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ON THE STATUS OF THE CONCEPTS OF MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY

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Observer bias is considerable in studies investigating differences between the characters of the sexes, partly because "masculinity" and "femininity" are not empirical concepts. Instead, they function to sort out phenomena by determining a range of significance, thus encouraging discriminatory evaluation of human action.

To support this I argue:

1. Particular character traits are assessed (valued and understood) differently depending on whether they apply to men or women.
2. Counterexamples to the generalization, "All men are masculine," are not accepted as real counterexamples, but are rather regarded as abnormal (subnormal, not rare).

† † †

INTRODUCTION

Many scientific studies address, in one way or another, the issue of differences between the characters of the sexes; and the concepts of masculinity and femininity, as they are used in scientific literature, are assumed to be based on findings. As such, the issue is presupposed to be a purely factual one, and tests are designed to discover what the differences are, as well as what their source or sources are, in order to better understand male and female natures. Observer bias in these sorts of studies is considerable; women entering the sciences are documenting it.

Naturally, one wonders why observer bias is prevalent. In fact, it arises because "masculinity" and "femininity" are not empirical concepts: They do not arise as a result of, nor are they susceptible to, empirical investigation. Instead, they are evaluative concepts which function to categorize and interpret behavioral data.

I

Evidence is being amassed which points to serious observer bias prevalent in tests seeking a biological basis for the alleged phenomena of masculinity and femininity. In the first place, as Kaplan and Bean (1976:99ff) point out, scientists exaggerate male-female differences by attempting to correlate traits thought to be masculine with testosterone, a male hormone, while failing to look for correlates of the same traits in female biology. Rarely are attempts made to discover hormonal correlates of aggression in females. Further, scien-

tists often define aggression by how it is manifested in or manipulated by males, seek male patterns of aggression in females, and conclude that females are not aggressive. Rather than investigate male and female patterns of aggression, which may differ due to situations available for expressing aggression, scientists report that aggression is a male trait—the very assumption on which the research was based. In the name of establishing fact, scientists perpetuate cultural value.

Other aspects of observer bias are indicated when one compares results of similar hormonal studies conducted at different times by different scientists. Rosenberg (1973) surveyed studies of castrated male guinea pigs that had been injected with estrogen. As published by one group, this resulted in increased mounting activity. According to another, it resulted in decreased mounting and increased receptive postures. A third group reported a decrease in any sexual behavior. Rosenberg (1973:114) notes: "When three different laboratories get three different results on nearly identical experiments, observer bias, even in guinea pigs, is very likely." The history of research on sex differences indicates that experimental methods are fraught with cultural bias.

Yet another aspect of observer bias has been brought to light by Horney (1974). When mapped on a bell curve, the results of tests designed to indicate the presence of analytic ability, such as Whitkin's rod and frame test, yield far greater statistical differences between individuals within one sex than between the sexes. Nevertheless, differences between the sexes are deemed significant, purportedly indicating a sex difference in analytic ability. But the results defy predictability of individual behavior and do not justify differential treatment, thus revealing that the alleged statistical significance is illusory. (Dr. Horney proposes looking for differences of character traits within situations, not within biology. In this way, one need not regard Golda Meir or Indira Gandhi as abnormal females, but rather as normal heads of state.)

Grave consequences of observer bias become apparent when male scientists are asked whether political restrictions on women are biologically justifiable. Hall (1976:81) notes that biologists are frequently called upon "to evaluate the extent and significance of biologically controlled differences between the sexes." Nineteenth-century scientists provided "professional" opinions with respect to women's capacity to reason. One outstanding example of observer bias in the late

nineteenth century, noted by Klein (1971:42-43), was the certainty of brain anatomists that the frontal lobe, which was then believed to be the seat of thought, was more developed in males than females. (And it was not until scientists no longer believed the frontal lobe to be the seat of thought that they admitted the male frontal lobe is not larger than that of the female.) As Whitbeck (1976) points out, the "women-are-undeveloped-men" view pervades scientific theory.

Scientists "found" femininity to be incompatible with rationality, and this was used to justify political restrictions on women. As Korsemeyer (1976) explains, seventeenth-century liberal philosophers such as Locke justified the rights of citizenship on the basis of man's ability to reason, an ability which distinguishes him from (other) animals. Naturally, if women were not prone to rationality, there were no grounds on which to bestow the rights of citizenship, i.e., to remove political restrictions.

II

Observer bias, thus, is a serious problem prevalent in studies investigating character differences between men and women. This is not simply due to failings of individual scientists. A conceptual confusion is involved, for the status of "masculinity" and "femininity" is not empirical. The concepts do not arise from empirical investigation and discovery, nor are they really susceptible to disputation.

In the first place, character traits paradigmatic of "masculinity," such as aggression, are assessed differently depending on whether they apply to men or women. Aggression is normally considered a flaw in women while regarded as an asset in men. On the surface, this appears to be insufficient indication that "masculinity" and "femininity" are not empirical. By analogy, fragility is valued differently when applied to various forms of glass; it is considered a flaw in windowpanes and an asset in wine glasses. Nevertheless, the basis for the valuation is empirical. Windowpanes require sturdiness to be effective weathering agents, while the purposes for which wine glasses are designed make sturdiness a defect.

However, the analogy does not hold. Windowpanes are designed and manufactured by people for a certain purpose. Men and women are not designed or manufactured by people for a certain purpose. To claim that aggression as valued in men but not in women is analogous to sturdiness as valued in windowpanes but not in wine glasses, is to commit a form of the naturalistic fallacy. The implication is that men and women, while not designed by people, are designed by nature, as if the fact that aggression is valued in men but not in women is justified by (natural) fact, by the natural purposes for which they were designed and used. However, since people did not design men and women—if, indeed, it even makes sense to talk of men and women being designed—any purpose for which they might be used is determined only from observing what they are capable of. (This is not true of window-

panes.) And as not all things men and women are capable of are valued (e.g., women are capable of aggression), there is no basis in (natural) fact for valuing aggression in men but not women. So, the matter is not analogous to the valuation of sturdiness in windowpanes but not wine glasses. Hence, that traits paradigmatic of "masculinity" and "femininity" are valued differently, depending on whether they apply to males or females, suggests that such traits do not play a legitimate role in correlations seeking biological bases of sex differentiation. It also indicates that "masculinity" and "femininity" are not based on empirical findings.

In the second place, character traits paradigmatic of "masculinity" and "femininity" are not only assessed differently in that they are valued differently in men and women, they are also understood differently. (This is not true of fragility in glass.) An aggressive male is normally seen as confident and ambitious. Aggression in a woman is normally viewed as indicative of frustration and neurosis. As confidence is rarely equated with frustration, researchers are bound to "find" that male and female natures differ, which is to say that such findings are not the result of empirical discovery but rather of cultural biases. And this is, at least in part, because the concepts of masculinity and femininity encourage discriminatory perception and evaluation of human action such as aggressive behavior. As such, the concepts themselves do not arise from empirical investigation, nor are they really susceptible to disconfirmation.

III

Perhaps the easiest way to detect the status of a concept is to form a generalization and test it by counterexample. If a concept is empirical in nature, that is, susceptible to research, the generalization will be susceptible to refutation. For example, the generalization, "All bachelors are unmarried men," is unlike the generalization, "All grass is green," in that the latter is subject to empirical investigation, while the former is not. Novelist Willa Cather describes the reddish prairie grass of Nebraska, and one could discover upon investigation that, in fact, not all grass is green. In this case, a counterexample proves the generalization false. Further, red prairie grass is no more and no less a subnormal strain of grass than is green crab grass or Kentucky bluegrass. All are real grass, even if there are some differences in chemical composition.

Alternatively, should a novelist attempt to describe bachelors who are married, this is not the sort of topic about which investigations might be conducted. The truth of "All bachelors are unmarried men" stems from the words themselves. Anyone claiming to have a counterexample has simply not learned what "bachelor" means. Nothing will function as a counterexample, which is to say that the concept is not subject to scientific research. It is not empirical. It is analytic.

Now consider the statements, "All women are feminine" or "All men are masculine." When a novelist describes a man

who is not masculine, the situation is not entirely analogous to the bachelor example; the temptation is not actually to claim that this person does not understand what "men" means. However, it is equally true that one does not react as in the grass example. The result has not been a simple discovery, perhaps with surprise, that not all men are masculine. Instead, the counterexamples are acknowledged, but are not accepted as "real" men. Somehow these men are abnormal, "effeminate." Only certain traits are applicable to "real" men, even though other traits are found in men. This is to say that the basis for selection lies in cultural value and not in empirical investigation and discovery.

One might object, by analogy, that a counterexample to "All cats are four-legged" is also regarded as abnormal; hence, that counterexamples are not readily accepted does not show that a given claim is not empirical. Yet, the analogy does not hold. In the first place, the abnormality arises due to the fact that the cat was once four-legged and has since lost a leg due to an accident. Further, a cat having three legs as a result of an accident is not thereby less of a "real" cat. And should a three-legged strain of cat develop, one would come to discover that not all cats are four-legged. Three-legged cats would eventually be viewed as no more an abnormal, i.e., substandard, strain of cat than red grass is viewed as an abnormal strain of grass, rare, perhaps, depending on numbers, but not substandard, not any less a real cat.

Others might object that there is a significant difference between generalizations (All men are masculine) and generalities (Most men are masculine), and while a counter example to the former is regarded as abnormal rather than a "real" counterexample, it is because in fact the generality is true. This, however, begs the question.

The distinction between a generalization and a generality is useful only when one is trying to prove a generality false. One bit of red grass proves that not all grass is green, but it does not disprove the generality, "Most grass is green." Yet, this does not salvage the generality from the issue raised here. When a counterexample is uncovered in science, while it can potentially prove a theory false, it may, in fact, be used to prove the theory false, or it may be discounted as an exception. But there are limits to discarding counterexamples, beyond which they become significant. In the case of investigations of differences between men and women relating to the characters of the sexes, the discarding of counterexamples, even in "objectively measurable" areas, is carried to extremes. Thus, scientists were once convinced that female frontal lobes were slightly smaller than male frontal lobes, discounting as an exception any female frontal lobe larger than a male frontal lobe. This occurred not only in spite of the fact that the generalization is false, but also in spite of the fact that the generality is false.

Further, if an appeal to generality attempts to justify why a counterexample is regarded as abnormal, at most it

might explain why a counterexample is regarded as abnormal, i.e., rare. But in questions about traits paradigmatic of "masculinity" and "femininity," counterexamples are not regarded as rare; they are treated as exceptions to be discounted because they are abnormal, i.e., substandard. In truly empirical investigations, just a few of a sort of x do not make those x's any the less "real" x's. Thus, an appeal to generalities to salvage "masculinity" and "femininity" as empirical concepts fails; the evaluative nature of these concepts equally affects the generality and the generalization.

IV

"Masculinity" and "femininity" are limiting concepts unlike "greenness" and not entirely unlike "material object." They function to sort out phenomena by determining a range of significance, and, in that sense, they limit perception. They facilitate interpretation of human action—action that is otherwise interpretable—by throwing a certain light on it (as is true of any prejudgmental concept). Thus, for example, the actions of a wife who puts raw eggs in her husband's lunch pail will be viewed as indicative of feminine dizziness (though not professional absent-mindedness) rather than a conscious or non-conscious aggressive act of sabotage in a situation devoid of real power for self-determination. The former fits the model of femininity.

Until "masculinity" and "femininity" are disregarded and discredited and the paradigms lose their preferred status, there will be no objective investigation relating to the characters of males and females. There is a conceptual confusion underlying the attempt to conduct studies to discover characteristics peculiar to women, for example, in order to discover the true nature of femininity, when the perception of these characteristics already depends on a concept of femininity. No wonder there is observer bias. "Masculinity" and "femininity" do not function as empirical concepts; hence, studies investigating paradigmatic traits, or phenomena relating to paradigmatic traits, will only reinforce existing valuations while appearing to locate findings in fact.

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