# Why Do Definitions Matter? Kate Manne on “Misogyny”

In the last 150 years or so, people have spent a lot of time thinking about issues racism, sexism, religious bigotry (and in trying to change society so as to eliminate/reduce these things). But this raises a philosophical question: how exactly do we define these terms? We might try simply asking people, but as it turns out, people disagree (often in quite significant ways) about what does/should count as racist or sexist. Some people, for example, focus primarily on psychological states (e.g., a racist/sexist person is one who has beliefs or feelings of a certain sort), while others focus on social issues (e.g., a racist/sexist policy is one that affects people in certain negative ways). From a philosophical standpoint, we can consider this at a more general level. When we ask “What is X (where X might beauty or love or truth or racism or sexism)?” what kind of answer are we looking for? There are at least three possibilities:

* **Ordinary language analysis:** This approach starts with the idea that since “sexism” or “beauty” (or whatever) are words, we should find out what they mean by seeing how ordinary people who speak the language use them. It’s likely we don’t always use them in consistent ways, so the job of the philosopher is just to point out these inconsistencies. The problem: it’s not clear that this sort of analysis will do anything interesting for us, or help us solve any the (real world, not philosophical) problems that actually involve the idea/concept we happen to be talking about.
* **Essentialism:** This (very different approach) begins with the idea that there is one uniquely correct definition that “carves nature at the joints.” The analogy is with disciplines like physics—just as “atoms” have particular structures that exist regardless of how non-specialists happen to talk about them (or the beliefs they happen to have about them), so do concepts like racism and sexism. The problem: it’s not clear how we go about discovering this essence (especially in a way that will be convincing to people who define the term in other ways). There simply aren’t philosophical equivalents to things like the electron microscope.
* **Explication:**This approach grants that people mean different things AND that we’re unlikely to find one “essential” definition. So, it instead proposes that we set out to find a *useful* definition of whatever word/concept that we’re talking about. The definition we end up with is thus going to depend on what we want to *do* with it (e.g., what do we hope to achieve in classifying things using these terms)? It’s very possible (and in fact, likely) that we might end up with multiple explications of the same term, since different definitions might be more useful for different purposes. Problems? We need to make sure the definitions we end up actually are useful!

To put it more succinctly: ordinary language analysis is interested in how people use their words, essentialism in what the world is really like, and explication in formulating definitions that we can *do* things with.

## Misogyny: A Brief Introduction

**Kate Manne** is a contemporary philosopher who teaches at Cornell University. Her 2017 book *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* is probably one of the more widely read philosophy books published in the last few years. Along with being an interesting/contemporary topic, it provides a useful example of the sort of thing in the previous section. Given its content area, Manne’s book is also unusual in that it is written from the perspective of **analytic philosophy** (a style of philosophy closely associated with logic, philosophy of science, and related areas) as opposed to **continental philosophy** (a style of philosophy that aligns more with history, sociology, English literature, etc.). Manne offers a definition of **misogyny** that fits within what we’ve called “explication” above (she calls it “ameliorative analysis”).

**What’s wrong with the psychologistic definition of “misogyny”?** The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines misogyny as “Hatred or dislike of, or prejudice against women.” This definition notably refers to the inner psychological states of people (after all, “hatred” or “dislike” are things that happen in your mind!).What’s wrong with this definition? A few things. First, according to Manne, it’s just not that useful. So, for one thing, it’s just not clear how it is supposed to apply to even the most obvious cases. So, for example, even a serial killer who targets women might not “hate” all women as such, and might not even describe himself as hating women. Part of the problem here is that mental states like “hatred of women” are relatively **epistemically inaccessible** in that it’s hard to figure how we could go about “knowing” that someone is misogynistic. It would be better is misogyny was defined in a way that people (especially people who might be negatively affected by it) could actually know about it. A second problem is that this is an overly **moralizing** definition, in that it assumes that “misogyny” must be done by bad people that hate women. Manne grants that *some* misogyny is like this, but she’s doesn’t think it is all like that. Instead, she thinks that there are plenty of (not totally terrible) men and women who participate in misogyny.

## Manne’s Definition (Annotated)

Manne’s basic idea is to define misogyny with respect to its role in enforcing gender/sex norms against women and girls (the stuff that keeps them “down”). However, in order to spell this out, a fair number of details are needed (again, this is pretty typical of this style of philosophy, but it can sometimes make it difficult for lay people to engage with).

***Constitutively speaking [i.e., what “defines” the concept]****, misogyny in a social environment comprises the hostile social forces that:*

* *will tend to be faced by a (wider or narrower) class of girls and women because they are girls and women in that (more or less fully specified) social position; and*
  + In other words: misogynistic rules are targeted at those people who society treats as women and girls. Why this requirement? Manne doesn’t want to rule out transwomen experiencing misogyny. Also, there may be certain women (such as the Queen of England) who have such a high/different social status that none of this applies to them, since they aren’t really treated as normal “women” by society.
* *serve to police and enforce a patriarchal order, instantiated in relation to other intersecting systems of domination and disadvantage that apply to the relevant class of girls and women (such as various forms of racism, xenophobia, classism, ageism, transphobia, homophobia, ableism and so on).*
  + In other words: misogyny is made of social rules (written or unwritten) that serve to “keep women in their place” with respect to men. However, there are LOTS of rules meant to keep people in their place based on their race, social class, physical disabilities, etc. Misogynistic rules are just one special sort.

*As a****substantive matter of fact [i.e., what misogyny looks like in our world right now]****, these misogynistic social forces will:*

* *often target girls and women (in the relevant class) for actual, perceived, or representative challenges to or violations of applicable patriarchal norms and expectations (again, operating in conjunction with applicable intersecting oppressive forces).*
  + For example, if the patriarchal norm is “It is women’s responsibility to raise children” (Manne thinks society often requires women to give *care*), misogyny might consist of laws that make it difficult form them to balance work/child-raising (e.g., not enough parental leave), or in moral norms that treat women/men differently in this regard (e.g., maybe society is much more forgiving of men being subpar parents than it is of women). Another example: there are some studies that suggest that women apply to *leadership* roles are judged differently/more negatively than are equivalent men. In particular, resumes with women’s names are judged “not competent” or “not likable” at a higher rate than equivalent resumes with men’s names. Manne does NOT think that the people making these judgements are doing so explicitly because they “hate” women; however, it remains the case that this sort of thing hurts women.
* *Where patriarchal norms and expectations may involve, for example:*
  + *distinctively gendered****contents****, which reflect and help to regulate or restore patriarchal order; or*
  + *particularly harsh****enforcement mechanisms****for girls and women (in the relevant class), as compared with boys and men (in this class — that is, male counterparts); or*
    - One of Manne’s ideas is that society tends to be much more forgiving of powerful men “screwing up” than it is of women in the same position. She calls this “**himpathy.”** So, for example, when the Stanford athlete Brock Turner got 6 months for raping an unconscious women, this might be an example of that. (That is: she thinks it is tough to imagine that a woman committing a similarly serious crime would be given this light of a sentence.) Manne thinks is true more generally (e.g., in the way the press treats women politicians as opposed to male politicians.).
  + *particularly intense and/or invasive forms of policing (for example, surveillance, scrutiny and suspicion) for girls and women (in the relevant class), as compared with male counterparts.* (Manne, 2020, “Women in a man’s world…”)
    - Women arguably face greater scrutiny than men in a variety of areas: everything from school dress codes to parenting choices to health care laws (e.g., regarding abortion), etc. Again, Manne is NOT worried about the motivations of the particular people writing a particular rule; her argument is that a *reasonable* person could see the overall effect of these norms/rules as being “misogynistic,” in the sense that they make it *more difficult* for women and girls to break out of the “boxes” that society has assigned to them.

## Objections

So, what criticisms might be made of Manne’s thesis? A few possibilities:

1. **Is Manne’s definition of misogyny too permissive?** Manne’s definition focuses on how a “reasonable” person might see the effect of a rule. However, for any given case, it always is possible there is a good, non-misogynistic reason for the rule in question, *even if a “reasonable” person might not see it.* For example, Manne argues that anti-abortion laws are misogynistic, but perhaps there are good moral reasons for them. Similarly, she suggests that women’s failures to succeed in certain fields (political leadership, C-level business executives, etc.) are plausibly the result of misogynistic processes, but perhaps (as some evolutionary psychologists have argued) we will eventually discover this is simply a result of women having different interests/talents than men.
2. **Is Manne’s definition “useful”?** Manne’s book doesn’t actually say much about how to *fix* misogyny as she has defined it, and she seems fairly pessimistic that it can be fixed (at least anytime soon). If this is the case, one might ask: “What’s the point of the definition?” It would be one thing if we could have confidence that classifying things as “misogynistic” would lead people to change them. However, there is at least some evidence that this is not the case—e.g., merely telling someone that what they are doing is sexist, racist, etc. oftentimes doesn’t lead to any positive change (and may in fact lead to the opposite).
3. **Should we give up on psychologism altogether?** Manne rejects psychological definitions of misogyny. However, are these definitions really as useless as she claims? For example, it sure seems like there are some people who genuinely *do* have negative thoughts/feelings about women (even if they say that they don’t), and this might be a productive area of study for psychologists.

## Review Questions

1. Give TWO examples of events from your own knowledge/experience that might count as misogynistic in Manne’s sense, and explain why. Remember, misogyny need not involve “laws,” but might involve shaming/teasing/judging/etc.
2. Manne’s definition allows for misogyny to occur even if no one in particular is “to blame” for it. Do you agree with this?
3. What aspects of Manne’s definition, if any, would you change? Why?
4. When we try to define concepts like “misogyny” which approach (ordinary language, essentialism, explication) is best? Why?
5. If Manne’s definition was widely known and adopted, how helpful (or not) would this be? Explain/defend your answer.