

DON MILLIGAN'S
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“I’m not male or female”



SAM SMITH has come out as ‘non-binary’. I find this all rather difficult. As a gay man in his seventies who’s never been able to swing his hips or sashay in the way that some boys do, I have to admit to being gripped with envy when I see Sam Smith and his troupe of dancers performing *How do you sleep?* But, then again, I’ve never performed a wheelie, or ridden a skate board. Mind you, it remains blatantly obvious that if I could have moved my hips like Sam’s lads my life would have been entirely different.

For most of us being stuck ‘with ourselves’ can often be a troubling experience. I suspect that the difficulty of being a person assails us all with the sense that there’s somebody else inside of us striving to get out. As Sam recently told Jameela Jamil, “I do think like a woman sometimes, in my head.” Of course, we all think inside our heads, but I wonder how Sam knows how to “think like a woman”?

Sam's conception of womanhood and gender is learned. We all learn about gender from a myriad of intimations, gestures, senses, which inform and shape our personalities as we grow. For homosexual men, like Sam, there a collision between the different ways of living as a man, which are dominant in our culture, and our somewhat 'irregular' desire to have sex and make love with other men. This 'irregularity' or 'dysfunction' has in recent years been undermined by the emancipation of gay men and lesbians, calling into question hard and fast gender rules and disrupting all kinds of venerable certainties.

However, although this disruption has been profound it has not provided us with the escape velocity to move beyond the genders we have learned and have constituted us as we've grown. When Sam "thinks like a woman", he imagines that he's thinking like the women he has known and loved, learned from, admired, feared, and laughed with. He can never actually "think like a woman" independent of what the word woman means to him. His thought remains as gendered as ever it was.

There is no escape.

This is exactly what the 'non-binary' wallahs prefer to draw a veil over, or to leave hanging in the air. As Sam asserts, being non-binary is about being "your own special creation". Now Humpty Dumpty (the one who had a great fall), could make words mean what he wanted them to mean.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."

Humpty could abolish the social character of language and make it volitional, entirely personal, shaped to his own unique specification. Sam puts it like this:

That's me looking at myself and thinking maybe
I'm not a man, maybe I'm not a woman, maybe
I'm just me.

So, for the non-binary person (and all those who challenge the gender assigned to them based upon the form of their genitals), gender is not a social or historical artefact, not a product of a distinct culture, but a unique feature of their individuality that is entirely plastic, fluid, malleable, and may be determined by how they think about themselves.

There is no social problem here.

I'm convinced that people should be able to dress how they like, be how they like, fancy who they like, and make love with whomever would like to share their bodies with them. But this freedom does not, and cannot alter, the cultural assumptions of those who insist on challenging the tyranny of gender. This is because, it is man and woman, male and female, masculine and feminine, that create the very possibility of being non-binary, or transsexual. There is actually no other possibility than being male or female, being a bit of both, or transitioning from one to the other.

It is not in the gift of anyone other than a poet or a novelist to move beyond the genders bequeathed to us by our history and culture. This may not always be so, we can have little idea of how the future will pan out, but Sam thinking "like a woman" is not a step into such a future, because it does not take us beyond gender. Rather it explores moving from one to the other, and perhaps, back again, but not beyond the binary division which results from our gender being assigned to us at birth the moment our genitals hove into view.

It is undoubtedly true that challenges to the certainties of gender assignment can cause a great deal of upset, even outrage, as the ground appears to

move under our feet. Those of us opposed to questioning the simple division, male and female, can get extremely exercised and indignant at the very idea of wanting to question age-old beliefs. This is because of the conflation that often takes place between biological notions of male and female, and the social, cultural, or historical ideas of masculinity and femininity associated with inescapable physical realities.

To be sure, 'male' does not mean the same thing as manly or masculine in all cultures or at all times. Similarly, 'female' does not mean feminine in some unchanging or invariant sense. Masculinity (. . . and effeminacy), and femininity, are subject to perpetual cultural metamorphosis, across the world in different material and historical circumstances. But these divisions always arise upon the basis of the of the male and female genitals possessed by our species.

This cannot be wished or wafted away by the desire "to just be me".

Gloria Gaynor's marvellous affirmation, "I am what I am", does seem to have morphed over the years into the increasingly popular idea that one's identity is simply a matter of choice . . . not a socially determined aspect of oneself nor "an ensemble of social relations" (As Karl Marx argued). . . but on the contrary, our natures, our identities, are thought to be composed subjectively of our individual desires, and little else.

I'm keenly aware of the appeal of this subjectivity, because after I've applied the moisturiser every morning, I know damn fine that I don't look a day over 25, and I can move my hips just like Sam Smith and his gorgeous fellas.

See the discussion of transsexuality in

'Genitals = Gender'

at: <https://donmilligan.net/off-the-cuff/p3?>