Sex and gender: two terms with a lot of ideological baggage. What do the terms mean? And why must we understand the difference? Sex and gender are linked, but they are often conflated as a single concept. Because of this, it’s time to provide some clarity on the topic.

/ Sex describes the purely biological differences between males and females, namely your internal and external genitalia and your dominant gonadal tissue, ovaries or testes. Whether you’re male or female depends on the developmental pathway you went down for the production of either sperm or eggs. You do not have to be able to produce sperm or eggs to be male or female, as there are plenty of females who do not menstruate and plenty of males who do not produce sperm. 99.98% of births are unambiguously male or female. Classical intersex conditions which comprise the remaining 0.02% of births (sometimes with a mix of ovarian and testes tissue) do not destabilize the foundation of biological sex.

Gender, on the other hand, is often linked to sex, but it’s not always used as a synonym for male and female. Rather than describing the purely biological components of male or female, gender is more about the set of behaviors, interests, and social roles associated with someone’s sex. You can also think of gender as a set of masculine and feminine traits, of which we all hold a mixture. These components can be influenced by both biological and sociological variables, but many aspects of gender are also based in culturally-defined stereotypes of how males and females should behave. Thus, using a broad definition, we can define gender as a sex-based behavioral phenomenon which is affected by our biology and our environment.

/ Take toy preferences, for example. Boys tend to be more interested than girls in toys that move. This gender difference has both biological and sociological components that are often hard to separate. / Biologically, strong evidence suggests that prenatal androgens play a role in the hyper-development of the brain’s visuospatial system. Since boys are often exposed to much more prenatal androgen than girls, more boys show an interest in moving objects. And yet, sociologically, there is also strong evidence that parents play a large role in influencing their child’s toy preferences. So, to understand how biology and society affect gender differences requires an integration of many variables.

/ A pathological component of gender can be found in gender stereotypes. Traditionally, boys were seen as tough, aggressive, and stoic, while girls were seen caring, agreeable, and emotional. While these phrases may loosely describe a pattern of behavior on the population level, such a description says nothing about the individual, nor does it tell us where such patterns originate. / For example, while it may be true that more boys than girls play with trucks, it would be incorrect to say that 1) all boys play with trucks, and 2) that boys SHOULD play with trucks simply because they are boys. / You can see how applying stereotypes to individuals can quickly devolve into oversimplified judgments which threaten the natural expressions of someone’s behavior and interests. Because of this, predicting an individual’s behavior and interests based on stereotyped behavioral patterns is not without serious flaws.

/ Knowing that gender can be used to describe patterns of behavior between men and women, and that these descriptions can also be used to constrain individual behavior, gender can be broken into two parts: the descriptive and the normative. Gender is descriptive where it describes behavioral patterns
between men and women; on the other hand, gender is normative where it judges how men and women should behave based on those patterns.

So, why should we separate the concepts of sex and gender? Because if we can separate society’s expectations of how men and women should act from biological sex, then we can achieve liberty for men and women both.

In the 1940s, feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir separated sex and gender. Her famous quote, “One is not born but becomes a woman,” reflects this. Beauvoir does not mean that ‘female’ is socially constructed, but rather that the societal expectations of how a woman should act are constructed. This distinction was useful to separate traditional gender roles from biological sex. Beauvoir agrees that your sex does not define you as a person, and it doesn’t tell us anything about your character or your values. No matter who you are, you should be able to live the life you choose; you should have liberty.

The classical feminists understood that justice for women could only happen if biological sex was recognized. After all, how can you liberate what you cannot define? But, what happens if this critical understanding of sex and gender is not just undone, but reversed? What happens when gender, not sex, becomes your immutable trait? Such a phenomenon is happening now.

It happens when girls are told they are actually boys because they like playing with trains or guns or because they like dressing in boys’ clothing. It happens when boys are told they’re actually girls because they like playing with dolls or because they like dressing in girls’ clothing. Such a practice is not progressive, but regressive, as it defines the sex of a child by using gender stereotypes of how boys and girls should act and behave.

Our society used to say a girl who plays with male-typical toys was a tomboy. Now we say she is a boy, that she should become a boy. But, why? Only if you believe that gender expression is the indicator of your true sex. The irony is, if you’re a girl who likes playing with dolls, your interests are viewed as a product of socialization, but, if you’re a girl who likes playing with trucks, then suddenly, you might be a boy trapped in a girl’s body. The truth is each of us has a mix of masculine and feminine traits. But this diversity does not transform us into the opposite sex: feminine boys are still boys, and masculine girls are still girls. As long as our society keeps conflating sex and gender, and as long as we believe that boys and girls who do not conform to gender stereotypes were born in the wrong body, then the liberty we desire from the constraints of gender roles will never be reached.

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