

Translated excerpt

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Man, Woman, Human Being. What Makes Me What I Am?

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THERE'S MORE TO A HUMAN BEING THAN YOU THINK!

Man or woman? Young or old? Fat or thin? Self-confident or shy? - These categories, along with many others, are the ones we unconsciously use every day to 'place' the people we encounter. We also see *ourselves* as belonging to particular groups. But to what extent are such categories truly relevant to our personalities? What difference would it make if - for instance - our gender were different? Would we have a different sense of ourselves, and would we behave differently?

Yes: this book is indeed about identity. But it isn't a self-help manual, aiming to show people how to become more attractive, more intelligent, more successful. It is about achieving a better understanding of the process whereby we become what we are. Scientifically speaking it is difficult to pin down the precise nature of human identity. Neither in the brain nor anywhere else in the human body is there any trace of anything that could be defined as our 'self' or our 'personality'. What we have above all else is a *sense* of our identity, which can be captured in words only with difficulty, if at all.

What we call our 'identity' or 'individuality' is also the product of a social process, for no one is born with a fully formed self. From childhood right through to the point where we embark on a career, our thoughts, feelings and decisions are influenced by others and by society in general. Our sense of our own gender, for instance, begins to evolve during childhood, and only once they have reached a certain age do children feel that they belong to one gender rather than another. But what constitutes this feeling of belonging to a particular gender?

Our body may seem to us to be a product of nature, and that is indeed the case; but the way we *perceive* our body, and the rules governing the ways it may be displayed to others, are socially determined. By the same token, our tastes do not evolve independently of other people: even our career choice and our choice of partner are influenced by the attitudes and ideals of society at large. In a different

society and in different circumstances, would I be a different person? And am I truly one hundred percent the person I want to be?

AM I WHO I WANT TO BE?

Even though we are almost never aware of it, our gender influences the way we perceive others, and the way we behave towards them. We need such categories in order to deal with everyday life - but they sometimes alter and even distort our perception of reality. This applies to all of us. At any given moment every single human being in the world, no matter where they happen to live, exists within a specific set of social determinants, compounded of their body, gender, character and environment. Our individual identity is forged not only by our biology, but also by the rules and laws of the society in which we live.

Those who are fully aware of their own identity and openly avow their true nature, thereby encourage others, too, to show themselves as they really are. In this sense our identity is not solely a private matter, for people who don't allow themselves to be constrained by the bounds of what is deemed 'normal' tend in the process to have an influence - however minimal it may be - on their society's conceptions of 'normality'.

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IDENTITY - Who am I capable of being?

LOOK IN THE MIRROR TOO LONG, AND WE SEE A STRANGER

When we look in a mirror we look directly at our own face. In my own case the face I see is male, usually exhibiting a certain amount of stubble. In our culture a three-day growth of beard is a typical mark of masculinity. I carry on looking and see greenish-brown eyes and dark eyebrows. Down the middle of my face I see a largeish nose, and full, curved lips. On closer examination I spot laughter wrinkles around my eyes. And then something happens that startles me anew every time I take a really close look at myself in the mirror: the various parts of my face melt into one another and lose all definition.

All of a sudden I can no longer see my own familiar face. It isn't even an unambiguously male face any more: its features could just as easily be those of a woman. My lips somehow seem to be feminine, and my eyes are no longer indicative of either maleness or femaleness. In the end I can see no clearly delineated attributes whatsoever. I have stared at my face so long that I no longer recognise myself.

Looking in the mirror is thus all it takes for us to realise that we can't take our own identity for granted anywhere near as readily as we tend to suppose.

OF COURSE I KNOW WHO I AM – OR DO I?

What do we look out for when we're searching for the toilet in a club or restaurant? We look for a sign depicting a male or female figure, or conveying the same message by other means - isn't that so? And if the sign only says 'WC', we automatically check before going through the door to make certain there isn't another sign somewhere identifying the toilet as being specifically for men or women. In the case of trains, on the other hand, it is standard practice for there to be only one toilet, rather than separate ones for men and women, and then as a rule our sole concern is to check whether it's a normal one, or one reserved for the disabled. 'Normal'? Our assumptions are sometimes so deeply entrenched that we never think to challenge them. This bears on our sense of self and on our gender.

EVERYONE HAS BOTH GENDERS.

Everyone has a rough idea of who and what they are. But what exactly does this 'me-ness' actually feel like? Defining it is by no means easy. Our sense of self may well exist, but we can rarely find suitable words to describe it. Much as we see our identity in terms of prevailing norms, so too we might take our gender completely for granted. Our gender is stated in our birth certificate and in our identity card or passport. It is determined according to physical attributes. But once we start thinking about it, it isn't altogether clear whether that correlates directly with our own sense of ourselves. Can we explain more exactly what we mean when we say that we are male or female? Is there such a thing as a specific sense of gender? Or to put this another way: does it make any difference to my sense of identity whether I *feel* myself to be male or female? For one thing is certain: our gender is not simply and solely a function of nature, even though people are mostly born with a clearly definable gender. Gender is not exclusively a matter of biology. The fact that someone is born as a male does not of itself mean that they are masculine. Am I wrong?!

SOCIAL GENDER EVOLVES ON THE BASIS OF EXTERNAL INFLUENCES.

Defining one's gender is difficult not least because no human being has just one gender: properly considered, everyone has *two* genders: a biological one, and a social one. In English there are even two quite distinct terms for these: 'sex' denotes an individual's biological gender, as manifested by their genitalia, whereas 'gender' means their *social* gender, i.e. as manifested by their cultural and psychological attributes. What matters in respect of our social gender is each individual's perceptions, feelings and behaviour. What do we make of a boy who on completing a trip on his scooter takes off his helmet and gives his hair a painstaking brushing right there in the middle of the street, then styles it with hair spray? He might do lots of other things, too, such as buy himself flowers, do cooking in an apron (and pretty good cooking, too!), wear jewellery, perhaps even wear a ring on his little finger. In addition he might be attentive to his figure, be very keen on personal hygiene, and enjoy watching romantic films. Would we say that that is a female mode of behaviour? Would we deem his social gender to be female, or are we merely interpreting his behaviour in such a way because these are characteristics that we usually expect to encounter in women?

Defining social gender is by no means straightforward, as it is a process rather than a fixed state. Social gender is the sum of all those attributes that allow us to say which gender a given individual belongs to. It thus comprehends everything that people say or do in order to identify themselves as a man or a woman - the way they dress, speak and move, the way they behave in the presence of others, but also the way they choose to describe themselves. These attributes and modes of behaviour are not invented anew by each individual, but are influenced by what we suppose society expects of each gender: each of us adopts a social role.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, we allow ourselves to be guided by prevailing social attitudes when we ascribe particular attributes to ourselves or to others. Imagine a bedroom in a state of extreme untidiness, littered with empty crisp packets and festering yoghurt pots. If the room belongs to a boy, we'll probably

exclaim ‘Typical boy! Total chaos!’, whereas if it’s a girl’s we might well ask ourselves ‘How on earth did *this* happen?!’ These different reactions demonstrate that we have already made assumptions about the specific characteristics of the two sexes. But where does the assumption come from that girls are tidier than boys? Is it really the case that one sex is tidier than the other? Or are we basing ourselves on social generalisations that don’t necessarily apply to particular individuals?

OUR SOCIAL GENDER IS LEARNED.

Whereas our biological gender is more or less a given, our social gender evolves through the influence of society, our upbringing, and our individual circumstances. Our social gender is something we learn as our life proceeds, and it is also something that can change at any stage of our life. At the same time, however, it remains closely connected to our physical body: our biological and social genders are two sides of the same coin.

EVERYONE HAS A SENSE OF THEIR OWN GENDER

How long is it before a child knows whether it is a boy or a girl? Before we can identify ourselves as belonging to one gender or the other, we need to be able to actually perceive ourselves and have thoughts about ourselves. And for that to happen we first have to have developed a consciousness of self. Up to the age of fourteen months children remain unable to recognise themselves in a mirror; only in the period between 15 and 24 months do infants come to realise that the image in the mirror is their own reflection. The very first time they do so can be a disconcerting spectacle, or even a decidedly comical one, as quite a few children start pulling faces the instant they recognise themselves in a mirror. Indeed in psychology the child is said to enter the ‘mirror stage’ at this point. This is the exciting developmental phase in which the self begins to evolve.

BY THE AGE OF TWO CHILDREN IDENTIFY THEMSELVES AS BOY OR GIRL.

Interestingly enough, this development is paralleled by another of major importance in the child's gender awareness, for by the age of two at the very latest, children have acquired a so-called 'core gender identity', by which psychologists mean a deep inner sense of belonging to one sex rather than the other. Our subjective experience, our own personal perception of our gender, plays a crucial role in determining which sex we identify with. Normally this perception of our gender does not occur at a conscious level. It comes to the surface only when it clashes with our biological gender. In the majority of cases our biological gender, our social gender, and our own personal sense of our gender all more or less match one another - but not in *every* case. This is readily demonstrated by people whose bodies are at variance with their subjective sense of gender. Although biologically they may be unambiguously male or female, they perceive themselves as belonging to the opposite sex.

OUR PERCEPTION OF OUR GENDER MAY DIFFER FROM OUR BIOLOGICAL GENDER.

At a certain point in our life, then, we begin to perceive ourselves as male or female. Although we may not yet have the means to express it in words, a sense begins to emerge in us that we interpret as being broadly male or broadly female. Our consciousness of self and our sense of our own gender thus both arise in early childhood. Just as we acquire a sense of our identity, so too we we develop a sense of our gender.

TO WHAT EXTENT IS MY GENDER DETERMINED BY EXTERNAL FACTORS?

It is indeed the case that the gender identity of children is subject to external influences, even before their consciousness of self begins to develop. Even though no one retains any conscious memory of these influences, their existence can be readily demonstrated, not least in various studies of the relationship between parent and infant. Although the infant itself is totally unaware of its gender, its parents and other

adults of course know perfectly well what it is, and treat the child differently according to whether it is male or female. This extends from their choice of name right through to their tone of voice and their use of words. Does it contribute to shaping your identity if you are addressed as ‘Big Boy’ or ‘Princess’?! When settling a social gender on an infant, parents and others normally take their cue from its biological gender, and it is accordingly our genes, hormones and physical characteristics that condition both the attributes that are ascribed to us, and the behaviour we are expected to display.

However, this does not mean that our social behaviour and the role we adopt within society as a whole are immutably determined by our biology or our genes. For in addition to our biological and social genders there is also our subjective sense of gender. The proposition that our biological and social genders don’t necessarily match is borne out by those who find it impossible to identify with their biological gender, and feel instead that they belong to the opposite one. The umbrella term for this phenomenon is ‘transgenderedness’. However, a variety of different words are used in reference to transgender individuals. In the twentieth century the most common term was ‘transsexuality’ (‘Transsexualität’ is also the term used in German law); today, however, ‘transgender’, ‘trans identity’ or simply ‘trans*’ are increasingly used as overall terms for trans people - a category that also includes those who define themselves as non-binary, i.e. who feel themselves to be neither male nor female.

Transgenderedness is quite distinct from sexuality or sexual orientation, relating instead solely to an individual’s perception of themselves. For this reason the word ‘transsexual’ is rejected by many of those concerned as it places too much emphasis on the physical and sexual aspect, whereas the word ‘transgender’ foregrounds *social* gender. This word is regarded by some as inadequate, however, since a person’s individual gender identity involves not only their social gender but also the question of which body they feel comfortable in.

The multiplicity of terms suggests that transgenderedness takes a whole variety of different forms. This is partly because individuals experience their gender identity in their own particular way, but they may also focus on their unwanted biological or

social gender, or indeed both. Those who don't identify with their social gender will concentrate chiefly on that and seek to modify their behaviour accordingly. And trans* people who identify with a different physical gender will quite often wish to alter their biological gender through surgery and hormone treatment.

INFANTS ARE TREATED DIFFERENTLY DEPENDING ON THEIR SEX.

This shows how important it is for our personal identity that we identify with our own gender and body, for such people not only suffer from their sense that they inhabit the wrong body: they also often feel that the wrong social gender has been imposed on them. Generally speaking we want our outward appearance to match our inner sense of ourselves.

WE WANT OUR INTERNAL SENSE OF GENDER IDENTITY TO BE MATCHED BY OUR EXTERNAL APPEARANCE.

Even in those who basically feel themselves to be in the correct body, there can be variations, and mismatches between their biological and social gender. Furthermore, it isn't necessarily the case that 'male' and 'female' are the only possibilities.

WHAT I AM, AND HOW OTHERS SEE ME

Who we are and how we behave is by no means set in stone, for even after childhood we carry on evolving. Although we change, and perhaps feel and think quite differently from the way we did ten years earlier, we know intuitively that we have remained the same person. Without this knowledge we couldn't have an identity. Our conscious mind must be constantly receptive to our thoughts and feelings, it must sort our experiences and our memories into the correct chronological sequence, and bring all of that together to give us a coherent sense of ourself. It is only through this awareness of coherence that we are able to distinguish between past, present and future.

According to psychologists, the core of our identity remains unchanged no matter how many kinds of development we may experience over time. We can

conceive of this unchanging element as being a mixture of character and temperament; an element that constantly shines through even as our personality evolves. Many psychologists speak of an 'essential self' in each and every one of us - one constituent element of which is our sense of gender identity. It is perhaps this essential self that leads most people to regard themselves as unique individuals. No one else is exactly the same as me, no one else looks exactly the same as I do. That's the case, isn't it? My character, my personal history, my particular quirks - they are what make me what I am. So why then should we assume that just because we share our gender with half the world's population, we should be exactly identical to them in that respect? Why should our gender be any less individual than the rest of us?

And the same applies, really, to *all* the characteristics ascribed to us by society. For in social terms our entire identity can be divided into a variety of different categories - for example physical attributes, gender, sexual orientation, health, background, profession, skin colour, education, wealth. Someone might be - let's say - 23 years old, female, 1 metre 70 tall, heterosexual, dark-skinned, German-born, and well educated. These attributes all tell a story and reveal something about the individual. But do they constitute the *personality* of that individual? Does the fact that someone is a programmer who was born in North Africa tell us much about them? Aren't such designations merely convenient labels enabling us to slot people into pigeon holes?

Whenever we want to describe ourselves or someone else, we find it quite useful to use categorisations such as young or old, fat or thin, well or ill, male or female, successful or unsuccessful, extrovert or introvert, since the individual's identity is thereby resolved into a set of discrete elements that an observer can readily define. Even when we visit the doctor we are categorised in terms of the symptoms we present so that he can make a diagnosis and decide on the appropriate form of treatment. In this respect, therefore, such categories benefit us and make life a little simpler by giving us a sense of order and a sense of knowing where we stand. At the same time, however, they do define our identity in terms of a specific set of characteristics, and this can be highly restrictive. Being classified in this way by others can come across to the individual concerned as accurate or inaccurate,

motivating or demotivating, pleasant or unpleasant. For who decides where 'thinness' stops and 'fatness' begins? Who defines what 'successfulness' consists in? What is clear is that these categorisations influence and even determine our perception of ourselves and hence also our identity. For when it comes to our gender identity, what matters is not merely what we ourselves consider to be male and female, but what counts as male and female in the eyes of others.