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On *Man*

Jaret Kanarek, Editor-in-chief

There is an all-pervasive assault, especially in schools, on “gendered” language. Increasingly, it is not acceptable to say *he*¹ or *she*, *him* or *her*, et cetera.² These terms are seen as exclusionary to any and every unspecified party. Instead, students are required to say *one*, *person*, *s/he* or some other non-specific, arbitrary, “gender-neutral” term. The epicenter of the assault, posited as the pinnacle of linguistic evil, is the term *man*. *Man*, the assailants say, only denotes males. Females are the excluded party, and thus the use of the term is sexist.³ The solution, then, is to reject the use of the term for some “substitute.”⁴

Unfortunately for the assailants, there is no substitute, neither metaphysically nor linguistically. Just as *man* is unparalleled in cognitive measure, so is the term that describes him. *Man*, by definition, is “a rational animal.”⁵ To say that *man* only denotes males is to say that being a female violates the definition; whether females are not animals, not rational, or neither is for the assailants to specify. The term’s linguistic referents are all men – past, present, and future – each as an individual, though not limited to any particular one.

The suggested “substitutes” for *man* do not and cannot achieve such a meaning. They are conceptually limited and through the filter of gender neutrality, most are laughable. Take, for example, the term *human*

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- 1 Italics will be used to designate a term being used, referenced, or defined.
 - 2 See “Beyond the ‘He/Man’ Approach: The Case for Nonsexist Language” by Wendy Martyna, a professor of Psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz.
 - 3 See “Why Sexist Language Matters” by Sherryl Kleinman, a professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
 - 4 See, for example, the nonsexist writing guidelines by the National Council of Teachers of English, The American Philosophical Association, The British Sociology Association, and Hamilton College’s writing center, which includes a works cited containing many more examples.
 - 5 This definition originated in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, and has since been the classic definition in philosophy. A broader context of this definition is given by Ayn Rand in *Introduction to the Objectivist Epistemology*, where she writes, “[The] valid definition of man, within the context of his knowledge and of all of mankind’s knowledge to-date [is]: ‘A rational animal.’”

and its plural form, *humans*. Conceptually, the former only refers to a single, particular, concrete of one man. John can be called a human, as can Susan and David, but the term, used properly, can only denote one at a time. Singular terms falter quite substantially in that they are conceptually limited to a single entity. Alternatively, *humans* refers to John, Susan, and David as a specified group, but also each as individuals and, by definition, includes all men. *Humans*, then, could be a substitute for *man*; however, it cannot pass the filter of gender neutrality. It is near impossible, even for the assailants, to ignore the fact that the root of the term *human* is, in fact, *man*. Any reason why *man* is bad logically pertains to any term wholly encompassing it.

It should be clear, then, why *mankind*, and its corollary *human-kind*, are not viable substitutes, at least through the filter of gender neutrality. In terms of meaning, they face severe conceptual limitations in that they only refer to a collective whole, and cannot refer to any individuals comprising the collective. It would be incorrect, for example, to say that John, Susan, and David are *mankind* (or *humankind*). *Homo sapiens*, which refers to the entire species of man, has this limitation as well.

Person faces the limitation of only referring to a single, particular, concrete of one man. Its plural, *people* (seemingly the favorite substitute of the assailants), is limited in that it only refers to a collective of men. In fact, the origin of the term is the Latin *populous* (or *populace*), which is, by definition, only a collective. *Man*, as stated earlier, refers to all men, each as an individual, though not limited to a particular one. By contrast, *people* does not have to mean all men, but can be only some specified number of men.⁶ Its subject is the specified collective and not the individuals comprising it.

To demonstrate this point, take, for example, the sentence “People are white,” which is grammatically correct and factually true. It is factually true because there are men who are white (a collective sum), even though not all individual men are white. The sentence “Man is white,” is grammatically correct, but is factually false. “Man is white” is factually false because

6 It is important to note that the term *man* can be changed to *men* (its plural form) and subsumes the meaning of *people*. The reverse cannot happen in regards to *people*. A man could say “there are eight people,” but a man could not say, “there are eight man.” He would have to say, “there are eight men.” The existence of the term *men* denotes another reason why man is so unique and appears alone in its achieved conceptual meaning.

man refers to all men, each as an individual, and there are individual men who are not white. A conceptual difference occurs because *people* can refer to any collective of men, whether specified or unspecified, and does not have to be all men.

Some men say that *people* is able to achieve the same meaning as *man*. This is true, only in certain contexts (when *people* is used in the utmost general, unspecified way, where *people* is intended to mean “all men”).⁷ The sentences, “People are good. Some people are not,” require specification about which people are good (*these people, some people, eight people, et cetera*), because the context requires it. *People* could mean “all men” but, just as validly, be any other quantity of men. By contrast, “Man is good” cannot be followed by a sentence specifying its opposite about “some men.” In conceptual meaning, these two sentences would be in direct contradiction with one another.⁸ If the sentences were written with a subsequent contradictory sentence the term *man* would be unfit for such use. The sentence could not read, “Man is good. Some men are not,” but would have to be, “Men are good. Some men are not.” Further specificity about which men would be required; however, this is only because the term *man* is no longer in use.

Notice that in this case *men* and *people* achieve the same meaning, but *man* remains irreplaceable in conceptual meaning and content. Because of the context-dependent nature of *people* it cannot consistently have the same meaning as *man*. In light of the shortcomings associated with *people*, the term *man* fulfills a necessary linguistic role. In cases where *people* cannot be used to the same effect as *man*, the term *man* becomes a linguistic necessity.⁹ In summation, *man* denotes all men, each as an individual, while *people* denotes only a specified collective of men. *People* does have one “redeeming” quality, though, in that it is impossible to know the gender of its referents.

One final substitute is *individual*, and its plural, *individuals*. The conceptual limitations of the singular and plural need no further discus-

7 In most cases, *people*, in order to avoid confusion, must be presupposed with the use of the term *all*.

8 Where *man*, properly defined, denotes all men each as an individual, but no single man specifically.

9 It becomes a linguistic necessity because there is no other concept, if the goal is to speak about the referents of *man*, which can replace the term.

sion, nor does its obvious success as a gender-neutral term. However, the use of the term *individual* begs the question: individual what? Specification is required for the reader to know exactly what the individual is. Regarding the sentence, “The individuals John, Susan, and David are sitting in the backyard,” can you confidently say that the subjects are men and not dogs?¹⁰ *Individual*, as a term, cannot denote what the subject is, and thus cannot be considered a viable alternative to *man*. Where as *individual* specifies a number of some entities, *man* specifies the nature of the entity. Thus, *individual* can modify *man* by specifying the quantity of men, but cannot be substituted for the term.¹¹

Evidently, the term *man* is linguistically unparalleled in that no other term is capable of its conceptual content. With the weeds finally wacked, it is necessary to unearth the assault on *man* at its root. In Old English, the term *man* was used to refer to ‘human beings’ in general, regardless of sex.¹² At the time there were separate terms for “adult male” and “adult female,” but the term *man* eventually replaced the term for “adult male” all the while maintaining its original, definitional meaning. The argument against *man* as an old-fashioned and sexist term originated from the obfuscation of *man*’s actual referents. *Man*, the assailants say,¹³ not only excludes women but also posits them as inferior because the term *woman* is a modification of *man*. This is only under conditions in which objectivity in definition is abdicated in favor of ascribing arbitrary referents to terms, i.e. ascribing “adult male” to the term *man*. In current use, it is, in fact, the use of the term *woman* that continues to delegate the definition of “adult male” to the term *man*. The real issue is not with *man* but with *woman*. If the assailants really cared about gendered language, they would have ceased their attacks on *man* and abandoned *woman* long ago. If the assailants really cared about language, they would have ceased their capricious modification of definitions, realizing that they were trying to fix the problem with its cause.

The attacks on *man* and the suggested “substitutes” are irrational.

10 Contextual clues always help, such as the activity changing from “sitting in the backyard” to “doing calculus homework,” but the point remains the same.

11 The same applies to other such substitutes, such as *one*.

12 Information regarding the history of the term *man* comes from the *New Oxford American Dictionary* entry for “man”.

13 See footnotes 2, 3, and 4.

The fight for the term *man* is the antithesis. This fight is not a trivial one, for it is, in essence, the fight for reason, objectivity, and that which necessitates them: man and the efficacy of his mind. In today's prevalent culture of whim-worship, it is more important than ever to move past the tyranny of irrationality and into the joy of reason. This can be accomplished only when man is able to finally stand upright, hold his head high, and declare proudly, defiantly, and without guilt: "I am man!"