rarely resolvable or useful as political interventions. People accused of having misogynist attitudes are likely to be unproductively offended, and also likely to protest the purity of their intentions or the innocence of their emotions. Such arguments turn the focus to the perpetrators and away from the victims, and in an especially unhelpful way.

I would argue that many of the misogynist structures that enforce patriarchy are not only structural but indeed built directly into our material environment, completely apart from how we feel about that environment or whether we approve of it. Consider traditional suburban homes, with their fairly formulaic divisions into rooms, their separation from workspaces, and their privatization of leisure space. These homes materially embed all sorts of gender norms, and undergird and propagate patriarchy merely through what is involved in living in them. Similarly, gated communities that fracture and disunify urban space while creating territorial boundaries embed racist and classist ideologies, regardless of the conscious beliefs and attitudes of their inhabitants. All of us are often stuck living in spaces that reproduce problematic ideologies whether we want to be in them or not. Once we do, our daily activities embody and perpetrate these ideologies just in virtue of needing to negotiate these spaces, regardless of our individual mental attitudes or emotions.

Manne takes misogyny to be the ‘enforcement’ arm of patriarchy, and sexism to be its ‘justification’ arm: “I propose taking sexism to be the branch of patriarchal ideology that *justifies* and *rationalizes* a patriarchal social order, and misogyny as the system that *policies* and *enforces* its governing norms and expectations. So sexism is scientific; misogyny is moralistic” (20). One reading of Manne’s distinction is that misogyny is a set of *prescriptions* that uphold patriarchy, while sexism is a set of *descriptive empirical claims* that justify these norms. This is suggested by her talk of morals versus science. On this reading, for example, the prescriptive norm that women should take their husbands’ last name when they get married (thereby indicating that their identity is tethered to and less solid than their husbands’) would be a piece of misogyny, whereas the empirical claim that women are biologically more care-oriented than men would be a piece of sexism.

But in the domain of ideology, I am not convinced that there are clean distinctions between enforcement and justification. Indeed, it strikes me as one of the characteristic hallmarks and part of the power of ideology that it operates in ways that confound just this distinction. For instance, Manne writes, “As a substantive matter of fact, sexism often works by *naturalizing* sex differences, in order to justify patriarchal social arrangements, by making them seem inevitable, or portraying people trying to resist them as fighting a losing battle.” (79) I agree, and have argued elsewhere (Kukla 2000, 2002,

³All otherwise unreferenced page numbers are from *Down Girl*.

⁴For an accessible and responsibly written popular overview of this research, see Frankish (2016).

and 2018) that this naturalizing move is actually the signal mechanism of ideology. But naturalization doesn't just justify – it also enforces. Claims such as “women are naturally more caring” are shot through with normative meaning, which is exactly why they support norms. A term like ‘naturally’ masquerades as a purely scientific, descriptive term, but it only does ideological work because it is in fact functioning as a normative term, meaning something like “properly” or “when things are working as they are meant to.” By treating something as natural we treat it as ahistorical and given, in a way that makes it *wrong* to contravene or question it. Claims of naturalness – of breastfeeding or heterosexual sex, for instance, or of the sexual binary – are routinely used directly to police and punish those who behave “unnaturally,” and to shut down critical inquiry into the “natural” way of doing things. Justification and enforcement are not detachable functions in such cases.

Another challenge for separating justification from enforcement in the domain of ideology is that many of our ideologically potent beliefs do not take the form of occurrent mental states, but instead are embedded into our practices. In particular, sexist beliefs, such as that girls are more caring and worse at math, for instance, are often embodied and revealed in the subtleties of how people act. Teachers assign girls helping and caring roles in the classroom and underestimate their mathematical abilities; parents buy their daughters books about the caring professions or expect more caring behavior from them than from their brothers, and so forth. These practices manifest beliefs, even if the people enacting them would disavow these beliefs. The various enforcement activities that uphold patriarchy are often, in effect, justificatory practices. Conversely, much of what enforces and upholds patriarchy is people's induction into various scientific research paradigms and the like, that are also tools of justification.

None of this is to reject Manne's basic distinction as unhelpful. My point is only that when we dig into its metaphysics and its political functioning, it becomes murky and complex rather than clean. There is more philosophical work to do in teasing out the justificatory and enforcement functions of patriarchal ideology and understanding their interdependence.

Strikingly, Manne strongly resists the common idea that misogyny involves dehumanization. As I read her, she takes this resistance as required for coherence with other essential parts of her account. Women's role under patriarchy is to provide certain goods to men. These goods include recognition, emotional support and validation, sexual appreciation, and so forth. Such goods can only be offered by persons; objects cannot provide them. If misogyny dehumanized women, Manne reasons, then there would be no way of using it to keep women in their place, giving men the goods that patriarchy demands they give – indeed it would render them unable to occupy this place at all. Women are relationally defined under patriarchy, but as *persons* in relation: Patriarchy makes a woman “somebody's *mother, sister, daughter, grandmother*: always somebody's someone, and seldom her own person. But this is not because she's not held to be a person at all, but rather because her personhood is held to be *owed* to others, in the form of service labor, love, and loyalty” (173).

Prima facie, it certainly seems like there is a lot of dehumanization of women going on around us, so Manne faces a high bar in making her case. The commodification of women's bodies, sexuality, and appearance; the silencing and invisibility of our epistemic perspectives; the use of our bodies as adornment and stage-setting in many contexts; the broad cultural skepticism concerning our ability to choose, use rationality, or have comprehensible preferences; the assumption that we are governed by arational hormones rather than reason – all these things certainly seem like examples of our dehumanization. On the face of it, it seems that if Manne can make room for dehumanization in her account, then she should. It is true that if dehumanization literally involved taking people as pure objects, then dehumanizing women would be incompatible with using us for the functions that she argues we perform under patriarchy. But while I understand Manne's reasoning, I think that she relies on an unnecessarily simplified and absolutist conception of dehumanization in order to make her case. Furthermore, dehumanization doesn't need to be *complete* or *constant* to be real. Men may

dehumanize women in some contexts but not others, or they may treat us as having reduced rather than nonexistent humanity and agency

Notice that Manne's argument against misogyny involving dehumanization is in effect a riff on a classic Hegelian point: In the master/slave dialectic (Hegel 1977), the master needs the slave to provide him with recognition, which is something that only a subject rather than a mere tool can offer. According to Hegel, this is exactly why the position of the master is tension-ridden and ultimately self-undermining. In dehumanizing and objectifying the slave, the master thereby undermines the possibility of extracting from him what he needs most. But Hegel's most important lesson is that ideology and ideologically structured practices and norms are by no means internally consistent. The master can objectify and dehumanize the slave *and* simultaneously need him to be human, and men can do the same to women. Like many ideological practices, this is indeed incoherent. Plausibly, the incoherence of misogynistic logic is precisely why women can't win at its game. Overly obedient, conformist, pliable women are punished for being too object-like, while women who make their independent humanity and agency clear are punished for stepping out of place. Some of men's anger at women can be read as rooted in the fact they have objectified us so much that they cannot extract from us the validation they need.

Manne claims that the fact that women can practice misogyny means that these practices are not dehumanizing, because surely we don't dehumanize ourselves (146). It's not obvious to me that people never dehumanize themselves at the level of experience and attitudes. Certain kinds of depression might well go along with experiencing oneself as thing-like, for instance. Moreover, it is all too easy for people to fail to empathize with or respect others who are nominally or demographically "like them." That is, a woman might in fact have misogynist, dehumanizing attitudes towards other women, while thinking of herself as an exception, or simply while not feeling any strong sense of identity with other women *qua* women. But let's assume for purposes of argument that it is unusual or difficult for someone to *experience* members of a group to which they belong as dehumanized objects. Remember that according to Manne, misogyny is not reducible to a set of mental states or attitudes, but rather consists of systems of social norms and practices. Given this, I don't see why women wouldn't be able to participate in and enforce misogynist norms, including dehumanizing norms perhaps, without any particular felt attitudes towards ourselves or other women.

In what I found the most disturbing and surprising moment in *Down Girl*, Manne writes, "If the perpetrators of mass atrocities often dehumanize their victims, then why do the perpetrators so frequently rape the female ones? It is not just that sex between human beings and nonhuman animals is generally taboo, and relatively unusual, presumably partly because of this it is also that the *spirit* in which mass rapes tend to be committed is typically vindictive, punitive, triumphalist, and domineering. These acts hence bear all of the hallmarks of *interpersonal violence*" (165). I certainly don't think of the act of rape as particularly reflecting or recognizing the humanity of the victim. But more specifically, it seems much more plausible to read rapes that are acts of war or terror as designed to target the *owners* of the women – their husbands and fathers. Wartime rape treats women as men's *property*, and desecrates that property. This is why it so often goes along with more general looting and pillaging. It is also why wartime rapists generally have no trouble raping even those women who they mark as "disgusting" because of their race, age, anatomy, or whatever. I cannot see why we should think that the vindictiveness, punitiveness, or triumphalism Manne mentions are aimed *at* the victims themselves. These rapes are strategies for harming and humiliating *men* by desecrating their property and "ruining" their women. Such rapes turn women into the spoils of war. Indeed, wartime rape is often used as a tool of ethnic cleansing, by making women "unfuckable" because they have been "used" by another man.⁵ None of this requires understanding the

⁵For instance see Akylal (2017).

rapes as interpersonal exchanges between the *victims* and the rapists. Indeed, wartime rape strikes me as one of our most powerful examples of dehumanization.

I have different intuitions than Manne does about when language is dehumanizing. She supports her claim that misogyny is not dehumanizing with an analogy with race: “Think of the terms ‘thug’, ‘welfare queen’, ‘urban youth’, or even ‘looter’, as they figure in current political discourse in the United States. These are all primarily terms used by whites to refer disparagingly to black Americans. ... Yet none of the concepts these terms express seem, on the face of it, well described as dehumanizing” (152). On the contrary, I think that ‘thug’ in particular is a deeply dehumanizing term. The point of the insult is to portray someone as governed by purely animalistic impulses towards violence and destruction, as beyond reason, as needing to be constrained by force rather than persuaded by argument.⁶ The ideological function of the insult is to justify the use of force, in virtue of the beast-like character of the target.

If neither wartime rape nor conceiving of people as “thugs” counts as an example of dehumanization for Manne, I think she has defined the concept too stringently for the purposes of her ameliorative project. It is probably extremely rare for someone to literally and completely take another person as not a person at all, as a mere object. But the *logic* of dehumanization – the reduction of the agency and perspective of others and the objectification of their bodies and impulses – can still be an important part of many ideological practices. This can include practices where this logic is directly in tension with competing logics, as is arguably so in the case of misogyny.

Down Girl has had a profound effect on me, as on many others. It has shaped the lens through which I see much of the culture around me. For instance, while I was reading the book, I went to see *I, Tonya*, a movie that purports to be a “dark comedy” chronicling the rise and fall of ice skater Tonya Harding. To my surprise, the movie contained a relentless series of scenes of horrific and graphic abuse of Harding at the hands of both her mother and her husband, played for laughs. Tonya Harding was a woman who challenged the proper gender (and class) order by being strong, aggressive, and assertive – she was not in her proper place. Thus, Manne’s account helps us see, the performance of her brutalization is a way of reaffirming this proper order. Why is this a comedy, though? Harding was – and was presented in the film as being – strong and savvy, as well as aggressive. Thus the idea that *she* could be a target of abuse is inherently “hilarious.” This is underscored by several scenes in which she hits back after being attacked (also played for laughs), conveying that she is not a victim but a full participant in a dysfunctional dynamic. The superimposed text in the movie’s epilogue tells us that her terrifyingly abusive husband (Jeff Gillooly) is “happily remarried.” The word ‘happily’ here, surely undersupported by any possible evidence that the filmmakers could have had access to, denies the deep pattern of abusers continuing to abuse regardless of the behavior of their victims, and implicates that Gillooly was a decent guy who was just hapless enough to end up with an unmanageable, abuse-inducing woman. In our contemporary social climate, it is not socially acceptable to make a movie openly claiming that a woman deserves brutalization. But by portraying Harding’s strength and assertiveness as funny, and using it to imply that she is un-abusable, the movie powerfully reinscribes misogynist norms and puts Tonya in her place, without needing explicit bigotry to do it. We could call this the “Taming of the Shrew” trope. This was just one example of how I found Manne’s account of misogyny powerfully illuminating of the logic of the culture around me.

Down Girl is a difficult read indeed. I had to take numerous breaks from reading it, and numerous breaks from writing this response. The story it tells is both brutal and completely fundamental to understanding how the social world works, at least in late-capitalist post-industrialized nations. I have

⁶I discuss the ideological function of the term ‘thug’ in detail in Kukla (2018).

raised some philosophical questions and worries about the details of its story, and there are places where my intuitions or understanding of the facts depart from Manne's, as I have discussed. But the existence of this book is vital, and reading it and wrestling with it was as illuminating and empowering as it was emotionally exhausting.⁷

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