

**Cousin Itt**  
**Thinking Beyond Gender Distinctive Pronouns**

By  
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Today's message began in 2004, during a Cosmology course, when professor Larry Edwards, a Harvard trained chemical-physicist, asked the class to consider the phrase, "Someone is knocking at the door. I wonder what *it* wants."<sup>1</sup> He pointed out that we don't usually have any problem using this third person singular pronoun, *it*, in reference to anything else, including other kinds of living creatures, but prefer to violate the rules of grammar when it comes to human beings. If we hear a dog barking outside and don't know its gender, for example, we don't mind saying, "I wonder what *it's* barking at." If a bird thumps against the window, we think, "I hope *it's* okay." Or if we're kind to animals and catch a mouse in our humane mouse trap, we don't mind taking *it* far away and releasing *it*. But when referencing other human beings in gender neutral ways, we either state things awkwardly with phrases like, "one," "oneself," "he or she," "him or her," and so on, or, as is most common, use a third person *plural* pronoun, like "they" or "theirs," to refer to a single individual. "Someone is knocking at the door. I wonder what *they* want."

I struggle with this as writer and speaker who strives to be both grammatically correct and gender inclusive. I don't like using a plural pronoun in reference to a single person, nor do I wish my words to sound cumbersome by using too many proper names when a simple "he" or "she" would suffice. Being trained in the study of classical philosophy and psychology compounds the problem for me because most classical writers resolved the problem in the classical way, by masculinizing everyone, referring to all human beings with male pronouns. Hopefully my audience doesn't usually notice, but I often have to edit some of my favorite thinkers in order to make their citations gender inclusive.

Last year, for example, I gave an entire series of sermons based on Erich Fromm's idea of the humanistic ethic, which he said, ought to be "based on the principle that what is 'good' is what is good for [humanity] and 'evil' what is detrimental to [humanity]...<sup>2</sup> *the sole criterion of ethical value being [human] welfare.*"<sup>3</sup> At least that's what I said he said. His actual text says its, "based on the principle that what is 'good' is what is good for man and 'evil' what is detrimental to man... *the sole criterion of ethical value being man's welfare.*" In fact, the title of the book this citation comes from is, *Man for Himself*.

In this example, it's not the "Man," that bothers me, but the "Himself." For today we associate the word "man" with "males," but this isn't true of its etymology. *Man* is just another word

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<sup>1</sup> Edwards posed this question during August 2004 at the University of Creation Spirituality in Oakland, CA.

<sup>2</sup> Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt & Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

for human. In this sense, all humans, male or female, are men. The modern association of “man” with maleness is due to classical writers using the third person singular masculine pronoun, “him,” “he,” “himself,” when referencing “man” or “mankind,” as in the title of Fromm’s book.

But *Man* originates from the Proto-Germanic language and, again, originally referred to all humans, male or female humans. The word *human*, originating from Latin, means, “of man.” So, in the classic *Star Trek* open, when Captain Kirk says, his crew is on a five-year mission to “go where no man has gone before,” he’s talking about male and female man. Yet, again, these days the word has come to be so closely associated with maleness, that when *Star Trek: The Next Generation* came along in the 1980s, Captain Picard changes the phrase to, “Where no *one* has gone before.” I do the same thing when I write and speak.

But what I want to emphasize here is the problem isn’t with the word *man* to refer to everyone, but with the fact that classical writers resolved the pronoun problem by exclusively assigning the third person singular *masculine* pronoun to it. It only stands to reason that after doing so long enough, generation after generation, that we would all come to associate being a man with maleness.

But if only males are men, what does this make females? Up until about a thousand years ago Old English used the terms *wer* or *wif* when distinguishing females from males, which is where we get the pronoun *her* and the term *wife*. Female men were called *wer-men* or *wif-men*, from which we get the word *woman*. There doesn’t seem to have been a corresponding term designating men who were male. Men who were male were just called *man*, while men who were *female* were called, *women*. This one-sided distinction is probably indicative of the discrimination against females that remains part of every society on Earth to this day, from lesser to greater degrees.

For centuries most human languages have pivoted on this distinction between males and females, often resulting in the mistreatment of females who have been considered something lesser or other than *man*. In this sense, the word *woman* was originally a discriminatory or prejudicial term, although feminism has worked to redeem it, as exemplified in the Helen Reddy song, “I am Woman, Hear me Roar!” Yet, for much of human history, women have been treated as less than men, and, again, still are to some degree in every country in the world. I won’t go into great details, but need only point to China where the one-child-rule often resulted in the murder of newborn girls by parents who wanted a boy, or in some industrialized Middle-Eastern countries that still don’t allow women to drive or be in public without their husbands, or are subject to honor killings by their own family members. Nor will I neglect to mention that until only recently women in the U.S. weren’t allowed to vote because they weren’t considered as smart as males, or to gain financial independence by working and earning their own living, are still often paid less than males, and are still fighting for reproductive rights over their own bodies.

All of this is supported by languages that chronically distinguish between male and female. In many languages, from ancient Latin and Greek to modern Spanish and French, even nouns have masculine and feminine versions. In English, this distinction is mostly dependent upon the use of pronouns. This linguistic pattern, this prejudicial paradigm, is the one I one to try to crack open today. Our overuse of masculine and feminine pronouns perpetuates the all-pervasive distinction between male and female at the turn of almost every phrase, even when one's gender has nothing to do with a conversation, which is most of the time.

If I say, for example, "Peggy is a schoolteacher. Her summer is over and she must return to work on Monday," her gender is inconsequential to the point I'm making, yet it plays prominently into this turn of phrase. Likewise, if someone says, "Todd is going home after he leaves today and he will likely take a nap," my gender has nothing to do with either going home or taking a nap yet is central to the narrative. That's the point I'm making, that our language almost constantly promotes the unnecessary distinction between males and females, adding to the cultural prejudice that gender distinctions are all pervasive, the most important part of everything we are and do. But, if you think about it, except for reproduction, sexual preferences, and medical considerations, our gender has little bearing on who we are, how we think, or what we do. Yet, linguistically, it is pointed out in almost every third person discussion.

In the process of chronically distinguishing between masculine and feminine, our language inadvertently assigns specific characteristics and behaviors to male and female persons. Culturally this means females are expected to demonstrate certain qualities, as are males, and those who don't are often treated with scorn or worse. Boys are supposed to be made of "snakes and snails," and girls of "sugar and spice." As a male who doesn't like sports and fears the thought of ever getting into a fistfight, my culture doesn't consider me very manly. I also enjoy cooking and am a very nurturing parent, roles that when I was growing up were assigned to females. I know the same is true for many females who buck culture by enjoying many of the activities and traits it has traditionally assigned to males. As historian Yuval Harari writes in *Sapiens*, "Societies associate a host of attributes with masculinity and femininity that, for the most part, lack a firm biological basis."<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the gender of a human fetus remains unexpressed until the final month of its first trimester. Until then, female is considered our default gender, because that's the path we all start off on. If there's a Y chromosome present, it won't begin introducing male hormones until around 9 weeks, which begin transitioning the developing female into a male. Her ovaries begin descending to form testicles, her clitoris elongates to become a penis, and her labia enclose to become a scrotum. Because these "base organs" are the beginnings of both female and male genital structures, and, because the already developing fetus only masculinizes if and when androgen is suddenly introduced to turn them into male structures,

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<sup>4</sup> Harari, *Ibid.*

as is SOX9, a DNA protein that releases and regulates a hormone that inhibits their course toward female development, female is considered our default gender.

Even so, the process isn't always precise. Gender is based upon our gonadal, chromosomal, and hormonal makeup, in addition to our psychological disposition, none of which are always in full alignment. It's possible to have male genitalia yet be insensitive to masculinizing hormones. Or to be physically and hormonally female yet feel like a male. Whether there are some personality traits more typical of those born female and male, or whether these are strictly cultural, may be debated, but there's no denying that males and females are far more alike than we are different, that we are all far more fluid than we've been taught, and that our gender has far less significance in our lives than our language allows.

Fortunately, these days many people are realizing this and are beginning to defy traditional, restrictive, sometimes soul crushing, stereotypes by using nonbinary language when discussing their gender. This is why there's a lot of talk today about pronouns, which I think is great. We're trying to figure out how to transcend the binary limitations of our language, which, again, has and continues to reinforce prejudicial and discriminatory practices against females in particular, as well as against those who don't fully express themselves according to the gender they are culturally assigned.

But this sermon is more about those of us who do. Those of us who have been duped into thinking and behaving as if our gender is the defining quality of our identity. For our cultural unwillingness to use a gender neutral third person *singular* pronoun in reference to human beings, causing us to substitute the masculine *he*, *him*, or *himself*, for *it*, has reinforced centuries of discrimination against females, as well as against gays, lesbians, and transgender persons who violate common expectations about gender.

So, we're back to the problem with which we began, the pronoun problem. In the past we dealt with it by just referring to all men with the masculine pronouns, *he*, *him*, and *himself*. Nowadays, some prefer getting rid of the word *man* altogether, replacing it with *human* or *person*, and following up with the third person singular pronoun *one*, or else violating grammar by using the third person plural pronouns *they* or *them* to refer to a single individual.

Today, I'd like to play with our language a little by considering the option Larry Edwards asked me to think about years ago, using the third person singular *neutral* pronoun that already exists in our language when referring to ourselves, *it*. The problem with this, which is why it hasn't been done before, is we associate *it* with inanimate objects and other kinds of animals and prefer to think of ourselves as something special and subjective. So, we don't usually refer to people as *its*. This is odd given our historic tendency to objectify others. It's also interesting that most of you probably didn't notice just a short while ago when I referred

to “*its* third trimester,” when discussing a human fetus, and few of us have a problem asking expecting parents, “Do you know if *it’s* going to be a boy or a girl?” (It’s as if gender must proceed personhood.) Despite this anomaly it would sound very strange to most if we started referring to a person as “it” rather than *he, she, one, they, or them*.

Some of you may remember Cousin Itt from the 1964 TV series, *The Addams Family*. The Addams were creepy and kooky, as their theme song says, and include beloved family members with names like Thing, Lurch, Fester, and, Cousin Itt. Itt stands about three feet tall and is covered from head to foot with long hair. Were it not for the sunglasses Itt usually wears, we’d not be able to distinguish Itt’s front from Itt’s back or sides. Itt speaks gibberish with a high voice that only the Addams can understand and Itt has no discernable gender.

Cousin Itt offers a fun play on words, because, as a proper name, referring to a person as Itt doesn’t bother us so much as when we use *it* as a pronoun. But let me repeat the same description of someone named Mary instead. Mary stands about three feet tall and is covered from head to foot with long hair. Were it not for the sunglasses it usually wears, we’d not be able to distinguish Mary’s front from its back or sides. It speaks gibberish with a high voice that only the Addams can understand and it has no discernable gender.

This might take a little getting used to. Consider this brief excerpt from *Little Women*, in which I’ve substituted the third person feminine pronoun with the third person neutral, *it*:

Mother, I’m going to work Mr. Laurence a pair of slippers. *It* is so kind to me, I must thank *it*, and I don’t know any other way. Can I do it?” asked Beth, a few weeks after that eventful call of *its*.

“Yes, dear. It will please *it* very much, and be a nice way of thanking *it*. The girls will help you about them, and I will pay for the making up,” replied Mrs. March, who took peculiar pleasure in granting Beth’s requests because *it* so seldom asked anything for *itself*.

Here’s one more example from *Of Mice and Men*:

The first man was small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features. Every part of *it* was defined: small, strong hands, slender arms, a thin and bony nose. Behind *it* walked *its* opposite, a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, and wide, sloping shoulders; and *it* walked heavily, dragging *its* feet a little, the way a bear drags *its* paws. *Its* arms did not swing at *its* sides, but hung loosely.

Most people think I’m strange when suggesting we start using the neutral pronoun when issues of gender are not pertinent to a conversation. Some are even offended by the thought. But, as Christopher Hitchens once noted about the U.S., “In this country, I’ve been told, ‘That’s offensive’ as if those two words constitute an argument or a comment.” Still, I think we’d get used to using *it* in a hurry if more authors started doing so. I think, by using *it* in reference to people, we’d soon stop associating *it* with objects and would have the benefit of liberating ourselves from gender specific language and the all-pervasive paradigm it forces upon almost everything we say and do.

But the real value of doing so, from my point of view, has nothing to do with being grammatically correct. It's about liberating us all from the prejudices about ourselves and others we cannot help but maintain when our language constantly requires us to think and speak as if gender is the defining point of everything we're about. Again, with few exceptions, like reproduction, sexual preference, and medical concerns, our gender plays little to no significant role in most of what we do, yet our language constantly requires us to point it out and to make a point of it. Imagine what our society would be like if gender only mattered to us when it should matter. Imagine if we considered ourselves mostly the same, with the exception of minor gonadal, hormonal, and chromosomal differences that have no bearing on our conversations most of the time, let alone on how much we earn or whether we should be allowed to drive or not. Imagine what our friendships would be like if gender didn't distinguish and isolate us as much from one another as it now does. Imagine who we might be as individuals if we were freer to transcend the gender stereotypes and expectations placed upon us.

Saying *it* more often may not be the solution, but Larry Edwards challenge all those years ago, to consider the phrase, "Someone is knocking at the door. I wonder what *it* wants," still has me thinking about how much we overemphasize gender through language, and how much better the world might be if we didn't. Maybe we should give *it* a try.