

The Gender Myth
Exploring the Blurry Line Between Male and Female
By
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When I was a kid I had an elementary school friend who said, “Hey, I’m half boy and half girl. My father is a man and my mother is a woman.” He thought it was a good joke, but it made good sense to me. Even though we may appear a certain gender on the outside, it made me wonder about what we can’t see on the inside. Of course, my culture had been teaching me something different ever since, that the distinction between the sexes is clear, that when God made Man, “male and female he created them,” and, *Snakes and snails and puppy dog tails, that’s what little boys are made of. Sugar and spice and everything nice, that’s what little girls are made of.* In our culture, the distinction between male and female seems about as clearly defined as any there is. But if every person is born of both male and female, as my boyhood chum’s comment helped me realize, then we must, in some way, all be a combination of both.

Admittedly, my grasp on biology wasn’t great back then, and I didn’t understand that making a person isn’t exactly like baking a cake—throw in a little sugar and spice with your snakes and snails, and, *voila*, you have the perfect blend of all ingredients. The sweetness of a cake depends upon how much sugar is in the recipe. It may be muted by the other ingredients if there’s not a lot of it, or it may overwhelm everything else if there is, but whatever proportion is used doesn’t become unexpressed once it’s stirred into the mixture. A baker doesn’t put every ingredient in the cupboard into a big mixing bowl, then program the mixture to only express those necessary for making a cake. That only happens on *Star Trek*. Living things, on the other hand, have all kinds of genetic possibilities that don’t get expressed. We look and act like our genetic expression, but that doesn’t mean the other genes aren’t still there.

Our physical gender is usually determined by our chromosomal makeup, either XX in females, or XY in males. Hence, all of us inherit an X from the half of our genes we get from our mothers, but may inherit either another X or a Y from our fathers. After an egg is fertilized by a sperm cell, however, whether it has two Xs or an XY, the gender of the fetus remains unexpressed until the final month of the first trimester. Until then, female is considered our default gender. For it isn’t until the Y chromosome begins introducing male hormones around 9 weeks that the developing female starts turning into a male instead of continuing on her course. Her ovaries begin descending to form testicles, her clitoris elongates to become a penis, and her labia enclose to become a scrotum. Because these anlagen, or “base organs,” are the beginnings of both female and male genital structures, and, because the already developing fetus only masculinizes when androgen is suddenly introduced to turn them into male structures, as is SOX9, a DNA protein that that releases and regulates a hormone that inhibits their course toward female development, female has long been considered our default gender. Stated more simply and less clinically, we all begin as females.

Nowadays the experts are beginning to stray from this simple binary explanation, realizing gender distinction is complex, preferring to describe those first 9 to 12 weeks of gestation as

the androgynous state in which we all begin before either masculinizing for feminizing. Either way of putting it is no less wondrous, that we all start off the same, as females, or as some sexually ambiguous entity that uses the same parts to make subtle changes to our physiology that makes us, at least, appear to be either male or female.

I say “appear” because our gonadal makeup is only part of what determines our gender. Gender depends as much upon our chromosomal and hormonal makeup as well. For this reason, correctly assigning gender based strictly on whether an infant has a penis or vagina is irresponsible, and cruel when resulting in years of confusion and distress for a person who has been wrongly assigned. Because this part of embryonic and fetal development is so complex, and because the difference between male and female expression is so subtle, intersexuality is far more common than most would guess, and, perhaps, more normal than most might expect.

Intersexuality is the term used to describe those of us who express an ambiguous mixture of both female and male physiology. Someone could be born with female genitalia, for instance, yet be chromosomally or hormonally male. Adrenal Virilism Syndrome is the name given for this kind of intersexuality, which causes a person with female genitalia to masculinize at puberty because adrenal tumors start excreting androgen, the male hormone, into the individual’s body. It’s also possible that what appeared to be a clitoris at birth is actually a micropenis, a blend, if you will, between the two, resulting from some disruption of the masculinizing process during gestation.

Not long ago, medicine considered it best to surgically alter such infants to make them appear female, treat them with hormone therapy, and raise them as girls, since it was not medically possible to construct a functional penis. This treatment often turned out to be a cruel and terrible mistake for those who grew up believing themselves female though they inwardly felt like males. There is a tribe in New Guinea, by contrast, the Kukukuku, with only one frequently recurring genetic strain of intersexuality. “Though at birth the affected babies look ambiguous as to sex,” explains Dr. John Money, in the book, *Human Sexuality*, “rather more feminine than masculine, they are by tradition always assigned as males.”¹ Over time this has proven to be the right choice given that these individuals always masculinize at puberty and identify as such.

There are also those born male in appearance, yet have Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome, meaning, despite their male genitalia, their hormones do not cause them to further masculinize at puberty. They will go on to develop breasts, maintain a high voice, lack facial and body hair, and, with the one exception, appear to be female in every way, even though they are chromosomally male. Although most intersexed persons have ambiguous sexual characteristics, there are also some born with both kinds of fully functional sex organs.

And there are some males, about 5 out of 100,000 born with two XX chromosomes. Most with this syndrome have feminine qualities, although some do not. And there are those with

¹ Green, Richard, M.D., *Human Sexuality: A Health Practitioner’s Text*, The Williams & Wilkins Company, Baltimore, MD, 1975, p. 109.

XY chromosomes that don't develop testicles during the usual point of gonadal differentiation, preventing the development of those male hormones that would otherwise stop the fetus from continuing to become female. This is called Swyer Syndrome, and those XY individuals with it go on to develop normal female organs, including fallopian tubes, a cervix, vagina, and uterus.

You may also find it interesting to know that in some animals, birds for instance, the chromosomal configuration for male and female is opposite what it is in humans. It is the male that has two of the same chromosomes and the female that has two that are different. Thus, rather than the sperm determining their chromosomal gender, it is the female ovum that makes the difference. Although the chromosomes in birds and humans are different, they are believed to have developed from a common ancestor, suggesting the chromosomal difference between what makes us male and female is an arbitrary result of evolution.

Other species, like the clownfish and flatworms, don't determine their gender until they mate, at which point one becomes female and the other remains male. Some kinds of water fleas are all female and reproduce asexually by cloning themselves. But if overcrowding occurs they produce a hormone causing them to give birth to males and start reproducing sexually, helping them to reduce the amount of egg producers in their overall population. The slipper limpet, furthermore, is a fish that is male while swimming, but female when resting on rocks, and the tropical hamlet is another fish that continually fluctuates between being male and female while mating, changing genders about every 30 seconds.

We could also conclude, given, as we have seen, some strains of intersexuality are inherited, as with the Kukukuku, that if it becomes more advantageous for the survival of our own species for each of us to function sexually and reproductively as both male and female—like individual snails that produce both eggs and sperm—then evolution could very well make these nondominant genetic anomalies dominant, and we would become an intersexed species, with a few anomalous members that have recessive genes making them appear to be one gender only. In recent years, we've also found that many species of frogs and fish are becoming transgender, mainly through male to female transition. Research suggests the cause of this is manmade chemical pollutants in the waters in which these animals live. Sad as this is, the very idea that some animals can spontaneously transition from one gender to another proves just how similar male and female are to begin with.

And that's why I've said all of this, not to give a biology lesson, but to point out the line between male and female is extremely fuzzy, and that our sexual identity may be more a matter of upbringing and culture than it is physical. Why should little girls like to play dress up, house, and with baby dolls, while little boys play sports and learn to rough house? Both start out very much the same, with minor gonadal changes during gestation, yet, otherwise, remain indistinguishable, with high voices and hairless bodies, until the hormonal changes that occur many years later during puberty?

Nor should we conclude just because an individual's genitals, chromosomes, and hormones all correspond with what appears to be their gender, that they necessarily identify as such. Bruce Jenner's, who once epitomized the masculine stereotype, recent transition into Kaitlyn

Jenner is a good example. Just as our biological gender can be mixed, ambiguous, or both, so can our psychological identity. We've all heard stories of those who long felt as if they were trapped in a body not their own—a male trapped inside a woman's body, or a woman trapped inside a man's.

Again, due to our cultural perception of gender, we tend to think of such persons as anomalous, as if they are unusual, even strange, and, sadly, in many cases, subjects of ridicule, scorn, and inequality. But what if the distinctions between what we consider typical female behaviors and male behaviors are merely inventions our culture's tendency to absolutize and concretize our ideas about things, rather than coping with the nebulous, indistinct, and mysterious nature of reality? What if our ideas of male and female are from generations of being told boys play baseball and girls play with dolls, that boys are made from snips and snails, and girls from sugar and spice, that boys should be courageous and tough, and girls should be caring and ladylike? What if the reason more men don't fall in love with other men is because they've been taught they can't, and, likewise, for women? Is it merely the physical gender we love, or the soul of a person? If it is the soul, then female and male come in all kinds of packages.

We could be physically female and psychologically masculine, or physically male and psychologically feminine. In fact, my two favorite psychologists, Erich Fromm and Carl Jung suggest we've not fully developed until we are inwardly both. Fromm says, "Eventually, the mature person has come to the point where he is his own mother and his own father... The mature person has become free from the outside mother and father figures, and has built them up inside."² In this sense, my little friend was right, we are part female and part male because we have a mother and father inside us. Jung, who believed the soul of every man is feminine, *anima*, and that of every woman is male, *animus*, takes all this even further with his notion of *enantiodromia*, Heraclitus' idea that, "everything changes into its opposite in the course of time,"³ including males and females. Over the course of psychological maturation, a process he called *Individuation*, through which all our unconscious qualities become conscious (or differentiated), Jung thought we should come to embrace both our feminine and masculine qualities. He even pointed out that as we age, males physically feminize, and females become more male due to the lessening of testosterone and estrogen, becoming more androgynous again, as we were before puberty. The cultural idea tells us we remain distinctly male and female from birth to death, but were we to alter our paradigm to include the normal hormonal phases of life we might come to see ourselves as a species whose gender fluctuates at different phases in life, masculinizing and feminizing when necessary, but also enjoying a more androgynous existence during the bookends of our lives.

In his book, *Sapiens*, historian, Yuval Harari, says throughout history "different societies adopt different kinds of imagined hierarchies."⁴ Among Americans, for example, race has

² Fromm, Erich, see, *The Art of Loving*, "About the Author," Harper Perennial, Modern Classics addition, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1956, 2006, p. 34.

³ Jung, C.G., *Dream Analysis*, Bollingen Series XCIX, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1958, 1984, p. 224n.

⁴ Harari, Yuval, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, HarperCollins Publishers Inc., New York, NY, 2015, Kindle Version, Loc. 2281.

been a huge source of discrimination, but not so among Medieval Muslims, he says, just as caste has been important in India, but not in modern Europe. “One hierarchy, however,” he writes, “has been of supreme importance in all known human societies: the hierarchy of gender.”⁵ Outside of childbearing, which, for obvious reason, is restricted to those of us with wombs, Harari says, “Societies associate a host of attributes with masculinity and femininity that, for the most part, lack a firm biological basis.”⁶

Yet every society is replete with laws and taboos forbidding women from doing those things considered manly, like working, voting, driving, choosing to have sex, and so on, and punishing men who act effeminately, all based, again, not upon biological reality, but upon cultural fabrications. “A good rule of thumb,” Harari says, “is ‘Biology enables, culture forbids.’ Biology is willing to tolerate a wide spectrum of possibilities. It’s culture that obliges people to realize some possibilities while forbidding others. Biology enables women to have children—some cultures oblige women to realize this possibility. Biology enables men to enjoy sex with one another—some cultures forbid them to realize this possibility.”⁷ The irony is that culture insists these limitations are based upon biology by believing they only reinforce what is natural. When, “In truth,” Harari says, “our concepts of ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ are taken not from biology, but from Christian theology. The theological meaning of ‘natural’ is ‘in accordance with the intention with the God who created nature.’”⁸ Because our myths around gender are more cultural than biological, furthermore, and none of us, therefore, fully embodies our stereotypes, we must continually enact rituals proving we are still manly enough or feminine enough. This kind of behavior is further proof gender is not based purely upon biology. Otherwise, just being born with the obvious set of chromosomes would be enough to assure our manliness or femaleness for the rest of our lives.

I have brought all of this up today, on Pride Sunday, as we celebrate the lives of our gay, lesbian, and transgender friends, family, and selves, not as justification for the variety of ways in which we express gender identity, but as a call for fairness and justice for all those who are ridiculed, oppressed, brutalized, even murdered because they don’t play the game of our culture’s imagined gender reality. It would be nice if, with the legalization of same-sex marriage, we could conclude the war is over, that it is now safe to be other than heterosexual in our society. But, given the recent reemergence of White Nationalism and White Supremacy that has apparently been hiding in the shadows for decades, we know all the hate and prejudice is still there, just waiting for the chance to legitimize itself again. This is precisely what’s happening with the, so-called, “restroom laws” cropping up around the country that would legally allow society to reject any sexual identity that counters its “imagine reality.” So, discrimination against gays, lesbians, and transgender folks is really an attempt to reinforce our puritanical and false ideas of the absolute differences between male and female. For we don’t want anyone around reminding us how blurry the line really is, biologically, psychologically, and culturally. So it’s not only an assault upon those individuals who are different, which is bad enough, but an assault upon truth and reality.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

But imagine what our world might be like if we could all let go of the stereotypes we have been conditioned to uphold our entire lives. I remember when my son was a little boy and we were in a grocery when he noticed a transgender woman for the first time. "Is that a... ladyman," he asked. He had to make up the term on the spot because he hadn't been exposed to any of the stereotypical language. I turned, looked at the woman he was talking about, said, "Yes," then went back to shopping. Today, one of his roommates is a transgender woman, which he gives no more thought to than a fish notices water. That's the kind of society I want, one in which plurality is so common and so accepted, that we don't even have to think about it anymore. We can all just say, "whatever," and go about our own business.

I'll close with a little anecdote about myself. When I was born I'm told the hospital had run out of blue blankets, so I was wrapped in a pink one instead. So, I like to say I came into the world dressed in drag. I'm not sure what colors I'll be wearing in the end, but I hope between my bookends I can enjoy developing and expressing the masculine and feminine qualities of my nature, embrace the natural transitions between the two, and wave the rainbow flag of inclusion and freedom wherever I go, whoever I am. Or, as the teenage girl in me might say, "Whateva'."