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Gender Dichotomies, Sexual Continua, and Emotional Taxonomy

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*We're for difference, for respecting difference, for
allowing difference, until difference doesn't
make any difference.*

Johnetta Cole, quoted in (James 1997)

The politics of identity and difference have taught us to be suspicious of the clear dichotomy between fact and value. As Piet Hein pithily put it, “No cow's like a horse, and no horse like a cow: that's one similarity, anyhow.” Countless differences and resemblances between people, and many statistically significant differences between groups, can be established with rigorous objectivity. But which differences and which resemblances we choose to attend to is a question that can be of momentous significance, and one that can have serious political consequences. In this essay, I shall be concerned with two sets of categories derived from a normalization of perceived differences: one having to do with sexual and gender categories, and the other with way we conceptualise the repertoire of our emotions. The two are related in an obvious way, insofar as we associate certain emotional profiles, among other stereotypes, with masculine and

feminine genders. In both cases, my purpose here is to plead for a elision of categorial barriers, at both the epistemological and the political levels. The epistemological question is about when to regard differences and resemblances as ontologically or practically significant—and whether there is a convergence between the ontological and the practical points of view. The political question is whether those differences and resemblances, once noted, should form the basis of differential policies. Both are normative, but each is responsive to its own set of norms. Both are normative, but each is responsive to its own set of norms: of truth, for the epistemological question, and of utility for the political. The question of the overlap between those sets of norms is itself both an epistemological and a normative issue which I'll not make bold to tackle here..

I shall proceed as follows.

First I shall sketch the general form of what I shall call the essentialist debate in three domains: in the biology of species, in gender, and in emotions.

Second, I shall ask the simple question: How many sexes and genders are there? A similar question can be asked about emotions. For both sexes and emotions, we conventionally regard the answer as trivially obvious: there are two sexes, and there is a larger but still finite and relatively small number of emotions that account for the greater part of human actions. In both cases, however, I shall argue that the obvious answers are importantly wrong.

Gender is commonly distinguished from sex as consisting of psycho-social factors as opposed to the supposedly biological nature of sex. It is nevertheless deemed to be grounded in sex, or typically attributed to persons on the basis of the natural dimorphism of sex. It will therefore be useful to examine the nature of that supposed dimorphism. It can be shown, I will argue, that sexual dimorphism is as much constructed as gender itself, on the basis of a number of contrasting factors which are relatively independent of one another, and which in fact are in several cases not themselves dichotomous. I will then suggest some likely consequences for the notion of gender, and particularly for the nature of the differences these are supposed to represent. I shall especially stress two points: one is that members of groups, such as a “race” or

“sex”, should feel unconcerned about the claims made about those groups on the basis of statistical differences. The reason, I shall argue, is that it is to some extent arbitrary and misleading to regard statistics about some group to which I belong as being in any significant sense about me. The second moral I shall draw concerns emotions: while it makes good sense from a practical point of view to slot emotions in terms of a small number of “basic” or “standard” emotions, evoked by stock situations of life, I shall plead for a more fluid conceptualization of emotion, involving a focus on the quality of emotional experience characteristic of aesthetic contemplation rather than active life.

Essentialism

In the old Aristotelian scheme of things—which is not necessarily to be attributed to Aristotle himself— all natural objects are endowed with two classes of properties. Accidental properties can help to identify individual members of a kind, but they constitute, as it were, a second rank of properties in relation to properties which define the kind of thing something is, the *what it is to be that kind of thing*. These latter form a privileged tier of “essential” properties which if lost thereby deprive a thing of its identity as the kind of thing it is. In defining biological species, the essentialist idea fits in well with an old fashioned theory of special creation of true-breeding lineages, and is neatly captured in the Linnaean system of classification: every species has features in common with other members of a genus, and is distinguished from them by a specific differentia without which a specimen would not be of that species. It fits in less comfortably with evolution by natural selection, since it is only in retrospect, in the light of the reproductive isolation of two groups of living things, that one can assert with confidence that they belong to different species. Since any two living things have a common ancestor somewhere up the line of their descent, there are no permanently true-breeding species, and one cannot assert, in advance of the accidents that may promote reproductive isolation, that two animals are differentiated by essential properties.

The status of man or woman, though obviously not a specific differentia in the literal sense, seems to play pretty much the same role in defining the identity of a human being. The frequent complaint that women and men are different species may be merely jocular, but it is often heartfelt. Early feminism, notably de Beauvoir (1952), with her slogan that women were "made not born", strongly opposed essentialism of sex and gender, stressing the cultural origins of our conventional stereotypes. A second wave of feminism, including those identified as "maternal feminists", returned to a sort of essentialism in stressing the difference and not infrequently the moral superiority of womanly thinking not only in ethics (Ruddick 1989; Jaggar 1983; Noddings 1983) but also in science and epistemology generally (Longino 1990; Code 2002) Now there is an intriguing aspect to the fact of gender. Most people are, from a very early age—certainly by two—utterly certain of their gender. This is even true in those cases where the self-attribution of gender does not match the gender attributed to the child by others on the basis of anatomy. And yet most people are somewhat at a loss when asked what, beyond the shape of genitalia, that certainty consists in or what facts it rests on (Ayim and Houston 1985). A fortiori, a two year old can hardly be expected to have an awareness of the primary and secondary sex characteristics that are generally agreed to mark the distinction. It is as if gender, or at this stage sex itself—since a two year old obviously can't be expected to make the theoretical distinction between the two—were in itself a simple, unanalysable property that is apprehended directly, not on the basis of any other property on which it supervenes.

Biology, the domain in which the notion of "natural kind" obviously has its natural home, is also the domain that sets the example of how to dismiss essentialism. As Ernst Mayr has put it, population thinking has replaced typological thinking in the biological theory of species (Mayr 1963). The criteria of identity of species are both controverted and vague. In general we no longer wonder what might have caused a particular specimen to deviate from the proper type to which it should rightly belong. Instead, we should ask why so many parameters cluster about certain values in populations of interbreeding specimens.

Here's an analogy. For centuries, scientists had worried the question of what keeps the arrow in flight. (My own favourite explanation holds that the air displaced from the front of the arrow goes to the back and pushes). Newton taught us to ask not why the arrow stays in flight, but why it slows and stops. Such is the import of the first law of motion, which holds that in the absence of any force, any object's persisting in flight is the default, that which occurs *without cause*. Similarly, the default in biology is diversity. Resemblance, not divergence from type, is what requires to be explained.¹ But where the default assumption is diversity, explanations generated by Mayr's "population thinking" are statistical, not simply causal. That is not to say that there is no debate about what this really means.² But the central message is clear and can be summed up in a formula: *the statistical norm is not normative*.

Essentialism in the sense rejected by that formula, however, has an emotional grip that is enormously difficult to discard. It creeps back in by all the cracks of our scientific resolve. Witness, for example, the following passage from a prominent researcher in the psychology of sexual desire:

Suppose a particular woman desires sex more often than her husband. If this is a typical pattern that characterizes most relationships, she should probably accept her greater desire as a standard fact of life.... In contrast, if the typical pattern is the opposite (greater desire among husbands), then she may more appropriately wonder why her situation is different. Undoubtedly the worst outcome is if a woman reaches a self-critical view based on a false understanding of what the actual norms and typical patterns are such that she thinks something is wrong with her..." (Baumeister, Catanese and Vohs 2001).

This passage is revealing: under a veneer of "non-judgmental" compassion, it confirms the tyranny of the statistical norm. It is likely that if Baumeister, as therapist, urged instead that "typical patterns" are *absolutely* irrelevant to how she *ought* to regard her own level of desire,

she wouldn't believe it. We are a conformist species, far more keen than the proverbial monkey to imitate what is done by the majority, and better at it too (Boyd and Richerson 2005). Our own difference generates anxiety. Thus Kinsey's reports on sexual behaviour in America brought great relief to large numbers of people from guilt and anxiety about what they thought of as their own sexual "deviance". Most people, not knowing what others did, thought their own practice perverted, until they discovered that everyone else did it too. There is happiness, it seems, in the mere knowledge that one is "normal".

How many sexes?

The simplicity of the common view of sexual dimorphism as a given occasionally encounters a well-publicized dilemma. An athlete, for example, presents female external genitalia but a chromosome test reveals that she "really" a male after all. Or a child brought up unproblematically as a girl until adolescence "grows" a penis and is reassigned as a male. Or an individual is born with two complete or partial sets of internal genital equipment, testes and uterus. What is revealed by such cases is the complexity of the biological factors that constitute a human as a male or a female.

What hides that complexity, is the presumption that there are *obviously* just two sexes. Beyond simple prejudice, this might be held to gain support from two biological facts. One is the existence of dimorphic gametes: one small, stripped of cellular resources, produced in vast quantities, one large, produced in more sparing numbers but equipped with the cellular resources required to sustain it after fertilization. The dimorphism of gametes—which constitute respectively the smallest and the largest cell in any human body—is very common though not absolutely universal in nature. It is often held to be emblematic of differences in mating strategies between men, looking to spread their genetic heritage with abandon, and women, whose typical reproductive strategy involves investing more in a smaller number of viable offspring.³

A second biological fact commonly held to support sexual dimorphism concerns chromosomal sex: in one sex, the sex-linked chromosomes are “homogametic” while the other’s are “heterogametic”. Thus in mammals females have the XX pattern, while males have the XY pattern. Since there are just four possible permutations in the ways the chromosomes pair off, reproducing the 50-50 distribution between heterogametic and homogametic chromosomes, this gives rise to the impression that the mathematics of chromosomal combination inevitably yields two sexes in a ratio of 1:1.

One problem with this view is that the two factors just listed don’t always pair up in the same way. In birds, for example, the small gametes are produced by the homogametic sex. From the chromosomal point of view, then, it is the males that lay the eggs. And there are other sex and gender determining factors. They are imperfectly correlated with one another, and after the first two, already mentioned, they often vary along a continuum:⁴

1. Gametic sex and 2. Chromosomal sex have already been mentioned, as has the fact that they don't always walk correlate in the same way. It's worth adding there are also XXX's, XYY's, male XX's, female XY's, etc. (Bainbridge 2003) So there is not, after all, a single strict dichotomy here either.

3. Fetal hormones: these have various effects on the development of the fetus; if absent, or in some cases where the fetal cells are unresponsive to these hormones, a chromosomal male can remain anatomically female.

4. External anatomy: In part, this is controlled the fetal hormones mentioned in (3). This can fail to form in the expected way given the input of fetal hormones.

5. Gonadal sex (internal functional-anatomy: ovaries, uterus). Gonadal sex doesn't always conform to the expectations raised in (3) or (4).

6. Physiological reproductive functions (ovulation, menstruation, lactation, erection, ejaculation). These can also come apart from those just listed, as well as those listed below.

The first six factors seem unequivocally to determine sex rather than gender. The next set of factors are also related to biological sex, but affect our conception of gender more directly.

7. Hormonal activity in adolescence and adulthood. This influences (8)

8. Secondary sex characters: beard, voice, breasts. Depending on a variety of factors, some of which are affected by levels and kinds of physical activity, which are themselves influenced by cultural conceptions of gender (Fausto-Sterling 2005), as well as physiological factors including the production of and receptivity to the hormones mentioned under (7).

9. Social roles, influenced by norms governing sexual and parental partnerships, including child-raising practices. These are obviously highly dependent on cultural factors, and they bring us directly into the second set of issues to be considered below, in that they imply deep differences in emotional dispositions.

10. Related but to some extent separable from (9) are social roles regarded as masculine and feminine in the wider context of social and political practices. This touches very concrete issues of concern to feminism, such as “glass ceiling” obstacles to women's development, barriers to women in sport, and so forth. But these also involve obstacles that constrain the cultural development of males, marking out as “sissy” any boy who prefers to join a choir or learn ballet rather than to devote himself to more brutal forms of competitive sport. In this area, too, individual differences are often attributed to characteristic temperamental divergences between males' and females' emotional dispositions, such as an greater unwillingness in women to sacrifice family life.

11. Gender identity and style. As already noted, there is something paradoxical about this, in that a conviction about a child's own gender identity, as *natural* rather than conventional, tends to solidify by 18-24 months, long before any consciousness of the nature of sex differences. This too could be deemed to consist in several factors rather than one: cross-dressing, for example, is independent of sexual identity, as well, of course, as of the last factor I shall list, namely sexual orientation. The power of gender identification is attested precisely by the strength of transsexuals' typical insistence that they are stuck in the “wrong sex”.

12. Finally, and perhaps most obviously dubious in its relation to the distinction between the sexes, is sexual orientation. Traditionally, sexual orientation has in most cultures been assumed to follow from gender identity. In liberal Western culture, this assumption is no longer made, despite the fact that in a majority of cases, perhaps as large as some 90%, gender identification is a predictor of sexual orientation. The fact that we no longer regard this statistical fact as supporting a *normative* requirement of heterosexuality may be regarded as a model for the possibility of dissociating statistical prevalence from normativity in the case of the other characters that generally follow for a cluster of gender identification.

If the biological basis of sex lends no clear support to a simple dimorphism, it can no longer be urged, as it often is, gender dimorphism is “natural” even if not strictly “biological”. Yet we do find that of gender dimorphism is actually enforced as a social norm, for which, as for strictures against certain sexual practices (homosexuality, masturbation, bestiality) the idea of “natural law” is still invoked, particularly among philosophers and moralists inspired by the Thomist tradition (Finnis 1980).

And indeed that idea has an honourable history, going back to Aristotle's conception of biological organisms as having natural potentialities discoverable in experience by observation of what happens “always or for the most part.” (*Met.* VI-2).

For Aristotle, each natural object O has a natural function. You discover it by watching the effects O has “always or for the most part”. Thus you read off Nature’s “intentions”, and you can then help Nature along by encouraging the natural as opposed to the unnatural way. That is how Aquinas argues when, for example, he defines ‘vice against nature’ as “every venereal act from which generation cannot follow” (*Summa*, II-2, question 154). According to him, this entails enforceable natural standards proscribing masturbation, homosexual acts, fornication, bestiality, and so forth.⁵

After Darwin, however, the Aristotelian scheme must fail. Evolution is not providence. It cares nothing for the individual, whom it favours only as a side effect of the reproductive success

of genes⁶ “Natural” has no evaluative force. Arguments from nature are never better than that of the airline passenger in Gardner Rea’s *New Yorker* cartoon who refuses a drink: “No thank you; I don't think Nature intended us to drink while flying.”

The reason that Aristotle's scheme won't work after Darwin is that it presupposes the fixity of species. Only on that condition can it be said that the natural is also what is normal. Aristotle also assumes—though the question never comes up explicitly, as far as I know—that nature works *for us*, or at least that there is some intrinsic value in the natural. But we can no longer assume that what is so “always or for the most part” is more desirable than the exception. Or not, at least, if we presume that existence as *homo sapiens* is preferable to the life of a unicellular organism. For at each step on the way from our single-celled ancestors to us humans, there must have been a statistically rare genetic change. If all your ancestors had been normal, you would be a bacterium. We all descend from millions of freaks.

So the question we should ask about behaviour, practices or other social arrangements, or simple traits—including emotional capacities—is not: *Is it “natural”?* or *“Is it frequent?”* Neither should we worry about whether there some natural process that fosters it. We should ask instead: *Should we value it?* Is it compatible with our ethical ideal of fundamental equality of claims and rights?

When we ask that question about the importance of gender in our sense of our own and others' identity, the answer is not obvious. Could we imagine not having to check an M or F box on every form? Could we imagine not identifying each person we meet first as of some gender? Could we imagine forming friendships and love affairs or even casual social relations with someone without ever noticing whether they were a man or a woman? Could we imagine identifying oneself in terms of a number of important characteristics none of which included gender? To this last question, posed to a large class, one student memorably replied with this *cri du coeur*: *If I couldn't be a girl, I couldn't live!* While this is a common response, it seems to me arguably an irrational one. In what follows, I want to address only one tiny part of what the

notion of gender has been taken to imply: I refer to the ascription of characteristic emotional profiles to men and women. One thing that the backgrounding of the emotions would imply would be a sort of de-regimentation of emotions.

How many emotions?

In psychological and philosophical treatments of emotion, one commonly encounters lists of “basic” or “universal” emotions.⁷ Descartes, for example, has half a dozen (Descartes 1649); Ekman has six slightly different ones, Panksepp has seven built around a core of four syndromes uniting hormonal, neurological, and psychological systems in the brain. And evolutionary psychologists are inclined to reinforce the assumption that emotions come in relatively self-contained “modules” that have evolved around typical and frequently arising life situations that confronted our mammalian or primate ancestors (Cosmides and Tooby 2000). From that observation, given the assumption that for our ancestors in the environment of our most important evolutionary adaptation, there were important differences in gender roles, it is a short step to the belief that men and women naturally differ in their emotional capacities and dispositions.

In fact stereotypes in people's conception of gender are extremely robust. In a study of expectations about gender differences in emotion, (Hess, Senécal, Kirouac, et al. 2000) found that

the basic emotion process is biologically grounded and universal, ... the type of events attended to, the appraisal of these events, and the relevant norms for behavior may vary as a function of culture, gender, relative power status, as well as the relationship between the interaction partners. (Hess 2001, 386).

That means, in effect, that what comes out of the cultural machine to reinforce our preconceptions is just what those preconceptions helped to produce in the first place. Thus, as

Leslie Brody has phrased it, “Stereotypes may generally reflect reality, partially because they help to shape reality” (Brody 1997, 370). She cites this telling example: the common belief that women smile more than men appears to be an artefact of the fact that people in subordinate positions smile more than those in power, together with the fact that women are more often in subordinate position. (ibid., 386).

Furthermore, the matter of emotional differences is subject to the same publication bias as all other research on differences. When a difference is found, it is news. When it is not, it is ignored. The result is conducive to meta-analyses that gleefully proclaim that most studies find differences, simply because most studies that don't never get published (Thornton 2000).

All this talk of emotional dispositions being tied to gender presupposes not only gender dimorphism but also a manageably small panoply of emotions to be allocated between the two genders. The “basic emotions” and the stories told by evolutionary psychology both favour the view that this is a realistic expectation to have of our emotional repertoire. But that presupposition might not be true. There is an alternative way to classify emotions, exemplified by Klaus Scherer’s conception of emotions as involving multi-dimensional appraisals. On one version of this theory, there are some sixteen dimensions of appraisals that are implicated in specifying a given emotion. (See, e.g. Scherer et al. 1993, p. 332) Of those sixteen dimensions, 10, such as *suddenness*, *urgency*, *concern relevance*, are potential continua; the other 6, such as *familiarity*, *agent causation*, *intention* are at least bivalent. Assuming, conservatively, 10 degrees of discriminability for the first type, this allows us to estimate the order of magnitude of the space of emotions. On this basis, the answer is that there are $2^6 \times 10^{10}$ or 640,000,000,000 discriminable emotions.

Needless to say, we needn't suppose that all points in that space will be equally salient. There will be “hot spots”, particularly clustering around the stock situations crucial to survival that are of interest to evolutionary psychologists. These will be particularly conducive to action tendencies (Frijda 1986) But insofar as emotions are experienced, as opposed to geared to

behaviour in the world, they can be expected to roam more freely in that vast space of possible emotions. Insofar as we are comfortable enough to be able to detach ourselves from urgent life needs, we can take an aesthetic view, detached from the need of immediate action, but permeated with the sense of the subtleties in the possible values to which our emotions constitute responses.⁸

How to be cozy under the Bell curve.

Our emotional propensities, like our sex and gender characteristics, vary from one individual to another. In the case of emotions, the variability is exhibited in the huge range of different and incompatible tastes of different people in movies, literature, art, sport, sex, and other diversions. But in all these domains, as in most things biological, the distribution of any given trait or characteristic is likely to form a Bell curve. At one end of that Bell curve, there will be a tiny number of individuals that altogether lack the trait, or find themselves at one far end of a continuum of sizes, intensities, or other variable quantities. At the opposite tail, there will again be a very small number of individuals that have the trait to the maximum possible extent for that sort of individual. Thus the height of adult humans is pretty reliably confined within a range between two and nine feet. When a trait is plotted separately for different groups belonging to a single species—men and women, ethnic groups, members of different professions—the mode for each group—that is, the top of the curve, marking the region where most individuals are to be found—can be displaced in relation to the mode for the other. But what is more important is that the vast majority of members of both groups will be found in the region of overlap. (See Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 here: Fig 1: bimodal distribution

One curve can be flatter than another, with a longer tail. The overall result when the two curves are superimposed on one another is a bimodal curve. In Fig. 1, if we colour Group A yellow and Group B blue, the overlap (darker cross-hatching in the black and white figure) can

be read as green. In terms of that picture, then, any given individual is overwhelmingly more likely to be in the green zone than in either pure yellow or pure blue. If that is so, it seems bizarre to insist, as so many do, that one's identity is essentially bound up with one's membership of the yellow or the blue group.

Each of us, in fact, belongs to an indefinitely large number of groups. Examples might be blue-eyed people; people whose name begin with a K; German nationals; kind people; cruel people; chess players; philosophers; readers of Homer; tall people; women; men—and so on. Each of those memberships presumably makes it slightly more or less likely that I should have this or that characteristic, or that I should have slightly more or less of it. But how has it been determined, before we are given any say in it, that some of these facts about my group membership are more central to my identity than others?

The question is tailored to drive me into the hornet's nest of identity politics, a debate to which I propose to contribute only the tiniest observation about my own sense of puzzlement. My puzzlement is best put in terms of an analogy. Consider the plight of the novelist who draws inspiration from the real character of his friend. The novel requires a villain; traits described using Friend as model become the traits of a villain. Friend complains: you have maligned me! Surely the novelist is right to protest that since Friend is not a villain, the points of resemblance between him and the novel's villain are no more than just that: points of resemblance. But the character has a different name, and is manifestly not the friend, since he is, and the friend isn't, a villain.

Whose side should we be on? I incline to the novelist's. The friend, it seems to me, is protesting too much: if he were really confident of not being a villain, he would be calmly confident that the fictional character is not he. His complaint will gain more substance, however, if the novel becomes widely recognized as a *roman à clé* in which the hidden dark side of Friend is revealed. If that occurs, then the novel will, whether knowingly or inadvertently, have damaged Friend's reputation in unmerited ways. And if the novelist has intentionally produced those effects, Friend will have reason to complain.

Unlike the novelist, however, nature had no intentions in placing me just where I ended up on this or that Bell curve. In most respects, I will neither care or know where on the Bell curve I am. Most of the groups to which I belong are merely contingent facts about my characteristics or my interests. They contribute little to my sense of who I am. But sometimes my acquiescence in the social practice of labeling me as a member of this or that group makes of the fact that I “belong” to a given group a salient reality, to the point of contributing to my identity. But if that is so, we should not assume that to be a good thing. There may be as much reason to resist as to endorse categorizations in terms of “essential” attributes enforced by social norms.

To illustrate my point, let me take the recent case of the “Larry Summers affair”. In 2005, Larry Summers, president of Harvard University, gave a talk in a somewhat restricted circle of educators at a conference devoted to “diversifying the science and engineering workforce”. Speculating on the reasons for the stubborn disproportion of men in the physical and mathematical sciences, Summers said the following:

If one is talking about physicists at a top twenty-five research university, one is not talking about people who are two standard deviations above the mean... it's talking about people who are three and a half, four standard deviations above the mean in the one in 5,000, one in 10,000 class. Even small differences in the standard deviation will translate into very large differences in the available pool substantially out.” (Summers 2005)

This apparently innocent and probably correct observation caused an uproar, and earned Summers the distinction of being the only president of Harvard who was effectively fired. Why should this be? Here is one complaint: “Women in a longitudinal study who heard news reports about girls’ differential math ability had lower expectations of their daughters’ math abilities than before.” (James 1997)(James 1997: 220, citing Eccles). That may be a true factual claim about certain women. But are the attitudes described reasonable ones? I think not. Each of us is where we are under that Bell curve, regardless of what the President of Harvard may or may not

have said. And here as elsewhere, the chances of being anywhere but in the vast mass of those that lie in the green zone of overlap is several thousand to one. Why should the thought that one per ten thousand of a group to which I am said to belong are in the extreme tail, while two per ten thousand of some other group are in that extreme tail? Both figures are ridiculously low. Look again at Fig. 1. By definition, facts about one extreme tail either way, will make no difference to 4999 people out of 5000. It doesn't seem plausible that I should think it rational to decide whether or not to put in an effort into achieving some specific aim in the light of the information that the chance of a member of some group I belong to is one in 5000 but not one in 10000. It would be wiser to try first to discover where on that curve I might lie. Again: for the vast majority of us, the answer will be: somewhere in the thick of the overlap. And if I want to know more precisely where I am, there are more useful indicators of my relative position than whether I'm in the area defined by the yellow curve or the blue.⁹

Returning now from the example of the comparative thinness of extreme tails to statistical differences in other aspects of gender, and particularly of our emotional dispositions. Would it help if we were to refine our categories, so that instead of thinking of ourselves as situated either in a vast yellow zone or in a vast blue zone (with a very high probability of actually being in the green zone), we could think of ourselves as belonging to one of several smaller exclusive categories? We might, for example, adopting Fausto-Sterling's suggestion that we recognize five sexes instead of two, allow those five sexes to underpin a larger but still limited variety of genders.

I fear that the advantages of such a proposal would be outweighed by its drawbacks. One reason is that categories have a tendency to arrange themselves in hierarchic order. The five sexes could then soon resemble the caste system of old India, a result that would hardly be conducive to the promotion of equality which motivates the proposal. Even if that prospect is excessively pessimistic, a five-sex and five-or-more gender categorization of people is bound to complicate lives by making it necessary to assign doubtful cases to either side of four or more

dividing lines rather than one. This may well exacerbate rather than lessen cases of discrimination against individuals of the “wrong sexes” as well as cases of private crises of gender identity.

Is there an alternative? I think there is, though I concede that the alternative is strongly tainted with utopianism. The alternative is to do away, at least in certain contexts, with gender altogether, and to do away as well not only with characteristic gender-coded emotional dispositions, but with the system of the salient categorization of emotions that goes with it and sustains all sorts of other expectations about human relationships: the quest for “real love” as opposed to “mere infatuation”; the generalization that say that one can't both feel anger and tenderness at the same time (or they are not *really*) anger and tenderness; and the notion that any legitimate emotion must be nameable in the familiar vocabulary of emotions. In the last section, I shall focus especially on the possibility rejecting such generalizations with a view to enlarging our emotional repertoire.

How to be an aesthete: sex, gender, and emotion

In ordinary practical life, feelings, perceptions, desires and beliefs serve various purposes. Some of these are own projects. Others are not really “our” purposes so much as those of our “genes”—or whatever the reproducing entities are whose dispositions to influence our choices have evolved over millennia very natural selection. In all those cases, categorization is not a dispensable part of our mental equipment: it serves to trigger chains of reasoning and to organize useful responses to the challenges attendant on different life situations. In addition, categorization serves an essential purpose in verbal communication. When action is required, it is most efficient for our mental states and our emotions to focus on the selection of a specific act in situations of forced choice. When our emotions are linked to the needs of agency and interpersonal communication, they are probably recalibrated in such a way as to allow mutual recognition and at least an appearance of understanding. These are, as it were, the black-and-

white emotions. In other sorts of situations, however, where there is no urgent need for action, our attention can be directed at the world in such a way as to evoke responses in which the specific quality of experience is primary, not the question of how most appropriately to categorize it. Occasions of pure aesthetic contemplation are most likely to be of that sort. The possibility of such contemplation shows that the complex sensibility honed by natural selection results in capacities for experience that provide for far more than mere categorization.

Considered purely as experiences, emotions don't need to foreground any particular scheme of classification. They can float free of their function. Each carries meanings enriched by unique genetic predispositions and unique formative episodes, which don't necessarily correspond well enough to the emotions acquired by others in their different sequences of individual experience to warrant a shared vocabulary. These are what I call "full-colour" emotional experiences. They are not bound by the needs of action, but roam all over a huge multi-dimensional space of value like the one represented in Scherer's appraisals. Each involves an evaluative response which may, but need not, exhibit a positive or negative valence/behaviour preference. Judging by the result of my half-serious calculation of the size of Scherer's emotional space, there are virtually no limits to the number of distinct emotions that can be experienced, though doubts could be raised about the capacity to match with discriminable experience the richness of the theoretical space defined by Scherer's space.¹⁰

All this is perhaps too speculative to be compelling. It should be taken as a sketch of a limit, a utopia, where humans would be sufficiently leisured to attend both to one another and to their own emotions with a minimum of categorization tasks. On meeting a stranger, we will no longer devote the first few milliseconds of the encounter to the determination of the other's gender. Among the implications of that erosion of boundaries, we shall form fewer, or more subtle expectations about the emotions to which the other is susceptible, as well as about those the other may legitimately trigger in oneself. Instead of thinking of ourselves as having a "sexual orientation", we will respond to individuals as more or less sexually desirable without first sorting them into the qualified and the disqualified.

It would be nice to think that part of what sustains the persistence of love, whether in friendship or in affairs, is the sense of undiscovered possibilities. If that is true, then allowing my responses to be predetermined by knowledge of my friend's gender limits their range, and thereby also the range of interaction that is possible between two people.

I must concede, however, that I know of no direct studies about the relation between expectation of novelty and the endurance of relationships. On the other hand, it has been shown that entertaining illusions about your spouse is conducive to long-lasting relationships (Murray, Holmes and Griffin 1996). That suggests that the stability of couples is not fostered by an interest in discovering more truths about one's lover. Besides, there's doubtless much to the view that the real core of lasting love is in habit, the comfort of the "old slippers" feeling. So I may not actually be entitled to that thought about our taste for discovery in the emotional domain. If so, we must concede that in our emotional life we are content with repetition. Here as elsewhere, then, the benefits of thinking about utopia may be limited to the realization of some ways in which our lives fall short of it.

Notes

1. One attempt to explain this leads its author to reinstate a kind of essentialism about species. This is Richard Boyd, with his theory of “homeostatic clusters” of properties that maintain their identity and isolation over a long period of time (Boyd 2000).
2. See, for a sophisticated discussion of the role and significance of statistical thinking in biology, the debate among (Matthen and Ariew 2002) (Bouchard and Rosenberg 2004; Walsh, Lewens and Ariew 2002).
3. These two strategies, when applied to species as opposed to sexes, are known respectively as r-strategies and K-strategies. Stock examples of the first are elm trees, or the second, mammals.
4. The information summarized here can be found in standard textbooks. For an early account, from someone who endorsed strict sexual dimorphism, see (Money and Ehrhardt 1972).
5. Such proscriptions should fall, of course, if Aquinas's and Aristotle's naturalistic method were actually consistently followed, upon the observation that other animals actually do, “for the most part”, indulge in the practices once thought to be “unnatural”. But Aquinas's modern followers in the Vatican have apparently failed to take note of any such observations.
6. ‘Genes’ is being used here in the broadest possible sense, for any “replicator”. Critics of “gene-centred” conceptions of evolution have made much of the fact that genes are only part of the causal chain of reproduction, and only the most prominent of entities the form of which reproduces faithfully through the generations. (See, for example (Griffiths and Gray 1997; Oyama 2000).) The relative importance of role of replicating DNA is certainly open to debate; but whatever the facts about that, it is still clearly not the case that the individual, in any sexually reproducing species, is ever a replicator; as such, then, it is never the direct beneficiary of natural selection. For more on this, see (de Sousa 2007).
7. For a rich representative sampling of views on emotion, see the selection of essays in (Ekman and Davidson 1994).

8. I have expanded elsewhere on the idea that once freed from the immediate requirements of action, the range of our emotions can expand indefinitely. See (de Sousa 2004).

9. The point about the confining power of narrow conceptions of identity is most prominently exemplified by issues not of sex but of colour, race or religion. Thus in a recent article Thomas Judt is quoted as saying: “For many, the way to be Jewish in this country is to aggressively assert that the Holocaust is your identification tag... I know perfectly well my history, but it never occurred to me that my most prominent identity was as a Jew.” (Washington Post 10/9 '06, A03).

10. Which is greater: the number of possible thoughts, the number of possible emotions, or the number of possible experiences? It's been calculated that the number of distinct meaningful sentences of 20 words or less is of the order 10^{20} . (Steven Pinker (1994, 86). That's a good deal larger than Scherer's space. So perhaps, if one naturally—if perhaps trivially—supposes that for every meaningful sentence we are capable of uttering, there is at least one discriminable experience that we can have, there are at least as many experiences as there are utterable sentences. But although there may not be as many discriminable emotions—which perhaps explains why the intellectual life can seem more interesting than the emotional—their number is still vast. Further, insofar as they are held to have nonconceptual content (that is, that there might be points on that space that cannot be mapped onto any concept or sentence), we must suppose the "continuous" dimensions to be at least dense. That immediately sends the size of the space into the hyperastronomical sphere. Against this, however, it doesn't follow from the fact that a space is theoretically dense that the number of discriminations that can be made is infinite. Worse, since the point of digital representation is precisely to procure a basis for reliable reidentification of discrete states, the blurring inherent in analog representation might more than outweigh the theoretically continuous structure of their dimensions. So it might still be true that we can have more experiences with categorization than without.

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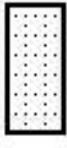
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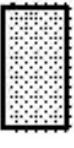
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Group a:



Group b:



Overlap

