

Genitals = Gender

HISTORICALLY – certainly for as long as anyone can remember – the form of our genitals have told us our gender. Our gender is ‘ascribed’ not ‘achieved’. The antiquity of the concepts involved should not as a matter of course lead us to suppose that this will always be so, but it should give us pause. Clearly, something peculiar is happening to the meaning of some of the words involved.

Men and boys are male, and woman and girls female; in strict biological terms they are immutable categories. Of course, a few individuals at birth present a challenge to these neat certainties in the form of hermaphroditism – where the biological presentation of an infant’s genitals is of a mixed or an indeterminate character. These rare exceptions ‘prove the rule’ that genitals equal gender because the category, “indeterminate”, arises from the biological oppositions ‘male’ and ‘female’.

This opposition is, no doubt, folded into the complex and socially determined modes of thought associated with the long and complicated history of biology, but it does refer to an undeniable characteristic of adult human beings that some of us have vagina, clitoris, and breasts, while others have testes, penis, and merely residual breasts. These different or opposing physical characteristics work together, through their difference, in the process of biological reproduction.

Now, one can become as ‘Foucauldian’, or as ‘constructivist’, as one likes in opposition to the ‘essentialism’ of the binary opposition, male and female, without touching upon the confusion at work over the proposition that “genitals = gender”.

Evidently, we cannot reproduce without a sexual encounter between a male and a female whether this is expressed through direct heterosexual intercourse or through the special delivery of sperm through the post, or the insemination of a woman (designated as surrogate) with donated sperm. Regardless of the mode of human reproduction chosen, the rather blunt oppositions of biology undeniably hold firm.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

Genesis: 1.27:28 *Bible*: Authorized by King James, 1611.

The idea that the binary opposition male and female are essentially imposed upon us by God (or by Nature standing in for God) is very old and conveys, expresses, or contains, a number of fundamental confusions. If nothing else these biblical truths anger a great many feminists, animal rights activists, and assorted vegans, precisely because they conflate biological and social categories, and in doing so attempt to confer an immutable or ahistorical status upon relations between men and women and between human beings and other animals.

This ancient script is bugged up by men who insist upon having sexual relations with members of their own sex. Lesbians and gay men insist upon having sexual relations that play no role in sexual reproduction and in doing so blatantly separate sexuality and its associated pleasures from the eternal truths proposed by God, by St Paul, and by a host of other religious and secular luminaries down the ages.

In a similar manner women who insist upon expressing manly virtues and characteristics, and men who consciously adopt the virtues and modes of behaviour historically associated with women rip through and violate the binary categories derived from biology. This occurs because 'femininity' and 'masculinity' are socially and historically determined categories, which vary from culture to culture, from age to age, from time to time.

I well remember encountering a crude conflation of social with biological characteristics at a meeting of young communists in Moscow around 1965. In response to a question concerning homosexuality and male ballet dancers in the Soviet Union, the 'leading comrade' present simply replied: "In Russia, All our Men are Men."

Nowadays, this nonsense would simply elicit guffaws in Britain, if not in Russia, because we have grown used to the separation of biological gender from the mode of sexual expression. However, the opening of this particular Pandora's Box has recently led explorers in sexual identity to extend the notion of sexual expression and gendered personalities towards the complete separation of gender from genitals through the curious route of transsexualism.

The reason I think that this is a curious way of challenging 'genitals = gender' is because, by and large, people who identify themselves as transsexuals are often engaged in surgical and hormonal interventions designed to bring their physical form – their bodies – into proper alignment with how they feel about themselves, their true selves, or their proper gender. In this, transsexuals whether they intend it or not are endorsing the age-old idea that 'genitals = gender' because if they didn't believe in aligning their bodies with their 'felt' gender, they would feel no need at all to alter their breasts or genitals. They could happily self-identify as a man or a woman or indeed as 'non-binary' regardless of the genitals they were born with.

This is precisely the point we have now reached where some people regardless of their genitals have decided to self-identify as male or female or as non-binary in a total and radical rejection of the idea that biological form should dictate our relationship to masculinity, femininity, or any of the fields, rich in ambiguity, which have always lain between the two grand certainties apparently bequeathed to us by God and Nature.

In principle there is no problem here. If a six-foot, broad shouldered, bearded man, wants to be addressed as “she” or even by some entirely novel pronoun, it is and should be their right. People really should be able to say anything they like about themselves and there is no reason at all why the law, the state, or people in general, should get into a pickle over this.

The problem arises when individuals in the course of advocating these novel forms of self-identification attempt to conflate or collapse the concrete social and biological experience of others. For example, when a born man identifies himself as a woman, whether or not she is transsexual, or is simply transgender employing entirely new modes of address, or finding novel uses for existing pronouns, ‘ze’ is manifestly not a woman in same sense as the person born biologically female, and raised as a girl and a woman.

Deciding to be a woman is not the same thing as being born female, any more than deciding to kick over the traces by refusing to be identified as either male or female removes you from the gender assigned to you at birth. In other words, an individual’s autonomous decision to reassign their own gender does not automatically remove them from the cultural expectations and experiences which have proved formative in their social development. Incidentally, bi/gender, trigender, pangender, and any number of the neologisms involved in the self-gendering process, lead to considerable distress, embarrassment, or confusion. This is because, we cannot know, in advance, how people want to be addressed, or

whether or not they wish to be thought of as male, female, or as 'none-of-the-above'.

Masculinity and femininity vary between both time and place. They may be held in tense opposition, or they may be thought of as opposite ends of a more fluid continuum. Whatever they are, regardless of how they're figured, they are undoubtedly cultural creations that have arisen historically within a given society. Masculinity and femininity, might be said to have arisen on the foundation of the biological male and female, but they are not reducible to it, and there is no reason to insist upon conformity between women and femininity or men and masculinity. Girls can be boys and vice versa. Manifestly, we don't have to agree with the gender assigned to us at birth.

However, if we decide to challenge the sex to which we've been assigned at birth, at whatever age we embark upon this of course of action, we can never hope to achieve identity with 'cisgendered' persons, because the social and biological experience of a cisnormativity creates a chasm, which cannot be bridged by self-identification.

A person who starts out as male, as a boy and man, cannot expect, through the process of declaring themselves to be female, to be accepted as identical to those who have always been female. This is because girls and women not only inhabit an entirely different biological reality from transgendered people, but also the transgendered person has by and large not shared the social and cultural experience of growing up into womanhood. Neither the transsexual nor the transgendered person who started out as male can share in the experience of born women who have never challenged the gender assigned to them at birth.

Consequently, male to female transsexuals are not women, just as female to male transsexuals are not men. This also applies to those transgendered individuals who wish to challenge the gender assigned to them at birth, without employing surgery or hormone treatments.

Trans-women are not women and trans-men are not men, and any proposals in law to declare 'self-identification' as the legal basis of gender will inevitably be opposed by women. This is because women will certainly fight against the participation of people born male in women-only institutions and spaces. Women will simply not accept trans-women into women's refuges, women only swimming pools, public toilets, and many other institutions established exclusively for use by women, because trans-women do not share the physical or social experience of women.

Trans-women and gender fluid people born as male who now identify as female do not have the experience of growing up as little girls, they do not menstruate from puberty to middle age, they do not have the potential at any time, of pregnancy or childbirth. They can have no experience of the menopause, of what it is like to be a middle-aged woman, or indeed an old lady. They have little or no experience of what it is like to be a woman in a society, which continues to be largely dominated by men. Trans-women are not women and born women do not need to be styled "cis-women" because their status as women requires no qualification. Trans-women however do need the prefix "trans" to establish exactly that they were born male and have decided to adopt a female persona and lifestyle, however they wish to express this. Trans-women cannot claim identity with women or with people whose fundamental experiences they do not share.

I do not know whether trans-women need special trans-women places and facilities, but I would have thought spaces currently available for both genders might be recast as spaces for all genders – male, female, trans, and any others that might come along.

None of this means that we should reject out-of-hand the challenge that the self-identification of gender poses to the historical association of masculinity and femininity with gender assigned at birth. Nor do the more radical activists who challenge

the need to identify with gender at all pose any threat to the stability of society.

All that needs to be acknowledged by trans people is that deciding to reassign your gender will not result in identity with those who are untroubled by living with the gender assigned them at birth. Cisnormativity cannot be wished away anymore than we can be rid of transsexuality or the challenges posed by the transgendered.

You can, of course, alter your genitals, and change your behaviour in extremely radical ways, but 'gender intelligence' tells us that your identity will always be that of a transsexual who has moved from one gender to another, or the identity of a gender fluid person. This is because although you might have always felt ill at ease with the gender assigned at birth you cannot elude or forget the reality of this unease; you cannot wish away the process or experience of becoming trans – which I imagine is an incomparable journey. A trans-woman cannot efface her singular experience anymore than most of my readers could ignore the fact that whatever other dilemmas they may have faced, consciously questioning their gender wasn't one of them.