



Androgyny and Beyond

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Are men different than women? Biological definitions of male and female divide almost all of humanity into nearly even halves. History presents men's experience to be different than women's. Women describe their experience to be disparate from men's. Men are not the same as women.

I. DIFFERENCES AND LIKENESS BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN

In what sense do men and women differ? Males and females differ genetically. Males have a Y chromosome; females have no Y chromosome, but one more X chromosome. Males and females differ anatomically. Their pelvic bones are shaped differently; they have different reproductive organs and genitalia; some of their glands and brain cells are different. Men and women differ physiologically. Their hormonal balances are not the same. Their metabolic functions and rhythms are different. Women menstruate during portions of their lives; men do not. There are also some general differences between men and women which are grounded in biology. Men are usually taller than women, although some women may be taller than some men. Men are more visually oriented; women are more audio-oriented. Most women give birth. Many nurse children. Significant physical differences exist between men and women. However, after these physical differences have been accurately articulated, one discovers males and females are biologically more alike than different.

Are men's and women's differences merely biological? Historically, men have lived differently than women. Male and female power, income, roles, rights, temperaments, dress, interests and goals have been different, although not universally so in every civilization. Western civilization has been characterized by a dualism which presents men as more dominant, independent, active, rational, assertive, analytical, and combative; it presents women as more subordinate, dependent, passive, emotional, receptive, intuitive and tolerant. In North America, not all men and women are this way but most are expected to be this way. Men have studied predominantly male samples and cast their findings as representative of all human experience. Women disagree. They are naming their own experience and find it to be different than men's or what men say about women. In the United States, working women earn approximately

40 per cent less than working men. More women than men live in poverty. More women are single parents. More men than women are in the military and ordained ministry. Only men have been president of the United States. Significant societal differences exist between men and

women. After these differences have been accurately articulated, one discovers males and females are culturally more different than alike.

Cultural studies of men and women reveal not only difference, but difference as the occasion for prejudice, oppression and abuse. Men are considered the norm; women the exception. Men are in charge; women are to follow. Men are fully enfranchised; women are not. Women have a lesser place in a man's world. Women are not the only ones to suffer. The stereotypical male roles and definitions of masculinity are major factors in diseases which kill men. The life span of the average male is seven years less than the average female in the United States.

How do these differences between men and women arise? Most of the differences between men and women have biological origins. Chromosomal, anatomical and hormonal differences are scientifically demonstrable. Their origins as well as their functions are known. There is general consensus on the source of these physical sexual differences. The origins of male and female societal differences are less clear and widely debated. Some social scientists claim biological roots for male and female differences in temperament, abilities and interests. Their arguments take one of three general lines of thought.

The first line of thought suggests societal differences between the sexes are due at least in part to differences between female and male nervous systems. As the male fetus develops in the womb, the testes secrete androgen which influences the growth of the brain. The female fetus does not produce this, nor an analogous hormone at this stage. Therefore, male and female brains differ and this difference is the basis for differences in behavior.¹ The second line of thought is psychoanalytical. It conceives of feminine or masculine behavior as response to body structure. In this view, one's experience of one's body or that of others is a major factor in producing sex-specific personality traits.² A third line of thought suggests a relationship between certain sexual hormones and behavior. One such view holds that testosterone is a major cause in male aggression.³

None of these lines of thought has been conclusively demonstrated. Each of them has been challenged by some social scientist. The psychoanalytical view has been particularly attacked by women. All these approaches, plus other viable hypotheses concerning the relationship between biology and societal sexual differences require more study. There is speculation, much bias, some plotted ground, but little solid knowledge.

How do the differences between men and women arise? Some differences have biological origins; other differences may. A great many of the differences in power, income, rights, roles, dress and goals are clearly social convention.

¹See John Money and Anke A. Ehrhardt, *Man and Woman, Boy and Girl* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1972).

²See James Strachey, ed., *Sigmund Freud: Collected Papers* (New York: Basic Books, 1959).

³See Steven Goldberg, *The Inevitability of Patriarchy* (New York: William Morrow, 1973).

Somehow combinations of thought and action resulted in beliefs, attitudes and social patterns greatly differentiating and subordinating women to men. In western civilization, a great many complex factors present themselves as possibly influencing this process: the need of males to have some meaningful and controlling connection to their offspring; the necessity in less

technological cultures for women to be closely involved in the early stages of childrearing; the symbolic analogies from nature (particularly the animal kingdom in temperate climates); the role of brute strength in hunting-gathering, agricultural and industrial societies; the space to isolate oneself and one's group; the possibility of conquering another without destroying oneself; the philosophical legacy of Platonic dualism; and, the theological impact of the patriarchy of Scripture and the Christian church. These are but a few of the potential contributors. None has the power in and of itself to generate the great societal differences between men and women. All of these, together with the biological differences, create a powerful, shaping force. The social construction of reality needs more study. There is speculation, much bias, some plotted ground, but little solid knowledge.

How do the differences between men and women arise? Some differences definitely do have physical origins; other differences may arise from the physical. A great many seem to be social constructions. Much is unclear; many proposals are more a reflection of their author's bias than verifiable truth. More study is needed. However, an important corollary discovery has arisen from the inquiry. Human beings and human societies are extremely plastic and diverse. People can and do choose a great variety of vital lifestyles and values. Human beings and societies can participate in defining and determining significant dimensions of their sexual destiny.

Are the differences between men and women inevitable? Chromosomal, anatomical, hormonal and childbearing differences are biological. Does that mean they are inevitable? Maybe not. Usual, yes, but maybe not inevitable. Even these basic, biological realities are becoming malleable in a technological society. Chromosomal research, reconstructive surgery, drug therapy, and contraceptives are but a sample of the resources available for influencing these biological differences. From these basic female and male realities, the plasticity of human sexual differences increases as one moves toward cultural realities such as dress which changes in western civilizations nearly every year. Are the differences between men and women inevitable? Perhaps a few are; but in a sophisticated, technological society, a very few. Consequently, the studies of men and women in technological civilizations have raised anew and central issue.

Are the differences between men and women desirable? A cacophony of voices provide widely-divergent answers. Among the voices are those speaking a resounding, yes! "Vive la difference," some say. Preserve and foster the differences; these differences enrich life; they give it spice and variety. Other yea sayers use the Christian Scriptures or their religious tradition to prove that male and female differences are divinely mandated; some of these make it clear the differences are to include male domination of females. Other yea sayers shout: "Different, yes and separate and enemies!" These people envision a battle be-

tween the sexes, at least until women have won their freedom and established justice for themselves. Among the cacophony of voices are those saying differences between men and women are not desirable or at least need to be greatly diminished. "Unisex," some say. Women must give up their second class ways and become like men to form a common brotherhood.⁴ Although those who argue for unisex are few, there are many women who follow a male road toward what they believe to be liberation. Much more prevalent are those who present an androgynous vision for men, women and society.

II. THE ANDROGYNOUS VISION

Androgyny is not a new concept. Androgyny is a combination of the Greek words: andro, meaning male and gynos, meaning female. Strictly speaking, an androgynous person is one with both male and female natures and characteristics. In ancient Latin, androgynous equalled hermaphroditic. In ancient Greece, Dionysus was pictured as a being with both male and female natures. The search for the androgyne is a minor theme throughout western literature.⁵

Androgyny usually has a double, but limited meaning in contemporary usage.⁶ An androgynous person has both so-called feminine and masculine characteristics; this person is independent and dependent; active and passive; rational and emotional; assertive and receptive; analytical and intuitive; combative and tolerant; etc. These traits and behaviors are expressed freely in response to different life situations. In general, contemporary usage, androgyny does not refer to anatomy or sexual orientation.

In its second contemporary usage, androgyny refers to a society in which both females and males and the so-called feminine and masculine traits and behaviors are equally valued and incorporated into the fabric of civilization. In this sense, androgyny is a symbol of societal equality, justice and freedom. Androgyny becomes a vision of individual and societal wholeness:

The ideal of androgyny begins with the recognition that, out of the whole range of human potentialities, certain traits have been differentially assigned to men and to women, and that all such systems of arbitrary distinctions between the sexes are crippling to women and ultimately to everyone. Androgyny is a form of life in which every person will be enabled to become a whole human being.⁷

In this full blown form, androgyny envisions females and males who may possess different chromosomes, anatomy and hormones, but whose traits and

⁴See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1953). Although de Beauvoir is arguing for androgyny and makes many valuable observations, she pushes for a world in which women give up their evolutionary inferior traits and behaviors and become like men to form a "brotherhood."

⁵See Elemire Zolla, *The Androgyne* (New York: Crossroads, 1981).

⁶See Betty and Theodore Roszak, eds., *Masculine/Feminine* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969); and Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

⁷Valerie C. Saiving, "Androgynous Life: A Feminist Appropriation of Process Thought," in *Feminism and Process Thought*, ed. Sheila Greeve Davaney (New York: The Edwin Mellon Press, 1981) 15.

behavior are similarly representative of the entire range of human existence. All roles, other than those most strictly anatomically determined, will be available to both sexes. Female children would not be socialized differently than male children. Both men and women will be fully enfranchised. Society will be informed by symbols and models of sexual equality, interdependence and completeness.

The androgynous vision is variously articulated and vigorously debated. There is much to commend it. The vast majority of so-called feminine and masculine traits and behaviors are clearly socially conditioned. Great energy goes into establishing and maintaining them. These sexual stereotypes create destructive facades, limit human potential and alienate people from themselves and one another.

He is playing masculine. She is playing feminine. He is playing masculine because she is playing feminine. She is playing feminine because he is playing masculine. He is playing the kind of man that she thinks the kind of woman she is playing ought to admire. She is playing the kind of woman that he thinks the kind of man he is playing ought to desire.

If he were not playing masculine, he might well be more feminine than she is—except when she is playing very feminine. If she were not playing feminine, she might well be more masculine than he is—except when he is playing very masculine....

She is supposed to admire him for the masculinity in him that she fears in herself. He is supposed to desire her for the femininity in her that he despises in himself. He desires her for her femininity which is his femininity, but which he can never lay claim to. She admires him for his masculinity which is her masculinity, but which she can never lay claim to. Since he may only love his own femininity in her, he envies her her femininity. Since she may only love her own masculinity in him, she envies him his masculinity. The envy poisons their love.

He, coveting her unattainable femininity, decides to punish her. She, coveting his unattainable masculinity, decides to punish him. He denigrates her femininity—which he is supposed to desire and which he really envies—and becomes more aggressively masculine. She feigns disgust at his masculinity—which she is supposed to admire and which she really envies—and becomes more fastidiously feminine. He is becoming less and less what he wants to be. She is becoming less and less what she wants to be. But now he is more manly than ever, and she is more womanly than ever.⁸

The androgynous vision would do away with these artificial and destructive conventions and replace them with socialization more in tune with personal uniqueness and societal health. Human energy could be freed for use in more creative pursuits. Individuals could be more true to themselves. Relationships between the sexes could become more genuine. Human abilities, particularly those of women, could be released and fostered in the marketplace, the church and the world as well as in friendships and families.

⁸Betty and Theodore Roszak, vii and viii.

This androgynous vision enlarges to become a view of society. Sexual justice, equality and mutuality are its foundational building-blocks. They are seen to foster harmony, cooperation, security, human worth and interdependence. The vision sees women's as well as men's powers to be necessary for societal survival and development. It encourages tapping the full range of human potentialities to build a better world.

III. BEYOND ANDROGYNY

A society of justice, equality and mutuality between the sexes. Men and women encouraged to be genuine and fully themselves. All people, fully enfranchised, contributing to a vital, interdependent world. Is this not a desirable vision? The androgynous vision has

weaknesses.

Androgynous persons are to possess both feminine and masculine traits and behaviors. Feminine and masculine labels are, in most cases, arbitrary. Where they are arbitrarily applied to human traits and behaviors, they need to go. They are not helpful; they perpetuate false images of men and women; they are infected by the assumptions androgyny is meant to overcome.

The difficulty goes deeper than labels. The androgynous vision would encourage both the so-called feminine and masculine traits and behaviors in individuals and society. The question arises: Are all of these traits and behaviors desirable? Are either dominance or submission desirable goals for human behavior? What about manipulateness, narcissism, and cunning? What common good can come from exploitation, ruthlessness and aggressiveness? The full range of traits and behaviors included in the so-called feminine and masculine needs to be scrutinized. Each trait or behavior can be weighed against its contribution to a just and humane society.

There is a more serious difficulty. The problem is not only with certain traits and behaviors that are undesirable, but with that view of reality which would split all traits and behaviors. Are independence and dependence, rationality and emotionality, analytical and intuitive, assertive and receptive or individuality and relatedness mutually exclusive? The dualism which informs most western understandings of reality would say so. Descartes speaks of the ideal individual as one who requires nothing but himself to exist. In this ideal an individual is to be independent, self-sufficient and autonomous. This dichotomous view of reality is artificial and destructive. It has not only separated men and women, but split history and nature, humankind from the earth, spirit from body and nation from nation. A new vision of reality is needed which takes androgynous concerns seriously, yet goes both behind and beyond androgyny.

Androgyny is susceptible to other dangers which need to be addressed in any vision of gender and relationship between the sexes. The androgynous vision could become a stereotype of the ideal person or society which is more oppressive than what it replaces. One could have a world in which an individual is not only free to develop the full range of constructive human traits and behaviors, but is under great compulsion to do so. In this world, everyone is to be everything. In this existence one finds autonomous definitions of persons and society not unlike those of Descartes. Finally, androgyny raises the question

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of who will participate in shaping the new vision of men and women and by what criteria. Certainly, much of it will just emerge from the dynamic forces already at work. But to the extent that humankind is able to consciously and deliberately influence the process, will only those presently enfranchised (men) shape the vision? Must not women as well as men, children as well as adults, past and future as well as the present and marginal as well as enfranchised participate? As they participate, they need to tap the constructive balances of the diversity and unity in the human situation.

A new vision of gender and sexual relationships is emerging. Ours is a pregnant moment for Christians to join in shaping changing sexual understandings. Our Christian faith has implications for gender issues; our biblical heritage provides perspectives; our traditions contain resources; our experience has much to offer.

A new vision of gender and sexual relationships might well consider the following:

- 1) The establishment of justice, equality and mutuality for females and males;
- 2) The enfranchisement of a broader range of constructive human traits and behaviors;
- 3) The reflection of genuine female and male differences in social construction;
- 4) The reflection of individual and societal particularities in social construction; and
- 5) The development of an interdependent vision of reality.

Although naive and flawed, the androgynous vision's call for sexual justice, equality and mutuality is fundamentally sound. There is strong support for these dimensions of the vision in the biblical message. Both men and women have been created by God in God's image. Both men and women receive God's blessing and charge to multiply and care for the earth. Both men and women are direct and full recipients of God's grace. Both men and women are called to be God's people and servants. Both men and women are heirs in God's future. These basic understandings of females and males suggest what men and women are to have: the freedom to discover who one is and what one wants to be; the right to share equally in making decisions which affect all humankind; the opportunity to develop all one's capacities, mental, physical and spiritual; the right to find satisfaction not only in nurturing and supporting others, but in being nurtured and supported; the right to be equipped emotionally, intellectually and materially; the right to stand on one's own two feet; the power to speak one's thoughts and to be heard by others; the opportunity to act and make one's actions effective. Whatever else the emerging vision of gender and sexual relationships is becoming, it must become a world of symbols, structures and dynamics which establish justice, equality and mutuality for both men and women. Symbols imaging opposing principles need to be challenged and reconceptualized. Structures fostering injustice, inequality and exclusivity need to be dismantled and reconstructed. Dynamics resulting in domination, isolation and exploitation need to be identified and redirected. Language, imagery, leadership, laws, institutions, roles, relationships, work and worship can reflect justice, equality

and mutuality. Men and women of faith can explore and reconstitute each of these within the church and join other forces in doing the same throughout the world.

A new vision of gender might well enfranchise a broader range of constructive human potentialities. Certain human traits and behaviors have been linked to men and with men have been viewed as more powerful and desirable. Independence, activity, rationality, assertiveness, analysis, competition and individuality have been highly valued; dependence, passivity, emotionality, receptivity, intuition, cooperation and relatedness have been of lesser value or devalued. Androgyny would value all the so-called feminine and masculine characteristics in persons and society. A more discrete vision is needed. The biblical message presents humankind with a broad range of traits and behaviors; it does not present all human traits and behaviors as life-giving. Every human trait and behavior can be explored and evaluated as to its ability to promote life in individuals and society. Those which give life can be enfranchised and promoted. Those which do not, need to be carefully examined and reworked or rejected.

Who decides what gives life? Those representative of the society need to be involved. Persons of diverse racial, religious, socio-economic, sexual, political and physical perspectives can be participants. Public conversation and persuasion is needed. The process itself can become a large part of the vision. The biblical view of reality is one wherein justice, equality and

mutuality can break forth in symbols of God and human traits and behavior which promote truth, peace and well-being. Large dimensions of this work wait to be tackled by linguists, liturgists, prophets, politicians, biblical scholars, leadership developers, business leaders, social scientists, care-givers, etc.

Men and women are not as different as traditional stereotyping would have them be. Neither are men and women the same. God created humankind in God's image; female and male God created them. Almost all human beings are either man or woman or choose to become one or the other. The differences between females and males need be neither overworked nor unimportant. Different chromosomes, anatomy and hormones are not fully determinative of human destiny, but they affect human existence. Men don't give birth to children. Women don't produce sperm. There are separate women's and men's pro tennis circuits. Different histories, social conditioning and societal experiences are not fully determinative of human destiny, but they are realities men and women need to take seriously in their development. Men have dominated women. Women have been primary nurturers. In the United States, the average age of death is seven years earlier for men than women. Even though men and women are fundamentally much more alike than different, the differences are real, need to be taken seriously, and need not become the occasion for stereotyping nor exploitation. Female and male differences can be accurately discovered, articulated and validated. There need to be both female and male symbols of God. Motherhood and fatherhood share parenthood. But motherhood is not fatherhood. More women might well become jockeys; more men might well handle jackhammers. Men and women need to be thoroughly, if not evenly represented in decision-making structures which affect humanity.

Women need to speak for women; men for men. Presently, women have different issues than men do in human liberation. Traditionally, sin may primarily exhibit itself as pride in men and timidity in women. Men's and women's realities are always contextual and need to be viewed in their concreteness. The emerging vision of gender and sexual relationships must be developed into a society in which the genuine differences between men and women are discovered and validated. Justice, equality and mutuality can be enhanced by particularity and diversity.

A new vision of gender and sexual relationships can provide symbols and models which open men and women to their uniqueness without creating a superhuman stereotype. What are the rich potentialities present in humanity? Which of them make for the good, right, and beautiful? How does one encourage the uniqueness in each man and women? How does one foster the uniqueness of a particular civilization in a particular time and place? How does the freedom of a unique individual fit with the good of a particular society? Are there symbols and models which free and expand, rather than oppress and limit? Each of these questions needs to be asked separately and in relation to each other. One biblical view of reality suggests the importance of the uniqueness, worth and freedom of each person within the uniqueness, value and necessity of an integrated, interdependent world. Each person is a gift and has gifts for the community. Each individual has need of the community and can be enriched by the community's gifts. Each man, each woman can be free without having to be everything; each woman, each man can be free to work out their uniqueness in relationship to and enriched by the uniqueness of others in society. Friendships, marriages and families can take a variety of forms in providing for

basic human needs. Partnerships between males and females can be mutually beneficial while infinitely different. Unique individuals can complement without dominating one another. Individuality and diversity can exist within relatedness and unity.

Most importantly, a new vision of gender and sexual relationships needs to be grounded in an interdependent view of reality. Plato can give way to the Yahwist; dualism can be reconstructed; and existence can be unified. Both stereotypical views of men and women and androgynous visions of persons emphasize a dichotomous view of reality. The first view splits both men and women and their characteristics; the second vision splits their characteristics and encourages persons to be autonomous. Neither position is adequate nor life-giving. The Old Testament view of reality is covenantal. God is the source and sustainer of all creation. The entire created order is organically and volitionally connected to its source who has promised never to leave nor destroy it. Life within the existing creation is organic and volitional. It is based on interdependent patterns and promises. Both the patterns and promises are malleable and interconnected. The cultural and historical, which are the arenas of social construction, are to be based on covenants; that is, they are to be grounded in vows mutually agreed upon, respectful of all parties, open to renegotiation, inclusive of the full range of life and death issues and subject to internal and external sanctions. In this view of reality females and males are unique, of equal value and mutually interdependent one of another, biologically and culturally. In this view

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of reality, individuality is not separated from, nor antithetical to, relatedness, but they are enabling dimensions of each other. One can only have individual existence out of one's relationships to others and the earth. One can only know relatedness through individuation and maturation which creates the specificity from which to be an other. Existence is essentially connected and interdependent.

Valerie Saiving, a process theologian, borrowing heavily on the Whiteheadian concept of the "rhythm of process"⁹ holds a similar view of reality:

Not only are individuality and relatedness compatible aspects of every actuality, these two principles require each other. And since they require each other, neither is more "real," important or valuable than the other. On the contrary, individuality and relatedness support and enhance one another. The more profound and complex an occasion's relationship to the world from which it arises, the greater its opportunity to achieve unique value for itself; the more unique its individual satisfaction, the more valuable its potential contribution to the world which supercedes it. What Whitehead calls the "rhythm of process" at the heart of actuality is a rhythmic alternation between giving and receiving, between the appropriation of others for the enrichment of oneself and the yielding up of oneself for the enrichment of others.¹⁰

Christian men and women can vigorously explore and present the covenantal view of reality; they can appropriate the compatible notions of process thought in pressing the case for an interdependent view of the world. Preachers, teachers, worship leaders and administrators might well proclaim, present, and organize within this conceptual framework. A theology born of

foundational biblical concepts can reform our dualistically skewed tradition and provide a lodestar for men's and women's lives and a more just and lively world.

⁹Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1968) 88.

¹⁰V. Saiving, 26.