

Gender: Mind, Body, Community

Gregory Nero

Abstract—This essay is a preliminary attempt to organize my current opinions on gender by exploring gender from three distinct but intimately connected perspectives: gender of the mind, gender of the body, and gender of the community. These three categories and their intersections will serve as a foundation for illustrating my experiences with gender. The essay will begin by addressing the question “What is gender?” to motivate and propel the discussion into the three aforementioned genres before concluding with a discussion of the ever-present question of “Why am I non-binary?” which will be an investigation of my experience with gender and a journey of introspection for my own sake. This essay is therefore the light, the object, and the shadow all at once: the concept, the self, and the psyche, all of which exist in community with themselves and with others. Gender means something different to everybody, but here I will explore what it means to me at this stage of my life.

Index Terms—gender, identity, mind, body, community

I. WHAT IS GENDER?

The gender-binary is a reductionist’s agenda and exists because it is *convenient* for it to exist. Let’s start by trying to answer the question of “What is gender?” with an illustrative dialogue which is pretty common. To the question, the answer might be: “Gender is if you are a boy or if you are a girl.” What naturally follows this answer is, for example, the question: “Well, what does it mean to be a boy, or, a man?” This question alone is a platform for lots of great and productive discussion, but in many situations it leads us to the answer: “If you have a penis and testicles you are a boy.” What a horribly dismal and shallow world it would be if we accepted this answer as the end-all! True, there are boys who have these reproductive organs but this doesn’t automatically make you a boy, and just because you are a boy doesn’t imply you have those organs. To even ask the question “What does it mean to be a man or woman, boy or girl?” Is to jump head-first into the sea of the psyche, of identity, of nuanced experience and the culmination of years of socialization. I start with this dialogue to emphasize the separation between gender identity and body alone (more on the relationship between mind and body identity to come later in the essay). Let’s again consider this more productive question and run with it: “What does it mean to be a man or a woman?” Here we can start to get at something with substance. Now, the values emerge. The burdens placed on us and the joys afforded to us by simply being “man” or “woman,” the privileges we inherit and the discrimination we face by being one or the other. Here we start to see gender as something more nuanced than “boys wear blue and girls wear pink.” It’s more than shopping for soap or choosing sizes of clothing or an answer on an online questionnaire. Gender is a mechanism for introspection, for perception, for interaction, for self-discovery. There’s a beautiful and chaotic fluidity to it. It’s a lens through which things are perceived.

It’s something that can be seen and that can’t be seen. It’s the condensed vapor on the foggy bathroom mirror of identity that we can draw little hearts with our finger into and blow again with our own breath to rewrite it. Are we doomed to live rigidly bound to crags of this reduced scheme and the stereotypes forced on us because of it? No, no, no, no. Unless we can hear the word “man” or the word “woman” without any preconceived notion of what either of those might mean we cannot ignore the ways that the gender binary has influenced our way of thinking. As an illustrative metaphorical example, consider the question: “What is love?” We all agree that this isn’t something that can be answered so simply. We all have the unique right to figure out what love means for ourselves and use this concept, this entity of *love*, to grow with ourselves and our community. It is a *platform* on which we can build something beautiful. And so too is gender. By asking the simple question of “What is gender?” we give ourselves the opportunity to critically think about our own identity and how we interact with others. Imagine if somebody told you what love meant to them. Surely, you might agree with some parts of their definition. But there’s a good chance that their definition is incomplete for you. That’s because love is intimate. There are secrets we keep for ourselves and the ones we love that make it so spectacular. Now consider if you shared what love meant to you and were received with “Well, that’s not how I see it so you’re wrong.” Who are they to deprive you of your own intimate way of experiencing the world? And so too with how we can think about gender. It means something different to everyone and that’s what makes it so beautiful. Yes, in some cases it wreaks havoc: men absentmindedly inheriting power and women being discriminated against simply because of their gender. But this is even more a reason to be aware of gender and the ways the binary affects us. Furthermore, gender is something we should get to decide for ourselves. Autonomy of the mind and body includes autonomy of gender and gender expression (To fit this into our framework, we could say we have unique and individual rights to our gender of the mind and similarly we have the rights to express that identity through gender of the body).

So, to answer: “What is gender?” means to weave a tapestry from the treads of billions of unique experiences. We quickly see how this question can become a philosophy. What does gender mean to me? To start to address this question, I have recently found it convenient to think about three areas: gender of the mind, gender of the body, and gender of the community. Each of these feel uniquely different from one another but their intersections form a more comprehensive picture of what gender is and what it means to me.

I’d also like to comment before I proceed: it is not my objective to destroy the gender binary, since many find comfort and peace in it. Relationships, the way society operates: much

of it rides on the stability of the gender binary. And, I'm not trying to be a vigilante for chaos (yet, anyways). I simply want to critically think about it and follow those thoughts where I can.

II. GENDER OF THE MIND

I treasure gender of the mind most dearly. This is where I began my adventures with gender and gender identity. I hold the belief that gender is not something that you can see. This isn't to say that gender lives in the mind alone, but I cherish gender of the mind the most because it feels the most personal. The mind is a sacred place. Gender, being a platform for personal growth and a way of interacting with the world and with myself, is something that first and foremost lives in my mind. What is my gender? That is a question for the mind. I want to know myself, deeply, to my core: I want to be self-intimate. And one aspect of that self-knowing is having the continued discussion with myself: "Do I have a gender and if I do what does that mean?" As somebody who identifies as non-binary I don't have a firm and resolute gender of the mind. And because my mind is mine and mine alone, I alone get to decide that identity. For someone to say to me "No, you are not non-binary" means to subvert my authority and autonomy to have my own identity, which should be a moral crime (what someone actually means when they say this is "No, I don't understand you and I have no desire to, so I will instead invalidate you"). Gender of the mind is also the least tangible, which makes it particularly difficult to describe. It's the seed from which we sprout, buried beneath the soil. And what sprouts? We do: again, and again and again, season after season. And so, we now consider: how is the gender of the mind reflected in gender of the body?

III. GENDER OF THE BODY

In what ways do I express the gender of the mind outwardly? How am I perceived by others? And does the way I am perceived by others influence my own perception of myself? How important is it to me that I am perceived by others the way I perceive myself? So many interesting questions to answer. The body is often a powerful force for both euphoria and dysphoria when it comes to gender. When my body is in unison with how my mind sees myself, in whatever complicated way that may be, I feel euphoric. The body, in its entirety (hair, voice, style, mannerisms, etc...) is the platform by which I can express my mind, and is the way I am ultimately perceived by others, especially at first glance. Note: the body is not the mind and is therefore not an identity but a reflection of it! Yes, I can express my gender through my body, but my body does not define my gender. (Interesting tangent here: personality vs. gender? A lot of these discussions of gender and identity and perception – it feels like we're just talking about personality. As in, personality of the mind, personality of the body, personality of the community. Who am I? How do I interact with the world? This feels very similar to how I might go about describing my personality. So, what's the difference? Why even bother with gender when we could

just focus on personality? Why does it have to be gender-centric? It's my opinion that gender expression and identity is a facet of personality and expression. Of course, there are stereotypical castings for different kinds of personalities to each of the binary genders. But we are, often daily, cast into both different kinds of personalities and genders. I can be called annoying, kind, persistent, angry, short-tempered, loving. I can also be called man, woman, faggot, queer. Personality, gender, identity: they are all connected. We assign importance to what matters to us. And I think that gender has a profound effect on the way I interact with the world. Agree or disagree, it doesn't matter. It matters to me right now, so I'm going to write about it.) There is intimacy in getting to know somebody's mind, at which point a person is their essence and not merely a body reflecting their essence, but by and large we are perceived shallowly, quickly. Therefore, the body can be a platform for validation, and just as easily, for invalidation. Being mis-gendered as a man can feel dysphoric because it is dissonant with how I perceive myself. However, when I am correctly gendered based on my expressed gender of the body, it feels extremely euphoric. So, I can't easily dismiss the importance of the gender of the body. At the end of the day, I will be perceived over and over again until the day I die. And my body is an ambassador for how others will perceive me. It is often said "gender is a performance" [Butler] and the gender of the body is a perfect example of that. I am learning to accept euphoria where it exists and grow through dysphoria where it exists. And I can't hold it against people for accidentally mis-gendering me. Since I hold such an importance to gender of the mind, it wouldn't make sense to get angry or upset at people for mis-gendering me because only I know what's going on in my mind: people can't know my gender for certain unless I tell them myself. If I tell people my gender and they mis-gender me that's another thing, but usually it's harmless and without the intent of hurting me or invalidating how I feel. I still mis-gender people (growth is a long road)! It feels so refreshing to be asked what my pronouns are and have them respected because it feels good to be seen and validated in the identity I see myself as. And because it feels good to know that other people are also thinking about gender. And it feels good to know that I'm not alone in this adventure of gender. Because gender is also a way of connecting with other people. It's a way to be seen by others as the mind and body that I am. It's a way of being part of a community.

IV. GENDER OF THE COMMUNITY

Community is the altar on which I lay my purpose. I am nothing without the people around me, whether it be my family or my friends. It would be a sad existence to be solitary in my ideas and perspectives on life with nobody to share them with, and even more sad to be deprived of hearing how other people think. Community spawns the rich material for growth and love and joy, (yes, also hurt and grief and pain, but through that: more growth and more joy) and what would the seed of identity be without the soil that nourishes it? The way I interact with my communities and the way my communities interact with me fundamentally shapes the person I am. Yes,

I am an individual. Yes, I have my own ways of thinking and of doing things. But still, I am part of a community. There is such a profound joy in this. My communities give me the opportunity to express how I feel, to manifest mind and body, to validate who I am. And gender and community are bound together because gender is part of identity.

V. THE INTERSECTION OF MIND, BODY, AND COMMUNITY

The gender of the mind, body, and community currently form the pyramid of my gender experience. Mind and body become self and form the foundation for identity. Community shapes the mind and validates the body, thereby shaping self and altering mind and body. Then, community becomes a part of self and therefore of mind and body. And we become even more a part of that community that is shaping us. So, gender is both intrinsic and extrinsic. All these are all in constant flux with each other, in a harmony that is both beautiful and overwhelming at times. But that's the joy of existence, to participate in this wonderful chaos. If gender is performance, gender of the community is the stage on which gender of the body performs. But don't we also perform for ourselves in our own elaborate ways? Perhaps gender of the body is how we perform for ourselves, the gender of the mind serving as the wings of the stage before we appear finally, flesh and blood, before ourselves and our community and scream "YES, yes. This is me."

VI. WHY AM I NON-BINARY?

Simply: I am non-binary because I am. I am non-binary because when I look inward and ask myself "Am I a Man?" I say "No, surely this does not feel right." And when I look inward and ask myself "Am I a Woman?" the same response echoes. And so ironically, it is precisely because of the gender binary that I identify like this. Given a genderless society, this would not be necessary. I would simply be a human. But this is not the case. Since I am both and neither simultaneously, I inherit this identify for myself. And happily so, at that. It fills me with a joy that comes from embracing my own abstraction, and from that ambiguity comes a great feeling of peace and freedom. But now, you must see that this ambiguity *must* be intentional. It must be that way because a reductionist's society confines ambiguity to a cage. And so, to thrive outside of that cage, the cage must be opened. To be non-binary in a binary society means accepting an active identity.

Imagine asking a ruby why it is red. To hold beauty in your palm and demand from it: tell me! To know the exact journey of the ruby is not possible. Centuries of earth and pressure and heat have formed the ruby into what it is, but beyond the general abstract process of its formation, you cannot know the ruby's actual journey. The ruby, even, likely does not know exactly how its crystal structure came to be. How could it? The process of becoming is not a linear one. So, to ask such an impossible question doesn't make any sense. And the facets that the ruby chooses to carve out of itself to shine and gleam with beauty are just as nuanced as its innate structure. The ruby is beautiful, that should be enough. But now, to continue with this long-winded analogy, what if the ruby asked itself:

Why am I the way I am? *This* is what I'm trying to do here. I have the liberty to discover this for myself.

As a scientist and someone who has always been scientifically minded, I am driven towards abstraction and generalization. And as an artist I am willed to a life of metaphor. So maybe it is my quest for abstraction, ambiguity, metaphor that has guided me here. The more I think about it, it makes perfect sense that I've arrived here, asking myself "Why?" All around me for as long as I can remember, I've been asking this question of "Why?" And now, I turn my inquiry inwards and ask myself that very same question. Propelled by curiosity I embark on this exploration.

VII. FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

Here I've laid a foundation for some of my current opinions on gender. But there's more to think about! I'm excited about exploring new, more specific, avenues like: Gender of the Culture, Gender of the Family, and Gender of the Religion (more to come, probably. I'd like to write an entire essay about hair and gender expression at some point.) And I'd like to revisit topics discussed in this essay to expand upon them. But that's all for now. ♡