

Existence in its Sexual Being

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Sex and Gender

How should we understand Jacques Derrida's discussions of sex difference, and the affirmation one finds in them for thinking about human sexuality – and related concepts of desire, instinct, inclination, drive – 'beyond the binary difference' between men and women (C, 75)?¹

Attempting to make clear what Derrida has in view in that affirmation I will appeal to a distinction between *sex difference* and *sex differences*. I will not appeal, however, to a distinction between *sex* difference and *gender* difference. The sex/gender distinction seems more or less to control academic discussions about men and women at the moment. This is perhaps especially so in Anglophone contexts where that distinction draws on something already in the English language. However, the German word that will launch this article, '*Geschlecht*', does not seem to belong exclusively or simply to one side or the other of a sex/gender distinction. Indeed, as well as meaning 'sex' (someone's sex) it also means (among other things) 'genre' and 'genus'. I should make clear from the start, then, that my own non-observance of the regularly observed sex/gender distinction is deliberate. The British philosopher Stella Sandford, in a book on Emmanuel Levinas, notes at one point that 'the Anglo-American sex/gender distinction is blurred in French' (ML, 39).² Sandford does not stop to consider whether that blurring (if that is actually a good word here) might be something one should save rather than abandon to a clear distinction. My wager (and risk) is that not relying on the distinction might have virtues of its own. In particular, instead of thematising a person's existence in their sexual being in objective and general terms, as a

combination or synthesis of (natural) biological and (normative) social components, for example, the non-distinction of sex/gender in the term ‘Geschlecht’ makes room, I believe, for thinking about a person’s existence in their sexual being in existential and singular terms, in terms of their ipseity. This is the point of view that I want to explore in this article. Freed from a perspective that conceives each person’s sexual being in relation to certain bodily characteristics and socially recognised subject-positions, I will read Derrida as defending a conception that has its primary focus on a kind of being that has its very being in what he calls the inventive “choreography” of multiple singular events of relational sex difference (C, 76).

European Humanism

I will begin with Derrida seeking out the occurrences and occasions of Heidegger’s use of the polysemic word ‘Geschlecht’. He found it here and there, and discussed it, first, in relation to sex and sex difference, with reference to a text where Heidegger asserts the ‘neutrality’ of the word ‘Dasein’ as the name for the being that we are. Heidegger wanted to find the right distance from what had been called ‘Man’ in Greco-Christian, onto-theological metaphysics: he wants to use a name that doesn’t have the baggage of that dominant European tradition. ‘Dasein’ does not designate a being with certain special ‘ontical’ characteristics or anthropological traits (a capacity for the *logos*, or likeness to God, or possession of reason, or self-consciousness, or language), but a being which should, Heidegger argues, be given an ‘ontological’ construal: the kind of being that we ourselves are, and that he names with the ‘neutral’ term Dasein, is or exists at all only where there is ‘an understanding of Being’ (BT, 32).³

As understood in the anthropology of the dominant Greek and Christian heritage of Europe, the being that we ourselves are, the kind of being that, in that heritage, is called

Man is conceived as essentially more than a merely living being. Nevertheless, the human being thus understood is still conceived ontically, starting from the presence within the world of the human animal. Foregoing that point of departure, Heidegger's ontological framing might seem to neutralise too much, and to lose sight of something about the human being that is beyond any neutralization: the reality of its having two fundamentally different sex variations or inflections: male and female. This is where Heidegger first draws on the word '*Geschlecht*', speaking here of sex difference, the difference between men and women. And Heidegger does indeed affirm that Dasein is 'neutral' in this regard. Dasein is not sexually neuter, not without a sexual being, nor is it androgynous, but it is not, or not yet, either one or the other, not, or not yet, either male or female, man or woman – although each Dasein will be, in its 'factual concretion', one or the other (GI, 69).⁴

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As we shall see, Derrida will work through Heidegger's text on this fundamental Geschlechtslosigkeit of Dasein in order to affirm something opened by it but which also goes beyond it: the possibility that the idea of binary sex difference might not govern either our thinking about or our culture of human sexuality. It is an effort to go beyond a European culture which sees human life as everywhere inflected in two basic sexual modalities: the 'priapic', and the (there is apparently no other word) 'female'.

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Heidegger's Dasein, though not Man, is, as Derrida insisted, 'nothing other than Man' (EM, 127).⁵ Indeed, at certain points Heidegger's apparently neutral Dasein is clearly not neutral with respect to the European tradition it wants to break with. In particular, as we shall see, Heidegger's thought remains caught up in a distinctively Christian-Biblical anthropology of sex difference. One might say that the analytic of Dasein does not simply neutralise a number of more traditional ontic determinations – of sex, or the body, or death, or animality – but reinscribes those traditional determinations in an ontological register.

A central feature of the dominant European understanding of Man has been its humanism: Man is conceived as distinguished from or as having distinguished itself from all merely animal life. Sexual life does not escape this distinction of Man. Indeed, the first appearance of sex difference in history, in the Christian conception of history, the fate and destiny of Adam and Eve, virtually founds that distinction from animality. After the Fall we are never the same again in any way – death, birth, sexual life, our animality overall, is entirely transformed, through and through transfigured. There is, after the Fall, a radical break between Man and animal. And first with respect to sex difference, which becomes visible as such and for *the first time* with the presence of fallen Man.

In his own way, Heidegger will break less with this tradition than his insistent anti-humanism might suggest. Indeed, Heidegger's complaint against the humanist tradition was never that it raised Man too high. His complaint was that it did not set the distinctive '*humanitas*' of Man 'high enough' (LH, 234).⁶ However, one does not have to construe the natural history of human beings in terms which presume some kind of radical break from the rest of animal life. The opposition of Man/animal does not have to control our thinking about ourselves or about animals. Nor is that opposition the only problematic face of humanist anthropology. Another stubbornly insistent feature of anthropology in its Greek and Christian heritage is its conception of human history as the emancipation or progress of the *reason* in Man: from an originally animal condition, human history is conceived as the developmental history of Man towards his properly rational *telos*, for all humanity, with modern European humanity invariably conceived as the most advanced in that respect.

Heidegger's shift from 'Man' to 'Dasein' opens a space in which the meaning of our being and our history can be rethought. However, by retaining the old onto-theological humanist interest in maintaining the difference of Man – and hence also the difference of sex difference in Man – Heidegger's best effort to break the hold of a tradition which stands in

the way of that striking end still stands in the way. With a view to dismantling the humanist tradition's interest in obscuring from view the possibility of a more respectful interest in *Geschlechtsleben*, we will attempt to follow something of Derrida's interest in Heidegger's thought of *Geschlecht* as sex difference – where Derrida will find in Heidegger, along with something of that old humanist obscurantism still at work, something that promises something more promising.

The Body in its Sexual Being

To get a better focus on what is being discussed in Derrida's reflections on *existence in its sexual being*, and the possibility of cultivating that in a no-longer exclusively binary way, I want to contrast it with a theme that is not to the fore in his discussions, and risks confusing any reading of them: namely, *the body in its sexual being*.

What comes to mind when we think about the latter theme? Two things, I think. Both are important but neither are, I will suggest, Derrida's primary interest. First, we might consider the body in its sexual being in terms of an individual human body as something that normally (statistically speaking) sometimes gets sexually aroused. This is Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theme in a famous chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* entitled, precisely, 'The Body in its Sexual Being' (PP, 154).⁷ Merleau-Ponty is interested there in what he calls 'normal sexual reflexes': the more or less mechanically spontaneous onset, for most people, of sexual arousal in certain circumstances, a sexual 'impetus' that belongs to the 'emotional totality' of a 'strictly individual' life (PP, 156). Merleau-Ponty's interest here is primarily in the way that the body in its sexual being informs perception, pre-predicatively giving significance to what is given in experience as an immediately 'sexual world' (PP, 156). We can ask what it's like to have or to lack such a world, and how far it 'permeates' life overall for those who do not lack it (PP, 169). Although Merleau-Ponty shows no interest in it,

concern with sexual life in this sense could also take in issues of individual sexual orientation and preference or its absence: issues concerning the intentionality of arousal that relate to heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, or a-sexuality. Merleau-Ponty does not touch on this. His interest is in the quite general phenomenon of being turned on (or not), and how bodily sexual arousal is integrated into and informs what is given in perceptual experience in a strictly individual way.

Another, and quite different, discussion under the same title might focus on the anatomical sexual characteristics of human bodies generally. These are the characteristics that make it possible for the animal that we are, in one way or another, to reproduce. Biologically speaking these characteristics ultimately concern gamete types and the bodily structures that facilitate their combination. Human developmental biology will thus investigate and study the different gamete types in human beings – there are two, one larger, one smaller – and the specialised reproductive structures that are required to produce, protect, and combine such gametes. From this point of view, the body in its sexual being can be viewed as a machine for reproduction, with a reproductive system separated into two gamete-connected and gamete-connecting forms, the bodily forms of male and female human beings.

These two themes concerning the body in its sexual being are not what Derrida focuses on. There are, however, significant parallels to be drawn with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body. Like Merleau-Ponty, Derrida is ultimately interested in sexuality in a 'strictly individual' way, and without reference to whether one is heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or a-sexual. But Derrida will regularly say that the thought of a different and fundamentally non-binary sexuality that interests him is not limited to questions concerning bodily sexual arousal. As we shall see, for Derrida, sexuality belongs to the very *ipseity* of an existentially singular being, not simply to the perception-informing emotional undergoings of an embodied individual.

There are connections of sorts with developmental biology too, since Derrida does not call into question the classification of individual human beings as male or female ‘by the usual criteria’ (GIII, 9). His ‘beyond binary’ thinking is not concerned with the numerous empirical variations, similarities and differences between human bodies, neither between nor in addition to two empirically modal organic types.

Overall, then, the body in its sexual being is not the best heading for thinking about Derrida’s interest in existence in its sexual being. However, this is not to say that Derrida is indifferent to the body. In fact, he is very interested in the way the human body has been understood within European culture, and specifically within European humanism, both in the onto-theological philosophical tradition, as well as in its inheritance in Heidegger’s thinking. Heidegger’s discussion of the human hand is the central example in the *Geschlecht* series (GII, 173).⁸

As I have indicated, conceptions of the human being shaped by European humanism hold fast to the idea of a radical break between the human and the animal. And one should already see Adam and Eve, and the break with human animality that begins with the Fall, on the horizon of all such thinking, including Heidegger’s. The idea of such a radical break is principally expressed in terms of a fundamental difference in their respective mental lives: Man is distinguished by the capacity for the *logos*, reason, self-consciousness, or conceptual thought – or the understanding of Being; the animal defined as lacking those capacities. On the other hand, this humanism has always also been occupied with bodily being too. Embodiment is something we share with animals. But the humanist tradition resists the idea that this should be understood to imply that the embodied life of human beings is simply ‘the same’ as animal embodiment: in Man, the humanist will say, everything is changed.

Derrida is not everywhere hostile to the idea of the human body that one finds in humanism. In his work on the human/animal difference he does not simply erase the

humanist construal of the transfigured human body by generalising the animal side of the old distinction. Indeed, Derrida tends mostly to say that animals are not what that tradition calls animals, and that the features traditionally thought the preserve of Man are not, in fact, Man's exclusive possession (many other animals have them too) or are not even his possession at all as that is thought within humanism. The *differences* between human beings and other animals are not to be thought through the humanist lens of the *difference* between Man (or Dasein) and animal.

Sexual Difference and Sexual Duality

What do we think when we think of ourselves as 'Man'? Following Heidegger, Derrida emphasises the central and determining role played by the terms that come down to us from the anthropology of Greek antiquity and Biblical Christianity. Or, more precisely, of Christian creationism in its appropriation of Greek conceptual resources. As Derrida puts it in *Geschlecht III*, Christian theology is *constituted* 'by integrating or translating pre-Christian Greek metaphysics' into a Christian creationist conception of the human (GIII, 122).⁹

How is Man thought there? Man is thought from his beginning and end: from his *archē* to his *telos*. Man – theomorphic rational animality – is understood in terms of an *archeo-teleological*, universal history: from an origin (the Fall) to an end (Redemption). And this universal history of Man all begins with sexual duality as that which appears as such, for the first time, with the first appearance of Man as Man, with Man having sundered himself from mere animal being in the exit from nature that takes place in the Fall. Man is thus understood, in the first instance, as the being that is, uniquely, *alive* to, if not straight-off properly adjusted to, the *truth* of sex-difference-as-two. This conception of Man and his *archeo-teleology* is retained in a secularised 'modern' form too. On such secular construals, Man is conceived as the being whose own being unfolds in time in the movement of progress

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from a cognitively primitive or 'savage' origin towards his properly rational and 'civilised' end. And this conception of cognitive progress includes, and will have always included, the idea of attaining a form of individual and social life for Man that, finally, is properly adjusted to the truth of sexual duality or sex-difference-as-two.

As Derrida emphasises, Greco-Christian Man is still visible in Heidegger's text despite the critique of onto-theology that it develops. It is visible not only in relation to Heidegger's conception of Dasein's proper 'end', thought in terms of 'nearness to Being' (EM, 134), but also in terms of Dasein's 'origin', thought in terms of the sexual 'neutrality' of Dasein 'prior' to 'factually concrete' existence: 'it is hard to avoid...[the] ethico-religious associations, that would bind [the] dispersion [of Dasein's sexual 'neutrality' into factual concreteness] to a fall and a corruption of the pure originary possibility' (GI, 76). It is all Adam and Eve again, before and after the Fall. This is reproduced, Derrida suggests in both *Geschlecht II* and *Geschlecht III*, in the 'whole enigma' of the distinction that Heidegger draws between sex difference as a 'gentle and tender' difference or fold as two-fold or simple duality [*sanfte Zwielfalt* and *Zwielfache*] and sex difference as dual, as dissension, war, opposition [*Zwietracht*] (GII, 185-87). The 'one' of Dasein's 'neutral' *ein Geschlecht* is not, Derrida notes, an androgynous one instead of two (GIII, 167), nor the 'bland sameness' of hermaphroditism (GIII, 168). Rather, it is *not yet* duality-as-opposition.

Our sexual being in general raises the question whether the bodily differences that belong to the usual criteria for the sex classification of human beings make a difference to the most basic structures of human existence. Heidegger is interested in this question, and says they do not. However, he does not think that the idea of sexuality is simply irrelevant at that level either. It is not that human existence, conceived in terms of its most general structures, is simply without sexuality, only those structures are indifferent to the *Zwietracht* of sexual opposition. That difference can thus be bracketed, neutralised, in the analytic of Dasein

insofar as the latter is concerned with those structures of existence that belong to an understanding of Being. Dasein is, in each case, a sexually marked *x* with an existential structure which can belong to just *anyone*, man or woman: it is not an a-sexuality (that would be just another anthropological trait) but ‘an originary positivity and power of essence’ (GI, 72), the power indeed of an origin or source, the upstream to the limit which ‘bears within itself the internal possibility of humanity’, that which will be concretely human (and in that respect other than every animal), and if concretely human then *a fortiori* a human man or woman (GI, 72). At issue is a pre-dual (pre-war-of-the-sexes) sexuality, an originary positivity upstream of the *Zwietracht* of sexual opposition. It is the oppositional binary that is negative, or rather it is the sexual division or dissension that carries or will lead to negativity (GI, 72).

Dasein is a being whose distinctive ‘kind of Being’ Heidegger designates with the word ‘existence’ [*Existenz*], contrasting that with something that is ‘merely present-at-hand within the world’ (BT, 67-8). Existence in its sexual being, if there is such a thing, cannot be reduced to the usual criteria for distinguishing a living human being within the world as a man or a woman. Derrida raises but rapidly suspends the question whether, for Heidegger, the ‘pre-dual’ sexuality of Dasein really is still a kind of sexuality, a sexuality inscribed within the *ipseity* of every Dasein – where that individuality is not understood as the bodily individuated man or woman, but understood in relation to Dasein’s existential singularity, its having what Heidegger calls ‘in each case *mineness*’ (*Jemeinigkeit*) (BT, p. 68). Derrida suspends the question in relation to Heidegger, noting that, in any case, there is nothing in Heidegger’s text that calls into question the idea that Dasein’s existence in its sexual being is, ‘in its concrete factuality’ distributed in a binary way (GI, 73). As we shall see, however, a reading of sexuality as something inscribed within the existential singularity of each ‘my life’ is precisely what Derrida will want to affirm.

The Creation of a Creature

Heidegger's Dasein is always already 'thrown', that is to say, from the start historical. So Heidegger will insist on a primordial thrownness of every Dasein before its 'image' as a history inaugurating Fall: every Dasein is already fallen (GI, 78). But his overall picture is still Christian, still marked by Christian creationism, still all about Eve, and (first) Adam. There is, Derrida says, 'no other *content*' (GIII, 91). Indeed, the *Geschlechtslosigkeit* of 'neutral' Dasein is not an a-sexuality at all 'except with respect' to the 'two' thought as binarity or division or opposition or dissension. What is at issue is, once more, the difference between sex difference 'before and after the curse' (GIII, 123): existence in its sexual being as that is thought 'before and after' it first appears, for the first time, concretely as dual. Hence also the difference between sexuality as something animal and something human, as something that appears for the first time when the human being is transformed into its Dasein – and that not in our historical past but, for each of us, as a condition inherited originally, a condition for every Adam and Eve that each one of us is, each one of us, in the concrete factuality of existence, one or the other.

Derrida inherits something of Heidegger's conception of our thrownness. When he speaks of a person's life in terms of 'inscribed' existence (OG, 160), rather than in terms of rational subjectivity, rational spirit, rational consciousness, or whatever, he does so in part in order to be able to acknowledge that the 'somewhere where we are' is always 'in a text already' (OG, 162).¹⁰ We should keep this in view when Derrida talks about the 'code of sexual marks' that distinguish and classify individuals, and especially when he refers to the 'sexual marks whose choreography can carry, divide, multiply the body of each "individual"' (C, 76). Existence in its sexual being is not just culturally tattooed onto a biological or merely animal ground. To borrow and generalise an image of human existence from Nietzsche (one

that Heidegger nearly but doesn't quite mention in his *Geschlecht* reflections), at issue here is the creation of a creature (see BGE, 117, and GIII, 74).¹¹

Sexual Difference and Sexual Differences

While Derrida is not primarily interested in the body in its sexual being in either sense that I have outlined, he is interested in what gets inscribed and carried there: an historical prosthetics of sexuality that is integrated into the 'my life' of a living human being. One might draw on the etymology of 'person' here, which originally meant a mask but now simply means an individual. Derrida is interested in the European understanding of what it is to be a person in its sexual being, and how a particular construal of personhood in terms of binary sex difference has dominated the European understanding of ourselves as human.

Within that dominant understanding, empirical bodily differences between people are conceived as coupled with a qualitative difference in personhood: a radical difference between 'being a man' and 'being a woman' (a difference which is irreducible to questions about what turns you on). Europe's culture of sex difference as sexual duality and opposition has been cultivated in the name of the *truth* of such whole-life-inflecting sex-difference-as-two.

As Cora Diamond has suggested, it is helpful here to contrast two different concepts of sex difference: on the one hand, the concept of the *differences* between men and women, and, on the other hand, the concept of the *difference* between men and women (RS, 320).¹² In the European onto-theological heritage, talk about male sexuality and female sexuality is not a discourse on the factually typical, empirically modal *differences* between men and women, or human reproductive dimorphism: it articulates a humanist interest in a concept of the *difference* between men and women – it is the idea of a basic difference between male sexuality and female sexuality informing or inflecting *everything* human, all human

personhood. It is a point of view that fundamentally confines our interest in *Geschlechtsleben* to sex difference conceived in an exclusively binary way.

With the cultural articulation of that binary conception, we are, Derrida claims, in the space of what he calls ‘the decorum of all codes’ (C, 76). And the point is that the matrix of our cultural codes of the *difference* between men and women is not simply determined by the well-known *differences* between men and women. These codes articulate a prosthetics of sexual existence as binary sex difference, and the ways of being for men and women supposed properly *respectful* of (because *true* to) the sex of each. It is this concept that is Derrida’s theme. And his discussion opens on to the possibility, the ‘dream’ he says (C, 76), that all men and women might live in a non-binary culture: not an a-sexual culture but a culture that would be ‘sexual otherwise’ (C, 76); a respectful culture that would be the other of a culture of binary sex difference.

Note the wording here: not that dominant culture’s other but the other of that dominant culture. The former would be the dominant culture’s opposite. It is the position that argues, for example, that we should cultivate a culture in which the codes of sex difference which maintain inequality between the sexes have been abolished because men and women really are fundamentally or in all respects that matter, *not different* but *the same*. The latter, by contrast, speaks in a sense-transforming way of an altogether different culture of sex-difference for men and women. As we shall see, in Derrida’s thought this is conceived and projected, via Heidegger’s conception of Dasein’s existence, as a culture of irreducible sex singularities, each ‘my life’ an example of something that is, in each case, one of a kind, not an instance of a genus.

The classical feminism of ideal equality pits itself against patriarchal inequality: it seeks equal access for women to the possibilities of being that have historically been the preserve of men alone. Progressive feminism of this sort thus sees liberation in a ‘thinkable

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telos' (C, 67): namely, an attainable but as yet unattained truth of sexual difference that would belong to the history of humanity still striving for self-realisation, humanity on the way towards the elimination of a patriarchal culture of sex difference and its replacement by universal sex equality. In this respect this classical feminism of ideal equality still belongs to the old programme of the universal history of Man. Derrida wonders whether this telic universal history is something 'woman' is best conceived as simply part of, and whether the emancipatory interest of women lies at a distance from that idea, 'dancing otherwise' (C, 69), rather than of (finally) having an equal place in that telic history. In view of the practical necessity of feminist struggles of the classical type in public life, given the resistance those struggles have met and still meet that no dance could dispel, Derrida does not simply abandon classical equality feminism. Indeed, his own reading of the European culture of Man and his teleology, is, as we shall see, also opposed to its systematic 'male~~s~~ firstness' (C, 69), and hence the kind of 'deconstruction' he allies himself to will rally to many feminist causes. But it will no longer do so in the name of the old progressive idea of the *telos* of Man.

The Dream of the Non-Binary

Derrida asks whether human sexuality should be thought in an oppositional and binary way, as if all human personhood and personality is structurally dual. And he thinks they do not have to be construed in that binary way. Indeed, as we shall see, he thinks they are, uncannily, *already* not distributed in that binary way, whether or not we have come to terms with that culturally, which we have not.

'Neutral' construals such as Heidegger's might be important here since they promise to overcome the old binary idea and can help open a space in our heritage for approaching an altogether different non-binary idea. However, not only can the binary return in such construals (as it does in Heidegger) but that neutralising erasure of binary difference can itself

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be read as a kind of conceptual victory for one side of the binary: a victory for 'male first' understandings of human life. The supposedly neutral figure turning out to be, first of all, the priapic figure of the human male as the model for properly shaped humanity in general. Womanhood once more positioned as secondary and deficient – not quite up to the mark, not quite or not at all the equal of manhood. Man of European humanism has always been, first, a man.

As we have seen, a classical feminism might seek equality right here. This is the neutralising feminism Nietzsche railed against. Nietzsche's nightmare was of women wanting to resemble men, taking the position of men, and leaving everything as it is in that order. (The opposite of that would be equally unpromising.) Derrida too wants to avoid a too rapid equalisation or neutralisation, but not because he wants to save binary sex difference in a new way. What keeps Derrida at one remove from the modern 'democratic' spirit of equalisation sought for in a classical feminism of ideal equality is something he finds problematic in all efforts at neutralisation: such efforts wind up denying that the intentionality of respectful human relationships always involves a relation to the unique singularity of another, another who is recognised as being, for that reason, *altogether other*, not the same:

A certain dissymmetry is no doubt the law both of sexual difference and the relationship to the other in general (I say this in opposition to a certain kind of violence within the language of 'democratic' platitudes, in any case in opposition to a certain democratic ideology), yet the dissymmetry to which I refer is still, let us not say symmetrical in turn (which might seem absurd), but doubly, unilaterally inordinate, like a kind of reciprocal, respective and respectful excessiveness. This double dissymmetry perhaps goes beyond known or coded marks, beyond the grammar and spelling, shall we say (metaphorically), of sexuality. (C, 76)

The sense in which we might want to reassert symmetry here is that dissymmetry is equally on both sides of every such reciprocally respectful relationship: there where it is reciprocally recognized that the other is every bit other, it is a double dissymmetry. Derrida asks whether this is best thought in terms of the codes of a dissymmetry of male and female sexuality. And he denies it: in fact, this double dissymmetry is part of the structure of all respectful relations between persons, where each is recognized as a unique singularity. And this is so whether, as classified by the usual criteria, it concerns a man and a woman, a man and a man, or a woman and a woman.

The acknowledgment of this irreducible double dissymmetry is the opening to a (sometimes quite tentative) discussion of a ‘respectful’ culture of sex difference *beyond* the binary, part of a wider and rigorously democratic ambition to speak up for what, in the lives of each and every one of us, is singular, unique, unequalizable, before and beyond any assertion of or identification with any identity that people might share. Existence in its sexual being is, in each case, already fashioned in innumerable and unpredictable ways. The dream of the non-binary: it is hiding in plain view. There are already, right before our eyes, innumerable ‘my life’ variations – singular choreographies or stylings of existence in its sexual being – which a powerful humanist interest and its governing decorum of codes corrals into just two ‘respectable’ subject-positions, and altogether obscures from our view.

Style

In European culture – in the logocentric culture of onto-theological humanism and its inheritance – the culture of binary sex difference is not only about binarity as opposition, but, as I have indicated, has been constructed with an insistent hierarchical aspect of ‘male firstness’: the ‘*matrix*’ of norms that belongs to its decorum of codes is, as Derrida says, a ‘*patrix*’ (C, 73). Humanist logocentrism is, that is to say, a phallogocentrism, where the

phallus at issue is not the organic penis but the person-prosthetics of man-hood in contrast to, and positioned as superior to, woman-hood. Phallogocentrism is ‘the complicity of Western metaphysics with a notion of male firstness’ in the understanding of the truth of the being that we are, the understanding of what that tradition calls Man (C, 69). It belongs to a quite specific conception of the truth of sex difference in Man: the Adam-and-Eve conception of onto-theological humanism, the conception that belongs to the thought of Man after the Fall.

Is Derrida’s dream, then, the dream of a prelapsarian innocence? No: simply of the deconstruction of the phallogocentrism of European culture as the Greco-Christian, onto-theological culture of Man. And hence a dream of a culture of human sexuality beyond the codes of the battle or war of the sexes. It dreams the beyond of the European *patrix* in which ‘respectable’ existence in its sexual being has been inscribed hitherto.

How should we understand Derrida’s dream in its positive content? It is ‘beyond two’ – but not by adding a new suite of additional sexual identities (the ‘non-binary’ ones), or a spectrum of blends of the old two, necessarily bookended by the old two, but something else altogether. Beyond the thinking of the truth of Man and the truth of sex difference as two, Derrida affirms a conception of existence in its sexual being in terms of the “choreography” of singular events of respectful sex difference beyond the phallogocentric codes of sex difference as duality and opposition.

This desire for what exceeds binary sexuality is not a dream for more sexual types, or of new identities that mix the two, or of an ideal androgyny. It is, Derrida says, ‘the dream of the innumerable’ (C, 76); of sexual singularities that make their way in each ‘my life’ as soon as sex difference dances on the stage according to rhythms other than the orchestrated score of a strict and regimented 2-step – which is, in fact, right away. All of this challenging the idea that there is a *truth* of sex-difference-as-two to be attained, *a* sex difference (or a no difference) between men and women that would be an object of knowledge, and thence a

cultural norm. All of this part of a wider challenge to the logocentric heritage of the truth of Man and his teleology.

With the idea of the ‘performativity’ of ‘gender identity’ in view, Judith Butler speaks of ‘a stylized repetition of acts’ (GT, 140).¹³ Derrida perhaps gets close to this idea when, in his analysis of the fundamental ‘gift’ structure that (if it takes place) ‘produces the identity of the giver and the receiver’ in an each time singular relation of sex difference, he explicitly affirms that such an event can be conceived as ‘performative’, since the sex difference brought into being by the event ‘doesn’t rely’ on a pre-existing determination, and specifically not on a determination of ‘sexual opposition’ (WB, 201). On the other hand, however, Derrida affirms this performativity in terms of singular events, not repeatable-as-the-same acts. And his ‘dream’ is of singular events of sex difference irreducible to the sexual codes or sex-identities of phallogocentric culture. ‘One sex for each time’ (WB, 199),¹⁴ says Derrida, where *each time* is *the first time*, each time marked by what one might call an irreducible occasionality in the ongoing inventive composition and recomposition (choreography) of sexual *styles* – a scene of sexual stylization in some sense already prepared for by the general structure of an event which, in its ‘iterability’, produces (and hence reproduces) ‘the same for a series of singularities’ (GIII, 37). It is the performative invention, each time, of an all-the-time singularising of ‘my life’ in its sexual being irrespective of sex classification by the usual criteria, and irrespective of sexual preference or orientation.

Existence in its sexual being is decoupled here from the sexed couple male/female; decoupled first then from the idea that there are just two sexual genres but also from the idea of new types, or a spectrum of types, or of new classifications of mixed types of the two. The anatomically differentiated couple, and their sex *differences*, remains, but that couple is no longer wedded or welded to codes of sex *difference* that are framed or bookended by the figure of two sexual figures, or two sexualities. Instead, the space is opened for a culture of

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sexuality that is, Derrida says, 'beyond binary' (C, 76): not new sexual types, not new sexual identities, but innumerable 'my life' stylings: stylings of one's singular and unique existence in its sexual being, now freed from the old binary codes.

The key thought about style here is not simply the cheaply epigrammatic idea '*Le style c'est l'homme*' – but, as Wittgenstein stressed in fact, Buffon's original formulation: '*Le style c'est l'homme même*' (CV, 89).¹⁵ The style of the man is the very image of the man, which is to say, in view of the spectral ideality internal to the iterability that belongs to the very event of his 'presence', the very man of the man – whether this 'man' is, by the usual criteria, a man or a woman.

Derrida's dream is not, in fact, about the cultural significance of new and transgressive non-binary identities, something to be opposed (in a binary way) to the (supposedly) binary identities of most men and women. Rather, it is an invitation to think about existence in its sexual being in a way which does not lock up or block out possibilities of the unpredictable production and transformation of the creature that, in each case, we are. Derrida's dream thus envisages general conditions for our interest in *Geschlechtsleben* which could secure, in principle, that *any* other is respectable, thus opening the space in which the *singularity* of each 'my life' in its sexual being can best appear. Invoking Nietzsche's framing of what he called a 'democracy to come', one might say it envisages a social set-up that would 'create and guarantee', for each in the all, 'as much independence as possible' in their stylings of existence in its sexual being (see HH, 344).¹⁶

Irreducible to anything simply present in the behaviour of a living being, *existence in its sexual being* constitutes the very being-there, the 'substance', of a person. Absolutely invisible in what might be called the palpable organic remainder of a human corpse, the remains of *the body in its sexual being*, it concerns, fundamentally, the (always still-to-be-accomplished) invention *of style*: the creation *of* a creature.

¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Choreographies', interview with Christie McDonald (*Diacritics*, Summer, 1982).

² Stella Sandford, *The Metaphysics of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001).

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962).

⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference' (*Research in Phenomenology*, Volume 13, 1983).

⁵ Jacques Derrida, 'The Ends of Man', in *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (Birmingham: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).

⁶ Martin Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism', in *Basic Writings*, edited and translated by David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1989).

⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'Geschlecht II: Heidegger's Hand', in *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, edited and translated by John Sallis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Geschlecht III: Sex, Race, Nation, Humanity*, edited and translated by Geoffrey Bennington, Katie Chenoweth, and Rodrigo Therezo (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1973).

¹² Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991).

¹³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990).

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Women in the Beehive: A Seminar', in *Men and Feminism*, edited by Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (London: Routledge, 1987)

¹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, Revised edition, translated by Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human, Part II*, translated by Paul V. Cohn (New York: MacMillan, 1913).