

### III

## The Dogma of Gender

When depth psychology speaks of its fantasies of early childhood, certain consistent features stand out: the variety of sexual forms. There are oral things, anal things, genital things—each of which gives pleasure in its own way. Psychology's fantasy of childhood says we are many-sexed and that there are many forms in which our sexuality is expressed. Moreover, all of these pleasures are non-gender pleasures. Gender identification doesn't come until later. Before settling as little males and little females, we are polymorphously perverse, kinky, and sexy all over; every part of the body is involved, at some time or other, in one or another form of eroticism.

Let me quote from Freud some of the characteristics of the sexual instincts: "they are numerous, emanate from manifold organic sources, act . . . independently of one another and only at a late stage achieve a more or less complete synthesis. The aim which each strives to attain is 'organ-pleasure.' . . ."<sup>1</sup> "... they have in a high degree the capacity to act vicariously for one another and . . . can readily change their objects."<sup>2</sup> The sexual instinct has the strange capacity of being able to reverse into its opposite, e.g., from passive to active, from active to passive.<sup>3</sup>



Whether Freud is 'right' about infantile sexuality is not the question here. I am concerned only with his fantasy. To summarize this fantasy:

(1) Childhood sexuality is inferior, lower, and not of our better selves. It is shameful from the perspective of more mature faculties.

(2) These instincts were originally various and numerous and came from manifold sources. Their aim was unity, synthesis. That is, if we managed to get it all together, then we have become one, a unit, and either a male or female unit.

(3) Pre-gender sexuality is something past. Manifold and numerous sexuality was true of us once but—heaven knows—not now. It was something pre-, before the healthy, fully developed persons we now are.

(4) These instincts were organic: they came from the body, are in the body. (So in later life one way to rid ourselves of these instincts is to reject the body.)

(5) Their aim was pleasure: simply physical, organ pleasure, having nothing to do at their origin with reproduction, which requires genders.

(6) They are ambivalent, changeable, becoming first this, then that. You cannot pin them down. Active becomes passive and passive turns active.

To develop out of this pleasurable, polymorphous, childish, multiple, perverse, inferior, confused state as quickly and completely as possible is the psychoanalytic aim. But now, having safely accomplished this heroic feat of maturing, let us make the reverse movement. Just for fun, let us put our maturity aside and return to that projected fantasy state, that pre-gender condition called infantile childhood.

There are some disadvantages in this return. For one, it may make us feel ashamed and inadequate. Beware of anyone who says



he does not feel at least uncomfortable back there. Not to feel lowly in the polymorphous realm denies part of the experience, that fantasy of the polymorphous as inferior, confused, lower, inadequate, non-productive. If we take seriously the phenomena of our fantasy, *we cannot have the pleasurable vicissitudes of sexual instinct without this sense of inferiority*. In fact the inferiority is one of the instinct's very vicissitudes, part of its very pleasure. So let us keep the pleasure and inferiority together, not split into lust and guilt, Id and Superego.

Here, I'd like to remind you of Euripides' *The Bacchae*. The play begins as Dionysos arrives in Thebes to teach his rites, which he does with a vengeance since the people of Thebes have not recognized his divinity. To correct this omission, Dionysos incites the women of the town to a wild religious frenzy; they rush from their households and take to the hills in Bacchic celebration.

Pentheus, the ruler of Thebes, is enraged by this Bacchic madness yet also secretly fascinated. He does not, however, join in but rather climbs a tree over the site of the revelry to watch. He revels in looking down on it all from above. Eventually the unconscious libido, these dancing, libidinous maenads, turn on him—they don't like being looked down on—and one of them, Agave, Pentheus's own mother, tears him to shreds.

This kind of superego superiority (in Freud's terms), or one-sided attitude split from the unconscious (in Jung's), is bound to result in wild revenge from the primal, the mother. The more Pentheus sets himself apart from and superior to maenad forces, the more dangerous the situation; the more polarized, the more explosive. And besides, who's kinky really—the many who are dancing or the one high up in the tree?

But just to *be* these primal forces, the maenads, is not the point either, because that self-indulgence is precisely what sends Pentheus



up a tree—call him superego, parents, authorities, society, legislation.

Wild expression and upper repression need and seem to constellate each other. The moment we lose ourselves in one, the other is going to occur. So it is crucial to step aside from this maenad-versus-Pentheus structure, identifying neither with the fantasy of full, wild expression nor the fantasy of safe superiority.

Fortunately there is a built-in safeguard to keep us from this polarized situation, a safeguard belonging to the primal zone itself. We are protected from within it by a sense of weakness, the inferiority that we mentioned as accompanying the experience of the primal level. So long as we feel sensitive about hungry mouths, anus, clitoris, penis, about bowels and masturbation, they will not appear as overwhelming powers. When we are in touch with them, we will also be in touch with a sense of inferiority. Where there is primal sexuality, there is at the same time inhibiting humility.

Of course, there are many ways around this humility, many ways to deny it. I might say I would not feel so inferior and inhibited in these lower regions if my mother had not done such or my father been so. These rationalizations (like all rationalizations) keep me unconscious. I can remain childlike and powerful by pretending that my family circumstances were just an 'accident' that got in the way of my natural self. I'd be okay were it not for others. There is an omnipotence fantasy, a hidden inflation, in this urge to blame my problems on parents and surroundings—as though out of any context, unsullied by the world, I would have been without inferiority or ambiguity.

An Eastern idea puts it the other way round. According to this view, each soul is born into the precise family and circumstances necessary for its individuation. My soul chose my family as just what it needed. My mother and father are precisely the sort my



psyche required for its fate. The shock of this thought shows how much we have invested in external determinism and how dedicated we are to disowning natal realities. Actually the two experiences go together, external causation and internal inflation.

So let us consider the sense of instinctual erogenous inferiority as autochthonous and basic to the primal zone itself. Let us affirm that to be pre-gender or un-gender is also to feel inferior.

Inferiority was stressed by another depth psychologist, Alfred Adler. He spoke of organ inferiority, by which he meant an inferiority rooted in the physical body. As Freud's fantasy was bodily, so too was Adler's. But by imagining an actual organ as afflicted, Adler evoked a more literal, biological sense of infirmity, infirmity in the basis of physical being.

What was Adler getting at with this idea? In Freud's view, one could grow out of much of one's polymorphous perversity, leaving only a few traces (as foreplay). But Adler insisted we do not grow out of these inferiorities, so much as we construct opposites to delude ourselves away from them. The basic pair of these dichotomized opposites for Adler is masculine and feminine. In other words, *the construct of gender protects us from feeling our inferiority*.

The neurotic then orients his life according to these opposites of masculine-feminine and goes on to collect, with some help from the culture, more opposites along the same lines. Masculine-and-feminine becomes brave-and-cowardly, rich-poor, cruel-tender, victorious-defeated, defiant-obedient, and so on.

By entering into masculine and feminine constructs, we move into the neurosis that has been built to compensate the inferiority we feel in infancy as organic, physical beings. Since we need to do something with this inferiority, we construct opposite poles, one from which to flee and one toward which to strive. Of course, the



'feminine' is that from which to flee and the 'masculine' that toward which to strive.

Do note here that it is not only we women who are cursed with this experience of inferiority. Men are too. We *all* have a kind of penis envy, a castration anxiety, and feeling of biological inadequacy. We all strive away from pre-gender consciousness, what Adler called 'psychic hermaphroditism,' and then spend our lives trying to compensate this basic sense of inferiority. Unfortunately, in the flight from inferiority we lose the pleasure as well.

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But gender too brings pleasure—a pleasure of another kind, one that has to do precisely with male and female, the play between them, their tensions and unions. Gender cannot be ignored.

Ideas of gender distinction, of masculine and feminine, exist the world over and are utilized by most cultures in their languages, social structures, and mythologies. Gender is archetypal. We have always thought in terms of gender, and most probably some part of us always will. But that doesn't mean we need think that way all the time.

That gender is a form in which we *can* feel and think and experience does not make it right or true. If it is archetypal, it requires exactly that we *not* think this way all the time. For if we take one archetypal perspective exclusively, we are caught by it. And the result of being caught by an archetype is that experience shrinks. We cannot see beyond the archetype's confines, and we begin to interpret more and more of our experience only in its terms. We get single-minded. An archetypal idea per se is an overvalued idea that must be 'seen through' and placed in perspective.

But still, and once again, this gender archetype is so especially pleasurable! In fact, I wonder if pleasure is not precisely what gender



is about. When thinking and seeing in terms of gender, are we not engaging in a pleasurable way of perceiving—a way that eroticizes and engenders, brings to life, the world around us?

The difference between pre-gender pleasure and the pleasure of gender may simply be that we feel the first (pre-gender) as primitive, inferior, multiple, narcissistic and low, i.e., “bad” pleasure. While the second, blessed by society and by psychology, we feel as mature, reality-oriented, related, productive, i.e., “good” pleasure, which is also ego-syntonic. And here again is the rub: ego-syntonic tends to become ego-defensive. What agrees with the ego supports and is used by it. Thus begins the dogma of gender.

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Thanks to the women’s movement, most of us are aware of the pervasiveness of sexism in our culture. Perhaps it is time to look to ourselves to see what sorts of gender thinking we too have engaged in. There are two strands within feminist thinking which, for the sake of imaginative simplification, I’ll treat as though they were two distinct characters. But please bear in mind that my subject is gender thinking and not feminist thinking. I am inventing these imaginative simplifications not to criticize actual women or feminism, but to look more closely into dogmatic ways of thinking that would distort the intentions of feminism by exclusively and defensively identifying it with gender.

The first character says: “I am a woman—biologically, emotionally, in my very being. Because I am a woman, my values are different from those of men. It is unnatural for me to think hierarchically or analytically. Society, because it is the result of men’s thinking, oppresses my femininity. I want more attention paid to women’s needs: day care centers, wages for my housework, more adequate divorce laws. Furthermore, I want women in government



and in the boardroom. Being women, they will bring a feminine eros and understanding to offset male rationality. I want women, i.e., 'the feminine,' to be more highly valued."

A second strand of feminism or feminist caricature says: "Don't tell me what it is to be a woman. Don't talk to me of 'the feminine.' Femininity is a category invented by men to keep women inferior and pliable, fulfilling men's needs. Don't tell me my duty is to feel, receive, bring eros or beauty. I shall bring whatever I as an individual bring. I am first of all a person, and I want nothing barred from me on the basis of gender. I can think analytically and work creatively. Moreover, I can climb telephone poles, drive trucks, build houses, and do road work. My body is my own to do with as I wish, sexually or otherwise, and I shall dress and walk and talk however I choose."

It is not a question of siding with one or the other of these caricatures. From a psychological point of view, either may be using her ideas of gender defensively. Let's take the first: her idea of femininity, her gender, is her ego identity. She knows what she knows *because* she is a woman. Because she is a woman, she thinks differently and has access to feelings that men, because they are men, lack.

This collective attitude we all share to the extent that we think in terms of male propensities and female propensities. The problem comes when we organize expectations around these assumptions. For example, in many Jungian training institutes, trainees are required to analyze with both a female and a male analyst, the idea being that these experiences will complement one another. With a woman analyst, the experience will be more feeling, more motherly and receptive with greater emphasis on 'eros.' With a male, it will be harder, more phallic and 'logos'-oriented. This notion of analysis presupposes all sorts of gender principles and assumes that analyzed persons act in accord with mature gender-identified characteristics.



Gender may be used to justify personality traits. When I explain my behavior on the basis of gender—"I do this *because* I am a woman"—I gain an identity and self-affirmation that is difficult to question. There is no doubt about physical gender, so when my attitudes are tied to and buttressed by this referent, they too may not be doubted. Engendered attitudes are self-containing and self-confirming. Because our female bodies are internal, receiving and sensitive, we are superior in internality, feelings and sensitivities—simply *because* we are women.

This gender-identified attitude deters the deeper intentions of feminism, for it turns the richness of individual self-discovery into a sexism that narrows rather than broadens perception and experience. That is to say, the person who sees through these defensive gender spectacles may come to see only in terms of them.

I know someone who perceives even countries and nationalities as masculine or feminine. Southern countries are feminine, since they inspire feeling, eros, and body. Northern countries are masculine, because they are cold and evoke thinking, spirit, intellect. Any Italian, Greek, or Spaniard in a dream automatically means eros, whereas an Englishman or Scandinavian is thinking and intellectual, regardless of who the particular figure is and what he or she is doing in the dream. Even animals are 'gendered.' Cats and water birds and boa constrictors are female; lions, dogs and horses male, as though animals came in only one sex. The specific image or individual in the dream is clouded in the easy generality of gender. Dogma in psychology exists frequently where we are most fuzzy, not necessarily where our attitudes are sharp and unyielding.

Of course, the situation is worse when a male or female figure in a dream is acting in a contra- or non-gendered way. Should a male figure be, say, knitting, and a female performing a surgical operation—then the figures have most certainly gone wrong. To those who look at it this way, it is never our gender *ideas* that are in need



of reshaping, but rather dream *figures* that continue to be not as they ought. Such is the power of dogma.

Dogmas bar us from perceptive and particularized feeling as they truncate original, interesting thought. Wearing these simple gender blinders, we write whole books in terms of masculine (patriarchy) and feminine (matriarchy), interpret whole epochs, entire lives.

I mentioned a second strand of feminism or feminist character, the one at war with gender distinction of any sort. She too may use her gender ideas defensively. Whereas the first figure made an ego identity of her femininity, thereby bolstering herself, the second, feeling her biological gender to be a weakness, assumes her strength lies elsewhere. When she is feminine, she cannot be strong; when she is strong, she cannot be feminine. This character seeks to prove herself, so she takes on tasks that require great physical and/or emotional strength. Or—and this is more frequent—she performs her work *as though* it required great strength, making the effort, not the results, her confirmation. She is 'strong' because she is driven to do things in a strong way.

This character, also, has identified the qualities of softness, receptiveness, relatedness, and eros with femininity. But because she is not the sort to gather power through these qualities, she defines her ego in contrast to them.

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We have looked at two kinds of gender thinking, each dogmatic and defensive. We have also, however, recognized gender as a pleasurable biological and social fact. So the question: how might we enjoy the delight of gender without falling into these defensive, limiting dogmas?

One move might be to reconnect gender with the original pre-gender realm of pleasure. Rather than viewing gender as a develop-



ment away from the polymorphous, perhaps we may experience it as another form of the many pleasures, one of the ways sensuality enjoys itself.

This shift of emphasis, though slight, dethrones gender from its sovereign claim to unity and superiority, unseats it from its pinnacle as the most highly developed and unquestioned state. Perhaps it is not gender as such that is the problem anyway, but its singleness, the monotheism of gender, gender as the epitome of unity and identity.

When gender is restored to its polymorphous roots in pleasure, rejoined with an awareness of variety, changeability, shifts of role and function—then its pleasure includes a sense of the lower, the multiple and the incomplete. Gender sexuality by claiming less enjoys itself more, freed from the self-justifying, defensive dogmas surrounding it.

Experienced as polymorphous, gender becomes a quality of particulars rather than a generality into which particulars must fit. Sexual details—a male shape of buttock, a female curve of hip—become qualities adding to the individual, in the same way as do height, eye color, body build, and other sensuous particulars.

Roughness and softness, squares and curves, subtle movements of penetrating and receiving bring pleasure to a life experienced immediately, variously and complexly. As a painter would not begin a portrait with a generality, neither would a sensuous experience of life begin with an overall scheme as to how life ought to be. Yet the idea of gender does precisely that.

Often those who have most notably viewed the world in terms of gender distinction, from the pre-Socratics through Aristotle and on, were concerned primarily with thought. Their task was to form concepts, build classifications and organizational schemes. Linnaeus, for example, used gender to order the botanical world. Freud schema-



tized the meaning of symbols in terms of gender morphology. We draw upon gender distinctions when we need the broadest possible conceptual organization. Yin/Yang, lunar/solar, right/left brain, passive/active, matriarchy/patriarchy provide large oppositional categories. Biological gender is usually clearly observable, universal, unambiguous, offering a point of view that need not be confused by the variety and ambivalence of phenomena. This gender simplicity works for more than biology. I find that when I am confused, exasperated, or overwhelmed with emotion, I fall back on basic and unambiguous ways of organizing. I say, "Why does he always do that? Because he's a man—that's why!" I explain on the basis of gender something that would take more differentiation than I have available at the moment.

But most of the time one does not need these rough and ready categories. Usually one is free to enjoy perceiving persons as they are, each in a style of individual complexity. Then gender categories and schemes are an interference. When attributes are organized and taped, one can't hear, can't see, can't sense apart from the terms already given. Besides, a good deal of individuality is pre-gender.

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The two caricatures we looked at earlier were 'straight' in their relations to gender. By straight I mean their notions of gender were unambiguous. Each in her manner—one by being female, the other anti-female—had ironed out the kinks in her identification. Each had limited her awareness to a narrow ego realm in which she felt adequacy and power. Put aside were the many forms and inferior feelings of the polymorphous.

This straightening occurs in many other ways as well. In the field of psychology, it appears especially in what we call *identity*. A few



years ago the Trustees of the American Psychiatric Association announced they would no longer consider homosexuality a mental disorder. But what *was* a disorder, they maintained, was "sexual orientation disturbances." This means that someone who believes herself homosexual and lives as a homosexual with no qualms is okay. The moment she wavers, the moment she thinks, "I don't know. Sometimes I feel maybe something else, I don't know..."—well, then she is sick. Or he, of course.

In other words, what the American Psychiatric Association is after is straightness—and it no longer matters whether heterosexual or homosexual. It doesn't matter which way one is straight, just so all kinks are made smooth, just so the person has identified completely and unambiguously.

Yet on its deepest level, where sexuality touches the basis of being, does it not bring up unexpected contradictions, surprising moments, peculiar feelings? Are we not all at times rather confused concerning sexuality—where it is coming from, what it wants, where it has gone? To straighten all this out would be to miss it. Sexuality *is* the unexpected. Through it, consciousness drops into deeper bodily and more mysterious grounds.

Going straight also hurts marriage—an institution which anyway has that tendency in its legal and social functions. Couples often report that though they enjoyed their sex life before, now that they are married the fun has disappeared. One woman said that many of the sexual pleasures she enjoyed before marriage she now no longer dared enjoy. It was somehow too embarrassing. By taking the straight vows of marriage with its gender roles, she had straightened out as well her subsocial, polymorphous possibilities.

It is difficult to bring the perverse levels of the psyche into marriage. To do so is a contra-naturam act demanding effort and attention. The most natural, easiest, and unobstructed course is to follow



the flow simply into marital straightness (and eventually marital boredom).

Even the current notion of androgyny presents an opportunity for straightening. Here again, the idea of opposites is drawn upon (there are masculine qualities and feminine ones), but with androgyny they are imagined to be carefully proportioned. With our 'masculine' qualities and our 'feminine' qualities balanced, we are safe from psychological extremities.

What the concept of androgyny declares as really truly masculine and genuinely feminine ends up in a realm of concepts and abstractions: plus and minus systems, circles, Venus and Mars, a 'human' figure neatly drawn and perfectly divided. Missing is any sense of flesh, pain, confusion, or even life. The very word *androgyny* is clinically clean, straight, and sterile, free from the germs of time and struggle and disrepute. There is no sense of inferiority, for androgyny is the transcending, trans-sexual solution, not the soiling one.

A curious fact about psychological work is that it requires dirty words. Patients use dirty words. Words rank, tangled, conflicted, and smelling of history are humus for the soul in its struggles. To lose this dirt in the language of the psyche leaves the soil of the psyche barren.

The real difference between androgyny and polymorphousness is the experience. Let us imagine I experience myself as an androgyne, a little bit masculine here, a little feminine there. I feel okay, balanced into an idealized construct about myself.

The reason I prefer to experience myself as a bit soiled and kinky is that it preserves my primal, historical sense. If those experiences of dirtiness and inadequacy were as important in the formation of my particular personality as depth psychology claims they were, then if I value myself and my uniqueness, that basis is sacred. The basis is base and the bottom soiled.



Of course, *anything* can turn into a defense. One can ride one's inadequacy as a masochism; one can become genderless in a sexless, childish style. But again, by becoming identified—with the child in this case—one has become straight. Indeed *any move can become straight and defensive*. Any move can become an identification—straight child, straight male, straight female, straight androgyne.

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With the resolve not to identify in any of these ways, let us return to the pleasure principle, which for Freud rules the polymorphous realm. This principle is the desire for immediate gratification.

Yet it is strange how pleasures wear themselves out. Something pleasurable at one moment is no longer so at the next. Pleasures grow weary of themselves and then seek new refinements in order to become again enjoyable.

Half the world was discovered due to pleasure's drive for refinement. What-in-heaven's-name made us think we needed silk, damask, muslin, satin, velvet; sugar, pepper, ginger, cloves, cinnamon; maize, sesame, rice, lemons, melons, peaches, apricots, cherries, dates...? What made us tire of our simple meads, driving us to the many refinements of drink? What bored us with our daily bread, our basic meat, to develop the variety and complexity of cooking we have today? (Certainly it was no notion of balanced vitamins and minerals.) What moves our continual changes in fashion and in decoration, our explorations in architecture, literature, painting, music? Indeed, our very culture is testament to some mad, autonomous drive within pleasure for its own refinement.

Add to this the enormous variety of different kinds of pleasure—the oral pleasures: subtleties of taste, texture, heat, smell, the fact that this with that tastes different from this with something



else; the anal pleasures: work, discipline, putting aside, holding back and cutting off, building up, emotion, color, tension; letting it all out, exploding, making, creating, defining. To differentiate in the realm of pleasure we need never climb out and look down wisely from above. Pleasure has in itself its own differentiation, and in fact pleasure *demand*s it.

The polymorphous under-realm has form and logos within it. As the Pseudo-Democritus is said to have said: "Nature rejoices in nature, nature subdues nature, and nature rules over nature."<sup>4</sup> We might say the same concerning nature's pleasure: pleasure rejoices in pleasure, pleasure subdues pleasure, and pleasure rules over pleasure. The polymorphous realm continuously works on itself—defining, refining, and recombining its pleasures.

This work within pleasure upon pleasure implies a kind of natural light, *lumen naturalis*. As we end, let me relate a dream in which this appears:

A young woman dreams that her sister (whom she regards as fat, stupid and ordinary—the one who stays at home) is pulling her by the foot deeper and deeper down in the ocean. The dreamer struggles but finally gives in to her sister's downward pull. As she descends she finds to her surprise that there is air in the depths. She can breathe. The region is infused with a natural, phosphorescent light emanating from shapes in the depths. In the deepest regions beneath the ocean, nature reveals its own light.

This lower, instinctual, many-formed level of our biological existence has light and is highly organized—like the dance of the maenads (and not at all the dark and wildly chaotic force we sometimes project it as being).

When we experience this pre-gender realm as dark and chaotic—when we feel that if we let go of gender identification and ideas of masculine and feminine, if we let perversity into awareness



and other sexual forms into society, then indeed everything will break down—we are within a particular archetypal constellation, and it may happen according to how we prophesy it.

When we feel this way, we might stop and see where we are looking from. Most probably we are balanced high up in a tree, like Pentheus, superior to it all, looking down.

1. Sigmund Freud, "Instincts and their Vicissitudes" (1915), vol. IV of *Collected Papers* (London: Hogarth Press, 1925), p. 68.
2. Freud, p. 69.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *CW* 14, §21, 152n.