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“Femininity,”
“Masculinity,”
and
“Androgyny”

A Modern Philosophical Discussion

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Dedicated to the memory of Eunice Belgum

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Introduction

Virtually all sex difference theorists presuppose that for the overwhelming majority of us, each is either a “female” (a “woman”) or a “male” (a “man”) in some biological sense of these terms. This is our sex, to be distinguished from our gender: “feminine” or “masculine.” Virtually all sex difference theorists also affirm some link between sex and gender and argue that this link needs explanation. But are all “females” “feminine,” all “males” “masculine?”

The answers to this question clearly depend on how we more carefully specify sex and gender. These notions have been by no means universally construed in the same way. It is thus crucial for the reader of sex difference theory first to come to grips with any author’s notion of sex and gender before she or he can understand the thesis with which the author begins. A theorist who implicitly or explicitly defines “sex” in terms of “gender,” or vice versa, will effectively link “sex” and “gender” by trivial definitional fiat, forcing a conclusion by linguistic sleight of hand rather than by empirical investigation. Such a trap must be avoided if we are to answer the question prompted by the thesis of the sex difference theorist in any significant sense.

Let us take a closer look at some of the most common attempts at specifying “sex” and “gender.”
A. NOTIONS OF "SEX"

A number of criteria have been advanced for classifying a person as either “female” or “male” on the basis of biological traits. None of these, however, is entirely free of counterexamples.

1. Hormonal Criteria

Hormonal criteria classify a person as either “female” or “male” based on the amount of androgen and estrogen in the body of that person. Those persons with higher estrogen than androgen ratings are called “female,” those with higher androgen than estrogen ratings are called “male.” Such criteria, however, fail in those (rare) cases where unusually high amounts of estrogen are produced by the testes and adrenals in males and unusually high amounts of androgen are produced by the ovaries in females. More frequently, the criteria fail when males (females) are injected with large doses of estrogen (androgen) for a variety of reasons (in preparation for transsexual surgery on men and women, or, up until recently, for the prevention of milk production in those who have just become mothers and who do not wish to lactate).

2. Anatomical Criteria

At least two different types of criteria have been advanced for classifying a person as either “female” or “male” on the basis of certain features of a person’s anatomy. Genital criteria assign sex based on primary anatomical characteristics (“maleness” is assigned to persons with testes, “femaleness” to persons with ovaries). Morphological criteria classify persons as either “female” or “male” on the basis of secondary anatomical characteristics (a person with a penis, scrotum, prostate or deep voice, for example, is called “male,” a person with a clitoris, vulva, uterus, vagina, or high voice, for example, “female”).

Since it is now medically possible to alter both a person’s primary and secondary anatomical characteristics, both types of criteria face exceptions. But it is fair to say that of the two types, genital criteria are more valuable since fewer people lack primary anatomical characteristics than lack secondary ones.

3. Chromosomal Criteria

Chromosomal criteria classify a person as “female” when a chromosomal XX pattern is present and as “male” when an XY chromosomal pattern is present. Some, but very few, known cases in which XXY or XXYY constellations have appeared in humans are the only known counterexamples to chromosomal criteria for sex. For that reason, some current theorists, such as Janice Raymond, take chromosomal patterns for determining a person’s sex to be the most reliable criteria currently available to us.\(^5\)

The importance of determining just what criteria are being presupposed by any given sex difference theorist cannot be overemphasized to the reader of sex differences literature. For those authors who are affirming some link (causal or otherwise) between sex and gender, it makes a difference whether gender is being linked to hormonal, anatomical, or chromosomal features of persons; it is possible for a person to be a “female” in an anatomical sense of the term, but a “male” in the chromosomal sense. Moreover, since many authors conflate sex and gender, it is important to be wary of sex classification from the start. Let us now turn to some of the more common notions of gender.

B. NOTIONS OF “GENDER”

In common usage, a person’s gender is often characterized as either “feminine” or “masculine,” although what is meant by these terms varies from author to author. We shall try to capture here only the two major senses of the terms as commonly used in sex difference research.

The claim that a person is either “feminine” or “masculine” is often tantamount to a claim that the person exhibits certain psychological traits. Here the terms in quotes are being used descriptively. A sex difference theorist might describe a person as “feminine,” for example, if the theorist thought that the person had any or all of the following psychological traits (P-traits):

- gentleness
- modesty
- humility
- supportiveness
- empathy
Notions of Sex and Gender

compassionateness
tenderness
nurturance
intuitiveness
sensitivity
unselfishness

Or the theorist might classify a person as “masculine” if the theorist thought that person to have any or all of the following P-traits:

strength of will
ambition
courage
independence
assertiveness
aggressiveness
hardiness
rationality or the ability to think logically, abstractly and analytically
ability to control emotion

The P-traits the sex difference theorist claims a person has are to be distinguished from the behavior traits (B-traits) on the basis of which the theorist judges the presence of the P-traits in that person. For example, the theorist might claim that John has the P-trait aggressiveness because John has the B-trait of engaging in an unusually large number of fist fights. Or that Susan has the P-trait nurturance because she is the primary rearer of her children. The reason that this distinction should be noted by the reader (as PATRICK GRIM and SARAH HOAGLAND point out in Part III) is that the assignment of P-traits to individuals on the basis of B-traits is often biased; different B-traits are sometimes selected as indicating the presence of certain P-traits in women from those B-traits selected as indicating the presence of those same P-traits in men. Thus, for example, a sex difference theorist might classify a woman as “nurturant” because she often takes care of children whereas that same theorist might not classify a man as “nurturant” who also frequently takes care of children.

However, the claim that a person is either “feminine” or “masculine” can also be tantamount to the claim that not only does the person exhibit psychological traits from Group X or Group Y but it is good or proper that the person does. In this case, the terms are being used prescriptively. Since it is very rare for prescriptive sex difference theorists to hold that it is good for a male to have a P-trait from Group X or that it is good for a female to have a P-trait from Group Y, such theorists, rather than demonstrate, presuppose, that sex and gender are linked; in those cases where a woman (man) appears to have a P-trait from Group Y (Group X), the theorist can fail to assign “masculinity” (“femininity”) to the woman (man) on the belief that it is not good for her (him) to have the traits in question.

In the above accounts of sex and gender, it is easy to see that those sex criteria which rely on chromosomal differences suffer from the fewest number of counterexamples and that descriptive accounts of gender appear least likely to tempt the theorist to presuppose (as opposed to demonstrate) a positive answer to the key question at hand. (This is not, however, to deny that other problems may occur with descriptive accounts; these problems will be discussed in Part III.) But the paucity of psychological sex difference theories which do rely on chromosomal criteria for sex and descriptive accounts of gender will immediately strike the reader of primary sources in the field.

Some examples of sex difference theories which apply the term “feminine” to women and examples of the psychological traits often assumed to be central to the notion of the “feminine” are discussed by ANNE DICKASON in Part I. It is important to notice that sex difference theorists are concerned primarily with the ascription of “masculinity” and “femininity” to persons, since what they want to explain is the connection they affirm between a person’s being a certain sex and a person’s exhibiting certain psychological traits but not others. The meanings of these terms are to be distinguished from the meanings these terms might have when applied to other sorts of things (such as psychological traits themselves, behavioral traits, certain types of jobs or sports). Questions about the “masculinity” and “femininity” of these latter sorts of things will be raised in Part IV.

NOTES

1. This assumption is not entirely unproblematic. However, the problems with it will be carefully noted and spelled out in what follows.
Some are discussed at length by Glorianne M. Leck in "Philosophical Concerns About Gender Distinction," SISCOM Proceedings (1975) and by Glorianne M. Leck and Bonnie McD. Johnson in their "Philosophical Assumptions of Research on Gender Difference or: Two-By-Two and We'll Never Break Through," unpublished ms. available from Glorianne Leck, Department of Philosophy of Education, Youngstown State University, Youngstown, Ohio 44555.

2. For the time being it will be presupposed, along with the preponderance of the literature on the subject, that there are no philosophical problems with referring to a person’s gender as “feminine” or “masculine.” This presupposition will, however, be challenged in Part III of this work. To remind the reader of possible problems, the terms will appear in quotes wherever they occur.

3. At the time of this writing, I am aware of no printed publication by a sex difference theorist which flatly denies that there are at least some statistically significant psychological differences between the sexes. It is only in comparatively modern times that psychologists have tried to demonstrate that there are such differences (see, for example, Maccoby and Jacklin) and, as will be pointed out in Part III, these “demonstrations” are often fraught with methodological difficulties.

4. There is in common usage a sense of the term “feminine” (“masculine”) which means “being of the female (male) sex.” There is also in common usage a sense of the term “female” (“male”) which means “being of the feminine (masculine) gender.” However, to use these terms in these senses when engaging in sex difference research is in effect to link sex with gender merely by definition. Making this simple error has not, by the way, been limited to non-philosophers. See, for example, the writings of Rousseau and Nietzsche.

5. The above distinctions between the various notions of “sex” in the literature on sex difference are spelled out and discussed by Janice Raymond in her The Transsexual Empire (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), pp. 6-8. She is, in turn, explicating the various notions as originally noted by John Money in his “Sex Reassignment as Related to Hermaphroditism and Transsexualism,” which can be found in Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment, ed. Richard Green and John Money (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), pp. 91-93. Money also refers to definitions of “sex” in terms of the law, but we shall not be concerned with these definitions in this volume. In addition, he points out that sex is often defined in terms of psychological gender, but for the reason cited in footnote 4, I have followed Robert Stoller in clearly distinguishing between sex and psychological gender. See Stoller’s Sex and Gender (New York: Science House, 1968), pp. viii and ix.

6. This list of traits often used in applying the terms “masculine” and “feminine” to persons was compiled and presented for another purpose by Mary Anne Warren in her The Nature of Woman (Point Reyes, Calif.: Edgпресс, 1980), p. 17. It is not exhaustive (for example, it does not contain many of the overly negatively-valued psychological traits sometimes associated with the terms), but is merely exemplary of the sorts of traits usually selected. The reader might suspect that the justification for selecting the traits from Group X (often called “passive” traits) as criteria for applying “femininity” to persons and the traits from Group Y (often called “active” traits) as criteria for applying “masculinity” to persons will necessarily lead to some kind of circularity. Indeed, if the theorist’s justification for the selection is that all and only females exhibit traits from Group X and that all and only males exhibit traits from Group Y, the theorist is open to the charge of already having answered the question “Are sex and gender linked?” in advance of showing that they are. However, this is not the only justification to which the theorist might appeal. He or she could, for example, maintain that what is being reflected in dividing up the lists in this way is merely the common usage or ordinary meanings of the terms “masculine” and “feminine.” But once again, although circularity need not be reflected at this juncture, there may be other problems with applying the labels on the basis of lists divided up in this way (to be discussed in Part III).