

Feminist Ethics

Kathryn Norlock

We don't usually feel we need ethical theories when everything is fine. When the birds are singing and the sun shines and the people in our vicinity are all being pleasant to each other, it is unlikely to cross our minds that we need to deal with moral problems. We are most motivated to employ ethics when our moral alarm bells go off and tell us that something isn't right, and we have to figure out how to get a person or a community from a bad situation to a better one.

Feminist ethics is one type of response to the moral alarm bells warning that something is wrong—and not just wrong in general but wrong in a way that is gendered, that seems to be patrolling, or harming, or oppressively regulating people's abilities to live in sexed and sexual bodies in ways that would allow each of us to live good lives. I'm defining gender as the socially shared understanding of someone's sex.

A lot of wrongs and harms aren't like that, so it's possible to think about some ethical issues without noticing your own gender or that of others. In fact, I used to think the best world would be one in which I wouldn't notice my gender at all. It's kind of nice to forget for stretches that I even have one and just lose myself in whatever I'm doing, especially if I'm doing philosophy! And sometimes, when the world asks me to pay attention to gender issues, I find it tiresome and think, *This again?* I'm probably not alone in that experience.

But that's an odd preference in such a gendered world. Does that thought, in itself, set off any moral alarm bells? Does preferring to ignore or forget about gender suggest that what's

wrong is investing gender with any value at all? Is a world without gender the better world that we need to move to?

This essay will end by answering that last question with a very qualified *Maybe*. I can imagine a genderless world that seems perfect where feminist ethics is never necessary. But first, I'll offer an account of what feminist ethics is, and then I'll provide arguments about why it is necessary to think in terms of feminist ethics in the actual, imperfect world we have, in light of real-world evidence that some moral problems are gendered problems.

I think that sometimes we wish to forget about gender because we care about gender issues, but we're worn out by persistent oppression and want to not even think about how we fit into an unjust world. So after I define feminist ethics, I'll talk about it as a response to oppression. For example, I can remember a time when I was making small talk at a social gathering and heard someone make some terribly simplistic generalizations about women and about men. I didn't want to think about how I fit into such an oppressive, unjust picture (Do they mean me? Do I think such unfair things?), so I decided to ignore it. That doesn't make the oppressive view disappear, though. It's a retreat because oppression feels so present.

At other times, we might be resistant to hearing about gender because the oppression feels so distant. Perhaps we don't care as much because we think the problem at hand doesn't affect each of us personally or to the same extent, and this can be true, too. For example, reading a news story about a woman who asserts that she was sexually harassed by an employer while she was a famous, wealthy, young, immigrant, precariously employed, feminine, heterosexual actress in Hollywood will resonate with some people but may not set off the moral alarm bells of

someone else who shares few or none of these traits. Each of us is gendered while also being many other things, which is just to say that all of us have intersectional identities. That matters because it means there's no uncomplicated trait or situation true of all members of a gender—not even chromosomes, when they don't line up with external presentations of genitalia at birth. So we cannot generalize about all men or all women, and we do not always see ourselves as invested in the same problems and solutions. Maybe injustice anywhere really is a threat to justice everywhere, but sometimes we're not close enough to the injustice to even fully understand it, because our social location differs so much from those more affected. Intersectionality is one of the most important insights in contemporary feminism, so I'll take that up after I talk about oppression.

Because feminist ethics ought to be intersectional, it's not going to seem universal, and because feminist ethics is concerned with oppression, it is going to address material situations that are social and political. Some critics think that being political and not universal is a problem for a philosophical approach to ethics. I'll address that concern, but I aim to show that being political and not universal is not a problem after all.

I'll be operating on the view that all people live in what I earlier called a gendered world. There is no complex society on earth in which everyone is free from forms of governing people's choices about how to live in sexed and sexual bodies. It's a gendered world when our abilities to live good lives are complicated by the beliefs and practices of people and institutions that respond to us as gendered beings. Not all aspects of a gendered world are bad, and some are positively desirable to many. I'll say more about the good aspects later. But where there is gender, there is the ever-present possibility of gendered wrongs. I will grant that we could

eliminate the possibility of gendered wrongs by eliminating gender, but even as I end on granting how nice a genderless utopia might sound, I'll also offer reasons (that not every feminist ethicist would agree with) why I think we will always live in an imperfect and gendered world. Not only is that genderless utopia not going to happen, I don't think it would actually be that great. It may seem appealing in the abstract but dangerously inhuman once we consider what a genderless utopia might be like for individuals.

Before I do all that, let's start with a working definition.

Feminist Ethics as an Approach to Ethics

One of the best accounts of feminist ethics is by Hilde Lindemann, who wrote that feminist ethics aims "to understand, criticize, and correct how gender operates within our moral and social beliefs and practices."¹ She doesn't define feminism as a theory about women, and neither do I. The term *feminist* has more to do with the sources of this approach to ethics than the ultimate goals of such theorists; women were influential and early advocates of the view that sometimes a moral problem is a problem because it is gendered. Since some early public proponents of the import of gender were women who understood themselves to be subordinated in their worlds on the basis of their sex, the term for their ethical approach was described by some European nineteenth-century authors as 'feminist'—by which they simply meant feminine.

It was women who were doing most of that analytical, critical work, so it was usually described as an ethic by and for women. And those women indeed did a lot of work. Feminists

writing about social norms and unjust laws argued that some forms of social and political subordination were unfair and arbitrary. Feminists who wrote about philosophy, in particular, were critical of the tendency in most moral theory to address the concerns of individual, adult men in the public sphere to the neglect of women, children, nonhumans, and relationships in the private sphere. So the first body of work in feminism is primarily about women, and only some women.

But it's been a productive couple of centuries for feminism, and the more feminists gained access to opportunities to publish on ethics, the more feminist ethicists applied that key, critical insight—that gender operates in our moral beliefs and practices, so some moral problems are problems because they are gendered—to many analyses of social regulation of sex and sexuality. Today feminist ethics includes works about, and by, those who identify as male, as masculine, as queer, as nonbinary in gender identity, as intersex, and as transgender members of gender categories including women and those who embrace a feminine identity. Gender matters to all these writers and more, because of the ways gender has been valued, regulated, and enforced in their different experiences. It's philosophically important for individuals as well as groups to understand the world and change it for the better when it's gendered in a bad way, so the scope of feminist ethics can be very local or it can be global.

Noticing that gender matters to correcting a moral problem is not the only ethical job that needs doing, so feminist ethics is frequently employed alongside other ethical theories, too. It is not a moral theory sufficient to all tasks, because sometimes it's not the right tool for responding to a particular type of moral problem. Instead, it is a kind of approach to morality that says we

ought to pay attention to the facts on the ground and empirical information in order to know whether and how a moral problem is a gendered problem.

Oppression as a Gendered Problem

Unfortunately, we never seem to run out of gendered moral problems in what Alison Jaggar called “the unjust meantime.”² No society is perfectly just, and every society regulates and enforces gender structures in some way, so the opportunities for injustice and gender to collide are countless. Gendered injustice amounts to **oppression** when social power is held unevenly held by groups and individuals in a way that limits the opportunities for them to live flourishing lives *because* of their genders or related sexual orientations. Sometimes what we’re looking at is worse than oppression. Sometimes a gendered harm is so serious that someone’s life is intolerable, indecent, or impossible to continue, so bad that the harm is best described as an evil.³ Ideally, legislating to make gendered oppression or evils illegal would mean they cannot happen, but in practice, oppressions and evils are possible wherever there are people.

Some gender structures are more obviously oppressive than others when they directly uphold uneven distributions of power. For example, in a nation where boys and men have the legal right to go to schools while girls and women do not, those girls and women will be frustrated in their options to pursue a variety of good lives. Even there, not all girls and women will be equally oppressed; some will want more options than others, and some will already have more options despite the national laws. But even if we find that oppression doesn’t distribute equally across the lives of different individuals, we can easily see that a deliberately gendered distribution of education is oppressive.

If you're reading this while living in a nation or community that doesn't deliberately oppress on the basis of gender because it is illegal to do so, then you might think your society doesn't regulate gender at all. That's unlikely, though. The social realm isn't just the legal realm. It includes all the ways in which we organize our shared lives in communities. For example, even where it's not required by law, many of us have birth certificates, driver's licenses, even voter registration cards or workplace personnel files that identify our genders. Most documents also include our names, which may serve as indirect markers of gender. Our first names may have been chosen by our parents on the basis of their preferences for particularly gendered names. Our family names may reflect our marital status or even our status as sons or daughters.⁴ This is part of what I mean by a gendered world. Is it also a gendered moral problem that so many direct and indirect markers of our gender are on so many official and unofficial forms?

Again, it's not going to be equally a problem for everyone; as in the education example, the gendered documents are not going to feel like a problem to someone content with their gender and name from birth. It will become noticeable to those who live somewhere with social expectations that people of some genders, and not others, should change their family names when they marry. It will be more evident to those who want to change their first or last names for nonmarital reasons and have to justify their choices to officials, and it will be really evident to those who want to change their gender. The costs and efforts to make such changes will not distribute equally, and it won't even seem like a hassle to everyone who engages in changing all these documents. But the fact that it will be convenient for some, difficult for others, and at times impossible for still others means that gender is being socially organized in a way that leads to differential power to ignore these documents for different individuals and groups. That amounts

to an oppressive social order. It's not the worst form of oppression. Some oppressions are worse than others. But when a gendered social order is oppressive in a way that is ultimately arbitrary, then it's unjust, and an injustice is a moral problem.

The thing about moral problems is that they're not all equally serious. So we can end up struggling to articulate why gendered expectations, like those about our appearances or social conduct, are oppressive, when other people can suggest such issues should be shrugged off or ignored. They're not always wrong. For example, consider social settings where adults of some genders are free to walk around with visible leg hair unthinkingly, and others are always expected to think about it. For some determined personalities, the social expectation is possible to ignore even if they're not on the empowered side of the dividing line. If the social disapproval is unfair but mild, then the oppressive nature of the social expectation is a gendered moral problem, but it is, in context, a minor problem for those who can stick it out. A nonconformist can resist and even do so with rebellious cheer. But it would be a mistake to hold that if the problem is minor, then there's no oppression present. Wherever a social expectation about appearance is ordered along gendered lines, so that some are guaranteed approval or, perhaps even better, no attention to their thoughtlessness at all, while others are not free to expect such freedom from the scrutiny of others, then the social order is oppressive whether or not the moral harm is light.

The social order may even result in consequential *benefits* to an oppressed individual. For example, one of my favourite teachers told me that she went to an Ivy League college in the 1960s when women were not allowed in the law library. Unfortunately, her professor habitually required reading assignments that could only be completed there, and the readings were always to be loaned for only about an hour on the assumption that each student would photocopy it

and return it immediately. A classmate, a man who felt a bit bad about the unfairness of having easy access to the readings when she did not, routinely made a copy for her when he made one for himself, and he refused her offer of recompense for the cost of the copier when he emerged from the library to hand her the pages. When you think about it, she was coming out ahead, a few dollars at a time. Was she oppressed? She wasn't measurably harmed. (I don't know how she felt while standing outside the library. Let's imagine that in nice weather, she even preferred the outdoors!)

I think she was oppressed, even if she was otherwise lucky to be at an elite institution, and even if she suffered no monetary or emotional pains. If gendered oppression is the uneven distribution of power along gendered lines, then my future teacher was oppressed because she didn't have the power to decide when and whether to make copies of the required readings and she didn't have the freedom to consider the help of classmates optional. She didn't have these options because only men were allowed in the law library. So she couldn't pursue this part of her education in the way she decided was best and could only rely on the chance that a classmate was nice. But that left her success in a very competitive school to chance rather than to her agency, for an arbitrary reason that has nothing to do with her capacity to understand the assigned readings. So this was a form of oppression and a gendered moral problem, even if it was harmless and came with benefits. (Likely, though, it also wasn't completely harmless.)

Then there are the seriously harmful forms of gendered oppression. In my home country, the United States, women are five times more likely than men to be killed by an intimate partner.⁵ Gay men are more likely to be incarcerated than heterosexual men.⁶ Boys and girls are held to social ideals of masculinity and femininity that lead to depression, eating disorder, and even

suicide, especially when the boys aren't very masculine or the girls aren't very feminine. When their lives are intolerable or threatened as a result of gendered oppression, then people are living with evils that are not eradicated by passing some anti-discrimination laws, because intentional discrimination is not the only source of oppression. Longstanding practices of not prosecuting domestic violence, falling back on unexamined prejudice, replicating employment disparities and hereditary wealth, and imposing unrealistic social expectations can fall along gendered lines and perpetuate patterns of severe suffering. Sometimes oppression really is a matter of life and death, although it's evident that in these examples, the worst harms won't distribute equally to all women or all men. People living at intersections of multiple social identities are going to experience some of these harms and not others, or experience them as more or less severe, so it's time to talk about intersectionality.

Intersectionality as a Gendered Problem

Minimally, **intersectionality** is the view that we will fail to understand oppression if we think of oppression as happening across just one category of people, on one axis of identity. Consider governmental regulation of access to birth control pills or abortion. Does that regulate the lives of all women? Some queer feminists point out that this is a problem that intersects with heterosexual lives more than theirs. Does it affect all heterosexual women? Scholars in bioethics note that this is a problem that intersects with age, fertility, and varieties of disability or able-bodied being. And it intersects with class. In a place with great disparities of wealth, even forceful national laws might not be oppressive for the wealthiest women, who can exercise their agency

by traveling to a nation that permits them to make such choices. Lacking choices about birth control or abortion may be oppressive, but it won't be oppressive for all women and, depending on the circumstances, maybe not even most women. So appreciating the badness of oppression requires appreciating intersectionality as well. We should also avoid assuming that we all suffer to the same extent just by being in one of the same categories as those whose intersectional identities will land them closer to the centers of harm.

Intersectionality was raised to wider feminist attention by Black feminists who spent many years arguing that forms of oppression on the bases of race, class, and gender are interrelated. Kimberlé Crenshaw is the legal theorist who most influentially advanced the view that some gendered moral problems can *only* be understood intersectionally. For example, she cites the court case of Black women who argued that a workplace was discriminatory because it did not hire Black women prior to 1964 and laid off all the Black women hired after 1970 during a subsequent recession.⁷ Their employer let them go while employing white women in clerical roles and Black men on the factory floor, but it did not employ Black women in any capacity. A judge ruled against the Black women as having standing to be plaintiffs, on the grounds that they could not prove discrimination solely based on race (Black men were employed) or on sex (white women were employed), and therefore, they had no grounds for complaint. But being laid off and denied standing in court on the basis of their being *Black women* certainly seems like grounds for complaint!

Crenshaw's point was that the judge was limited in his decision-making by state regulations that permit laying claim to rights only on single dimensions of identity. That's not a situation of the judge's making, but it is oppressive because it means that the social order is one

that distributes the power to lay claim to rights unevenly among rights-holders, in this case to the disadvantage of black women. Sometimes a form of oppression is harmful precisely because it affects people who stand at particular intersections of identity. So if we're going to understand, criticize, and correct the role of gender in our moral beliefs and practices, then we have to understand that the role of gender in some moral problems may be intersectional with other grounds of oppression.

Intersectional theorists also encourage us to see that the oppression of the Black women in this case is not simply a doubling of the oppression of women added to the oppression of Black people. The women still employed, who were white, and the Black people still employed, who were men, weren't oppressed by the employer on these lines. So intersectional harm isn't just one oppression added to another oppression. It's distinctive to intersections of identity. That's why intersectional feminist approaches say that we should not make universal claims about the experiences of all members of one gender (or any other social category, for that matter).

Understanding that means paying greater attention to the experiences, cases, and testimonies of those who live at different social intersections, so that we avoid generalizing as if one experience was obviously shared by a whole gender. If it is difficult to make any universally true claims about all members of a gender category, and if some forms of oppression affect people whose social identities are not shared with all members of their gender category, then understanding the role of gender will require gaining more information in order to know whether a moral problem is gendered. Feminist ethics done well appreciates the challenges of intersectionality. Responding to those challenges requires gathering data, paying attention to empirical research and facts, taking in the stories of people with different experiences, or in some

way having a real-world basis for criticism of the way gender is operating in moral beliefs and practices. This is a social and political job, because no one can know all this just by sitting alone in an armchair and imagining what the lives of others might be like. Instead, doing feminist ethics means seeking out the views and data of others and making decisions— including whose perspective to trust, whose voices have been previously neglected, or whose views are representative of the group. These are social and political choices.

Objection time: If feminist ethics is political or not universal, then is it philosophical?

Because feminist ethics is traditionally motivated by bad social situations, responsive to empirical information and to the experiences of oppressed people, it is sometimes characterized as an approach that is political *rather than* philosophical. There are a few ways to respond to the view that a theory is political and not philosophical. But in this case, insisting that feminist ethics is not at all political is obviously not one of them. Whatever the focus of feminist ethicists, a widely shared characteristic of their work is at least some overt attention to power, privilege, or limited access to social goods. In a broad sense, then, feminist ethics is fundamentally political. This is not necessarily a feature of feminist ethics that distinguishes it from other ethics, however.

So here is a better route away from the objection that feminist ethics is political and not philosophical: arguably, all ethical theories are both philosophical and political. To say anything is political is to say that it has something to do with the social and organizational distribution of power. But then to say that feminist ethics is, and ought to be perceived to be, political is not to describe it as all that different from the ethics of those opposed to feminist ethics, because the

views of opponents to feminist ethics are also political. They are political when they take organizing norms and shared commitments to be the right ones for reasons that reflect commitment to *their* notions of a good life or a good philosophical practice. In that way, even the field of philosophy is a field with political commitments. Philosophers pursue certain inquiries in systematic ways, in organizations and published works with agreements as to what counts as philosophy, which are regularly revisited and revised in organized groups such as university departments (and in textbooks like this one!).

So someone who claims that feminist ethics is not philosophical on the grounds that feminism is political is making a claim which is also political—namely, that the values of moral philosophers are organized correctly around shared endeavors that don't or shouldn't include feminism. But the organized pursuit of values is political. It is political because it is social, and not just social, but social in systematic ways that include some works rather than others. And social arrangements that ensure public place and power for some and the power to exclude others are political arrangements. So all ethical theories are political if they pursue a commitment to upholding a set of values for social and systematic reasons.

Happily, great canonical philosophers of ethics seem to agree with this idea. Aristotle, Confucius, Epictetus, Kant, and Mill were all deeply committed to the social and political goodness and public applications of their ethical theories. Their theories may have been grounded in different justifications, but each of these philosophers offered their moral theories earnestly in the stated hopes that readers understood the social and political import of their ethics. That an ethic is political is not remarkable in the history of philosophy.

One might argue, instead, that the problem isn't that feminist ethics is political but that it's not universal and, therefore, not philosophical. This escapes the problems with the previous objection but has a couple of flaws of its own. One is that many philosophical ethics are not universal. For example, canonical philosophers such as David Hume claim that questions of rightness and wrongness are answerable, but that their answers do not depend on a universal moral principle being true. If Hume can be philosophical and not universal, then so can many feminist ethicists.

The other trouble with the argument that feminist ethics is not universal is that some feminist ethical theorists do, indeed, offer universalist moral theories, or at least moral principles they take to be universal and informative of their prescriptions. For example, some argue for feminist obligations to resist gendered oppression by building upon a theory like Kant's ethic of duty to every person. Others argue for guaranteeing and developing girls' and women's capacities for individually flourishing lives by appealing to a conjunction of human rights and a theory like Aristotle's virtue ethic. And arguably, cultural and political practices or beliefs that value, regulate, and even enforce conceptions of gender affect everyone in the world.

You might read the above and think that taking an ethic like Kant's and applying it to oppression is not feminist, it's just humanist, and no one needs feminism if we have humanism. All humans matter, and all should be free from oppression. And in the abstract, in the absence of any social circumstances or unfortunate realities, you would be right! That view is humanist. But such an argument is not *merely* humanist—it is also feminist in contexts in which oppression is gendered, such as the one described in the example of oppression earlier, when girls' and women's rights to education are being denied or subordinated to men's. In context, in a

particular time and place, a humanist argument is also a feminist argument because it understands, and criticizes, a currently gendered social order. And all arguments actually do occur in times and places. Therefore, the context matters. It always matters. And as long as the context includes gendered injustices, many humanist arguments are feminist arguments. (We can have both.)

Since feminist ethics is not merely a branch of ethics but is instead “a way of doing ethics” (Lindemann 2019, 7), philosophers engaged in these tasks can be concerned with any branch of ethics, including meta-ethics, normative theory, and practical or applied ethics. The point of doing feminist ethics in academic philosophy is to change ethics for the better by improving ethical theorizing. The point of doing feminist ethics in social and political settings is to offer better approaches to issues, including those involving gender. Whether they’re happening in academic or social contexts, inquiries and applications of feminist ethics are not limited to the concerns of girls and women because gendered issues include the effects of gendered beliefs and practices on everyone. And the scope of feminist ethics isn’t limited to gender issues because the insights of feminist ethics are often applicable to other moral experiences. Realizing that one form of oppression helps to explain another is a typical sort of positive argument to make in philosophy, the sort of argument that shows *this* explains *that*. So whether it’s political and universal or not, feminist ethics can do philosophical work in a gendered world.

Making the (gendered) world good

But what's the goal of all this feminist moral work? Is the aim to make the gendered world a good one with many genders, or to make it less gendered by eliminating gender as a big organizing part of the social order so that it doesn't oppress anyone? Can we do both? I mentioned at the outset that I used to think getting rid of gender entirely sounded desirable, usually when I wanted to temporarily ignore it myself. I've changed my mind, but I'm in good company with feminists who have taken up this complex question.

Theorist bell hooks famously said that feminism is the movement to end sexist oppression, but how to end oppression (or cut it back) is a matter of debate. Scholars like hooks can be very affirming of gender as having great value to individuals. She argued for better versions of masculinity and femininity, better lives for every gendered person.⁸ So first, let's look at why bell hooks argued for feminist ethical work aimed at achieving a better-gendered world.

Intersectionality and oppression end up playing big conceptual roles in the value of gender to individuals and groups. I said above that context always matters, and in many actual social and political contexts, some groups have had the experience of their gender being denied or undermined, even while the dominant culture valued gender roles. For example, hooks notes that a culturally dominant ideal of masculinity in America during slavery included that of being a heterosexual patriarch of a nuclear family who could provide for his wife and children. That's a familiar ideal to many even today, but of course it's an ideal that men held in slavery were often denied any chance of fulfilling. Some were not permitted to live with and love their own family members, and most could not be their family's provider while being enslaved. So the experience of being a free and (ideally) equal citizen rather than a slave is one that a man previously subject to slavery might well value as an opportunity, to be a provider who has and protects his own

family. Freedom to be a man like other men, at last, would be attractive. Many men whose ancestors battled to escape the emasculation of slavery won't agree when told that masculinity should be abolished or devalued. Instead, bell hooks thought it wiser to argue for a more expansive view of what it means to be a good, masculine man, so that it's not one limited to heterosexual provider-patriarchs.

That teacher of mine who was barred from her law library was also happy to embrace her identity as a woman, in part precisely because she was oppressed. In a context in which her status as a woman was used to justify limiting her opportunities, she found some joy in describing herself as a woman who defied those limitations. She exceeded expectations of those who thought women didn't belong or were unlikely to get doctorates. It was meaningful to her that at the time she graduated, fewer than ten percent of philosophy professors were women. So becoming and being a woman in philosophy was an achievement. You could argue that she shouldn't have to be proud, because ideally no one is surprised at a scholar having any particular gender. But she didn't live in an ideal world free of any social context. She lived under gendered oppression.

Some philosophers argue relatedly for the value of gender categories to trans and nonbinary people. Some nonbinary authors argue that *nonbinary* refers to a gender identity different from those of men or women. But it is hard to see how to respect that identification of nonbinary as a gender difference unless men and women are gender categories to differ from. Likewise, if we want to affirm the gender identity of trans individuals who advocate for inclusion in a gender category that others would exclude them from, then the socially shared understanding of a trans man *as* a man, for example, has value to him and those who affirm him.

As Stephanie Kapusta writes regarding women, my youthful impulse to make gender go away completely “at the very least contributes to robbing transgender women of the power to express their own senses of self, and of the opportunity to develop a language and conceptual resources that articulate those senses of self.”⁹

In all these examples, being an adult who navigates gendered oppression in a gendered world can amount to a meaningful, personal form of success. And you don’t have to agree that those examples are success stories. Living a gendered life may not be a success or an achievement that anyone ever completes anyway. We could see it as simply a commitment to some form of emergence into gender roles. And it may be more like an ongoing project that must be carried out in a world that is sometimes hostile and violent.

No one is born a man or a woman. You never hear someone say, “Hey, I’m going to have a baby, and I found out it’s a man!” We start as infants, and in most societies, we’re usually identified as boys or girls on the basis of the genitalia we present upon birth. As I explained earlier, this is one of the reasons that I define gender as the socially shared understanding of someone’s sex; when to identify someone as an adult is a social, political, cultural, and communal decision that isn’t the same in every place and time. It’s gendered when we describe someone as a woman instead of a girl because we are conveying something about how to understand their social role in a gendered world, and it’s meaningful in a social context in which being an adult is important. It is hard to separate the worth of being seen as an adult from the worth of gender concepts in social contexts where we want people to share an understanding of us as being a genuine adult. Men and women might identify with their gendered identities with some pride for that reason alone. These aren’t the only identities possible, and nonbinary adults today would be

among those to say they are not the best gender roles for everyone, because they do not fit the experience of every person.

The fit of felt, embodied experience with shared understanding of a gender role is an important reason that some transgender advocates argue for the value of gender. Most societies assign everyone a gender at birth, but some people strongly feel their gender identity is not the one they were assigned. Not everyone has a pronounced sense of internal gender identity, let alone one that conflicts with the sex they are ascribed at birth, so as I said at the beginning, not everyone will even perceive the same problems with the social practice of assigning infants genders or with wanting a different assignment. Bodily experiences differ, and the experiences of embodied individuals with their sense of whether they have a gender and whether it matters will vary. But for those whose experience of their own gender is an internal and felt sense of their identity, it seems like a mistake to suggest that individuals are wrong to have any sense of their gender identities.

Today most of us consider it unethical and sad that in the 1960s, the parents of Bruce Reimer, who as a newborn suffered damage to his penis during circumcision, would be directed by a doctor to continue to raise their child as a girl even as the child grew and began to resist and reject that course of treatment. As an adult, Bruce (and his family members) recounted that he never felt his gender assignment was correct, asserting a strong, inner sense of a different identity than that which was being rather aggressively imposed. The harms of the gendered life that resulted from the doctor's orders included deep depression for Bruce, more than one suicide attempt, and great challenges to entering adulthood as the kind of man he wanted to be.

Learning about his experience helped me rethink my early imagining of a world with no gender categories. If individual bodies vary, if different people have more or less pronounced senses of their identity as the sort of gendered person they are and want to be seen to be by others, then is it possible that a world with no gender categories would be one that still distributes power unfairly and unequally? Would those with no strong sense of their gender have the privilege to ignore a social order that discourages gender identification, while others would find it inconvenient, difficult, or impossible to articulate why they want to be understood as having a particular gender identity? Would sexual orientation be something that we cannot generalize about, so that we lack a shared and widely accepted way of articulating what we want as sexual beings? If so, then a perfectly genderless utopia means that gender is still being socially organized in a way that leads to differential power to ignore these norms for different individuals and groups. That amounts to an oppressive social order.

Most advocates and ethicists don't advocate for utopia, fortunately. I'll say more about that below. But thinking through some implications of a genderless world helps me to realize that it isn't really desirable because it's a world that seems weirdly disembodied. Or at least, it's one that seems to require all our bodily experiences to be the same. I'm happier to think about humans as we are, embodied, sexed, sexual (including not that sexual, including asexual), and gendered (including not that gendered, including agender). Most of all, I'm happy to remember that we're each and all social beings, that we're not just these bodies with sexes or sexualities but also in these social locations that really do occur at different intersections of identities. Intersectional gender identities are valuable to individuals in this actual, embodied, and social world.

Some advocates of what's called gender abolition suggest that their idea for a better world is not a disembodied utopia and is compatible with personal self-expressions of gender identity. They argue that what should be reduced or done away with is the social imposition of gender roles or gender categories in official settings. To reduce gendered oppression, gender abolitionists simply suggest that we ought to dial down the import of gender in organizations, political entities, and practices where gender differences are more arbitrary and less irrelevant. That is worth doing. But I doubt that it leads to abolition of gender in the public sphere, because we cannot just dial down the social force of gender while appreciating intersectional identities. Individuals who value gender recognition want more than private self-expression. So the relevance of gender remains complicated. Sorting out when gender is relevant is an endless political task that each new generation has to visit all over again, and the possibility of gendered oppression remains ever-present no matter how well a particular society works it out. Where there are embodied individuals with strong feelings about their identities, there will always be opportunities to regulate each other, to think some bodies are right and some are wrong, to think some feelings reflect reality accurately and others don't. That's the gendered world. The task for feminist ethics is to make it a good one.

¹ Hilde Lindemann (2019), *An Invitation to Feminist Ethics* (Oxford University Press), p. 15.

² Alison Jaggar (2019), "Thinking about Justice in the Unjust Meantime," *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 5(2), 10.

³ For more on evils, including gendered evils, see Claudia Card (2002), *The Atrocity Paradigm* (Oxford University Press).

⁴ For example, until 2019, family names and given names in Iceland were required to comply with an official list of gendered names.

⁵ Erica L. Smith (2022), "Female Murder Victims and Victim-Offender Relationship, 2021," *Bureau of Justice Statistics*, U.S. Department of Justice, December 2022, NCJ 305613.

⁶ Ilan H. Meyer et al (2017), "Incarceration Rates and Traits of Sexual Minorities in the United States," *American Journal of Public Health* 107(2): 267–273.

⁷ Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989(1), Article 8, p.141.

⁸ For her distinctive take on better masculinity in particular, see bell hooks (2004), *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (Routledge).

⁹ Stephanie J. Kapusta (2016), "Misgendering and Its Moral Contestability," *Hypatia* 31(3) 504–505.