21. COULD THERE BE A HUMEAN SEX-NEUTRAL GENERAL IDEA OF MAN?¹

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I suggest that the Humean male and Humean female of Hume's *Treatise* would have different mental lives due to a great extent to what Hume takes to be the socio-culture in place. Specifically, I show that the Humean male would be incapable but the Humean female would be capable of forming a Humean sex-neutral general idea of man. The Humean male's inability is not innate but the result of the trauma he experiences when discovering sexuality, reproduction and realizing how insecure a claim of paternity is. The Humean female not having such a traumatic experience is not impaired in the same way. Insofar as she is impaired, it is because in the very same socio-culture she cannot exercise her ability because it would endanger the socio-culture she is expected to partake in.

In the "Myth of the Neutral Man"² Janice Moulton uses a classical logic text book example of a deductively valid first figure syllogism to call attention to the problem that can arise, if one takes the term 'man' as having a sex-neutral sense. The example she uses is:

First and major premise:  All men are mortal
Second and minor premise:  Socrates is a man
Conclusion:  Socrates is mortal.

Moulton claims that most people would report taking the occurrence of the plural 'men' in the major premise of the syllogism as sex-neutral. She, then, proceeds to point out that if one does so, then the syllogism becomes invalid since the occurrence of the singular 'man' in the minor premise must be taken as sex-specific. This, says Moulton, would be immediately obvious to any one who tries to replace the name 'Socrates' with a woman's name to form another deductive first figure syllogism such as:

First and major premise:  All men are mortal
Second and minor premise:  Sophia is a man
Conclusion:  Sophia is mortal.
Moulton's argument is straightforward. A valid syllogism must have exactly three terms and each must have exactly the same meaning every time it occurs. If the plural 'men' occurring in the major premise of the classical logic text book example is not understood as sex-specific, which is the way the singular 'man' occurring in the minor premise must be understood, the syllogism contains a term that is used in two different senses and is, consequently, invalid.

If Moulton's argument is, as it seems to be, so straightforward, then, it is puzzling that it escaped so many and for so long. The puzzle on hand, however, may find its solution in Charles Echelbarger's paper "Hume on Deduction". In this paper Echelbarger claims that Hume was not only concerned with induction but also with deduction, that this latter concern motivated his theory of abstract ideas and, that his theory of abstract ideas contains some of the ingredients that are crucial for a Humean model of the psychological reality of syllogistic reasoning.

If Echelbarger is right, then, according to Hume, the capacity to reason syllogistically is an acquired capacity whose development depends on the development of certain linguistic skills. This is so because it is while learning to converse that one learns both:

a. the habits or dispositions that attach to singular ideas in the manner necessary in order to have general ones,

b. the habits and dispositions that guide the transitions involved in syllogistic reasoning, hence, the rules of such reasoning.

Echelbarger refrains from expressing agreement or disagreement with Hume. Instead, he endeavors to construct a Humean account of the psychological reality of syllogistic reasoning using the four valid first figure syllogisms as his examples. In the process of doing so, he points out that, in the case of the middle term of these syllogisms, it seems as if the account requires two middle term ideas since there are two dispositional shifts involved in the inference: one producing the singular idea of the undistributed middle term and the other producing the general idea of the distributed middle term. He goes on to say that since the two dispositional shifts take place in the course of a single inference, what is happening is joint causation and as a result, it is not necessary to construct an account with two middle term ideas, if one allows for a single middle term idea that changes representationally or is both singular and general at one and the same time. Only in this way will the Humean account be elegant enough and, according to Echelbarger, Hume's theory of abstract ideas permits the construction of just such a satisfyingly elegant account.

The Humean solution to the problem of the middle term that Echelbarger offers may form the basis for a solution to the problem on hand. If correct, then Moulton points out a problem that does not really exist. This is so because in that classical logic text book example of a valid first figure syllogism, the plural 'men' in the major premise and the singular 'man' in the minor premises are the syllogism's middle term. Consequently, the former could be sex-neutral and the latter sex-specific in the context of the same inference since all that means is that:
1. The plural 'men' stands in the syllogism for the sex-neutral general idea of man in the inference; i.e., it stands for the general idea of the human species.

2. The singular 'man' stands in the syllogism for the sex-specific singular idea of man in the inference; i.e., it stands for the singular idea of one of the members of the human species.

3. The two are not two different ideas but one and the same idea, or an idea that changes representationally.

All, then, seems well again. But, this is so at face value only because the problem that Moulton points out cannot be disposed of so easily, especially not on Echelbarger's Humean grounds and not necessarily for Hume himself. To dispose of the problem in the suggested way, it is necessary for the ideas of woman and man to resemble each other sufficiently since, according to Echelbarger's version of Hume's theory of abstract ideas, a Humean general idea is a singular idea accompanied by a disposition to review other ideas that resemble it sufficiently.

If the ideas of woman and man do not resemble each other sufficiently, a Humean sex-neutral general idea of man is impossible. In that case, the plural 'men' in the major premise of the syllogism could not be taken as standing for such an idea in the inference. At most, it could stand for the sex-specific general idea of man in the inference. While it follows from this that the problem that Moulton points out necessarily disappears, this time this is so at the cost of the myth of the sex-neutral sense of 'man', exactly the cost that Moulton wants paid for the resolution of the problem that she has called attention to.

But, would this be the cost that a Humean would have to pay? Perhaps a Humean sex-neutral general idea of man is possible.

II

There are a few recent expository works of Hume's work that concern themselves specifically with Hume's view of women and question his sexism. The authors of all these works agree that Hume's views are sexist. But, some argue that Hume's sexism is accidental and others argue that it is fairly fundamental to his work.

I too believe that Hume's views of women are sexist. Indeed, Hume makes some rather disparaging remarks about women and he obviously believed that women were inferior to men. This is indicated, for example, in the Treatise in a section in which he compares the response to a mother's and a father's second marriage and explains the difference by an appeal to the way thought and passions work. According to Hume

When we turn our thought to a great or a small object, the imagination finds more facility in passing from the small to the great, than from the great to the small; but the affections find a greater difficulty.

And in application what this means is that
When the imagination goes from myself to my father, it passes not so readily from him to his second wife. . . . His superiority prevents the easy transition of the thought from him to his spouse. . . .

With views like these, I would have been tempted not to want the ideas of woman and man to resemble each other in the manner that could be considered sufficient to allow the kinds of associations that are required in order to have a Humean sex-neutral general idea of man. However, leaving aside Hume's low opinions of women, what is at issue is whether Hume believed that the ideas of woman and man resemble each other in the proper way.

There are some things that Hume says that suggest that he would have not believed that there are significant differences between women and men. Thus, he says in the *Treatise*:

> Now 'tis obvious that nature has preserv'd a great resemblance among all human creatures. . . . The case is the same with the fabric of the mind, as with that of the body. However the parts may differ in shape or size, their structure and composition are in general the same.

There are also places in the *Treatise* where Hume talks about women in such a way as to lead one to conclude that while he believed that women and men are different, he took this difference to be one of degree only. He says:

> All human creatures, especially of the female sex, are apt to overlook remote motives in favor of any present temptation.

If Hume believed that there are no significant differences between women and men, then he could also be taken as believing that the ideas of woman and man are not significantly different, hence that they resemble each other in such a way as to make a Humean sex-neutral general idea of man possible. Similarly, if Hume believed that such differences as exist between women and men are of degree only, then he could be taken as believing that the ideas of woman and man are not significantly different, hence that they resemble each other sufficiently to allow for the formation of a Humean sex-neutral general idea of man.

But, did Hume believe that there are no significant differences between women and men or that such differences as may exist between women and men are of degree only?

In the section of the *Treatise* on chastity and modesty, where Hume attempts to explain why the duties of chastity and modesty are expected from women in a way that they are not expected from men, he says:

> Men have undoubtedly an implicit notion, that all those ideas of modesty and decency have a regard to generation; since they impose not the same laws, with the same force, on the male sex, where that reason takes not place. The exception is there obvious and extensive, and founded on a remarkable difference, which produces a clear separation and disjunction of ideas. But as the case is not the same with re-
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...ard to the different ages of women, for this reason, tho' men know, that these notions are founded on the public interest, yet the general rule carries us beyond the original principle, and makes us extend the notions of modesty over the whole sex, from their earliest infancy to their extreme old age and infirmity.10

Notice that Hume talks here about "a clear separation and disjunction of ideas". The ideas he refers to may be the ideas of modesty and decency that differentially regulate women's and men's conduct. Alternatively, they may be the ideas of woman and man. I believe that it is the latter ideas that Hume refers to since the difference between the ideas of modesty and decency that differentially regulate women's and men's conduct cannot be explained without appealing to a difference between the ideas of woman and man.

But, even if Hume is referring to the ideas of modesty and decency that differentially regulate women's and men's conduct, there is still enough here to suggest that Hume would not believe that the ideas of woman and man resemble each other sufficiently to allow for a Humane sex-neutral general idea of man. This is so because one's mental life would be rather messy unless one's ideas of woman and man were as clearly separated and disjointed as one's ideas of modesty and decency for women and men and, Hume tended to believe that our mental life is not very messy.

I would like to support my conclusion by calling attention to the end of the citation which seems to me to indicate that Hume believed that age based differences between women are not as impressive as what he calls "a remarkable difference", which is a difference between women and men and a difference that he discusses somewhat earlier in the section on chastity and modesty where he says that:

Whoever considers the length and feebleness of human infants, with the concern which both sexes naturally have for their offspring, will easily perceive, that there must be an union of male and female for the education of the young, and that this union must be of considerable duration. But, in order to induce the men to impose on themselves this restraint, and undergo cheerfully all the fatigues and expenses to which it subjects them, they must believe that the children are their own, and that their natural instinct is not directed to the wrong object, when they give loose to love and tenderness. Now if we examine the structure of the human body, we should find that this security is very difficult to be obtain'd on our part; and that since, in the copulation of the sexes the principle of generation goes from the man to the woman, an error may easily take place on the side of the former, tho' it be utterly impossible with regard to the latter. From this trivial and anatomical observation is deriv'd that vast difference betwixt the education and duties of the two sexes.11

Here too Hume attempts to explain the difference between the ideas of modesty and decency for women and men. And, here too in his explanation he traces what he now calls "the vast difference betwixt the education and duties of the two sexes" to another difference. However,
this time he makes it fairly clear that he believed that there are biologically based differences between women and men. Moreover, he makes a causal connection between these two sets of difference and claims that the latter leads to the former; i.e., the biologically based difference leads to the differentiation of the ideas of modesty and decency for women and men.

Again, I believe that in order to explain the "vast difference" that he wants to explain, Hume has to presuppose vastly different ideas of woman and man. But, even if this is not so, then given the "anatomical observation" that Hume makes and his beliefs about the way the mind works, it is just too unlikely that the ideas of woman and man could resemble each other sufficiently to allow for a Humean sex-neutral general idea of man when the other ideas pertaining to women and men that are formed as a result of this observation are so vastly different.

If I am right, then for Hume there can be a general idea of woman and a general idea of man. Yet, if what Hume says about women and men in the Treatise section on modesty and chastity is what he believed, he would have had to believe that the ideas of woman and man could not resemble each other in the manner necessary for the formation of a Humean sex-neutral general idea of man. But, I am not exactly right because on Humean grounds, it is not impossible for everyone to form a Humean sex-neutral general idea of man that is impossible.

III

For Humean ideas to be different, the impressions to which they are traceable have to be different. Something like this goes on in Hume's account of the difference between the ideas of modesty and decency for women and men and my elaboration of it. At the same time, there is something that is off center in the account since the impressions of women and men to which, following Hume, the difference between the ideas of woman and man are traced, are not the impressions of just any child, whether a girl or boy, nor are they the impressions of just any adult, whether a woman or a man. They are the impressions of a male of an undetermined age yet one who is aware of:

i. his and a woman's sexuality,

ii. the possible connections between sexuality and reproduction,

and is

iii. insecure about paternity.

What this Humean male of undetermined age is aware of and his insecurities take place in a social context in which the awareness of women and men's sexuality, the connection between sexuality and reproduction, and especially certainty about paternity are essential to his conduct. And, what this suggests is that it may be the case that it is because this Humean male's discovery of sexuality and reproduction and, in particular, his insecurity about paternity are so shocking in the social context in which they take place, that he disjoins the ideas of woman and man in the way he does.
It follows from the above that were one not to have this traumatic experience, one would not disjoin the ideas of woman and man or not disjoin them in the same extremely dichotomizing way. And, this is probably what happens in the case of the Humean female about whom Hume claims that she does not have the same experience as the Humean male, at least not when it comes to questions analogous to questions concerning the certainty of paternity; i.e., questions concerning the certainty of maternity. When it comes to these questions, she can, according to Hume, rest assured of her maternity.

While to some it may seem strange to suggest that women's and men's mental life differs in this way, feminist work such as Nancy Chodorow's and Carol Gilligan's, the former on psychoanalytic theory and the latter on the theory of moral development, points out something very similar to this. Both Chodorow and Gilligan call attention to a socially determined yet fundamental difference between the ways women and men relate to the world and, according to both Chodorow and Gilligan, women relate to the world in a much more inclusive manner than men. As Chodorow sees it, the difference is traceable to the experience of young girls and boys, though not the experience of security or insecurity regarding paternity or maternity that bothered Hume, but the experience of individuation.

For Chodorow, it is women's centrality in the young child's life that determines the difference in the individuation experience of girls and boys and thus, their future dispositions. Boys having to grow up and become men, must separate themselves clearly from women. Girls, on the other hand, having to grow up and become women, can retain flexible ego boundaries. Because of this difference, men would not, while women would, tend to inclusiveness in their relations.

Relying on Chodorow's and other psychoanalytic work Jane Flax offers a psychoanalytically based critique of philosophy as a historically shaped masculinist enterprise and throws an interesting light on some established distinctions, such as the distinction between reason and emotions, and the normative force that is associated with them. But, one need not rely on psychoanalysis in any of its versions to argue for conclusions like Flax's which suggest that gender is probably epistemologically significant. Alternative theoretical bases for these conclusions can be socio-historical. Or, one can argue from the data. Whichever way one turns, one would need to conclude with Sandra Harding that "there is a growing body of evidence supporting the conclusion that gender is a variable in conceptions of rationality".

The agreement between the claims regarding the differentiated mental life of women and men that I constructed for Hume and feminist claims on the subject is, of course, only an abstract agreement. Hume was not a feminist by any stretch of the imagination. So even if, as Annette Baier suggests, there is something that seems to be quite congenial between Humean and feminist theories, I doubt that he would have been pleased with the feminist idea of sex-based perspectives and its implications. Among these implications is an alternative approach to the Moulton puzzle regarding the reasoning process in the case of that classical logic text book example of a valid first figure syllogism—
First and major premise: All men are mortal
Second and minor premise: Socrates is a man
Conclusion: Socrates is mortal.

IV

Recall that Moulton’s first claim is that most people would report taking the occurrence of the plural ‘men’ in the major premise as sex-neutral. But, given the conclusions on hand; i.e., if there are sex-based perspectives, and moreover, they are as Hume would have conceived them so that a Humean male would radically disjoin the ideas of woman and man and a Humean female would not and consequently he would not while she would be able to form a Humean sex-neutral general idea of man, the report is far from representing accurately what really takes place. This is so because under the described conditions it is Humean females who would have the capacity to take the plural ‘men’ in the major premise as sex-neutral since it is they that would be able to form a Humean sex-neutral general idea of man. Humean males, on the other hand, lacking the capacity to form a Humean sex-neutral general idea of man, would have to take the occurrence of the plural ‘men’ in the major premise as sex-specific.

It follows from the above that the problem of four terms that Moulton points out as plaguing the syllogism under the reported reading, would have not come up for Humean males. They would not take the plural ‘men’ in the major premise as sex-neutral while taking the singular ‘man’ in the minor premise as sex-specific. Rather, they would take both as sex-specific and as referring to the same sex. If the problem could come up for anyone, it is for a Humean female who could take the plural ‘men’ in the major premise as sex-neutral while taking the singular ‘man’ in the minor premise as sex-specific.

But, even for the Humean female, the problem could come up only if while capable of forming a Humean sex-neutral general idea of man, in an important way for her too, like for the Humean male, the ideas of woman and man are disjoined enough to make the inferential movement through the middle terms of the argument an uneasy though not necessarily an impossible one. Without this kind of disjoining of the ideas of woman and man for the Humean female, as has been shown earlier, the Humean account of syllogistic reasoning that Echelberger constructs eliminates the problem of four terms due to the character of the middle term according to the account.

One could expect the Humean female to have fairly disjoined ideas of woman and man as a function of the culture that Hume assumes to be the operating socio-culture. The Humean socio-culture must at least be minimally characterized as a socio-culture in which women and men are expected to display very different virtues in their relations with each other. And, in such a socio-culture a woman for whom the ideas of woman and man would resemble each other significantly can be expected to have troubles adjusting to her assigned status and role. This is something that according to Hume ought to be prevented and he, therefore, suggests that women should be induced to act in compliance with the demands of chastity and decency among other things by fear. He says:
'Tis necessary, therefore, that beside the infamy attending such licences, there should be some preceding backwardness or dread, which may prevent their first approaches, and may give the female sex a repugnance to all expressions, and postures, and liberties, that have an immediate relation to that enjoyment. 18

The Humean female, constructed as she is constructed here, could, then, like Moulton, see the four terms in the syllogism, hence, its problematic nature. Whether she would or not is a different question. 19 Nonetheless, her unique capacity is part of the explanation of how this problem has escaped so many and for so long because, obviously, the conditions have to be such that she would be in the position and feel free to exercise this capacity.

The conditions in a Humean socio-culture would not be too conducive for the Humean female to exercise her capacity. The Humean male lacking the same capacity is, as was said, not in the position to discover the problem. So, in a Humean world, the problem would seem not to exist. It would be, as many of the problems that have been discovered by feminists are--invisible. 20 A Humean world, after all, is a paradoxical world, a world in which only women are psychologically equipped to have both a Humean sex-neutral general idea of man and disjunctive ideas of woman and man, while simultaneously being psychologically prevented from seeing the contradiction between the two.

V

By putting more weight on language, or on what Echelbarger refers to as "linguistically based habits or dispositions", it is possible to change the above description of the Humean world in such a way that the Humean male too would be capable of having a Humean sex-neutral general idea of man. Thus, he too, like the Humean female would, under certain conditions, be blind to, and under other conditions, be able to see the contradiction between it and a sex-specific idea of man.

Putting more weight on language, one would claim that it is in the context of learning the language that a Humean child of either sex learns the sex-neutral use of the word 'man'. Once the Humean child has learned this, she or he could form a Humean sex-neutral general idea of a man, an ability she or he will display by displaying an ability to move from the idea of woman to the idea of man and back when using, hearing or reading the word 'man' in its sex-neutral sense.

The question now is what happens in the case of the Humean male. And, the answer is nothing in particular, if it can be assumed that the force exerted by linguistically based habits or dispositions is as strong as the force exerted by his trauma in his mental drama. Given such an assumption, while the ideas of woman and man become separated by whatever experience the Humean male undergoes, the force of the linguistically based habits or dispositions is such that both could still be recalled when using, hearing or reading the word 'man' in its sex-neutral sense.

Hume says when discussing abstract ideas in the Treatise that:
This application of ideas beyond their nature proceeds from our collecting all their possible degree and quantity and quality in such an imperfect manner as may serve the purpose of life.31

He seems to allow, then, for quite a lot of latitude in our grouping of singular ideas. With such latitude, it should be possible for the Humean male to have a sex-neutral general idea of man, if it could be argued that the grouping of the ideas of woman and man, dissimilar as they may become as a result of his experience, serves the purpose of life in the case of the Humean male.

I do not know if one could argue this in general and I am not at all tempted to argue this for a Humean world.

ENDNOTES

1 A version of this paper was read at the Ohio State University Philosophy Department Colloquium in honor of Professor Robert G. Turnbull's retirement in June, 1984.


3 Charles Echelbarger "Hume on Deduction" read at the Ohio State University Philosophy Department Colloquium in honor of Professor Robert G. Turnbull's retirement in June, 1984.


5 Marcil-Lacoste's thesis concerning Hume's sexism is the strongest, while Baier's is the weakest.

6 David Hume *Treatise on Human Nature* (edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge and published by Oxford since 1897), 344.


9 *Ibid.*, 571. The emphasis is mine.

10 *Ibid.*, 573. The emphasis on "with the same force" is Hume's. The rest of the emphasis is mine.


12 Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (University of California, 1978), and Carol


14 Usually feminists rely on some version of Marxism as a socio-historical theoretical framework. Nancy C.M. Hartsock’s "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism", in Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (eds.), *op. cit.*, 283-310, provides an example of the use of Marxism for such a purpose.

15 Lorraine B. Code’s "Is the Sex of the Knower Epistemologically Significant?" *Metaphilosophy* 12 (Jul/Oct ’81), 267-76 is an example of a work on the subject that appeals to no particular theory.


18 *Treatise*, 572.

19 Sandra Lee Bartky's "A Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness" *Social Theory and Practice* 3 (Fall '75), 425-39 is a classic on the subject of the awakening of a feminist consciousness and suggests an analysis that is useful in trying to understand "sight".


21 *Treatise*, 20. The emphasis is mine.