

Understanding Misogyny

Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny

Kate Manne (Oxford Univ. Press 2018), 362 pages

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*Down Girl*¹ opens with strangulation and closes with the 2016 presidential election. Nestled between these unsettling bookends is a bracing philosophical exploration of misogyny: what it is and isn't, its social functions, its relationship to sexism, and its relationship to dehumanization. The book even explores some of misogyny's specific manifestations in our culture.

If only this book had existed when I began teaching legal writing.

The phenomenon of gendered second-class status is all too familiar to teachers of legal writing both past and present. Most of us entered the legal academy from the world of practice, where we enjoyed status, respect, a presumption of competence. We knew the skills we would be teaching are as—or more—important to our students' professional lives (not to mention to their clients' interests) as anything else they learn in law school. Some of us had even earned PhDs in related fields—rhetoric, writing, etc. And all of us were smart, competent, curious, and eager to contribute to the intellectual culture of our institutions and the legal academy.

And then we learned our (gendered, all too gendered) place.

Former federal prosecutor, Georgetown Law professor, and public intellectual Paul Butler has said that he became a Black man by virtue of his arrest and prosecution for a crime he didn't commit.² Wrongful arrest and prosecution is several orders of magnitude worse than being a second-class citizen at a workplace of highly educated, highly privileged

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¹ KATE MANNE, *DOWN GIRL: THE LOGIC OF MISOGYNY* (2018).

² Oliver Laughland, *Q & A with Paul Butler*, *THE GUARDIAN*, Aug. 11, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/11/chokehold-book-paul-butler-us-police-african-americans>.

professionals. The experiences aren't in the same league. That said, a strained analogy still holds: at least as regards the workplace, all too many of us became women by virtue of teaching legal writing at American law schools.

Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny gives us tools to name and understand not only our experiences in the legal academy but also experiences similar at their core but far more pernicious in their impact. Its author, Kate Manne, is a philosophy professor at Cornell University whose research focuses on moral, feminist, and social philosophy,³ and *Down Girl* is the first book-length analytical feminist treatment of misogyny.⁴ Although the book isn't a quick and easy read—don't take it to the beach—its careful, systematic argument rewards patient readers. The bottom line: *Down Girl* is a tour de force.

The book is both deeply ambitious and expressly cabined. Manne provides a *general* account of the logic of misogyny, meaning one that applies across cultures and social groups—an ambitious effort, to say the least. She knows such generalization is a fraught topic, given (among other things) the history of white women's feminism,⁵ and she also acknowledges that a “limiting factor for [her] authority is [her] own (highly privileged) social position and the associated epistemic standpoint or vantage point.”⁶ Nonetheless, she undertakes to provide a “conceptual skeleton” that can be filled in by those “with the relevant epistemic and moral authority to do so, should they so choose.”⁷ Differently put, her theory “explicitly builds in space”⁸ for intersectional insights and provides room “for detailed, substantive accounts of misogyny as they affect particular groups of girls and women.”⁹

Manne expressly limits her argument in several ways,¹⁰ but, for the sake of this review, one limitation is key: she “concentrate[s] largely on moral *diagnosis*, or getting clear on the *nature* of misogyny.”¹¹ She's not interested in making “characterological judgments, and effectively putting people on trial,”¹² in part because she views “an obsessive focus with

³ Kate A. Manne, CORNELL UNIV., <https://philosophy.cornell.edu/kate--manne> (last visited Feb. 13, 2021).

⁴ MANNE, *supra* note 1, at xiv.

⁵ As Manne points out, “Middle-class white women (in particular) have rightly been criticized for doing feminism in ways that illicitly over-generalize, even universalize, on the basis of our own experiences.” *Id.* at 14.

⁶ *Id.* at 12.

⁷ *Id.* at 13.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.* at 12.

¹⁰ Manne expressly omits any discussion of transmisogyny, not because she considers the issue unimportant, but because she lacks “the requisite authority to do so.” *Id.* at 24.

¹¹ *Id.* at 28.

¹² *Id.*

individual guilt and innocence” as a counterproductive form of moral narcissism.¹³ She also eschews any discussion of solutions to misogyny, noting that “combating misogyny is likely to be a messy, retail business that permits few wholesale answers.”¹⁴

So what is Manne’s argument? A full explanation is beyond the scope of this review, but her core arguments focus on the following points.

Rejection of misogyny as a psychological construct. First, she rejects what she calls the “naïve conception” of misogyny.¹⁵ The naïve conception—the likely dictionary definition¹⁶—posits that misogyny is the hatred of women *qua* women, and that a misogynist’s attitudes “are held to be caused or triggered merely by his representing people as women . . . , and on no further basis specific to his targets.”¹⁷ Under this view, the misogynist’s attitudes toward women will “trigger his hostility in most, if not all, cases.”¹⁸

But Manne argues the naïve conception falls woefully short. Among other things, “what lies behind an individual agent’s attitudes, as a matter of deep or ultimate psychological explanation, is frequently inscrutable,”¹⁹ which “threaten[s] to make misogyny epistemically inaccessible,”²⁰ and, therefore, conceptually irrelevant. Moreover, Manne argues that misogyny under the naïve conception would be rare rather than common in a highly patriarchal society, when one would expect patriarchy to be fertile ground for misogyny. Why would that be? As Manne explains,

[T]o see why misogyny would be rare within a patriarchal setting if the naïve conception of misogyny and misogynists is accepted, consider: Why would any given man in a typical patriarchal setting have a problem with women universally, or even very generally, regardless of their relations? On the contrary, we would expect even the least enlightened man to be well-pleased with some women, that is, those who amicably serve his interests. It is not just that being hostile toward these women would be doubly problematic, in being both interpersonally churlish and morally objectionable. It is that it would be highly *peculiar*, as a matter

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.* at 29.

¹⁵ See *id.* ch. 1.

¹⁶ Manne’s analysis rests on “three different approaches [within social philosophy] to ‘what is x?’-style questions”: (1) conceptual projects that examine our ordinary idea of *x*; (2) descriptive projects that investigate the extension of a term; and (3) ameliorative projects that try “to formulate a concept that best suits the *point* of having such a term.” *Id.* at 41–42. A detailed discussion of these approaches is beyond the scope of this review.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 32.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.* at 43.

²⁰ *Id.* at 43–44.

of basic moral psychology. *To put the problem bluntly: when it comes to the women who are not only dutifully but lovingly catering to his desires, what's to hate, exactly?*²¹

For these and other reasons, Manne dismisses the naïve conception of misogyny.

Misogyny as a mechanism for “policing” compliance with patriarchal norms. Second, after dismissing the naïve conception, Manne posits a different conception. Under Manne’s ameliorative proposal,²² misogyny “should be understood as the ‘law enforcement’ branch of a patriarchal order, which has the overall function of *policing* and *enforcing* its governing ideology.”²³ It is “whatever hostile force field forms part of the backdrop to her actions, in ways that differentiate her from a male counterpart (with all else being held equal).”²⁴ The specific norms of any particular patriarchal order may vary: patriarchal norms in, say, Iceland may differ from those in Afghanistan, just as those in a philosophy department may differ from those in an economics department. Similarly, the policing or enforcement mechanisms—“down girl” moves that keep someone in her place²⁵—may vary widely:

[M]isogynist hostility can be anything that is suitable to serve a punitive, deterrent, or warning function, which . . . may be anything aversive to human beings in general, or the women being targeted in particular. . . . As well as infantilizing and belittling, there’s ridiculing, humiliating, mocking, slurring, vilifying, demonizing, as well as sexualizing or, alternatively, *desexualizing*, silencing, shunning, shaming, blaming, patronizing, condescending, and other forms of treatment that are dismissive and disparaging in specific social contexts. Then there is violence and threatening behavior . . .²⁶

Under this view, the practice of acid attacks against women in Bangladesh, commonly motivated by a woman’s rejection of a relationship with a man, is misogynistic;²⁷ so too were Rush Limbaugh’s radio riffs about Georgetown Law student Sandra Fluke.²⁸

21 *Id.* at 47 (final emphasis added).

22 *See supra* note 16.

23 MANNE, *supra* note 1, at 63.

24 *Id.* at 19.

25 *See id.* at 68.

26 *Id.* at 67–68.

27 *See id.* at 72–73 (describing the rationale and social function of acid attacks in Bangladesh).

28 *See id.* at 55–57 (describing the rationale and social function of Limbaugh’s statements referring to Sandra Fluke as a “slut” by reason of her advocacy for required coverage of birth control in health insurance policies).

Relationship of misogyny to sexism. Manne's third major argument focuses on the distinction between misogyny and sexism. Both form part of a patriarchal order, but their functions differ. If misogyny serves to police and enforce compliance with patriarchal norms, sexism justifies these norms: "[S]exism should be understood primarily as the 'justificatory' branch of a patriarchal order, which consists in ideology that has the overall function of rationalizing and justifying patriarchal social relations."²⁹

It often seeks to accomplish such justification by alleging or naturalizing sex differences "beyond what is known or could be known, and sometimes counter to our best current scientific evidence."³⁰

Relationship of misogyny to dehumanization. Manne's fourth major argument surprised me. Most of us have heard the old saying that "feminism is the radical notion that women are people,"³¹ and that misogyny stems from a (sometimes mild, sometimes extreme) form of dehumanization. Manne disagrees. Her argument on this issue is involved, but she posits that much misogyny presupposes the humanity of its target. In fact, a target may be singled out for misogynistic punishment for withholding uniquely human goods. If she is regarded as "owing her human capacities [service labor, love, loyalty, etc.] to particular people,"³² her failure to provide these supposed entitlements may trigger misogynistic reactions. But her humanity is never in doubt.

Manne further observes that recognizing someone's humanity *may* lead to empathy, but it may also lead to hostility. "[O]nly another human being can sensibly *be* conceived as an enemy, a rival, a usurper, an subordinate, [or] a traitor,"³³ and given that, "[m]any of the nastiest things that people do to each other seem to proceed in full view of . . . shared or common humanity."³⁴

Down Girl's satisfactions extend well beyond a careful, thought-provoking (and to me compelling) argument. My summary of her conclusions cannot do justice to Manne's careful, methodical articulation of her argument. The book is replete with examples, with full discussions of counterarguments and competing positions, with qualifications of her own position. Even those who disagree with Manne's conclusions must wrestle with her weighty arguments.

²⁹ *Id.* at 79.

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ This statement is attributed to Marie Shear. See *Marie Shear*, WIKIPEDIA, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie_Shear (last edited Dec. 12, 2020, 11:00 PM).

³² MANNE, *supra* note 1, at 173–74.

³³ *Id.* at 152.

³⁴ *Id.* at 148–49.

Another pleasure of the book lies in its metaphors and word play. I read *Down Girl* on a Kindle and found myself highlighting materials constantly. My two personal favorites: (a) the term *himpathy* (coined by Manne's husband), referring to the "excessive sympathy sometimes shown toward male perpetrators of sexual violence"³⁵ or other wrongdoing; and (b) in describing the difference between sexism and misogyny, "[s]exism wears a lab coat; misogyny goes on witch hunts."³⁶

Down Girl has begun to make its way into legal scholarship but merits far more engagement within the legal academy. Two potential points of engagement stand out. First, as noted above, for those of us in (historically) pink ghettos within the legal academy, *Down Girl* gives us a new language and lens for understanding our experiences, which (at least in my experience) reduces the likelihood we will internalize any sense of second-class status. Second, in her argument, Manne outlines a series of "down girl" moves, meaning moves designed to keep people in their place. For those interested in rhetoric, metaphor, and storytelling, an analysis of "down girl" moves in judicial opinions and briefs—in subjects ranging from family law to employment discrimination to equal protection—would allow scholars and practitioners to rethink the assumptions that undergird many of our doctrines. But these two points of engagement represent only a beginning. For any scholar interested in issues of gender, reading *Down Girl* will generate new insights, new questions, and new frames for understanding familiar problems. Highly recommended.

³⁵ *Id.* at 197.

³⁶ *Id.* at 80.