

# MODERNITY, GENDER IDENTITY AND EXPRESSION: ENGAGING THE BOUNDARIES OF BIOLOGY AND CULTURE

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## Abstract

Against the probability of many doubts, the subtext of modernity was not simply an exultation of the power of reason or the weaponry of liberal capitalism. On the contrary, it was a return to the human subject. This return saw its initiating eloquence captured by the cogito of Descartes and later re-echoed by Immanuel Kant when he presented the mind as an active originator of experience rather than just a passive recipient of perception. Consequently, our knowledge of the world of experience became a knowledge that is constructed through our own frameworks and categories. This as it were questions whether our knowledge has anything to do with the world as it is. Later Continental Philosophy would stretch this to its limits through the enthronement of the subject and the freedom of the subject. Ever since this achievement was recorded, the human subject has remained at the centre of philosophical investigations. However, the focus on the subject increasingly demanded for an end to all enquiries that the human mind could not comprehend, implying that all metaphysics were to be discarded. It was this shift that paved the way for man as the measure of reality and with regard to our interest here human sexuality. Human physiology (biology) must now not determine the expression of gender. This would depend on the freedom and preference of the human subject. Against the fluidity of subjective freedom, this essay argues that modernity has only installed an instability of a cognitive nature. By questioning everything and making nothing to be constant, this article tests modernity through an engagement with gender identity and expression. Should we suppose that to be male or female no longer have a constant meaning as defined in, biology? My argument rests with the assumption that a postmodern understanding of modernity, makes the reality depicted by modernity to be, unmodern.

**Keywords:** Modernity, Gender, Biology, Culture

## Introduction

One recurrent hallmark of modernity is the relativism of values. As such, confronted with the question about values, most people today gravitate towards subjectification and relativism and will most likely respond along the line that everyone has his or her own values that are equally valid. Denominating this kind of reasoning is the attitude that everyone has the right to develop their own forms-of-life; that to allow someone else to tell one how to live his/her life is to give up one's freedom to be him/herself and thereby cease to be authentic; that since our values are compatible with our chosen ways of life, we cannot criticize others. This relativism of values, widespread in contemporary culture gives rise to a kind of individualism that shuts out every other facet of life with principal centring on the self. That this situation is real is evidenced by the myriad of publications on this subject viz. Christopher Lasch

*The Culture of Narcissism* and *The Minimal Self*; Daniel Bell *The Contradictions of Capitalism*; Allan Bloom *The Closing of the American Mind*; Hanna Arendt *The Human Condition*; Bellah et al. *The Good Society*; and De Tocqueville *De la Démocratie en Amérique* to mention but a few.

One critical area this subjectification and relativity of values plays out to a large extent in contemporary culture is the issue of gender identity and expression. Today it is no longer news that most countries in the west are daily legalizing same sex marriage. Indeed, it would be political suicide for any democratically elected office holder in the west to express anti-gay sentiments. At the risk of over generalizing, it may serve at this juncture to note that this development comes on the heels of the post-modernist attempt at the deconstruction of all cultural values in what is often termed the post-modernist cultural revolution. With respect to our theme, the post-modernist cultural revolutionaries champion gender mainstreaming, through “deconstruction of man-woman anthropological complementarity.” (Peeters 152–55) Viewed as such we are in a situation in which,

*De facto*, however, gender training is most often at the service of postmodern ideology: motherhood, fatherhood, male and female identity, the spousal relationship between married man and woman, the male/female anthropological complementarity are treated as basic stereotypes to deconstruct (Peeters 152).

The big question here is, how did we arrive at this stage of man’s development where there are no absolutes and in which everything is relative? How did we become so powerless before issues that humanity used to speak with almost unanimous voice?

The attempt to answer the above questions informs the theme of our short essay. We shall briefly explore the meaning, and notions, of Gender Identity and expression while identifying the trends that are blurring the line between human nature (biology) and culture. The postmodernist culture is found to be aimed at deconstructing unitary anthropology of the human person thereby blurring the complementarity of sex and gender and giving liberty to anyone to express his gender in whatever way s/he chooses. Notwithstanding, the aim of this essay is not to outline the woes of modernity, if anything, there is the effort to argue that these trends are very positive ones, especially viewed from the perspective of the promotion of human freedom. The advances in the different facets of life in our time unbundles a lot of power and places them at the disposal of individuals and societies. It would seem that the divine/scriptural injunction of conquering the world is most realized in our time. What however is at stake here is the fact that these powers may have been misapplied. It is based on this that we will toe the line of Charles Taylor (Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*; Taylor, *Sources of the Self*) in affirming that the promotion of this deconstructive culture is a product of a deeper societal malaise that incapacitates modern man from being true to his nature, a malaise that borders on modernity’s loss of the frameworks of meaning.

### **Gender Identity and Expressions**

Traditionally, gender is linked to sex. As such, sometimes it is hard to understand exactly what is meant by the term gender, and how it differs from the closely related term sex. Sex in this sense referred to the complex anatomical and physiological characters that, in sexually reproducing organisms, distinguish males and females of the same species. Gender on the other hand referred to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women based on their nature. Viewed as such, one is either male or female by nature and is expected to express this nature in culturally accepted modes of conduct that define his/her gender. Note that we recognize here that there are other physiological possibilities due to gene mutations whereby we have often differing phenotype and genotype in the same person. While we recognize those as exceptions, we would not go into the details of their analysis for this short essay.

However, historically especially from the sixties, the term gender and gender expression began to be separated from sex. The implication is that human gender will not be dependent on sex but a product of society and culture, making it indeterminate (Lucas Lucas 304). This as it were would give rise to different notions of gender and its expression in history.

### **Notions/Paradigms**

Historically, there are three paradigms (Lucas Lucas 303–04) that have found representation with respect to human gender and its expression: Sex as continuous with gender (sex=gender), Sex as discontinuous with gender and sex (sex ≠ gender) and sex and gender as complementary. With regard to sex as continuous with gender, human physiology determines the psychological as well as the cultural dimensions of the human person. To this extent, sex is equal to gender and human biology determines the social roles one is able to assume which is not transferable. Fixed as such, the man is masculine while woman is feminine. This paradigm became the module for the gender inequality between men and women for which it is considered to be dysfunctional in the western culture. (Lucas Lucas 308)

Sex as discontinuous with gender represents a view that sex is completely different from and independent of gender. This implies a total separation between the biological and the psycho-cultural dimensions of the human person making it possible for every person to choose his/her gender independent of his/her biological sex. It is this paradigm that is the background of such postmodernist movements as feminism, homosexuality and trans-sexuality. This paradigm whereby sex and gender are complementary, proposes a unitary anthropology of the human person. As such while sex (masculine and feminine) is different from gender, the difference does not pertain solely to the biological dimension but also is the ground for the psycho-social dimension. To this extent, the biological and the cultural are complementary to each other and cannot find expression except in this mode. This gives us the ground for the dignity and laws derivable from the human nature.

While the first paradigm as we have given above was the ground for gender inequality, the second paradigm is the ground for the different postmodernist movements of our time such as feminism, homosexuality, same sex marriage and reinterpretation of the marriage institution. The third paradigm on the other hand views gender and sex as not just an aspect of man but something that has to do with the totality of the human person. Unfortunately, however, it is the second paradigm that has gained so much ground in modern day society transforming itself into a trend.

### **Trends**

The general trend today may be put in the words of J. Butler that,

Gender is a cultural construction and as a result not the causal product of sex, nor is it fixed like it. In saying that gender is a construct, radically independent of sex, gender itself is an artifact free from all bonds. Consequently, man and masculine might mean just a female body as a masculine woman and feminine, a male body as a female man(Lucas Lucas 304).

This trend is an extreme form of the second paradigm above and is geared towards obliterating the divide between biology and culture in such a way that instead of sex and gender being integrally related and complementary, sex and gender has no link. As such biology has no determination whatsoever over gender. While biology is given, gender is a choice every individual will have to make.

### **Blurring the Boundaries of Biology and Culture**

The current of thought that sees no link between biology and culture, between sex and gender, has found very strong expressions through feminism, homosexuality and same sex marriage.

#### **1. Feminism**

Feminism is a term that dates back as far as the 1792 publication of *Rivendicazionideidirittidelledonne* of Mary Wollstonecraft. In its general sense it is taken to mean the awareness of the subordination of women with respect to men and the search for ways to overcome these conditions of inferiority and oppression, in order to better the living conditions of women. It is therefore a collection of ideologies aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights for women. Over history there has been different tenets of feminism. In its extreme form, it promotes dynamic sexuality of gender, which permits trans-sexuality. This form of feminism associated with the QUEER movement became part of the group of movements that promote the ideology that gender is a choice each individual is free to make irrespective of nature.

#### **2. Homosexuality**

This is the persistent and prevalent sexual attraction to persons of the same sex. Though homosexual men were traditionally called gay while women were said to be lesbians, today, the word gay is used to apply to both genders. In defining

homosexuality, there are three fundamental distinctions that throw light on the issue. These are

- a. Homosexual tendency and orientation
- b. Homosexual act and comporment
- c. Social and cultural dimensions to homosexuality

Homosexual tendency or orientation does not make one a homosexual since this may be classified along with sexual desires that heterosexuals have which may not be put into practice. The homosexual act or comporment also does not define one as homosexual. This is because there are those who have experienced the homosexual act but who afterwards remain heterosexuals. What really makes one a homosexual has a lot to do with the social and cultural dimension of homosexuality which for the purpose of this explanation translates into one's preferential choice and declaration as well as an active promotion of the homosexual course. This leads to what today is termed the homosexual culture. Within this ambience we have the gay movement that promotes the ideology that gender is a choice everyone makes which is completely separated from sex, leading to a deconstruction of all social norms about the human person including matrimonial union and human family.

### **3. Same Sex Marriage**

The modern day's deconstruction of gender has found its most profound and explicit expression in the legal enactments permitting same sex marriage. With gender defined as a social construct and modern-day laws and reproductive technology making it possible for anyone who can pay the price to take home a baby, the institutionalization of same sex marriage becomes only another phase of the bargain.

### **Evaluation**

Having briefly x-rayed the current social trends with regard to the dividing line between sex and gender, which reveals that contemporary society tilts towards the institutionalization of the ideology of onto-determination with regard to gender expression, it remains to ask what is the anthropological/philosophical foundations for this ideology as well as what are its ethical implications. Like we noted earlier, these tendencies are only a tip of the iceberg that signals an underlying mass of ice.

#### **a. Between Relativism and Absolutism**

One very significant implication of the deconstruction of the human nature and the enthronement of individual choice as the criterion for the determination of human gender is the acceptance of the relativity of truth. I consider absolutism in this sense to simply mean that there are some truths that can be known by all human beings based on the fact that there is a structured meaning to creation that is not dependent on our acknowledgement of it. Relativism on the other hand would seem to imply that something is true if we acknowledge it to be so. Another way of putting it is that there is no meaning to the structure of the universe except the meaning we give to it. This position aligns with the extreme existentialist views of philosophers

like Jean Paul Sartre who asserts that Existence precedes Essence. This gives the room for man to continuously determine himself. One risk of relativism as such is that once we deny a constant reference point from which all things can be verified as true, nothing can be true anymore except whatever we choose to make true. This definitely leads to a rejection of all moral authorities and thereby equating the moral to what is convenient and acceptable. Morality is thereby reduced to a trend or fashion.

**b. Exclusion of Moral Authorities**

A step further from the acceptance of the gender dynamism is the rejection of all absolutes and with that, the rejection of all moral authorities. It is along this line that despite the Church's repeated pronouncements and effort, there seem to be no impact.

**c. The Political and the Ethical**

One joker in the pile of cards of our current discourse is the link today between gender expression and politics. An interesting question that may serve our purpose here is "Does any politician in a country like the United States stand a chance of winning an election if he declares openly his non-support of the gay movement. Funny as it may sound, I will like to believe that s/he would stand very little chance and that is if he stands any chance at all. The issue of gender expression, homosexuality and same sex marriage has been so politicised that it has become very difficult for any public figure to take a real and disinterested stand. This is so much so that the interest groups have succeeded in making it take a centre stage in all political discussions, in such a way that being gay has suddenly become an advantage in the western world. Meanwhile it is anybody's guess that the gay are in the minority. This politicisation of the ethical constitutes the major problem in issues of gender identity and expression. This is so because since democratic politics is a game of number; and since only those who have very strong interests to protect are willing to tilt the scale; it is very difficult to for the ship of morals to coast in these murky waters.

**d. The Deification of Man and Onto-determination**

Another underlying reason for the thrust of events culminating in the institutionalization of same sex marriage is that modern man emboldened by the progress in the physical sciences and the attendant reductionism that is an outshoot of it, seem to deny the ontological. As it stands, once we deny that man has ontological dimensions, there would be no ground for any argument for the sacredness of the marriage institution between man and woman.

**Conclusion**

We have merely tried to argue that the blurring of the dividing line between sex and gender which translates to our society's progressive acceptance of extreme feminism, homosexuality and same sex marriage is a tip of the iceberg of more

fundamental problems in our society. In arguing this way, we have found an accomplice in the work of Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 1991. In the book Taylor discusses what he calls the malaise of modern identity but with a positive outlook that the ideal of authenticity has a redeeming feature. I share this concern and agree with Charles Lowney that "... for all the faults critics find in today's culture—its narcissism, its moral relativism, its neglect of the political, its obsession with the superficial, its fetish with the shocking—there are positive aspects that may prove to be redeeming" (Lowney 33–50). Charles Taylor in *The Ethics of Authenticity* emphasizes the ideal of authenticity as such a redeeming feature. Just like we argued that these tendencies are tips of icebergs of underlying societal problems, we will postulate also that notwithstanding these gloomy outlooks, these tendencies are evidently signs that man today is as free as he has never been. What is out of place is just how this freedom is applied. My belief is that man evolves and will also surpass this process of evolution for the very fact that it is not sustainable.

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