



Simion, M. (2021) Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 71(3), pp. 681-684. (doi: [10.1093/pq/pqaa048](https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqaa048)) [Book Review]

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Deposited on 03 September 2020

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Down Girl

Book Review

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In her fascinating and provocative book, Kate Manne argues that we should abandon the naïve understanding of misogyny as a simple psychological phenomenon – i.e., hatred towards women *qua* women – , in favour of seeing it as a complex social and political phenomenon. Manne sees her project as one in conceptual engineering: the ambition is to build a novel concept of misogyny that is better equipped to serve our feminist goals.

On the ensuing account, misogyny is a system that serves to enforce and police gendered norms and expectations to which groups of girls and women are subject under historically patriarchal orders. Misogyny is not understood in terms of the hostility that men feel towards women, but rather in terms of the hostility that women face in a patriarchal social order whenever they attempt to break with their historically oppressed role. According to Manne, while sexism is the source of the oppressive gendered social norms and roles, misogyny constitutes the policing mechanism for reinforcing said norms and roles.

Manne's is a crossover book: its main philosophical goal is to offer a fully-fledged treatment – indeed, the first of its kind – of the nature of misogyny. Its main political goal is to constitute itself into an anti-gaslighting manifesto: Manne identifies several recent public attempts at obscuring genuine instances of misogynistic behaviour via employing the implausibly narrow psychologistic understanding of this phenomenon, and sets out to resist them.

In this, I believe *Down Girl* is very likely the most important exercise in public philosophy in the last decade. The all-things-considered explanatory power of Manne's picture is also really hard to ignore.

I am in general agreement with Manne: the dictionary definition of misogyny is utterly implausible. Misogyny can be a property of behaviours and social structures just as well as a property of individual psychologies. When men have hostile reactions against women, they are not less misogynistic if these reactions are automatically induced by their enculturation than if they are sourced in occurring emotions of hatred towards

women. To the contrary, enculturation will likely result in a stable disposition towards hostile behaviour, in a way in which the mere harbouring of an emotion need not: the latter can be a one-off affair.

That said, I want to spend the remainder of this review registering, in some detail, one key point of criticism, mostly concerning the methodology employed in the book. The criticism is intended in the spirit of encouraging further development of what is overall an exceptionally rich and explanatorily powerful view. As such, I will conclude by suggesting two methodological alternatives that can serve to support the project and that escape my criticism.

Projects in conceptual engineering commonly proceed by first identifying a conceptual defect, and then proposing a fix. Manne's project makes no exception; in what follows, I will take a close look at the motivations she puts forth.

Manne argues that the naïve understanding of misogyny as hatred towards women *qua* women fails on three independent grounds:

(1) Extensional adequacy: it is implausible, she argues, that misogyny needs to be directed towards all women, or even women in general: misogynists are likely to have some women in their life that they care about, like their mother, sisters etc.

I worry that the champion of the naïve view has an easy comeback available to her here: it's not clear that the naïve definition does require the misogynist to hate all women, or even women in general. After all, hating Xs *qua* Xs – i.e., in virtue of their X-hood – is perfectly compatible with overriding considerations being present at particular (or even most) contexts and rendering particular (or even most) Xs improper objects for hatred. One may hate cats *qua* cats, but like the cats of one's girlfriend, in virtue of, say, positive associations. Similarly, hating women *qua* women is perfectly compatible with, *de facto*, liking quite a few women due to overriding reasons (e.g., of the sort that obtain in the case of family members and friends).

(2) The second and main motivation Manne puts forth for engineering 'misogyny' is epistemological: according to Manne, if the dictionary definition of misogyny is correct, it is exceptionally hard to come to know that one is a misogynist, short of being their therapist. In turn, this gives rise to hermeneutical shortages: victims of misogyny are unable to properly interpret their experiences in virtue of this lack of access to the perpetrator's private emotional states.

I worry that the epistemological motivation for the project will also be encountered with resistance from the

psychologist camp: just because X is a mental state, it need not follow that we have particularly impoverished access to X: indeed, the usual ways in which we have access to others' beliefs and emotions is via inference to the best explanation from the behaviour they exhibit. I need not be my partner's therapist in order to know that he enjoys sunny weather, hates snakes, and believes that Paris is in France. His behaviour is a great epistemic cue to all of this. Conversely, it's not clear that Manne's envisaged way to come to know that misogyny is present (on her definition thereof) is in any way epistemically lighter: according to Manne, the way to go is to ask ourselves: would a reasonable woman think that this behaviour or structure is misogynistic? If the answer is yes, then misogyny is present. It becomes clear that the inference proposed by Manne is more sophisticated than the inference to the best explanation that can be adopted by the champion of the naïve view: for one, because it involves second order thought. Secondly, how is one to know what a reasonable woman would think about the facts? Here is one way: reasonable women are those responsive to reasons. If so, the most straightforward way would be to ask: are there reasons to believe the behaviours and actions in question are misogynistic? If so, a reasonable woman would likely form the corresponding belief. But if this is so, it is not clear why we need to take the complicated route via the reasonable woman's reactions in order to establish the presence of misogyny rather than just go directly via inference to the best explanation from the behavioural etc. evidence we have.

(3) The third motivation appeals to prior plausibility considerations. According to Manne, intuitively, we take misogyny to be intimately related to patriarchal social structures. However, she argues, if the dictionary definition of misogyny is correct, it is mysterious why it should be so: after all, patriarchy, by definition, places women in subordinate social roles; why, then would men hate them? Why bite the hand that feeds you?

I worry that Manne neglects one easy response on behalf of the naïve view, to wit, that misogyny - together with its less aggressive cousin, sexism - is what *causes* the patriarchal social structure to begin with, which is what explains their intimate connection.

I said earlier that I am in full agreement with Manne that we should abandon the naïve dictionary definition of misogyny. I have, however, expressed a few worries concerning the motivations that Manne puts forth for doing so. In turn, since any conceptual engineering

project is only as powerful as the reasons we have to abandon the old concept to begin with, I would like to suggest it might be worth identifying alternative motivations for embracing Manne's account. In what follows, I will briefly do just that.

The first alternative motivation for pursuing Manne's project that I would like to propose is a straightforward, political one: as Manne herself notices, the naïve understanding of misogyny is too narrow to do any meaningful political work: we need to be able to diagnose behaviours and social structures as well as psychologies as misogynistic, if this concept is going to do any political work for us. Also, there is genuine need to be able to diagnose behaviours and social structures as such, because we do not have an alternative concept to capture behavioural and structural hostility towards women. The extant concept, then, on this way to look at things, is politically defective, which, in turn, gets Manne's engineering project off the ground.

For a second, radically alternative way to motivate Manne's project (which, I confess, would be my personal favourite), it is crucial to note that Manne takes her project to be one in conceptual engineering because she takes the dictionary definition of misogyny to correspond to the concept in use. She does so in virtue of a series of cases where it is employed in the public sphere.

Note, however, that it need not be that the dictionary definition of X, or even the understanding of X of a particular group – even a large group - corresponds to the concept of X: externalism about mental content has taught us as much. We, folk, can all be wrong (and likely are) about what, e.g., depression is: experts have sole authority over this concept. Similarly, one could think that the psychologistic, dictionary definition of misogyny is just mistaken. If so, we should abandon the dictionary definition of misogyny on good old extensional adequacy grounds. To see why this is a good way to go, note, again, that it is intuitive, even on our present understanding of misogyny, that it can be a property of behaviours and social structures, just as well as a property of individual psychologies. We often dub men's hostile reactions against women misogynistic, and we don't tend to think that they are less misogynistic if these reactions are automatically induced by their enculturation than if they are sourced in occurring emotions of hatred towards women: to the contrary.

In turn, these data concerning our pre-theoretic understanding of misogynistic behaviour and social structures seem to suggest that the dictionary definition is not true to our concept of misogyny; rather, it corresponds to a mistaken *conception* thereof. Concepts

and conceptions can come apart: we can have the right concept of misogyny in circulation, while, at the same time, some of us – indeed, even most of us – can be wrong about it: we can have the wrong *conception* thereof.

On this way of thinking about things, Manne's project would not be an exercise in conceptual engineering, but rather a descriptive conceptual (or maybe even metaphysical) analysis of what misogyny actually is, coupled with a project in *conception* engineering. In turn, this would also explain its excellent political potential: Manne's book stands to improve our understanding of what misogyny really is, which, in turn, counteracts the attempts at gaslighting that rely on the mistaken, psychologistic conception thereof. On this way to look at things, then, Manne's account is a better account of our *extant* concept of misogyny, that's why we should prefer it over the dictionary definition.