

On Elizabeth Barnes' Metaphysics of Gender and Theory of Gender Terms

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Abstract

This paper introduces and critically evaluates the view Elizabeth Barnes (2020) proposes in “Gender and Gender Terms.” According to Barnes, contemporary gender theories mistakenly conflate the task of a metaphysics of gender with the task of figuring out the application conditions of gender terms. She contends that we can and should separate the two, as the former is to explain the social reality of gender, which need not give us the definitions or truth conditions for sentences involving gender terms. Regarding the metaphysical component of her account, Barnes adopts and ameliorates Haslanger’s social position theory; for the semantic and conceptual component, she emphasizes that though the metaphysics of gender does not provide the application conditions of gender terms, the former nevertheless constraints the use of the latter. We argue that Barnes’ semantic analysis is far from satisfying. Moreover, it is not clear that separating the metaphysics of gender and the analysis of gender terms leads to more effective attainment of the ameliorative goal of gender equality.

Key Words: gender, metaphysics of gender, gender terms, social position theory, ameliorative project