

'Male and Female He Created Them'? Theological Reflections on Gender, Biology and Identity

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This paper reflects theologically on gender, biology and identity in light of ambiguous sexual biology ('intersex') and psychology ('gender dysphoria'). It affirms the goodness and diversity of bodily, sexed and gendered existence, while acknowledging the brokenness of the world and human experience of it. It closes with some suggested responses to these realities.

Introduction

'Gender bending' as it was once called, has gone from the titillating sideshows of cabaret to a mainstream social phenomenon. Some respond by reaffirming traditional binary theologies of sex and gender: they are established by God in creation, and only ever disrupted, questioned or complicated by sinful will. Others redraw the boundaries of embodiment and gender, theologically justifying proliferating gender categories. I am not satisfied that either of these options is *theologically* satisfactory. But in order to figure out a more adequate response we need to be clear about what questions need to be addressed, what resources we should mobilise, and what strategies we might use as we navigate our way through this terrain.

I will begin by briefly rehearsing the evidence that has been used to render problematic traditional notions of fixed, binary categories of male and female and masculinity and femininity, paying particular attention to gender dysphoria and indeterminate biological sex (intersex). I will then explore the theology of embodied human identity, arguing that while our bodies are fundamental to our being in the world and crucially shape our understanding and engagement with it, both what we are (ontology) and who we are (identity) are primarily determined by the relationships we form and in which we find ourselves. I will suggest that at the heart of those relationships is the one we enjoy with God in Christ which affirms our creation in God's image, redeems the brokenness of creation, calls us into new patterns of social relationship and promises our full restoration and glorification in a transformed physical order.

Orientation—data and questions

The biology of sex and gender is complex.¹ While humanity's sexed nature is fundamentally dimorphic, it is not a simple binary, biologically determined phenomenon. At its most basic level, it is the product of genetics: XY male; XX female.² However, from that basis in *genotype* things can get complicated, as *phenotype* develops in response to specialised protein and hormone production and tissue receptivity to it *in utero*, and during childhood and adolescence. Physical expressions of biological sex, such as the development of mature ovaries or testes and secondary sex characteristics, such as the size of the clitoris or penis, formation of labia or scrotal sack, breast development and so on, result from complicated interactions of genetics, epigenetics (environmental factors that influence the expression of genes) and developing anatomy and physiology. This can result in clear disparities between genetic sex and bodily form, such as Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome in which people who are genetically male (including having testes that produce testosterone) develop as physical females due to tissue insensitivity to male hormones (androgens).

This complicated biological picture also influences gender and sexual orientation. The brain seems also to be a hormonally responsive tissue and its natural plasticity is influenced by prenatal, childhood and adolescent changes in levels of testosterone, oestrogen and progesterone. The biology of sex and gender is complicated indeed.

The picture that emerges from work in social and cultural theory on gender and sex is equally complicated.³ If science is coming to see gender as having some biological basis (no matter how complicated), cultural theorists seem to be moving in the opposite direction. Both sex and gender are viewed as cultural constructs, neither biologically determined nor fixed. These views generally depend on critical theories which argue that the ways we see the world and navigate our way through it are shaped by language and the cultural systems that are codified by them. And so not only do our categories 'masculine and feminine' and the behaviours associated with them reflect culturally relative norms and values, so do our categories 'male and female'. Male and female are not value-neutral phenomena but are already interpreted in the language and cultural systems that form us into male/masculine and female/feminine actors. Furthermore, sex and gender are malleable, and subject to our will: people are free to choose both their social and relational expressions of gender and sexuality, and their sexed bodily form, in resistance to cultural stereotypes and heteronormative gender essentialism.

Intersex and gender dysphoria complicate this picture even further. Sex and gender are complicated. Intersex takes a number of forms, ranging from those whose bodily form does not match their genetic sex (e.g., Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome), through those with ambiguous genitalia (e.g., Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia), to those who demonstrate what was once called 'true hermaphroditism'.⁴ How do such people relate to our binary categories of sex? How do we understand them in light of God creating humanity as male and female when they do not fall neatly into either category? The history of 'assigning' such people a definitive sex (and gender) at birth, often accompanied with a regimen of complex and invasive surgery, is fraught with pain and tragedy. It seems as though our binary categories serve such people poorly.

Gender Dysphoria, on the other hand, is a little simpler to understand. People with gender dysphoria generally have a fairly clear biological sex, but they do not identify with that sex or the gendered behaviours that go with it. They feel alienated from their bodies: they are at home neither in their bodies nor in the social worlds in which they find themselves. And this causes them significant distress—hence gender *dysphoria*.⁵ For some of them the distress is so great that they feel they must change their bodies in order to match their experienced gender identity if they are to have any hope of feeling at home in the world. How do such people relate to our binary categories of gender? How do we understand the connection (and disconnect) between bodily sex and cultural expressions of gender, and how fluid can they be?

A framework for dealing with the questions

These are questions to which theology needs to give an answer—both in order that we might speak meaningfully in our cultural context, but also so that our theology can encompass the complex realities of the world in which we live. How to do this is a vexed theological question: for the sake of argument I will presuppose that theology and other disciplines need to be engaged in a mutually critical-and-constructive conversation.⁶

This strategy has been adopted by Mark Yarhouse and Megan DeFranza in their work on gender dysphoria and intersex respectively. Yarhouse outlines a threefold framework for understanding and dealing with the phenomenon of gender dysphoria: the *integrity* framework (male-female bodily distinctions are sacred); the *disability* framework (gender dysphoria is a non-culpable reality deserving compassion), and the *diversity* framework (transgender experiences are to be celebrated as part of diverse humanity), and suggests that each should inform our theology and practice where appropriate.⁷ DeFranza argues that the phenomenon of intersex renders problematic a simple binary opposition of male and female. Indeed, given that people with intersex are created in the image of God, we must allow our theologies to include them in our understandings of humanity and human community, and to embody communal practices that include them in our corporate lives.⁸

Their work suggests that we need to steer a path between conservative attempts to reify particular cultural constructions of gender as fixed ontological expressions of a determinative creational/biological order of (binary) sex, and 'postmodern' attempts to render sex and gender radically indeterminate—or self-determined—categories that deny the givenness of creation and the goodness of creaturely embodiment. The rejection of gender stereotypes and the acknowledgement of the complexities of human embodiment revealed in the phenomenon of intersex need not entail the 'queering' of gender and sex. A theological anthropology grounded in nuanced understandings of creation, Christology and eschatology provides us with a way forward.

A theology of (embodied) persons-in-relationship

In light of the creation narratives we should recognise that we *are* bodies; bodies are not things we inhabit, but the way we inhabit the world as the kind of creatures God has made us. These bodies normally are formed as male or female, and the shape of our bodies informs the character of our relationships with others. Sex and gender *inform* our identity and our God-given task in the world (Gen. 1:26–31), but we are not *defined* by our sexed bodies or gendered selves. We are fundamentally relational. The ‘not good’ of Genesis 2:18 is the absence of relationships of a particular kind: not *sexual* relationships *per se*, but the otherness of fellow creatures who require our commitment and evoke our delight. The primeval community was intended to embody relationships of love, justice, fidelity and delight between God and humanity and within the human community, and the expression of fidelity and joyful service in the world. It is those relationships that define us and shape our identity.

The embodied and relational nature of human existence is affirmed (and vindicated and transformed) in our new primary identity in Christ.⁹ This bodily existence shapes our lives, making some relationships possible rather than others, and so shapes what identifies and defines us. I am son and brother and husband and father and friend; and both my maleness and the particular forms of masculinity that I express necessarily shape those relationships and the self that they (in)form. Gender is another matter. Gender, understood as particular patterns of thought, affect, relationships and behaviour, is largely (but not entirely) culturally constructed or shaped. I say largely (but not entirely) constructed, because some of those patterns are given to us in the shape of our bodies and the ways our different hormonal environments shape thought, affect, behaviour, and so on. Again, while there is a spectrum of kinds of behaviour, etc., rather than a set of rigid types, there do seem to be characteristic patterns of male and female brains and ways of engaging with the world, valuing particular aspects of it, and so on.¹⁰

Nonetheless, we must not turn these particular patterns of thought, affect, experience and relationship into rigid ontological categories and assign our constructed visions of ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ to female and male bodies (which would be both arbitrary and historically and culturally naive, even arrogant). Femininity and masculinity are statistical patterns across populations, and many behaviours and attitudes are gendered differently in different cultural contexts; they are not eternal, trans-cultural, binary categories. While not dissolving the categories, we need to allow for a degree of fluidity in expressions of gender (a ‘permission’ that would, most likely, alleviate the distress of at least some people with gender dysphoria).

Implications and suggestions

Such a view complicates both simple binary categories *and* their repudiation in queered, fluid sex, sexuality and gender. We need to recognise that male and female phenotypes (bodily forms) exist as polar rather than binary phenomena: that is to say, at either end of a spectrum of physical types lie (versions of) paradigmatic male and female bodies; and in between these poles there is a variety of male and female bodies, and some that are neither/nor/both/and. Intersex should probably be seen as an inscription of the brokenness of a fallen world on particular human bodies (a *disability*) given the ways it complicates the biology of reproduction.¹¹ For one of the ends to which we are ordered as creatures is the procreation of the human species, and so our theology of the body needs to include our procreative capacities. But other variations of maleness and femaleness are complex expressions of the rich variety of God’s creation. We need to accommodate this full spectrum of bodily forms in our theology of the (sexed) body. On the other hand, our bodily existence is a given. Our bodies are not mere instruments, infinitely malleable expressions of our untethered wills.

This brings us to two related matters: how do we understand bodies and their relationship to ourselves (note, already, the fraught way this question is framed); and what role should (biomedical) technology play in the (re)shaping of bodies? The apparent body-obsession of contemporary (Western) culture hides an ironic hatred and fear of the body and its resistance to our wills.¹² The body is viewed as resistant matter that the unfettered will seeks to dominate and control, conforming it to the image of what we choose (choices which are ironically constrained by the market and technology, which render even our embodied selves into commodities). Medicine has become a commodity to be purchased from medical technicians, subject only to the constraints of the market and the demands of the ‘client’. This idolatrous vision of medicine must be replaced by a properly Christian account in which medicine exists as an expression of a community’s solidarity with and care for frail, finite embodied beings whose vulnerability has been exposed by illness, infirmity or misfortune.¹³

In such a view, medicine has a clear, if limited, role to play in the care of people with gender dysphoria or intersex conditions—for we do need to care for these people in need. We must do what can rightly be done to alleviate the distress of being alienated from their bodies so as to enable them to function as well as they can as persons and in their relationships.¹⁴ Radical surgical intervention may be warranted as a treatment of last resort, an accommodation to an otherwise intractable disorder. Similarly, if we allow for some kind of spectrum of sexed bodies, we need not engage in complex (and risky) gender assignment surgery on children with intersex conditions. Other strategies will generally allow them space to navigate the world as the bodies they find themselves to be, and to determine for themselves what, if any, medical intervention might be required later in life. But we must remember that medicine is not going to be able to ‘fix’ all the problems that people with gender dysphoria or intersex conditions might face. Many of them are the result of particular cultural patterns that are not subject to biomedical control. Much (but not all) of the distress such people face might be alleviated by allowing—even encouraging—a wider range of expressions of masculinity and femininity within Christian communities.

In/conclusions

Intersex and gender dysphoria call into question rigid binary categories of male/female and feminine/masculine without thereby undermining the notions *per se*. They require us to develop nuanced theologies of the body and understandings of how we relate to each other as embodied beings, and social and technological practices that allow us to deal with our fractured and flawed nature. I have suggested some possibilities and limitations on theological reflection on these issues. There are many questions I have not addressed, and a number of my suggestions are at best partial and provisional. But such is the nature of theology in a world such this.

For further reading

- Megan K. DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female and Intersex in the Image of God* (Eerdmans, 2015).
- David Starling and Edwina Murphy, eds, *The Gender Conversation: Evangelical Perspectives on Gender, Scripture, and the Christian Life* (Morling Press/Wipf & Stock, 2016).
- Mark A. Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (IVP, 2015).

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- ¹ This paragraph draws on Patricia Weerakoon and Kamal Weerakoon, ‘The Biology of Sex and Gender’ in *The Gender Conversation*, 317–330.
 - ² Even this is complicated, however, as there are variations at the chromosomal level such as 47XXY (Klinefelter’s Syndrome) and 45X (Turner’s Syndrome).
 - ³ This paragraph draws on Justine Toh, ‘Enculturated or created? Gender & Sex in the Context of Caitlyn Jenner’s “New Normal”’ in *The Gender Conversation*, 335–344.
 - ⁴ Megan K. DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female and Intersex in the Image of God* (Eerdmans, 2015), ch.1. Those who were once called ‘true hermaphrodites’ have more-or-less well-formed male and female genitalia and secondary sex characteristics. The term is, however, problematic and is normally avoided in current discussions of intersex—and for good reason.
 - ⁵ Mark A. Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (IVP, 2015), ch.1. The high incidence of depression and suicide amongst people with gender dysphoria in itself warrants the term *dysphoria*.
 - ⁶ John G. Stackhouse, *Need to Know: Vocation as the Heart of Christian Epistemology* (Oxford University Press, 2014).
 - ⁷ *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, ch.2. See his discussion in ‘Understanding Gender Dysphoria’, *Christianity Today* 59 (2015), 44–50.
 - ⁸ DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology*, esp. chs.1 and 6.
 - ⁹ See Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order* 2nd edn (Eerdmans, 1994), esp. 11–75; Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (SPCK, 2007), esp. ch.10. Gal. 3:28 suggests that sex and gender are not binaries that determine our identity; our identity is found in Christ.
 - ¹⁰ Weerakoon and Weerakoon, ‘Biology’.
 - ¹¹ *Pace DeFranza, Sex Difference in Christian Theology*, ch.4.
 - ¹² Gilbert Meilaender, *Body, Soul, and Bioethics* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1995); Gerald P. McKenny, *To Relieve the Human Condition: Bioethics, Technology, and the Body* (University of New York Press, 1997).
 - ¹³ Andrew Sloane, *Vulnerability and Care: Christian Reflections on the Philosophy of Medicine* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016).
 - ¹⁴ Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, esp. chs 1, 5–7.