



Christopher Bernard

## 8,000,000,000 Genders: Why “Gender” Should Be Abandoned

### 1. Maybe My Mother Was Right After All

One day, coming into my bedroom with an unusually sombre expression on her elegantly beautiful face, my mother sat me down and gave me a brief talk that turned out to be one of the most influential in my life. I was nine years old.

What she said, in her characteristically direct, even blunt way, was that I was a boy because I had a penis and testicles; my sister, on the other hand, was a girl because she had a vagina. (We were easygoing about nudity in our household, without making a fetish of it, so I knew precisely what she meant; I was only puzzled why she was making a point about something she knew I hardly needed a lecture on.)

At this point you might think, and dismiss, my mother as a biological determinist. But not so fast, because then she came to her main point. Though men and women were biologically distinct, they were not walled off from each other in impenetrable silos: all men had some so-called feminine traits (sensitivity, empathy, passiveness, or the like), and all women had some so-called masculine traits (aggressiveness, self-assertiveness, emotional detachment, etc.). This was essential, she said, to their “emotional balance” and psychological well-being.

She went on: Some men were excessively “masculine” (I was reminded of the Charles Atlas ads I had seen in comic books; the posturing muscleman had always struck me as ludicrous) and some women were excessively “feminine” (and I thought of Marilyn Monroe, who struck me, then and now, as almost a caricature of femaleness; both Atlas and Monroe were *performing*, theatrical, *false*; healthy men and women did not let themselves to be bound by performing stereotypes, which were, by definition, fraudulent – think, for example, of how racial stereotyping has been used for centuries by European whites against Jews, Asians, and Blacks). In both cases, this was unhealthy for both males and females, to say nothing of their relationships. Gender excesses (she said) had a number of pernicious effects: they created a wall between the sexes, and locked both women and men away from parts of their own psyches, creating sometimes irresolvable emotional conflicts that were guaranteed to poison their lives.

As she said this, I was thinking of both her and my father. My father, from a family that came to America from England in the early seventeenth century, with old Norman blood and later native American heritage (anyway, according to family legend), was a television director and producer and involved in the arts and literature (he was a gifted draftsman, musician, and writer; his own father had had literary ambitions in his youth, and his mother was a very gifted poet). Dad was also the main, as well as an adventurous, cook at home and the main wit at family dinners, often reducing the rest of us to tears of laughter. He had no interest in sports, automobile mechanics, or the sorts of things my friends’ fathers cared about, aside from shooting pheasant in the farm country where we lived during the hunting season each fall.

My mother had traits some might call masculine: the elder daughter of a Czechoslovakian father and a Welsh mother, she had a blustering directness and an impatience with insinuation and communicative hints, to say nothing of an irascible fearlessness that had no time for squeamishness and timidity (such as my own!) that I didn’t see in my friends’ mothers or other females. She swore like a sailor and made no pretense of sensitivity, though she was a talented photographer and sculptor and had a gift for pithy phrases that was legendary in the family. I have often said Polly had more testosterone than most of the men I knew.

So I felt I had examples right before my eyes of what my mother was saying. And since I loved and trusted both of my parents implicitly, and was convinced I had by far the best family that walked upon the green earth, her lesson met no resistance from me.

Her main point, as I understood it then, and now, is that there was no question whether my father was a *man* (that is, masculine and male) or my mother was a *woman* (feminine and female). Nature was liberal in her gifts but rigid in her identities. And human beings had no choice but to accept this, despite the endless examples of human folly I was becoming increasingly aware of.

My mother gave me a serious look and asked if I understood. I nodded, though I was still puzzled why she had told me this at that particular moment. Then I recalled I was being referred to more and more as “a sensitive boy” and already showing signs of artistic interests and an indifference and even disdain for athletics and other traditionally boyish pursuits, so I guessed there might be some connection; my mother was doing this to reassure me, and I felt a warmth of gratitude such as I have rarely felt. It is only in the last few years I have come to realize what a profoundly wise and kind thing she had done for me. She died too long ago for me to have had the chance to thank her. I only wish I had had this realization sooner.

Her talk had the great benefit of allowing me never to doubt my “masculinity”; whatever I did or whoever I was, I was “male” by definition. I would have other problems to deal with – how, for example, to be a decent human being in an often indifferent and brutal world and what it meant to be a successful grownup – or merely how to talk to “girls” without offending them (a skill I am still mastering). But “gender issues” had no meaning for me. Who was a “real man”? I was.

## 2. Social Illusions and Personal Harms

What is “gender”? What used to be a convenient two genders has, in recent decades, morphed, according to some, into as many as 78 – a meaningless number. And then there are the gender fluid, the nonbinary, the invented genders. (Indeed, why not take the notion to its logical conclusion – to a unique gender for every individual – which would mean, today, since the world population recently passed this threshold, 8,000,000,000 genders?)

The dazzling invention of pronouns confuses the matter even more. In my more puckish moments, I claim that my own pronouns are “I/me/mine.” Or if I want to be really annoying: “we/us/ours,” though whether I am being royal or merely editorial depends on whose skin I am trying to get under.

I have come to suspect that “gender” may have no useful meaning at all.

The social construction “gender” has come to represent, for a particularly aggressive groups of progressive activists, what no social construction, by definition, *can* be: an essence, an ultimate reality about a person, an “identity” (that other dubious and fashionable idea), when it is, at best, a rough intellectual model that, like any model, only approximates what it represents, and therefore must not be taken with complete seriousness and never, under any circumstances, literally.

One of the many pitfalls of the human condition as I have come to understand it is a perennial temptation to take our intellectual inventions and “social constructions” as well as the

surrounding web of insights and projections, guesses and illusions that make up human culture, as ultimate realities; even among secularists, as somehow sacred. And any deviation in the *physical* world from those *imagined* realities may find itself attacked as “false,” “inappropriate,” or “politically incorrect.” I recall the futile controversies during Obama’s first presidential campaign over whether he was “black” enough; one of the more ludicrous moments of that time. But it takes only a glance at recent history to see how such illusions, and the futile attempt to impose them on real human beings, can lead to psychological, social, and political pathologies of the most horrendous kind; to personal despair and mass violence.

Any concept, any idea we have about the world, is, of course, a more or less crude, more or less effective, tool for living in it. A useful concept grows and changes over time, adapting to circumstances and molding with the times; a useless concept is one that has frozen at a given moment and is now used as a weapon with which to hammer people who refuse to be paralyzed by fear of change. By the same token, every worthwhile concept is living, never to be completed because never a perfectly accurate picture of reality.

### 3. When Is a House Not a House?

My favorite example of this is “house”: certainly we mean something very different when we say “house” from what was meant during Shakespeare’s time – our “house” is likely to contain dozens of devices and items of “infrastructure” that Shakespeare could only have dreamed about in his most exalted inspirations, and yet it retains the same function in the “real world”: a structure to keep out the wind and the rain; a shelter, a place to make a home.

But imagine if we had saddled the concept “house” with details irrelevant to its function: if we had said a “house” must be half-timber, or built of bricks, or have at least one chimney and hearth, or not be higher than twenty feet – and if we had taken these details with complete seriousness so that not only was any building that deviated from these “norms” not a “house,” but was some sort of threat to the community, to social order, even to human life – and one can imagine the (to speak charitably) violent lunacy into which we would have descended.

When taken literally, “gender” is a form of just such misapplied Platonism: it presents the idea as more real (a “real man,” an “ideal woman”) than the scrubby, scruffy reality of actual boys and girls, of men and women trying to live in the world. As soon as one says this, it is obviously true. But when it comes to gender, we seem to immediately forget it and become hypnotized by phantoms.

“Gender” is especially, even tragically, problematic because of the explosive emotions regarding sexuality and physical desire (different from gender though easily confused with it). This is true

above all during adolescence, when young people have yet to learn that the “concepts” and “norms” of their society have no objective reality outside practical necessity and the dictates of power, and therefore they try, hopelessly, to conform to them, often down to the most exacting, and delusive, details. Indeed, their peers are often the worst offenders, as they seek to impose these illusions not only on themselves but also, through peer pressure, on their fellows. The violent dance of delusions and paranoia that makes up so much of human life often takes its first cruel steps in the corridors of high school.

The mistake we have made is splitting off the concept of gender from the biological reality of sex. This mistake has had disastrous consequences.

If we believe that “maleness” (to choose a glaring example) is reflected in a particular concept of “gender,” and then try to *impose* that concept, we are certain that, at some point, we will get wrong what actual boys and men do and what they really are. No concept of “maleness” can cover all the details of how actual men and boys behave and exist in the world; and many of those details are often conflicting and ambiguous and change over time. Many details regarding “gender” are illusory, though an illusion shared by powerful and influential figures, from parents to teachers, from peers to priests to presidents. The particulars of males will fall outside any concept of maleness and confuse people who cling to the concept no matter how much reality contradicts it. Most importantly, they will confuse the boy or man himself over who and what he “is.”

Whenever we take a *concept* as more true than the *physical reality* the concept represents, we become at best wrong-headed and at worst actively evil – both delusional and cruel, even murderous. The history of the past century provides more examples than many may be willing to fully absorb: the lessons, that is, of human delusions followed to the point of murder and mass murder.

All social constructions are illusions, socially shared will-o’-wisps, socially agreed *plausible absurdities* that are useful but have no ultimate reality; that have only the most tangential relationship to the reality we must deal with if we hope to live from moment to moment in the world. To take them seriously is to court madness and death, for an individual or a society. They should be handled, like any belief, lightly and ironically, and willingly discarded as soon as they cease to serve their purpose, which is to help us survive – no: help us *thrive* and *know happiness* in this world. As soon as they prevent that, they have become our enemy and must be mastered and conquered.

#### 4. The Madness of Academia

Certain strains of postmodernist philosophy and literary scholarship have become captured by the notion that all of reality experienced by human beings is socially constructed, and that every social construction is equally valid, no matter how it seems to violate our understanding of physics, biology and common sense; the only difference is that certain constructions are imposed by overarching power structures and certain others provide emancipation. And these ideas, after capturing many universities in the developed world in Europe and the Americas, are now being imposed on political, medical and, more egregiously, educational institutions.

The decoupling of gender from biology has, in particular, been one of the most damaging in its effects (which are described in relentless detail by Helen Joyce in her book *Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality*), not only on women, gays, and children, but on trans people themselves, for whom this decoupling has ostensibly been made.

The aim of these groups (which include, among the most heinous offenders, the ACLU, Human Rights Campaign, and the Democratic Party in the U.S.) has been to assert self-identification of gender over biological sex as the cultural standard and to give this assertion ultimate legal standing. This has led to situations in which males, simply because they state their gender is female even without any medical or surgical intervention, can have a legal right to use spaces previously confined to women, including restrooms, locker and changing rooms, and communal baths and showers. It also gives transwomen the right to compete in women's sports, in which many of them have such an enormous physical advantage that they dominate competitions. (If anyone doubts this has an effect in the real world, please see the case of Terry Miller and Andraya Yearwood, two transgirls who dominated in girls high school athletic events for several years in Connecticut: their dominance made it seem futile to so-called natal girls even to compete against them and led to a legal suit. There is, as of this writing, still no legal decision as to whether transwomen should be allowed in women's sports. Some predict that if they are, they will soon dominate such competitions (including the Olympics), in a setback for feminism it may take a generation to repair.)

If any of my readers have children, of either sex, these ideas must be deeply troubling. But gender self-identification is now the law already in Canada and Ireland and has strong support in Australia. In Canada, where free speech is not fully protected, you can lose your job and in some cases even serve prison time for objecting to gender self-identification, even when it goes against your religion or intellectual conscience (in other words, if you simply refuse to utter a falsehood – though if this reminds you of religious wars of both present and past, you would not be far wrong). It almost became the law in the U.K. And the Obama administration sought, unsuccessfully, to impose it, and the Biden administration is currently seeking to impose it

nationally in the U.S. We live in a very strange time when it can be against the law to state what you believe is the truth – when lying is legally binding.

## 5. A Modest Proposal

But to return to the humble body: speaking for myself, in the battle between identity and biology, I find that, to keep at least some of my sanity, to say nothing of satisfying my basic standards of honesty, I must come down on the side of biology and accept a definition of “male” as a human being born with the XY chromosome, penis and testicles that create the gametes called sperm, with the hormonal system that goes with them, and define “masculine” as whatever such individuals do.

I would define the “female” analogously; that is according to sex, not gender.

There will be exceptions, as there always will be in the fundamentally imperfect world we live in. There will be the inter-sexed of various kinds. There will be trans people who suffer from genuine gender dysphoria and who are not happy until their secondary sexual characteristics have been removed and secondary characteristics of the opposite sex have been given them. I accept a “transwoman” as a “transwoman” (and use feminine pronouns as a courtesy, a *legal fiction*, though if *legally mandated* I would refuse to comply) and a “transman” as a “transman” (similarly regarding pronouns), without confusing the issue by saying, with transactivists, that, in all situations, “a transwoman is a woman” or “a transman is a man.”

Claiming the latter causes harm to men and women, to same-sex oriented individuals, and, above all, to children, who are being submitted to one more immense experiment (social media being another) that has already wasted lives and ruined futures by creating people who can no longer experience sexual pleasure or who can never have children of their own. Nature (who, in the judgement of some, is our creator and master, and ultimate rewarder and punisher) mandated humanity to be mammals, and mammals reproduce through sexual selection; the sexes are immutable for that reason.

I also submit that it is not for an exception to rule; to do so is the definition of tyranny. And if the tyranny of the majority is a terrible thing, the tyranny of a minority is even worse.

In brief, I would abandon “gender” as a normative or even a useful term. It has done more damage than almost any other word or idea in the language in recent history. It is time to add it to such anachronisms as “phlogiston,” “phrenology,” and “bloodletting” – the obsolete social

constructions with absurd or horrendous consequences in the real world that we abandoned long ago.

When asked my “sex,” I say, “male.” If asked my “gender,” I say (puckishly, I admit): myself.

NOTE: Assertions and examples regarding the biology of sex, the dangers of gender self-identification, and the adverse effects of transactivism on women, gays, and children, and on transpeople themselves, are taken from statements and references made in the book *Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality*, by Helen Joyce, a book that contains a deeply sensitive discussion of the stakes involved in the ideology of gender affirmation ideology.

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