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You know...
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Watching a Contrapoints video by trans woman Natalie Wynn, it occurred to me that what follows might just be the product of my being, you know, a cis male. But actually, as to gender, and, if I say it quietly, *sexuality*, it feels more complicated. It's, you know...

I was 4 years old when Simone de Beauvoir published *Le Deuxième Sexe*, and 8 when it appeared in English as *The Second Sex*. Whether this really heralded the birth of second wave feminism, with its focus on rights (it is often suggested that began later, in the 1960s, concretised by Carol Hanisch's 1969 *The Personal is Political*), it certainly ushered in a certain way of thinking about identity, about who one is. Her opening line, "one is not born a woman, one becomes one", elicits 379 million results in a Google search, making it one of the most cited quotations in literary history.

I was 45 and 48 years old when Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*. Third wave feminism may have been sparked a little earlier, but Butler certainly places some very solid theory around its themes of identity, individuality, diversity, and intersectionality.

Sadly, I did not read either de Beauvoir or Butler until I was in my 70s. I became aware of gender diversity, of a certain fluidity, very late in life; but I really did enjoy hearing how people much younger than I talked about it. Pronouns, now there's a thing. The first time I was asked to identify my pronouns I was confronted with my own conservatism when I found that 'he/him' was in a minority among an absolutely dedicated, well educated, articulate, kind, and relatively young group of fellow communists. Secretly (or, you know, maybe not so secretly now), I rather like the idea of adopting 'they/them' as it opens a world of multiplicity that does not carry diagnostic overtones.

I found, already an old man, a certain joy in the freedom to be of indeterminate gender, which prompted, in the setting of a course of study, my reading of Butler. (I was by this time familiar with *The Second Sex*.) Without going into sexual preferences, my desire to dress up, to have a collection of elegant hats (because an old bald white man is just better in a hat), walking canes, expensive shirts, earlier seeming somewhat un-masculine habits, became acceptable in a more fluid world. It is petty, but in the end, you know, the political is always personal.

Now, in a new era, which seems to have come upon us very rapidly (but then time races by in your 70s), that wonderful fluidity seems to be receding. In the trans discourse, we are born with a certain gender; and, though it is sometimes at odds with our biology, it is one of only two possibilities. The freedom of multiplicity, the affirmation of being allowed to be as one feels, paradoxically seems to be limiting the possibilities of being.

This time it is not the thunderous voice of reactionary religious authority that exhorts us to be either male or female and adopt the prescribed social roles. It is a radical voice saying, *be who you feel you are, be proud of it*. But it must be, you know, one or the other.

That argument is pretty interesting, though it does cut across Butler's theory of the performative, which is one of my favourites. Why shouldn't people be free to express the person they feel themselves to be? Well, you know, there are a couple of pretty good reasons why not, not least that feelings are a bad source of data on which to base decisions. If on the inside I feel like shit and want to end it all, then, no, I should not follow my feelings. If I want to have sex with my neighbour, my feelings are a lousy guide. Some desire is dangerous in its expression. Some repression, as Natalie Wynn puts it, is good.

The other reason that comes to mind is that this permission-giving voice, saying, *be yourself*, does not mean the same as it did in the 1960s when we exalted individuality and self-expression (I'll leave the more problematic aspects of the neoliberal self for another time); the choices are more limited. On the inside, one is either male or female. The trans movement, if I can use such a phrase, is clearly born of a genuine desire for liberation; but, as Franz Fanon pointed out, so many revolutionary movements tend to have outcomes that were not predictable. If I am a girl who wants to hang out with the boys and likes trucks, gender-affirming counselling will ask whether I am actually a boy. That can make it much more difficult just to be a girl who hangs out with boys and likes trucks. I am faced with major decisions that will affect me over the lifespan at a time when my knowledge of the world and its myriad possibilities is confined to a relatively small territory.

Michel Foucault, in the 1982 interview *Sex, Power, and The Politics of Identity*, pointed out that the gay liberation movement in the 1970s achieved a lot in gaining acceptance of homosexuality, and in many places repressive laws were changed. But the movement that said, *this is me, this is my self, accept me*, in doing so, limited the options. One was either gay or straight. People who would not adopt either label encountered hostility from both sides. If I was attracted to the same sex, there was pressure to come out as gay. If I came out as gay and then had sex with a workmate of the opposite gender (you know, it usually is a workmate), I was a traitor. If I married a woman but sometimes wanted sex with a man, I was in the closet. Multiplicity of desire was suspect. 'Gay' and 'straight' became fixed identities with predictable beliefs and behaviours. Michel Foucault acknowledged that it was necessary to invent a unified message to bring about change, and, over time, that has changed, but it was a while before notions of gender and sexuality began to become more fluid. Now I seem to be seeing, in another liberation movement, a similar contraction of options.

Simone, Judith, Michel, and a host of writers who produced landmark sociological and philosophical work impinging on gender are silenced in a public cancelling equivalent to book burning. Any radical woman who does not adopt a 'gender affirming' approach (Kathleen Stock^[1], who lost an academic post over this, is usually mentioned at this point) is labelled a TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminist), and psychotherapists become wary of speaking their mind lest they face, you know, a complaint.

As Natalie Wynn puts it, beautifully, I think, gender and sexuality are not binary; they *are dualistic*, in the way that yin and yang represent an *interpenetrative dualism*, each contained in the other, each existing within the other and, thus, infinitely divisible, infinitely variable, infinitely changeable over time and context. You know, even in my 70s, I want those options.

We have been debating the age of responsibility for centuries, and we should perhaps continue to do so in the current conversations, but I do want there to be more options, regardless of age. I want us to affirm masculine women and feminine men as well as those who assert the right to radically alter their assigned gender. Right now, though, I need to, you know, check on my insurance, something we cis males are rather keen on.

Love and peace.

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[1] There are a number of lectures and interviews available on YouTube, for instance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8xLuEVLWun0>