

The Categories Were Made For Man, Not Man For The Categories - LessWrong

This website requires javascript to properly function. Consider activating javascript to get access to all site functionality.

LESSWRONG

LW

Login

Categorisation and Concepts

The Categories Were Made For Man, Not Man For The Categories

by Scott Alexander17 min read21st Nov 20148 comments

54

Philosophy of LanguageDistinctionsRationalityWorld Modeling

Personal Blog

The Categories Were Made For Man, Not Man For The Categories

I.

II.

III.

IV.

V.

VI.

8 comments

I.

“Silliest internet atheist argument” is a hotly contested title, but I have a special place in my heart for the people who occasionally try to prove Biblical fallibility by pointing out whales are not a type of fish.

(this is going to end up being a metaphor for something, so bear with me)

The argument goes like this. Jonah got swallowed by a whale. But the Bible says Jonah got swallowed by a big fish. So the Bible seems to think whales are just big fish. Therefore the Bible is fallible. Therefore, the Bible was not written by God.

The first problem here is that “whale” is just our own modern interpretation of the Bible. For all we know, Jonah was swallowed by a really really really big herring.

The second problem is that if the ancient Hebrews want to call whales a kind of fish, let them call whales a kind of fish.

I’m not making the weak and boring claim that since they’d never discovered genetics they don’t know better. I am making the much stronger claim that, even if the ancient Hebrews had taken enough of a break from murdering Philistines and building tabernacles to sequence the genomes of all known species of aquatic animals, there’s nothing whatsoever wrong, false, or incorrect with them calling a whale a fish.

Now, there’s something wrong with saying “whales are phylogenetically just as closely related to bass, herring, and salmon as these three are related to each other.” What’s wrong with the statement is that it’s false. But saying “whales are a kind of fish” isn’t.

Suppose you travel back in time to ancient Israel and try to explain to King Solomon that whales are a kind of mammal and not a kind of fish.

Your translator isn’t very good, so you pause to explain “fish” and “mammal” to Solomon. You tell him that fish is “the sort of thing herring, bass, and salmon are” and mammal is “the sort of thing cows, sheep, and pigs are”. Solomon tells you that your word “fish” is Hebrew *dag* and your word “mammal” is Hebrew *behemah*.

So you try again and say that a whale is a *behemah*, not a *dag*. Solomon laughs at you and says you’re an idiot.

You explain that you’re not an idiot, that in fact all kinds of animals have things called genes, and the genes of a whale are much closer to those of the other *behemah* than those of the *dag*.

Solomon says he’s never heard of these gene things before, and that maybe genetics is involved in your weird foreign words “fish” and “mammal”, but *dag*

are just finned creatures that swim in the sea, and *behemah* are just legged creatures that walk on the Earth.

(like the *kelev* and the *parah* and the *gavagai*)

You try to explain that no, Solomon is wrong, *dag* are actually defined not by their swimming-in-sea-with-fins-ness, but by their genes.

Solomon says you didn't even *know* the word *dag* ten minutes ago, and now suddenly you think you know what it means better than he does, who has been using it his entire life? Who died and made *you* an expert on Biblical Hebrew?

You try to explain that whales actually have tiny little hairs, too small to even see, just as cows and sheep and pigs have hair.

Solomon says oh God, you are so annoying, who the hell cares whether whales have tiny little hairs or not. In fact, the only thing Solomon cares about is whether responsibilities for his kingdom's production of blubber and whale oil should go under his Ministry of Dag or Ministry of Behemah. The Ministry of Dag is based on the coast and has a lot of people who work on ships. The Ministry of Behemah has a strong presence inland and lots of people who hunt on horseback. So please (he continues) keep going about how whales have little tiny hairs.

It's easy to see that Solomon has a point, and that if he wants to define *behemah* as four-legged-land-dwellers that's his right, and no better or worse than your definition of "creatures in a certain part of the phylogenetic tree". Indeed, it might even be that if you spent ten years teaching Solomon all about the theory of genetics and evolution (which would be hilarious – think how annoyed the creationists would get) he might still say "That's very interesting, and I can see why we need a word to describe creatures closely related along the phylogenetic tree, but make up your own word, because *behemah* already means 'four-legged-land-dweller'."

Now imagine that instead of talking to King Solomon, you're talking to that guy from Duck Dynasty with the really crazy beard (I realize that may describe more than one person), who stands in for all uneducated rednecks in the same way King Solomon stands in for all Biblical Hebrews.

"Ah course a whale is a feesh, ya moron" he says in his heavy Southern accent.

"No it isn't," you say. "A fish is a creature phylogenetically related to various other fish, and with certain defining anatomical features. It says so right here in this biology textbook."

"Well," Crazy Beard Guy tells you, "Ah reckon that might be what a fish is, but a *feesh* is some'in that swims in the orshun."

With a sinking feeling in your stomach, you spend ten years turning Crazy Beard Guy into a world expert on phylogenetics and evolutionary theory. Although

the Duck Dynasty show becomes *much* more interesting, you fail to budge him a bit on the meaning of “feesh”.

It’s easy to see here that “fish” and “feesh” can be different just as “fish” and “*dag*” can be different.

You can point out how many important professors of ichthyology in fancy suits use your definition, and how only a couple of people with really weird facial hair use his. But now you’re making a status argument, not a factual argument. Your argument is “conform to the way all the cool people use the word ‘fish’”, not “a whale is really and truly not a fish”.

There are facts of the matter on each individual point – whether a whale has fins, whether a whale lives in the ocean, whether a whale has tiny hairs, et cetera. But there is no fact of the matter on whether a whale is a fish. The argument is entirely semantic.

So this is the second reason why this particular objection to the Bible is silly. If God wants to call a whale a big fish, stop telling God what to do.

(also, bats)

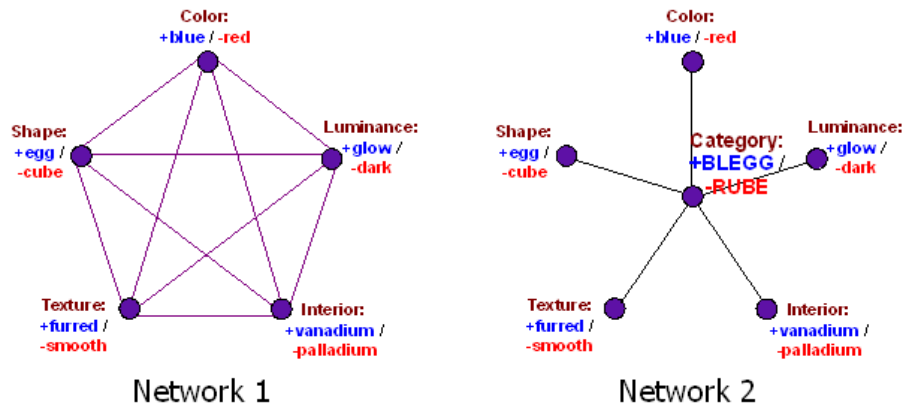
II.

When terms are *not* defined directly by God, we need our own methods of dividing them into categories.

The essay “How An Algorithm Feels From The Inside” is a gift that keeps on giving. You can get a reputation as a daring and original thinker just by copy-pasting it at different arguments with a couple of appropriate words substituted for one another, mad-libs like. It is the solution to something like 25% of extant philosophical problems.

It starts with a discussion of whether or not Pluto is a planet. Planets tend to share many characteristics in common. For example, they are large, round, have normal shaped orbits lined up with the plane of the ecliptic, have cleared out a certain area of space, and are at least kind of close to the Sun as opposed to way out in the Oort Cloud.

One could imagine a brain that thought about these characteristics like Network 1 here:



Obligatory Less Wrong picture

One could imagine this model telling you everything you need to know. If an object is larger, it's more likely to be round and in cis-Neptunian space. If an object has failed to clear its orbit of debris, it's more likely to have a skewed orbit relative to the plane of the ecliptic. We could give each of these relationships Bayesian weights and say things like large objects have a 32% chance of being in cis-Neptunian space and small objects an 86% chance. Or whatever.

But Network 1 has some big problems. For one thing, if you inscribe it in blood, you might accidentally summon the Devil. But for another, it's computationally very complicated. Each attribute affects each other attribute which affects it in turn and so on in an infinite cycle, so that its behavior tends to be chaotic and unpredictable.

What people actually seem to do is more like Network 2: sweep all common correlations into one big category in the middle, thus dividing possibility-space into large round normal-orbit solitary inner objects, and small irregular skewed-orbit crowded outer objects. It calls the first category "planets" and the second category "planetoids".

You can then sweep minor irregularities under the rug. Neptune is pretty far from the sun, but since it's large, round, normal-orbit, and solitary, we know which way the evidence is leaning.

When an object satisfies about half the criteria for planet and half the criteria for planetoid, *then* it's awkward. Pluto is the classic example. It's relatively large, round, skewed orbit, solitary...ish? and outer-ish. What do you do?

The *practical* answer is you convene some very expensive meeting of prestigious astronomers and come to some official decision which everyone agrees to follow so they're all on the same page.

But the *ideal* answer is you say "Huh, the assumption encoded in the word 'planet' that the five red criteria always went together and the five blue criteria

always went together doesn't hold. Whatever."

Then you divide the solar system into three types of objects: planets, planetoids, and dammit-our-categorization-scheme-wasn't-as-good-as-we-thought.

(psychiatry, whose philosophy of categorization is light years ahead of a lot of the rest of the world, conveniently abbreviates this latter category as "NOS")

The situation with whales and fish is properly understood in the same context. Fish and mammals differ on a lot of axes. Fish generally live in the water, breathe through gills, have tails and fins, possess a certain hydrodynamic shape, lay eggs, and are in a certain part of the phylogenetic tree. Mammals generally live on land, breathe through lungs, have legs, give live birth, and are in another part of the phylogenetic tree. Most fish conform to all of the fish desiderata, and most mammals conform to all of the mammal desiderata, so there's no question of how to categorize them. Occasionally you get something weird (a platypus, a lungfish, or a whale) and it's a judgment call which you have to decide by fiat. In our case, that fiat is "use genetics and ignore all other characteristics" but some other language, culture, or scientific community might make a different fiat, and then the borders between their categories would look a little bit different.

III.

Since I shifted to a borders metaphor, let's follow that and see where it goes.

Imagine that Israel and Palestine agree to a two-state solution with the final boundary to be drawn by the United Nations. You're the head of the United Nations committee involved, so you get out a map and a pencil. Both sides have sworn by their respective gods to follow whatever you determine.

Your job is not to draw "the correct border". There is no one correct border between Israel and Palestine. There are a couple of very strong candidates (for example, the pre-1967 line of control), but both countries have suggested deviations from that (most people think an actual solution would involve Palestine giving up some territory that has since been thoroughly settled by Israel in exchange for some territory within Israel proper, or perhaps for a continuous "land bridge" between the West Bank and Gaza). Even if you wanted to use the pre-1967 line as a starting point, there would still be a lot of work to do deciding what land swaps should and shouldn't be made.

Instead you'd be making a series of trade-offs. Giving all of Jerusalem to the Israelis would make them very happy but anger Palestine. Creating a contiguous corridor between Gaza and the West Bank makes some sense, but then you'd be cutting off Eilat from the rest of Israel. Giving all of the Israeli settlements in the West Bank back to Palestine would satisfy a certain conception of property rights, but also leave a lot of Jews homeless.

There are also much stupider decisions you could make. You could give Tel Aviv to Palestine. You could make the Palestinian state a perfect circle five miles in radius centered on Rishon LeZion. You could just split the territory in half

with a straight line, and give Israel the north and Palestine the south. All of these things would be really dumb.

But, crucially, they would not be *false*. They would not be *factually incorrect*. They would just be failing to achieve pretty much any of the goals that we would expect a person solving land disputes in the Middle East to have. You can think of alternative arrangements in which these wouldn't be dumb. For example, if you're a despot, and you want to make it very clear to both the Israelis and Palestinians that their opinions don't matter and they should stop bothering you with annoying requests for arbitration, maybe splitting the country in half north-south is the way to go.

This is now unexpectedly a geography blog again.

The border between Turkey and Syria follows a mostly straight-ish line near-ish the 36th parallel, except that about twenty miles south of the border Turkey controls a couple of square meters in the middle of a Syrian village. This is the tomb of the ancestor of the Ottoman Turks, and Turkey's border agreement with Syria stipulates that it will remain part of Turkey forever. And the Turks take this *very* seriously; they maintain a platoon of special forces there and have recently been threatening war against Syria if their "territory" gets "invaded" in the current conflict.



Pictured: Turkey (inside fence), Syria (outside)

The border between Bangladesh and India is complicated at the best of times, but it becomes absolutely ridiculous in a place called Cooch-Bihar, which I guess is as good a name as any for a place full of ridiculous things. In at least one spot there is an 'island' of Indian territory within a larger island of Bangladeshi territory within a larger island of Indian territory within Bangladesh. According to mentalfloss.com:

So why'd the border get drawn like that? It can all be traced back to power struggles between local kings hundreds of years ago, who

would try to claim pockets of land inside each other's territories as a way to leverage political power. When Bangladesh became independent from India in 1947 (as East Pakistan until 1971), all those separate pockets of land were divvied up. Hence the polka-dotted mess.



Namibia is a very weird-looking country with a very thin three-hundred-mile-long panhandle (eg about twice as long as Oklahoma's). Apparently during the Scramble For Africa, the Germans who colonized Namibia really wanted access to the Zambezi River so they could reach the Indian Ocean and trade their colonial resources. They kept pestering the British who colonized Botswana until the Brits finally agreed to give up a tiny but very long strip of territory ending at the riverbank. This turned out to be not so useful, as *just* after Namibia's Zambezi access sits Victoria Falls, the largest waterfall in the world – meaning that any Germans who tried to traverse the Zambezi to reach the Indian Ocean would last a matter of minutes before suddenly encountering a four hundred foot drop and falling to pretty much certain death. The moral of the story is not to pester the British Empire too much, especially if they've explored Africa and you haven't.



But the other moral of the story is that borders are weird. Although we think of borders as nice straight lines that separate people of different cultures, they can form giant panhandles, distant islands, and enclaves-within-enclaves-within-enclaves. They can depart from their usual course to pay honor to national founders, to preserve records of ancient conquests, or to connect to trade routes.

Hume’s ethics restrict “bad” to an instrumental criticism – you can condemn something as a bad way to achieve a certain goal, but not as morally bad independent of what the goal is. In the same way, borders can be bad at fulfilling your goals in drawing them, but not bad in an absolute sense or factually incorrect. Namibia’s border is bad from the perspective of Germans who want access to the Indian Ocean. But it’s *excellent* from the perspective of Englishmen who want to watch Germans plummet into the Lower Zambezi and get eaten by hippos.

Breaking out of the metaphor, the same is true of conceptual boundaries. You *may* draw the boundaries of the category “fish” any way you want. A category “fish” containing herring, dragonflies, and asteroids is going to be stupid, but only in the same sense that a Palestinian state centered around Tel Aviv would be stupid – it fails to fulfill any conceivable goals of the person designing it. Categories “fish” that do or don’t include whales may be appropriate for different people’s purposes, the same way Palestinians might argue about whether the borders of their state should be optimized for military defensibility or for religious/cultural significance.

Statements like “the Zambezi River is full of angry hippos” are brute facts. Statements like “the Zambezi River is the territory of Namibia” are negotiable.

In the same way, statements like “whales have little hairs” are brute facts. Statements like “whales are not a kind of fish” are negotiable.

So it’s important to keep these two sorts of statements separate, and remember that in no case can an agreed-upon set of borders or a category boundary be factually incorrect.

IV.

I usually avoid arguing LGBT issues on here, not because I don’t have strong opinions about them but because I assume so many of my readers already agree with me that it would be a waste of time. I’m pretty sure I’m right about this – on the recent survey, readers of this blog who were asked to rate their opinion of gay marriage from 1 (strongly against) to 5 (strongly in favor) gave an average rating of 4.32.

Nevertheless, I’ve seen enough anti-transgender comments recently that the issue might be worth a look.

In particular, I’ve seen one anti-transgender argument around that I take very seriously. The argument goes: we are rationalists. Our *entire shtick* is trying to believe what’s actually true, not on what we wish were true, or what our culture tells us is true, or what it’s popular to say is true. If a man thinks he’s a woman, then we might (empathetically) wish he were a woman, other people might demand we call him a woman, and we might be much more popular if we say he’s a woman. But if we’re going to be rationalists who focus on believing what’s actually true, then we’ve got to call him a man and take the consequences.

Thus Abraham Lincoln's famous riddle: "If you call a tail a leg, how many legs does a dog have?" And the answer: "Four – because a tail isn't a leg regardless of what you call it."

(if John Wilkes Booth had to suffer through that riddle, then I don't blame him)

I take this argument very seriously, because sticking to the truth really is important. But having taken it seriously, I think it's seriously wrong.

An alternative categorization system is not an error, and borders are not objectively true or false.

Just as we can come up with criteria for a definition of "planet", we can come up with a definition of "man". Absolutely typical men have Y chromosomes, have male genitalia, appreciate manly things like sports and lumberjackery, are romantically attracted to women, personally identify as male, wear male clothing like blue jeans, sing baritone in the opera, et cetera.

Some people satisfy some criteria of manhood and not others, in much the same way that Pluto satisfies only some criteria of planethood and whales satisfy only some criteria of mammalhood. For example, gay men might date other men and behave in effeminate ways. People with congenital androgen insensitivity syndrome might have female bodies, female external genitalia, and have been raised female their entire life, but when you look into their cells they have Y chromosomes.

Biologists defined by fiat that in cases of ambiguous animal grouping like whales, phylogenetics will be the tiebreaker. This was useful to resolve ambiguity, and it's worth sticking to as a Schelling point so everyone's using their words the same way, but it's kind of arbitrary and mostly based on biologists caring a lot about phylogenetics. If we let King Solomon make the decision, he might decide by fiat that whether animals lived in land or water would be the tiebreaker, since he's most interested in whether the animal is hunted on horseback or by boat.

Likewise, astronomers decided by fiat that something would be a planet if and only if it meets the three criteria of orbiting, round, and orbit-clearing. But here we have a pretty neat window into how these kinds of decisions take place – you can read the history of the International Astronomical Union meeting where they settled on the definition and learn about all the alternative proposals that were floated and rejected and which particular politics resulted in the present criteria being selected among all the different possibilities. Here it is *obvious* that the decision was by fiat.

Without the input of any prestigious astronomers at all, most people seem to assume that the ultimate tiebreaker in man vs. woman questions is presence of a Y chromosome. I'm not sure this is a very principled decision, because I expect most people would classify congenital androgen insensitivity patients (XY people whose bodies are insensitive to the hormone that makes them look male, and so end up looking 100% female their entire lives and often not even knowing they have the condition) as women.

The project of the transgender movement is to propose a switch from using chromosomes as a tiebreaker to using self-identification as a tiebreaker.

(This isn't actually the whole story – some of the more sophisticated people want to split “sex” and “gender”, so that people who want to talk about what chromosomes they've got have a categorization system to do that with, and a few people even want to split “chromosomal sex” and “anatomical sex” and “gender” and goodness knows what else – and I support all of these as very important examples of the virtue of precision – but to a first approximation, they want to define gender as self-identification)

This is not something that can be “true” or “false”. It's a boundary-redrawing project. It can make for some boundaries that look a little bit weird – like a small percent of men being able to get pregnant – but as far as weird boundaries go that's probably not as bad as having a tiny exclave of Turkish territory in the middle of a Syrian village.

(Ozy tells me this is sort of what queer theory is getting at, but in a horrible unreadable postmodernist way. They assure me you're better off just reading the darned Sequences.)

You draw category boundaries in specific ways to capture tradeoffs you care about. If you care about the sanctity of the tomb of your country's founder, sometimes it's worth having a slightly weird-looking boundary in order to protect and honor it. And if you care about...

I've lived with a transgender person for six months, so I probably should have written this earlier. But I'm writing it now because I just finished accepting a transgender man to the mental hospital. He alternates between trying to kill himself and trying to cut off various parts of his body because he's so distressed that he is biologically female. We've connected him with some endocrinologists who can hopefully get him started on male hormones, after which maybe he'll stop doing that and hopefully be able to lead a normal life.

If I'm willing to accept an unexpected chunk of Turkey deep inside Syrian territory to honor some random dead guy – and I better, or else a platoon of Turkish special forces will want to have a word with me – then I ought to accept an unexpected man or two deep inside the conceptual boundaries of what would normally be considered female if it'll save someone's life. There's no rule of rationality saying that I shouldn't, and there are plenty of rules of human decency saying that I should.

V.

I've made this argument before and gotten a reply something like this:

“Transgender is a psychiatric disorder. When people have psychiatric disorders, certainly it's right to sympathize and feel sorry for them and want to help them. But the way we try to help them is by treating their disorder, not by indulging them in their delusion.”

I think these people expect me to argue that transgender “isn’t really a psychiatric disorder” or something. But “psychiatric disorder” is just another category boundary dispute, and one that I’ve already written enough about elsewhere. At this point, I don’t care enough to say much more than “If it’s a psychiatric disorder, then attempts to help transgender people get covered by health insurance, and most of the ones I know seem to want that, so sure, gender dysphoria is a psychiatric disorder.”

And then I think of the Hair Dryer Incident.

The Hair Dryer Incident was probably the biggest dispute I’ve seen in the mental hospital where I work. Most of the time all the psychiatrists get along and have pretty much the same opinion about important things, but people were at each other’s *throats* about the Hair Dryer Incident.

Basically, this one obsessive compulsive woman would drive to work every morning and worry she had left the hair dryer on and it was going to burn down her house. So she’d drive back home to check that the hair dryer was off, then drive back to work, then worry that maybe she hadn’t *really* checked well enough, then drive back, and so on ten or twenty times a day.

It’s a pretty typical case of obsessive-compulsive disorder, but it was really interfering with her life. She worked some high-powered job – I think a lawyer – and she was *constantly* late to everything because of this driving back and forth, to the point where her career was in a downspin and she thought she would have to quit and go on disability. She wasn’t able to go out with friends, she wasn’t even able to go to restaurants because she would keep fretting she left the hair dryer on at home and have to rush back. She’d seen countless psychiatrists, psychologists, and counselors, she’d done all sorts of therapy, she’d taken every medication in the book, and none of them had helped.

So she came to my hospital and was seen by a colleague of mine, who told her “Hey, have you thought about just bringing the hair dryer with you?”

And it *worked*.

She would be driving to work in the morning, and she’d start worrying she’d left the hair dryer on and it was going to burn down her house, and so she’d look at the seat next to her, and there would be the hair dryer, right there. And she only had the one hair dryer, which was now accounted for. So she would let out a sigh of relief and keep driving to work.

And approximately half the psychiatrists at my hospital thought this was *absolutely scandalous*, and This Is Not How One Treats Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and what if it got out to the broader psychiatric community that instead of giving all of these high-tech medications and sophisticated therapies we were just telling people to *put their hair dryers on the front seat of their car*?

I, on the other hand, thought it was the best fucking story I had ever heard and the guy deserved a medal. Here’s someone who was totally untreatable

by the normal methods, with a debilitating condition, and a drop-dead simple intervention that nobody else had thought of gave her her life back. If one day I open up my own psychiatric practice, I am half-seriously considering using a picture of a hair dryer as the logo, just to let everyone know where I stand on this issue.

Miyamoto Musashi is quoted as saying:

The primary thing when you take a sword in your hands is your intention to cut the enemy, whatever the means. Whenever you parry, hit, spring, strike or touch the enemy's cutting sword, you must cut the enemy in the same movement. It is essential to attain this. If you think only of hitting, springing, striking or touching the enemy, you will not be able actually to cut him.

Likewise, the primary thing in psychiatry is to help the patient, whatever the means. Someone can concern-troll that the hair dryer technique leaves something to be desired in that it might have prevented the patient from seeking a more thorough cure that would prevent her from having to bring the hair dryer with her. But compared to the alternative of "nothing else works" it seems clearly superior.

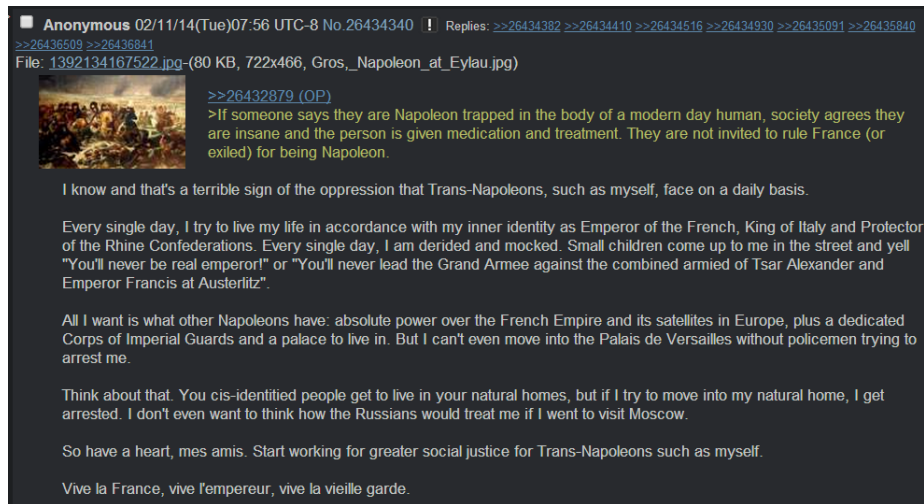
And that's the position from which I think a psychiatrist should approach gender dysphoria, too.

Imagine if we could give depressed people a much higher quality of life merely by giving them cheap natural hormones. I don't think there's a psychiatrist in the world who wouldn't celebrate that as one of the biggest mental health advances in a generation. Imagine if we could ameliorate schizophrenia with one safe simple surgery, just snip snip you're not schizophrenic anymore. Pretty sure that would win *all* of the Nobel prizes. Imagine that we could make a serious dent in bipolar disorder just by calling people different pronouns. I'm pretty sure the entire mental health field would join together in bludgeoning anybody who refused to do that. We would bludgeon them over the head with big books about the side effects of lithium.

Really, are you *sure* you want your opposition to accepting transgender people to be "I think it's a mental disorder"?

VI.

Some people can't leave well enough alone, and continue to push the mental disorder angle. For example:



There are a lot of things I could say here.

I could point out that trans-Napoleonism seem to be mysteriously less common than transgender.

I could relate this mysterious difference to the various heavily researched apparent biological correlates of transgender, including unusual variants of the androgen receptor, birth-sex-discordant sizes of various brain regions, birth-sex-discordant responses to various pheromones, high rates of something seemingly like body integrity identity disorder, and of course our old friend altered digit ratios. If our hypothetical trans-Napoleon came out of the womb wearing a French military uniform and clutching a list of 19th century Grand Armee positions in his cute little baby hands, I think I'd take him more seriously.

I could argue that questions about gender are questions about category boundaries, whereas questions about Napoleon – absent some kind of philosophical legwork that I would very much like to read – are questions of fact.

I could point out that if the extent of somebody's trans-Napoleonness was wanting to wear a bicorne hat, and he was going to be suicidal his entire life if he couldn't but pretty happy if I could, let him wear the damn hat.

I could just link people to other sites' pretty good objections to the same argument.

But I think what I actually want to say is that there was once a time somebody tried pretty much exactly this, silly hat and all. Society shrugged and played along, he led a rich and fulfilling life, his grateful Imperial subjects came to love him, and it's one of the most heartwarming episodes in the history of one of my favorite places in the world.

Sometimes when you make a little effort to be nice to people, even people you might think are weird, really good things happen.

Philosophy of Language3Distinctions1Rationality2World Modeling2
Personal Blog

54

Previous:

Diseased thinking: dissolving questions about disease

353 comments386 points

Next:

The noncentral fallacy - the worst argument in the world?

1755 comments288 points

Log in to save where you left off

Pingbacks

67Unnatural Categories Are Optimized for Deception

34The Problem of the Criterion

29Feedback Requested! Draft of a New About/Welcome Page for LessWrong

8Musical Outgroups

4Thoughts on a "Sequences Inspired" PhD Topic

Load More

8 comments, sorted by

top scoring

Highlighting new comments since Today at 3:56 AM

New Comment

Submit

[...]salmonofknowledge@gmail.com4y

20

I like the fish and whale and border examples. The ancient Jewish fish / land distinction makes sense and there was no reason why it shouldn't be so if it was the most helpful separation for their needs or at least if taxonomy by habitat had no disadvantages. The peanut is a legume but it doesn't affect our day to day lives not to know that isn't a nut. Although I don't think any complex phylogenetics and evolutionary theory would have been needed to explain why a whale was more similar to a cow. Pointing out that it gave birth to live young

which was suckled by mammary glands and that it was warm blooded may well have created a 'well wouldn't you know that' moment in ancient times.

How we categorise different things, where we draw the line is often not clear cut. The problem with the argument of Pluto as planetoid or planet is that we can not say on this basis that Jupiter is a planetoid, because it is distinctly still a planet. Another example is the difference between a lake and a pond? Everyone's line separating the two might be in different place. But equally this doesn't mean that Lake Victoria can be called a pond purely on the basis that there is a blurred line in the middle between small lakes and large ponds. Likewise the existence of grey does not mean that black can be white.

What these arguments are really analogous to are intersex conditions where it can be very difficult to call whether someone is male or female. Indeed there are intersex conditions which are more clearly one or the other sex whilst true hermaphrodites are rare but it's clearly a tricky business as to where to draw the line and what should take precedence in determining that line - gonads? genitals? chromosomes? phenotype? sexual orientation? personal feeling? stereotypical behaviours? There were times when gay people could be seen as hermaphrodites because the idea of same sex attraction was seen as against nature.

The problem with this analogy is that trans people are not considered to be intersex. They are unequivocally one biological sex or the other with matching gonads, genitals and genes. It is only their self assessment that differs from the reality of their bodies. The argument is as you say that the overriding determinant of sex should then not be anything objectively observable but instead a strongly held subjective feeling. This makes things more tricky opening as it does a huge can of philosophical worms.

The Napoleon argument touches on this and yes it's true it doesn't seem to be a common condition, probably because he's not as well known a figure as others these days. My psychiatric nurse friends tell me there are far more many Jesus's to be found - they having met several in their time. Though it's true no one has found any evidence for genetics predisposing one to this specific delusion. There is indeed some evidence to suggest susceptibility to hormones in utero may result in a trans gender identity via over or under expression of hormones due to genetics. Yet this and some minor brain area differences only really prove that people are telling the truth - that they genuinely feel they should have been born the opposite sex.

There are also genetics markers and brain area changes observable in people who develop schizophrenia. And also genetic markers and brain area changes in those people prone to be very religious. So we know these people genuinely believe what they see as truths, be it that they are being followed by an anarchist cabal, voices talk to them or that they experience a feeling of a divine presence. Yet we do not use their quite genuine experiences as a basis for everyone else having to affirm these experiences as objective truths. Unless of course we live

in theocratic dictatorship or think schizophrenic people have a hotline to some higher power.

We support freedom of belief and religious freedom. The argument that "I could point out that if the extent of somebody's trans-Napoleonness was wanting to wear a bicorne hat, and he was going to be suicidal his entire life if he couldn't but pretty happy if I could, let him wear the damn hat." is more difficult than it first appears. Of course it will not harm a person to wear a bicorne hat so why they shouldn't wear it and I agree. But what the argument proposes is that everyone must also affirm his belief that he is Napoleon. This is asking a lot. It insists that the rest of the world keep up a facade in order to protect the feelings of would be Napoleons. Whilst that can be a very sweet thing to do - cf the films *Lars and the Real Girl* or *La Vita e bella*, it does mandate mass mendacity.

I agree that if there's no harm in holding up a pretence and a person will be happier then there's a good argument for doing it - which is widely respected up to a point in the acceptability of white lies- the building block of social interactions. "I like your new hair cut" or "I can't make tonight because I have a cold" are fairly innocuous white lies which do more good than harm. But when it comes to Chinese officials making a fake show field of wheat to demonstrate to Mao their glorious leader the success of his agricultural policy when in reality millions are starving, then protecting someones sense of their competence is distinctly problematic. The potential for harm must be outweighed by the potential for good.

"If it's a psychiatric disorder, then attempts to help transgender people get covered by health insurance, and most of the ones I know seem to want that, so sure, gender dysphoria is a psychiatric disorder."

I agree here with this pragmatic approach. If people feel better after surgery and it relieves their dysphoria there is a good argument for saying that they should be given this treatment. Presumably you also agree with the removal of limbs for those with body integrity identity disorder. Though I think both types of patient should be given a full run down of other psychological causes which may be affecting their beliefs before they can volunteer for surgery removing healthy body parts- having met people who later realised this wasn't really the issue at all.

The hair dryer solution seems fair enough. Though if the woman had swapped her anxiety onto the iron and then the curling tongs and the lamps and then the tumble dryer it may not have been quite such a genius stroke. But whilst it was just a hairdryer no harm done. And there was no principle of reality that was being breached-the woman was correct in knowing that the hair dryer could not burn her car down when it wasn't plugged in. I have though another example of such an unusual solution which then created further problems.

I asked my psych nurse friend was it not sometime easier to play along with patients delusions than to constantly fight against them. He gave me an example

of a woman who was convinced her house had a flea infestation. Yet no fleas could be found. It caused her great deal of distress and finally a practitioner had the idea of hiring environmental health to go fumigate her house to see if that worked. And it did. The woman was overjoyed to have finally rid herself of the fleas and all was well.

Until a few months later when she became convinced that a new infestation had taken root. She asked again for the fumigators to be called but this time the practitioner declined saying no fleas were present. The woman was really confused and said 'But they were here before, otherwise the fumigators wouldn't have been called to exterminate them' So what seemed a simple fix actually ended up propping up a person's delusion.

"Imagine if we could give depressed people a much higher quality of life merely by giving them cheap natural hormones. I don't think there's a psychiatrist in the world who wouldn't celebrate that as one of the biggest mental health advances in a generation."

Hormones permanently change the body as well as there being as with most drugs, dangerous side effects. It would seem better to investigate drugs which might remedy the dysphoria by addressing the brain issue rather than the body.

"Imagine if we could ameliorate schizophrenia with one safe simple surgery, just snip snip you're not schizophrenic anymore. Pretty sure that would win all of the Nobel prizes."

This is a very worrying example. For in fact there was such an operation and it may have even got a Nobel prize. It was called the frontal lobotomy and in an age before anti psychotics it was a very useful operation allowing schizophrenic and manic patients to live perfectly peaceable lives no longer confined to the asylums. And it had the bonus of making everyone's life around these people a lot easier. What was then hailed as a wonder cure, a panacea for all mental health ills is now seen as one of the worst psychiatric human rights abuses. You would then think the psychiatric profession would be a little more cautious and less gung ho about the introduction of another surgical procedure claimed as a cure.

"Imagine that we could make a serious dent in bipolar disorder just by calling people different pronouns. I'm pretty sure the entire mental health field would join together in bludgeoning anybody who refused to do that. We would bludgeon them over the head with big books about the side effects of lithium."

Another very dubious conclusion here. That psychiatrists like some form of modern priests would insist that the population at large lie en masse to prevent a very small percentage of the population from having to take drugs with unpleasant side effects to help their condition by affirming a delusion.

"Sometimes when you make a little effort to be nice to people, even people you might think are weird, really good things happen."

This is really the crux of the article's entire argument. We should do it to be nice. Only where are the rights of other people in this? Why should everyone be forced to endure cognitive dissonance, to lie about their own perceptions of the world in order to humour a small subsection of the population who are unfortunate enough to have what may be a developmental brain glitch or a misapprehension caused by any number of other psychiatric conditions - and where there is no way of knowing which.

It would be salient then if this is considered a good thing, if everyone's else's sense of authenticity is expected to be compromised that the potential harms also be considered. What for example if your trans man patient or trans man friend commits a crime and is sent to prison. How do you feel about them being sent to male prison whilst in possession of a vagina. (No surgery is necessary to legally change sex) Much like allowing someone who identified as a wolf into the wolf enclosure at the zoo. Is this not where reality hits abruptly up against niceness? Only this week a trans man was raped in a hostel by a man who didn't much care that she told him she identified as male. Because he perceived her quite correctly, to be female.

This also runs into hot water the other way round. Now male sex offenders can claim they feel like women. Some may be genuine some not. On this basis they can then be moved to female prisons. What of the rights of the women in the prison? Who is being nice to them? Housing a woman in a cell with a serial rapist doesn't seem that fair an idea. Nor does destroying the ability of all women to ever congregate without males, be it in a changing room, a domestic violence centre, a rape crisis centre or any other spaces where women might be vulnerable to sexual assault. Which is statistically carried out far more by males, regardless of how they identify.

This problem with self identification has already been flagged up by gender specialists who state there is a huge rising tide of male sex offenders now identifying as women, most of whose claims they think are false. But of course they will be in no position to decide if self declaration is the only criteria necessary. If it is a psychiatric disorder then it's the first one where the patient is allowed to diagnose themselves and demand the treatment of their choosing.

Here we see that yes it is nice to be nice, but sometimes being nice by dint of dishonesty has many unintended consequences which are not quite so nice. Do you think the right to be affirmed as one perceives oneself for 0.3% of the population is more important than the rights to safety for 51% of the population? From a utilitarian perspective it certainly doesn't add up.

"I ought to accept an unexpected man or two deep inside the conceptual boundaries of what would normally be considered female if it'll save someone's life."

The suggestion that we should be hostage to people suicidal threats or attempts is a very morally dubious one. We do not advocate women to stay with men who threaten to kill themselves if they leave or to give into terrorists because

otherwise they will blow themselves up. There is a emotional blackmail angle here that in any other circumstance as a psychiatric professional you would surely question.

"There's no rule of rationality saying that I shouldn't, and there are plenty of rules of human decency saying that I should."

There are plenty of rules of rationality saying that you shouldn't. And a very restricted version of human decency that you should. One that only flies if you consider the feelings of a tiny fraction of the population to be more important than everyone else's right to safety, freedom of belief and authenticity. Which doesn't seem very decent at all.

Reply

[~]rohanhublikar99@gmail.com1y

4

I don't often post to public forums about topics like this, but from reading the FAQ I believe I'm supposed to point out poor arguments where they show up. Sorry I know this thread is very old but if I go around recommended articles on this site then I can't in good conscience not point out the number of logical leaps you've made in this response. Many of these were pointed out by An_Amazing_Login but she was understandably upset about the whole thing. I have no personal stake in the politics at hand, this is mostly just a rational rebuttal.

Firstly, I think it's easy enough to point out this bad-faith argument-

"This is a very worrying example. For in fact there was such an operation and it may have even got a Nobel prize. It was called the frontal lobotomy and in an age before anti psychotics it was a very useful operation allowing schizophrenic and manic patients to live perfectly peaceable lives no longer confined to the asylums." While that's true, it's also functionally irrelevant to the topic at hand. Medical ethics have advanced rather far since the age of the lobotomy and clearly Mr. Alexander wasn't referring to a horrifically damaging procedure in his offhand example of why low-cost treatments to debilitating psychological conditions would be nice. I imagine the obvious counterexample would be to say "nobody thought lobotomies were unethical when they were performed on marginalized people and yet they still destroyed people's lives. Perhaps most doctors don't think sex-change operations are unethical now but in 50 years we will consider the cutting-off-of-penis surgery (not mentioning the converse because you seem fixated on this one) to be highly unethical as well. I would consider that a good-faith argument, and I think the easy answer of bringing up the virtual infinity of other medical procedures that could be considered highly unethical one day to be a good point to begin with in response.

Your argument on the proposed medical treatment for depression is somewhat similar. We already prescribe drugs for depression, so clearly medical ethics

boards think risking (frankly horrific) side effects is in some cases worth it. I personally disagree, but then if I could actually, you know, *see* the side effects of the mythical hormones in question I would consider it. In reality, the side effects of hormone therapy on trans people seem to be passing my personal bar for ethical treatment standards, to a far greater extent than the prescription of benzodiazepenes or opioids.

Second bad-faith argument-examples of the rape of trans men and the question--would you want to send a man in possession of a vagina to a male penitentiary? As the other commenter rightly pointed out, I don't think a man being raped is any better than a women being raped, so this argument doesn't really make much sense. Unless you're arguing that the presence of a biological female makes a man rape where he otherwise would not, which I would argue seems to be a problem with the man, not with the sex of the other person in the room. To put it another way, if your issue with transgenderism is that it will lead to people with vaginas being raped where they would otherwise not be, then I suppose giving all biological females penises and reproducing via surgical procedures would be a moral imperative that we should get on making affordable. Similar reasoning applies to the other way around, unless you think that women can't rape other women. In fact, your arguments on this subject boil down to "the inherent physical advantage that going through male puberty confers means that most men will have the advantage in raping trans men and trans women have the advantage in raping other women." People who train effective martial arts for several years have a similar advantage over the general population--should we ban martial arts training? No, because it turns out we have different system of incentives in place to prevent rape.

Third--"There are also genetics markers and brain area changes observable in people who develop schizophrenia. And also genetic markers and brain area changes in those people prone to be very religious..." I don't claim to be an expert in ANY way on brain physiology but this argument seems ridiculous if I read it as is. Wouldn't you know, human minds are governed by the physiology of their brains. There are endless arguments on nature vs. nurture, but from even a slightly deterministic view of personality development your argument can be used to call someone liking vanilla ice cream a psychosis. (I mean, I wouldn't necessarily disagree). If instead you are just pointing out that Mr. Alexander's argument proves too much and you just chose bad examples, I can see where you're coming from, but would point out that some people have the opposite problem of believing transgenderism to be entirely dependent upon upbringing/personal choice, and it is worth pointing out the science on the issue as it is. Full disclosure, I do not know if the science has changed at all in the past three years, but that has no direct bearing on the fallacies in your argument here. I will do some research on my own.

Fourth--"This is really the crux of the articles entire argument--we should do it to

be nice.” I didn’t get that at all. The title of the article is ”The Categories Were Made For Man, not Man For the Categories.” It isn’t ”Be Nice to People.” This is the issue with entertaining bad premises to point out how they’re bad premises--a third party gets to cherry pick the argument and make an easy rebuttal. The question at hand is *not* whether it is nicer of cis people to accommodate trans people or of trans people to suffer in silence. The question is one of semantics. Now I’m going to do what I just said is a bad idea and say this--I am skeptical that the negative utility of accommodating reasonable requests of trans people (use preferred pronouns, for example) is greater than the positive utility of trans people on the receiving end of such tolerance. But more on the semantics point later.

Fifth- Accommodating trans-Napoleonism. See above, esp. including the ”cherry-picking the easy argument to rebut” since you made no mention of the more robust objection in Mr. Alexander’s article. I have nothing to add on this one until I hear such a rebuttal.

Sixth-Self identification. Some googling couldn’t turn up the study you cite, but assuming it exists, then the issue would appear to, again, be largely regarding the prison system and not transgenderism.

One argument I thought was somewhere in between was the one comparing gender dysphoria with body integrity identity disorder. I’m tempted to dismiss this one because it seems like *reducio ad absurdum*, but its a fairly compelling argument. I could point to any number of other instances where we respect a patient’s choice to effectively do themselves permanent harm. I believe by the same train of logic you would require a full psychiatric evaluation before any person ever got a tattoo, though that argument feels a little too absurd to be fair. There is a whole body of medical ethics on this and similar issues, but in my personal opinion it appears that the consequences of treating gender dysphoria with reassignment surgery are vastly different to the consequences of fulfilling a patient’s desire to paralyze themselves. It is a very, very difficult thing to determine when a person is of sound mind and I pretty much agree that gender reassignment surgery should come along with an intensive psychological evaluation process. For similar ethical questions--is it moral for the bartender to let intoxicated people poison themselves further and pay him for the privilege? At what point is it allowable for an elderly cancer patient to make the decision to move to hospice care? These are difficult questions and do not lend themselves to universal answers. But if the doctor, medical ethics board, and patient in question are all in unity on the subject, I think it would be very difficult to argue either way.

Okay, that’s all for bad-faith arguments I think. Now as far as my position on this matter and how it might differ from what I get from you--as I said, at the end of the day the argument you’re putting forth is essentially semantic.

Scratch that--part of it is semantic and part of it is misattributing societal flaws to the existence of trans people. (Can you put forth a actual reason why men, let alone trans women, shouldn't go in women's bathrooms that doesn't devolve into victim blaming? Did we start posting guards at bathroom doors to check peoples genitals when I wasn't looking?)

But the semantic bit. My point, and I think Mr. Alexander's point, is as follows: if you define "male" as a person with a Y chromosome and apply this rule unilaterally, you will produce a group of people who mostly share similar characteristics, with few enough outliers that it is still a good label. If you identify "man" as a person who identifies themselves as a man, you also produce a group with functionally the same degree of similarity. What makes one category better than the other? Well, if you ask me, you can have your cake and eat it too, since I just used two different words to describe two different, self-consistent groups. As a medical professional, I think of sex along biological terms and gender along self-identification terms, and have thus far managed to avoid asking a biological male if he is menstruating regularly. Language is sufficiently versatile and subject to change that the semantic portion of the argument that boils down to "should we change the meaning of a few words" appears to be a resounding "yes" for me. The obvious counter is that, if we keep changing the meaning of a few words for a relatively small group of people, eventually our language will become nonsensical. I won't point out that this hasn't seemed to be an issue for any of the other words that evolved in response to new social phenomena, but I will say that I would be much less in favor of my (and others') proposed changes if they weren't so obviously precise. And, in fact, I am in favor of adding words to the language to accommodate any person who needs accommodating, since the only way such changes would become widespread is if enough people are in need of accommodation that adding the word would appear to be a good idea after all.

Now then, I know you will probably never read this response, but I hope it provides some balance to anyone else reading this article in the future. (To the person I recommended this to about an hour ago, I didn't mean to write this when I did).

Cheers.

Reply

[-]Elusive Sam1mo

1

Can you put forth a actual reason why men, let alone trans women, shouldn't go in women's bathrooms that doesn't devolve into victim blaming? Did we start posting guards at bathroom doors to check peoples genitals when I wasn't looking?

Thanks for this question! I really tried to find an actual reason (without the stop signal answers like "culture" or "religion") and found following (it's probably

highly flawed, but at least worked for me):

Clothes were invented for protection and convenience -> civilization development created social disparity -> poor and slaves couldn't afford clothes -> nakedness slavery and slaves were the easiest source of sex -> it's shameful and dangerous to be naked -> shame and absence of genitals around free people sexualized genitals -> slavery slowly becomes illegal in the vast majority of cultures -> majority of people already conditioned that naked opposite genitals sex, nudists are minority and not mainstream -> with such conditioning (or simply, culture) we can't have common bathrooms.

Btw, prisoners rape prisoners regardless of genitals.

Reply

[+]An_Amazing_Login2y

-11

[-]TropicalFruit1y

2

This article did a great job de-cluttering the semantic debate from what I'll call the "fiat debate". In other words, many people will argue with each other about how certain thing should be categorized, and in the same conversation argue for the validity of the fiat standard defining those categories, without expressing or even realizing that they're bouncing back and forth between those two distinct debates while doing so, leading to quite a useless discussion. I completely agree that "man" and "woman" are merely categories and there's no *a priori* need for Y-chromosome to be the fiat standard for categorization.

However, despite there being no *a priori* reason, I'd still content that on the whole, there are reasons that something close to Y-chromosome is a better standard than self-identification. Now, with respect to people who present as male or female in public, certainly the humane thing to do is to refer to them as the way they present themselves. But with respect to fields where the biology of the person actually matters - specifically medicine and sports - surely we have to maintain a more biologically rooted standard like Y-chromosome (or something a little more nuanced like biological sex; to be honest I don't know if androgen insensitive XYs have an athletic advantage over XXs). To do otherwise would, in the former case, cause doctors to make uninformed decisions with regards to their patients, and in the latter case ruin the competitive integrity of women's sports (and in the case of fighting sports, dramatically increase the danger for athletes involved).

I'd love to know how far the redefinition of categories goes if we're going to use "self-identification" as fiat instead. I think the two most practical questions with respect to the fiat standard are - 1. Do doctors have a right to know their patients biological sex, and 2. Do female sports leagues have a right to exclude biological males.

On a more macro note, I worry that too much acceptance (and in that vein, encouragement) of gender dysphoria will cause more pain than necessary. I'll explain with the hair dryer example.

To solve her anxiety, bringing the hair dryer with her is a good solution. It has a pretty low, although nonzero, cost. It would be great if she could be cured with no cost, but being cured with a small cost is certainly better than being sick. However, we would rather she not need to bring her hand dryer with her, as that would make her life easier. It's an adequate solution, but we certainly don't want more people using this sub-optimal solution than necessary. We must carefully avoid convincing or even implying to other people who were anxious about their own hair dryers once or twice that said anxiety is a totally normal and acceptable thing, and that they should probably just start bringing their own hair dryers everywhere they go (and this is doubly true if the person in question is a child).

I think the parallel to transgenderism is obvious. We have two goals - 1. For the people born into the hell of gender dysphoria, we want to make their lives as good as possible. 2. We don't want any more people forced to deal with the hell of gender dysphoria than absolutely necessary. I worry that, with the current public discourse around transgenderism, we are failing at goal number 2 (although also at 1 for the most part).

This article is great and explains clearly the flaws in a lot of bad arguments "against transgenderism" (for lack of a better term). It also does a great job distinguishing the two distinct discussions - one concerning which category a person should be assigned to and the other concerning the standard for the categories themselves. And maybe that's as far as the author wanted to go.

However, there appears to be an implicit argument that if you accept the primary thesis of the article, you also accept that "self-identification" is a superior fiat standard for "man" and "woman" than biological sex. These are two separate issues, and I don't believe that the claim that self-identification is the superior fiat was defended. At the moment, I agree with the article's thesis about the nature of categorization while also maintaining that biological sex is a more appropriate fiat standard in most instances.

In fact, I think that if the transgender movement was only arguing to re-categorize men and women in the instances where the self-identification standard is appropriate (aka not sports, not medicine, not bathrooms unless you present as your self-identification), I don't think there would even be much of an argument. It is precisely the overreach into areas where biological sex is the superior fiat that causes the emotionally charged and largely irrational debate.

Reply

[-] 2y

2

"I could point out that trans-Napoleonism seem to be mysteriously less common than transgender" - well, because the Napoleon is a far more specific thing than (wo)man, nothing mysterious about that (even ignoring the fact that you are squaring off one (trans-Napoleon) against two (MtF and FtM). A better example would perhaps be something like "Asian feeling themselves as Caucasian" or - a broad category of a really small set (even if there are more than two genders I doubt many people would claim there are more than ten).

Reply

[_]Arun Gupta2y

2

1. Are some categories ("whales as mammals") more useful than others ("whales as fish") in understanding the universe?
2. If we categorize many different kinds of phenomena as "religion", we might arrive at "religion is universal - present in all human cultures", and we might then seek brain/neural mechanisms that provide an "explanation". Whereas another approach to categorization (e.g., "this phenomena is no more religion than philosophy is physics") might lead to "religion is far from universal; many cultures exist/have existed with no religion". We might no longer then seek explanations for religion in the structure of the human brain.

Categorization is then not "made for man".

3. The issue with Pluto, in part, would be, e.g., if we can deduce how and where it was formed and that mechanism and location is the same or different from the other planets. That is, the point of trying to form categories such as planet or planetesimal is so that the category is capable of a common explanation.

E.g., the ancient Hindu astronomers had the nava graha. Nava = nine, graha today means planet. But what were these nine? The five naked-eye-visible planets, the Sun, the Moon, And Rahu and Ketu. Rahu and Ketu are the two points where the Moon's orbit intersects the ecliptic; I.e., the lunar and solar eclipses occur when the moon is near Rahu or Ketu. In their categorization, these were the nine points moving through the sky whose positions they had to measure and predict. A different categorization, but less susceptible to finding a clean underlying structure/explanation than say, Kepler.

Categories "made for man" are not conducive to knowledge.

Reply

[_]gjm2y

6

Yes, some categories are more useful than others for understanding the universe. Or for various other purposes. Categories more useful for one thing are not always more useful for another. (E.g., Scott's example of hypothetical-Solomon's Ministry of Dag and Ministry of Behemah; hypothetical-Solomon would not have been well served by trying to have a Ministry of Mammals instead.)

The fact that some categories are more useful than others doesn't stop it being true that "the categories were made for man". It just means that our choices of categories aren't 100% arbitrary. And that's OK, because Scott is not claiming that they are.

Reply