

There’s a Good Girl: From Ambivalent Sexism to Benevolent Misogyny

The recent focus on misogyny has considered misogyny to be the ‘law enforcement branch’ of patriarchy, whereby women who fail to abide by traditional gender roles are policed and punished (Perry, 2001; Manne, 2018; Richardson-Self, 2018). From a linguistic point of view, misogyny has been considered as a purely negative phenomenon, with gendered slurs taking up much of the debate. Specifically, words like “slut” or “bitch” invade the context and leave their expressive mark. Although there is some disagreement over how exactly one is supposed to fix the referent of a slur like “slut”, most would agree on its highly hostile expressive power, demonstrating disapproval towards *some* type of woman (Ashwell, 2016; Diaz Legaspe, 2018; Berškýtė, 2024).

Whilst I think that the focus on “hostile” misogyny is warranted, it does not complete the logical space for the expressivity of misogyny. In this talk, I want to introduce “benevolent” misogyny; one that very much functions to police and control women, but it does so by way of positivity and praise for fulfilling one’s traditional roles. To do so, I draw on psychological research concerning ambivalent sexism (Glick and Fiske, 1996, 1997) and philosophical scholarship on oppressive praise (Holroyd, 2025), I suggest that when sexism becomes active through praise it turns into benevolent misogyny, e.g., “Your husband is a lucky man, you’re so well presented”; “I really respect women who don’t put out on the first date”; “You don’t see many women staying at home to look after her children and husband anymore, well done you for being a proper wife”. I explore the consequences of benevolent misogyny and its differences from hostile misogyny. Benevolent misogyny is positive, more covert than hostile misogyny and often manifests in praise. Its positivity renders it less explosive on the context than hostile misogyny; its covertness can make it seem difficult (in the context) to locate as controlling or policing; and social norms concerning praise (*prima facie* a nice thing!) discourage its rejection for the fear of being impolite. And so, benevolent misogyny’s sneaky nature and positive expressive nature can allow it to fester without recognition or challenge.

References

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