

The Androgyny Debate

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In *The Left Hand of Darkness* Ursula K. LeGuin described a species in which the same persons functioned as both male and female.¹ Most of the time they were neither, but for a brief period in a regular twenty-eight day cycle, LeGuin's "sci-fi" Gethenians became, through casual sexual foreplay and chance, one sex or the other, carrying out their love-making in heterosexual pairs or groups. After two or three days of intense concentrated erotic activity, they returned to an asexual state—inactive, unconcerned and undifferentiated. No one was pre-programmed, destined by nature to become male or female in that all adult Gethenians had been both. The children produced by their unions reckoned descent through mothers who had been, and would be, fathers of other children.

This ambisexuality, LeGuin says, "has little or no adaptive value," but, it has important social implications: no restrictions on the type of work people do, no rape, no sexual hierarchy, no sex-role stereotypes. Indirectly, LeGuin speculates, it could be related to the absence of wars, and, more generally, of all forms of aggression.

LeGuin's vision of sexual equality and its consequences for a peaceful world and harmonious social organization have given the book a cherished place in feminist literature. But since genital endowment is normally fixed for life and sexual activity is non-cyclical, and since we cannot provide both sperm and ova, the concept of biological androgyny belongs to the domain of ancient myth and contemporary science fiction.

Psychological androgyny is another matter, an idea that is at once more intuitively credible. Many persons who are uncomfortable with conventional definitions of masculinity and femininity feel that a description of themselves which incorporates both is closer to the emotional patterns and cognitive styles of both sexes. The term "androgyny" is anything but clear. It can mean that masculine and feminine characteristics serve as a dual resource to be drawn on according to whichever one is appropriate to a particular situation, or, it can mean that the two sets of characteristics modify each other in all situations. Sandra L. Bem who has done pioneering work in the field uses it both ways:

[It] is possible, in principle, for an individual to be both masculine and feminine, both instrumental and expressive, both agentic and communal, depending upon the situational appropriateness of these various modalities; and even for an individual to blend these complementary modalities in a single act....²

Androgyny can also mean that the duality is integrated and synthesized to form a new and different repertoire of behavioral predispositions. Most people who write about androgyny assume it is a single type with variations branching out. However, in practice and in various studies, we often find two types: androgynous men and androgynous women for whom the mix is not the same.

Despite the differences and inconsistencies of use, all scholars agree that androgyny does not alter in any fundamental sense established societal norms. It is, as we shall see later, a fairly conservative goal. Heterosexual coupling remains the dominant form of marriage. No woman is called upon to repudiate child-bearing functions; socialization veers only marginally from the familiar and familial paths. Androgyny challenges the more traditional models of social life in both private and public places. Yet, it does not redraw or change the private/public boundaries, nor does it communalize or expropriate the private household. Other ideas have been more threatening to our institutions, and more capable of evoking primal fears. Why, then, should this compromise, this modest idea be a matter of such contention?

Is it, as one psychiatrist suggests, a deep unconscious envy of the "Other," a universal and, incidentally, infantile wish to deny our real differences and to avoid the pain of a more mature recognition of the ineluctable biological fact?³ Or, is it nothing more momentous than an honest difference among scholars about the heuristic advantages of a concept? Between these extremes of subjectivity and objectivity is a political scenario which holds that the oppression of women is, in part, sustained by an ideal of femininity which disadvantages women for almost all positions in public life. At the same time, the ideal legitimizes male dominance in the most important areas of decision-making. Thus, the subordinate status of women is a combination of role content and "learned helplessness"—in short, dependency. Liberation, then, demands as a minimum a broader definition of what is appropriate behaviour for women, with the burden of proof being placed on those who hold that biological differences, not social discrimination, account for the non-random character of participation in all areas of social life. Finally, there is a question feminists raise but which is, as we shall see, not often dealt with in the literature:

Does equality require or presuppose a certain type (or range) of personality?

What is interesting about the debate is that it is not between feminists and anti-feminists, but among feminists, an in-house controversy carried on within a common ideological framework. Yet, the issues are divisive and capable of generating both heat and light. Some criticize the concept of androgyny because it does not go far enough; others think it goes too far. Some regard it as a long overdue adaptation to modern social organization, but still within a patriarchal social order flexible enough to accommodate the new psychological pattern; others regard it as a radical salvation transforming patriarchal institutions and humanizing the impersonal forms of bureaucratic organization. To some feminists, it is a step forward in the development of non-sexist thought; others, a step backward, and still others see it as neither, a lateral move. To some, it is a short transitional stage, limited in duration, while for others, it is the final stage in the long social evolution of male-female consciousness.

The clarification and resolution of these and related issues is made more interesting but more difficult to disentangle by the fact that the androgyny debate cuts across both the humanities and the social sciences, each with their different sensibilities, vocabularies and measures of validity. The tensions between positivist science and the normative disciplines, between quantitative measurement and qualitative insight, between an immediate and an historical orientation are enacted in the debate. As usual in such situations, the ecumenical spirit survives after the faithful have returned to their parochial exclusivity. Psychologists tend to know only what their colleagues write. Within that forum they generate more refined aspects of the original problem, while philosophers and literary critics withdraw to follow their own discourses based on their own agendas.

Our purpose here, then, is not to review the literature in each of these intellectual disciplines nor to assess the state of the art, but rather to provide a more comprehensive view of the range of issues and the shape of the argument. For that reason, the material has been arranged thematically rather than by special disciplines. First, we will consider the concept itself and its place in our knowledge. Then, we will examine the controversy about personality or social roles, which is followed by discussions of androgyny and mental health, androgynous persons or androgynous relationships, androgyny and feminist ideology, moral and historical issues. In the concluding section, we will discuss the larger issue of androgyny and/or equality.

1. How useful is the concept of androgyny in advancing knowledge? Eichler is not a strong advocate of androgyny, but does acknowledge that it is a "necessary step in the evolution of non-sexist thought."⁴ Others who are more supportive hold that androgyny is simply a better way of describing a reality which presently exists, that the evolution in behavior has already taken place, and that it remains only for our ideas to catch up.⁵ This reasoning is sufficient justification to incorporate androgyny into our paradigms of psychology and sociology.

The assumption here is that there is an ideal personality type (or a limited number of personality types) that is (are) congruent with a given social structure. Deviations from the norm produce strain for the individual and can contribute to the malfunctioning of institutions. At the same time, changes are taking place in the macrostructures which, in turn, are conducive to the formation of other personality configurations.

Applying this general proposition to our own society, it is asserted that the traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity were appropriate to a bourgeoisie and to an upwardly mobile middle class family in the era of industrial

capitalism. But that era has passed. Despite its lingering traces, there is relatively little stigma attached to behaviour that merely mimics traditional masculinity and femininity or, goes further, and departs from it significantly. Modern capitalism, based on monopolistic markets, bureaucratic organization, and the production of services, has led to family constellations as well as to new patterns of child-rearing and education. All of these together and in combination with other factors have made the older constructs of masculine and feminine obsolete, and, with few exceptions, dysfunctional for institutional participation beyond ritualistic conformity.

There does appear to be some evidence that a change has taken place within the past two decades, with the rate of change being greater for men than women.⁶ Caution should be exercised in interpreting these results since we still do not have long-term studies nor large sample population surveys. If it is true that a change has been occurring, and that it has been occurring at a differential rate favouring men, it confirms indirectly that persons located in roles where the organizational changes are most rapid—industrial structures—are adapting to a social reality. However, what is more significant is that these differential rates suggest that a new form of inequality may be emerging, inequality between the more and the less androgynous, between the fast-track leaders and the slow-track followers.

In examining children and their patterns of socialization, the androgynous child of either sex is viewed with suspicion by others, such as, peers and teachers.⁷ Indeed, the adults expect the "tomboy" or "sissy" to outgrow the unusual cross-sex behaviour. (Paradoxically, androgynous adults are better liked by their peers than non-androgynous persons.)⁸

Critics of the concept of androgyny are often more critical of sex-role research than androgyny. This is to some extent true of Eichler, and even more so of Morgan.⁹ Morgan argues that

the concept of androgyny is a bundle of logical contradictions and faulty reasoning. One example of the latter is the way pro-androgynists leave unexamined such problems as whether the profile of androgyny is universal or culturally specific. On the basis of her analysis, Morgan concludes that androgyny is neither possible nor desirable. But her criticisms would apply equally well to the concept of sex-roles if, say, we were all born into an androgynous society in which some academic said, "Let's consider the concept of sex-roles." Like androgyny, the concept of sex-roles would be neither sound logically nor desirable socially, yet, sex-roles exist and are not just a linguistic phenomena.

Psychologists have also criticized the concept of androgyny on the grounds that it perpetuates sex-role stereotypes.¹⁰ Sex-role research does have a place in psychology, they maintain, but sex-role stereotypes do not. The dissatisfaction here refers to the methodology of the androgyny studies where, in order to draw up the profiles of "masculine" and "feminine," the researchers ask their subjects to describe the types. Inevitably, then, the measuring instrument reflects attitudes which are, at best, coloured by self-interest and the biases of the culture. In Spence and Helmreich's work, for example, high school students were asked to define these polarities.¹¹ (This was an effort to get away from the class bias of using college students as subjects.) However, late adolescence may well be a unique point in development, a period when sex-role differentiation is highly salient, most simplistic in definition, and overwhelmingly present in consciousness.¹²

In short, the critics claim, the concept of androgyny is a reorganization of sex-role stereotype research, not a basic change in our thinking. It appears to be fresh, but it remains within the framework of existing definitions of masculine and feminine. In order to control for this problem, Spence and Helmreich, for example, introduce into their scale David Bakan's distinction between "agentic" (male) and "commu-

ion" (female) which they and he regard as universal. However, the Bakan distinction, like Erikson's "inner" and "outer" and Parsons's "instrumental" (male) and "expressive" (female), is by no means culture-free.

2. A second issue concerns the theory of personality, or, to be more precise, the relationship between sexual identity and social roles. Pro-androgyny psychologists argue that personality and the ability to perform various social roles at home, at work, in school or in the community are neutral, independent of gender. Although gender is essential for procreational activity, for reproduction, most of the years in our life cycle are spent in other activities where the competences required have no clear basis in physiological differences. If gender-typing persists, it reflects rigidity or a cultural lag.

Implicit in this is the assumption that human adaptation and survival are dependent on a learning process rather than biological destiny. The learning process itself is a measure of humanness; to the extent that it occurs and we are not guided or controlled by innate instinct, the outcomes are indeterminate. Thus, sex-roles vary widely within a given social system and even more so when they are examined historically or cross-culturally.

Anti-androgyny psychologists argue that anatomical and hormonal differences are too important in psychological development to be disregarded or undervalued. "Androgynists...have apparently dismissed the physical body altogether."¹³ Freud's particular theory of psychosexual development may be flawed but he was correct in recognizing the existence of infantile sexuality as well as the awareness of male-female differences throughout childhood and the way these differences lead in diverse directions through puberty to sexual maturity. Allowing for minor variations, the psychological differences between the sexes are so regular and consist-

ently patterned that we cannot account for them exclusively in terms of socialization.

Erik Erikson's studies of children's play are often cited as confirming his distinction between "outer" (male) and "inner" (female) spatial conceptions that seem to be characteristic of men and women. But Paula Caplan, who reviewed studies of children's play and Erikson's work in particular, found his investigations had not controlled for social learning or socialization, and that his statistics did not warrant the conclusions he drew.¹⁴ In her own work, when children were presented only with blocks, girls were just as interested in constructing towers as boys; when they were presented only with miniature replicas of domestic artifacts, boys were no less inclined than girls to create enclosed spaces.

Nevertheless, the conceptual problems remain. Can we understand personality and leave out our sexual biographies? What does personality mean if we can compartmentalize behaviour to such a degree that women who are passive in the bedroom are assertive in the boardroom? Personality is by definition that part of our behaviour which is not situationally specific. Rather, it is the stable core, the consistency of style in behaviour that puts a special stamp, our own individual imprimatur on all of our activity. Theoretically, an observer could predict from observations of behaviour in one setting to behaviour in another.

Sandra Bem says that of course it is important to be "able to look into the mirror and to be perfectly comfortable with the body one sees there."¹⁵ Yet, what we do in our social roles and how well we perform them is not contingent upon this body awareness. Judith Bardwick, on the other hand, insists that a strong sense of gender identity is essential for our emotional security.¹⁶ Without it women are confused about their bodies and the unique function of reproduction. She then notes that men are not asked to surrender their sense of manhood as a condition

for participation in public life. Why should women give up their sexual identity? Carried to its logical conclusion, she says, androgyny would mean asexuality, an unnecessary and exorbitant price for social justice. All that women want or need is freedom from ignorance about their bodies, liberation from the sexism in contemporary medical knowledge and biology; a better sense of womanhood rather than no sense of it.

Bardwick begs the question of what "manhood" and "womanhood" are, and whether they are ever strictly confined to the bedroom. In our society, for example, when men lose their jobs, they often feel they have lost their manhood which they may seek to recover vicariously through fantasies of "macho" man. Unless one knew the cultural code, it would be difficult to figure out these linkages. The point is that sexuality can never be isolated from its multiple social meanings.

Going back to Bem and Bardwick, the difference between them is the difference between a social psychological approach and a clinical one, between focusing on social roles and social structure, on the one hand, and on problems of identity and sexual dysfunction on the other. It is an impasse that is likely to persist.

3. Clinical problems aside, is androgyny a superior form of personality organization? Freud held the view that bisexuality, as he called it, was our original state, but that in the course of normal development we moved toward one polarity or the other.¹⁷ Failure to do so would result in abnormal behaviour. Using different criteria for mental health, however, may lead to other predictions. If it is correct to say that androgyny is an adjustment to a transformed social structure, then androgyny should be a preferred mode for no other reason than the fact that it eliminates incongruence. Different criteria might be flexibility, independence from group pressures and willingness to engage in cross sex-role behaviour

without anxiety. Another criterion might be self-esteem.

The empirical evidence seems to support the first two. This may explain why men who have more access to the better paying, more highly rewarded and more challenging jobs in the work world have gone so quickly from traditional definitions of masculinity to androgyny, and why they have made male androgyny a more acceptable image than female androgyny.¹⁸ With respect to the second criterion—versatility—, there is evidence from Bem's experiments that men who scored high on the androgyny scale would cuddle babies or, at least, not avoid such situations; similarly, women who were more androgynous were more willing to engage in less conformist behaviour.¹⁹ With respect to measures of self-esteem there is less agreement.²⁰

4. If, instead of looking at personality or roles, we look at relationships, a different view is obtained. Relationships are, after all, where we test equality. But very few studies examine relationships, and only one has used the term "androgynous relationship."²¹ In this case the relationship was marriage. The evidence is that there are some new tensions created by the liberation of both persons and the assignment of jobs in the household which neither partner saw as their domain. Whether this disharmony is permanently detrimental or leads to growth, whether it undermines the marriage but contributes to the emotional development of the individual partners are questions that have not been pursued in any depth. The importance of this approach, however, is that it moves toward studies of relationships; that is, studies of equality. Meanwhile psychologists may wish to question whether it is the proper use of the term androgyny to describe an egalitarian marriage as androgynous.

5. Traditionally, role-strain and status inconsistencies have been the source of conservative political thinking. Does it apply here, too; do persons who score high on androgyny have

favourable or unfavourable attitudes toward feminism? One of the best designed studies intended to explore this constructed four scales of equality: equal opportunity, family equality, the double standard in sexual morality, and the acceptability of female initiative.²² The findings confirmed that men who score low on androgyny scales are the most conservative. The results also reflected the ideological uncertainties of many women even when their androgyny scores were high. However, activists can take heart; androgyny with all of its strains is a positive factor in social change. In addition, their belief that there is such a creature as a "male chauvinist" is correct; he is not every man, but he is also not a phantom, not an angry or paranoid projection.²³

6. While psychologists have been exploring some of the empirical correlations between high and low androgyny scores and a variety of dependent variables, a different type of question has been raised by philosophers. To say, for example, that androgynous personalities are more adaptive and therefore superior in their mental health or adjustment assumes something about ends. Adaptive to what? Joyce Trebilcot, a philosopher, has argued that there are no moral grounds for regarding androgyny as better than any other configuration of traits.²⁴ As we noted earlier, she argues for a pluralistic model of society, a society which does not intimidate or disadvantage those who voluntarily choose or feel more comfortable with traditional notions of masculine and feminine. Androgyny is different, an alternative mode, but not one to be preferred, rewarded or mandated. The desirability of tolerance takes precedence over the desirability of androgyny.

The argument for the moral superiority of androgyny rests to some degree on the idea that androgyny is our natural state, a healthy condition that has been hidden or distorted by the dominance in cultural life of an imposed male-centered patriarchy, a system which created its

own androcentric symbolic systems. Carolyn Heilbrun, professor of English literature, has drawn attention to a rich tradition of androgynous images in art, religion and literature.²⁵ Androgynous gods have been worshipped in Eastern religions; androgynous heroes have been part of our mythology; many of the greatest writers, male and female, themselves androgynous, have created characters whose motivational complexity lies in the precarious balance between two sides of their nature. Jung considered androgyny to be an archetype of the unconscious mind projected as a vision of what we have been and what we might yet become: of human perfection. Yet, it is the idealization that may make it imperfect. "My fundamental objection to the concept of androgyny," Cynthia Secor writes, "is that it is rooted in a static image of perfection, in eternity, an image which cannot take into account the rough going of historical process."²⁶

Secor touches on the weakness of psychological research which lacks any comparative or historical scale. This is not necessarily an argument against androgyny. Her further reservation about Jung's concept of androgyny is shared by Gelpi and several others who find a male bias in it.²⁷ Literature, art, poetry and drama are replete with men whose beauty or nobility of character is enhanced by softness and sensitivity; in contrast, there is almost no comparable image of women driven by political ambition. Joan of Arc, Elizabeth the First, Queen Victoria, Golda Meir, Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi are seen more as deviants than models of human perfection. Indeed, in much of our popular culture the female androgyne is pictured as a castrating wife, a domineering mother, a jealous man-hating colleague, grotesque women with ringside seats at the guillotine. Androgyny, according to D.A. Harris, is "the sexist myth in disguise."²⁸ In addition, Jung thought men would gain from an infusion of the sensuous qualities of women, but women who took on some of the properties of men would lose those very qualities of womanliness which men, if they were to complete

themselves must adopt. Jung's men would become more humane, more loving and creative, but would still remain rulers and leaders; women, whether true to their nature or not, would continue to remain the ruled and the led.

June Singer, a Jungian, regards this view as a misreading of Jung.²⁹ Acknowledging that Jung shared the male chauvinism of his day, she maintains that it is the spirit of his discussion not the letter that counts. Androgyny is not "what" but "how," not substance but method, not content but process. "The key to the new consciousness," she writes, "is the capacity to feel oneself in the flow, in process, and to focus on the dynamic interchange of energy that goes on continually in the open system to which we belong." Thus, the androgynous personality of either sex is more fully realized and becomes the driving force in a self-correcting cybernetic system; the male bias disappears since the duality within each of us is being reborn.

Not all social theorists accept Singer's cybernetic model of society. If gender had no history and no historical significance, we would not be presently trying to change the social structure. One of the dissenting voices on androgyny is that of the late Herbert Marcuse.³⁰ The organizing principle of past history, according to Marcuse, has been the masculine principle of Performance: exploitative, acquisitive and ego-centric. The hope of any future civilization is Eros, the feminine principle. That being the case, there is no reason to retain, even in partial or muted form, the discredited masculine principle. Androgyny would only make women more like men in a world where any survival of Performance is regressive.

Marcuse deduces the characteristics of women from activities related to motherhood. He talks vaguely about receptivity, sensitivity, non-violence, tenderness, but, at the same time, he recognizes that these desirable nurturing characteristics of women are not innate; they are learned,

the consequences of being the second sex. Still, he says, the “long process of thousands of years of social conditioning means that they have become ‘second nature.’” Feminist critics see the historical process differently, as having inflicted appalling damage on the psyches of women. The legacy of being the second sex is masochism, passivity, dependency, privatization—all of them negative in terms of human freedom.

For this reason, the eminent feminist (pro-androgyny) theologian Mary Daly defines androgyny as an end state of a redemptive struggle; it is not what we are but what we become.³¹ Original sin for women, she writes is complicity in sexism. If these habits and their characterological consequences are raised to become the dominant principle in social life, women will betray themselves once again. Feminism is nothing without the radical impulse to change both personal histories and the social world. At the level of personality, the change is more than a change in degree and something less than a change in kind. The feminist struggle for structural equality, according to Daly, is the praxis through which women start to liberate themselves and, indirectly, to liberate men. Like Singer who also emphasizes androgyny as a process, Mary Daly tends to trail off into metaphysics. Ann Ferguson, a Marxist, maintains that androgyny, although desirable in the abstract, is not possible in class societies.³² To the limited extent that some version of it does occur, it is among the highly educated, well-to-do privileged classes. Any feminist revolution, then, must operate simultaneously on the social system and on the bases of personality, otherwise, one group of women would be liberating themselves at the expense of other women. Ferguson touches another weakness in the debate—its sociology or the lack of it. Patriarchy has meant the exploitation of women by men, but it has also meant the exploitation of some women—domestic servants, prostitutes and cheap labour—by other women, a phenomenon which operates against sister-

hood by contributing to a social distance between classes of women.

Thus, the androgyny debate continues unresolved. It continues to haunt our imaginations even after the various critics have scored their points. On an analytical level, it remains important for reasons indicated earlier: a social structure built on the principles of sexual equality requires a new personality type, a new motivation where sex differences are inconspicuous to both the self and others; that is, where they cannot be manipulated to the advantage of one sex or the other. If androgyny is not the motivational basis for this Good Society, what is?

The concept of androgyny suffers from the same weakness as the concept of modernization.³³ (Indeed, androgyny is to psychology what modernization is to sociology.) They both imply that patriarchy will disappear, wither away, but, in fact, just the opposite occurs: patriarchy is given a new lease on life; it becomes both modernized and androgynized. Meanwhile, the deeper equality eludes us. Neither concept—androgyny or modernization—can or should be discarded. They can only serve women when they have been integrated into a larger theory and vision of equality. In short, we have been putting the cart before the horse.

NOTES

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