

Masculinity and the Questions of “Is” and “Ought”: Revisiting the Definition of the Notion of Masculinity Itself

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Abstract

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) lists 1571 as the year of the first recorded use of the English word ‘masculinity’; the Ancient Greek *ἀνδρεία* (*andreia*), usually translated as ‘courage’, was also used to refer to manliness. The notion of manliness or masculinity is undoubtedly older still. Yet, despite this seeming familiarity, not only is the notion proving to be highly elusive, its understanding by the society being in a constant flux, but also one which is at the root of bitter division and confrontation, and which has tangible and far-reaching real-world effects. At the same time, while masculinity has been attracting an increasing amount of attention in academia, the large body of published work seldom goes to the very foundations of the issue, failing to explicitly and with clarity reach a consensus as to how masculinity *ought* to be understood. Herein I critique the leading contemporary thought, showing it to be poorly conceived and confounded, and often lacking in substance which would raise it to the level of the actionable and constructive. Hence, I propose an alternative view which is void of the observed deficiencies, and discuss how its adoption would facilitate a conciliation between the currently warring factions, focusing everybody’s efforts on addressing the actual ethical, deconfounded of specious distractions.

1 Introduction

2 The last century has witnessed immense social changes. In no small part
3 these are facilitated and sped up by technology and the present-day ability
4 to create information (in the form of text, images, sound, video, etc.) and
5 to communicate that information with speed across what are practically ar-
6 bitrary distances. A useful analogy is that of evolution by natural selection
7 (though, it should be noted, that as with any analogy, one should be careful
8 not to take it overly literally and to excess): most of the time, new ideas
9 slowly spread and effect greater change by virtue of seeping expansion and
10 accumulation; then there are occasional significant events, akin to punctu-
11 ated equilibria in evolutionary biology, which facilitate significant changes
12 in a short period of time. Such events can be environmental in origin, as
13 exemplified by a period of rapid evolution of mammals due to reduced com-
14 petition which followed the extinction of the dinosaurs (Saylo et al., 2011).
15 Alternatively, equilibrium can be punctuated by the emergence of a particu-
16 larly advantageous mutation which then lays ground for further accelerated
17 adaptation and speciation, as seen in the case of antibiotic resistant bacte-
18 ria (Boto and Martínez, 2011). The rate of social change that we are wit-
19 nessing at the present time suggests that we may be living though a period
20 of such punctuated equilibrium, punctuated by the emergence of new *ideas*.

21 The understanding of self-identity and the associated sex based norms
22 is one of the many elements of our world-view which has been undergoing

23 remarkable transformation in front of our eyes. As important concepts in
24 the debate that has been ongoing, the notions of *masculinity* and *femininity*
25 have themselves been undergoing intense scrutiny, their very natures being re-
26 examined in their own right, as has their relationship with gender (Biernat,
27 1991), autonomy (Friedman, 2018), and personal freedom (Garlick, 2017).
28 The former, that is masculinity, has been receiving particularly close at-
29 tention both in the popular media and in the academic literature (Google
30 Scholar retrieves twice as many articles containing the term ‘masculinity’
31 than those containing ‘femininity’), often being considered in the context of
32 its claimed detrimental manifestations, in the forms such as that of ‘toxic
33 masculinity’ (Harrington, 2021; Kupers, 2005; Elliott, 2018), ‘negative mas-
34 culinity’ (Krahé, 2018), ‘harmful masculinity’ (Anderson, 2008), ‘hegemonic
35 masculinity’ (Donaldson, 1993; Cheng, 1999), etc.

36 In the present article I argue that much of the conflict and disagreement
37 as regards masculinity emanates from the diversity in the manner these terms
38 are understood by different individuals and, what is more, that the under-
39 standings that dominate the debate are, firstly, insufficiently nuanced and
40 confounded by irrelevant considerations, and, secondly, that these are of-
41 ten incoherent, inconsistent, and sophistic, void of any actionable substance.
42 Hence, I systematically revisit the concept of masculinity (and, similarly, that
43 of femininity), starting with a critique of the leading contemporary views,
44 then proceed to delineate a coherent, constructive, and workable definition
45 of the notion, and finish with a discussion of the practical consequences of

46 the adoption of my proposal.

47 **2 What is masculinity?**

48 At the time of this writing, a search for ‘masculinity’ on PubMed retrieves
49 17,176 publications and shows a rapidly increasing number of publications
50 referring to the notion (see Figure 1); Google Scholar, which indexes a wider
51 range of sources, similarly retrieves approximately 1,340,000 results. Consid-
52 ering the sheer volume of research concerning masculinity, one would reason-
53 ably expect that the meaning of the concept is either a settled issue or one
54 which is undergoing intense debate. Yet, this is far from the case; rather, as
55 Spence (1985) put it:

56 “the terms masculine and feminine and masculinity and feminin-
57 ity have rarely been defined”.

58 With few exceptions, authors embark on empirical research or undertake
59 socio-philosophical discussions contingent on the notion, without their un-
60 derstanding of the same being clear at all (Konopka et al., 2021). This lack
61 of due rigour is made that much worse by a solid body of evidence that mas-
62 culinity is understood in a highly diverse manner by different individuals and
63 that this understanding often borders on trivial observations (Spence, 1985;
64 Moynihan, 1998). I contend that it is in this, that is in the lack of a common
65 understanding of masculinity and in the shallowness of the definition thereof

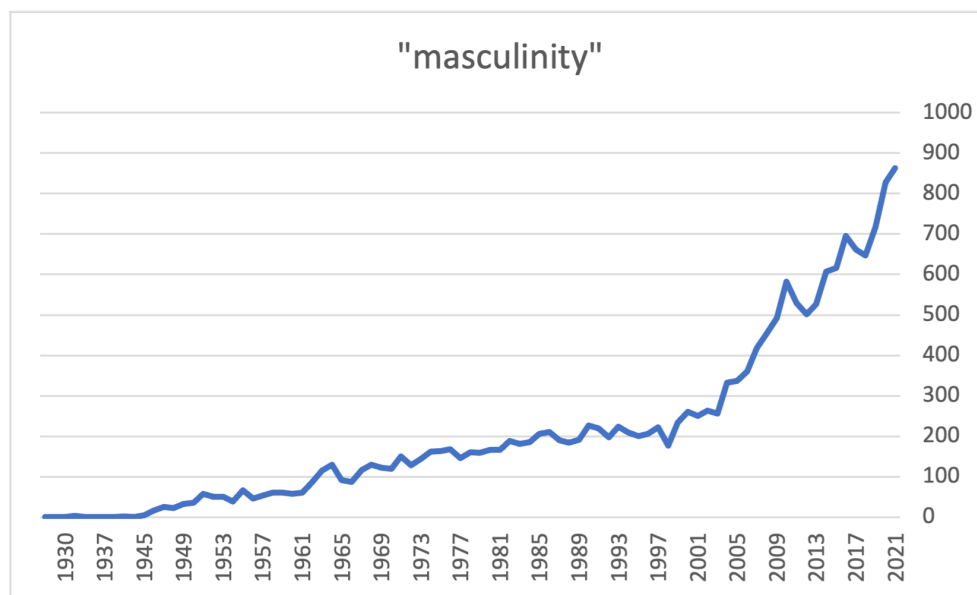


Figure 1: Number of publications (per year) retrieved by PubMed using the search term ‘masculinity’.

66 that is implicitly assumed by many, where the root cause of much of the
 67 controversy surrounding the concept lies.

68 This may be surprising at first, but it is certainly nothing new, be it in
 69 historical or contemporaneous academic literature. Oftentimes, the potential
 70 for different understandings of the same notion is overlooked, as is the pos-
 71 sibility of the seemingly simple being more complex than initially realized,
 72 with the discussion proceeding on the implicit assumption of some nebulous
 73 “common sense” understanding. As Wittgenstein argued in his *Tractatus*
 74 *Logico-Philosophicus*, I too argue that confusion often arises not as much
 75 from viewpoint differences as regards the substance of the matter, but from
 76 the language used to discuss it and our use thereof. While he was referring

77 to philosophical discourse in more general terms, the observation is no less
78 true in the context of social sciences.

79 **2.1 What is in a definition?**

80 So, let us start there, with a consideration of what would make a meaningful
81 definition of masculinity. I phrase the question in this constructive form so as
82 to emphasise my intent and focus on the underlying substance, rather than
83 semantics. In so much that a definition merely ‘is’, it cannot be incorrect nor
84 can it be argued to be wrong in any meaningful sense (to quote Wittgenstein:
85 “In most cases, meaning is use”). However, it is perfectly reasonable, and
86 indeed desirable, to seek such a definition which is *useful* – useful in delin-
87 eating phenomena of interest, in facilitating their better understanding, and
88 in providing practically actionable means of addressing social injustices and
89 wrongdoing. In any case, it is important that a common definition is agreed
90 upon before embarking on any further discussion of the concept. What is
91 more, a thoughtful consideration of this issue is important given that the
92 very act of naming a concept brings about an ontological substantiation. As
93 Butler (2013) puts it, performativity (the process of creating a concept by
94 acting in a certain way) is “the discursive mode by which ontological effects
95 are installed”.

96 Thus, my broad goal in the present work is to revisit and discuss the very
97 definition of masculinity as a concept, with a view of arriving at a definition
98 which is sound, clear, and useful in (i) addressing the various relevant forms

99 of harm in the society, and (ii) providing a clear conceptual framework for
100 scientific inquiry which would facilitate this change. I start with an examina-
101 tion of the existing work on masculinity which is virtually exclusively in the
102 scientific domain, that is focused on the understanding of the phenomenon
103 masculinity (its aetiology, effects, etc.) as presently defined. This examina-
104 tion allows me to demonstrate the weaknesses of the current definitions and
105 highlight that different authors implicitly adopt different definitions, often
106 without realizing this, thus resulting in much work talking past one another.
107 Illuminated by these insights, I proceed towards my final goal, that is a
108 new definition which is coherent and which, I contend, would serve better to
109 address the common goals of effecting positive social change.

110 To expand, right at the start I would like to preface my argument by
111 explaining what I am and what I am *not* trying to achieve herein. In par-
112 ticular, I am *not* arguing that the definition I put forward is *the correct one*
113 and that those I challenge are in some sense *wrong* (that is, not those that
114 are internally consistent). Indeed, this would be a meaningless claim, a *con-*
115 *tradictio in adjecto*, as the central question is that of defining a notion, and
116 a definition in this context cannot be ‘wrong’; it is what we agree it to be.
117 Inverting our labels for what we usually refer to as ‘apples’ and ‘oranges’
118 would not result in any conflict *per se*. Rather, it would be a pointless exer-
119 cise, for there would be no new insight or the potential of one, and nothing
120 substantial would change. Hence, the question at the crux of the debate is
121 what definition would be *instrumentally most useful* rather than ‘correct’.

122 **2.2 Contemporary views**

123 Let us begin by observing that masculinity exists only by virtue of its an-
124 tithesis in the form of femininity. It cannot exist on its own, in a proverbial
125 conceptual vacuum, no more than there can be a hole without a surround-
126 ing substance which gives the notion any meaning. This simple realization
127 — hardly a realization at all but rather more so an explication that raises
128 what is usually implicit to the surface — makes apparent the conceptual er-
129 rors that result in much of the confusion I emphasised earlier. In particular,
130 in most of the discussion of masculinity, the concept appears merely to be
131 implicitly understood as describing traits exhibited by the male sex. As I
132 already noted, researchers are seldom explicit in stating this, so instead I
133 shall begin with the definition found in Wikipedia¹:

134 “Masculinity (also called manhood or manliness) is a set of at-
135 tributes, behaviors, and roles associated with men and boys.”

136 This definition appears sensible enough at first sight and I expect that most
137 would have no major objections to it. Yet, it does not take much further
138 scrutiny for one to start observing its defects. In particular, note the absence
139 of any, explicit or implicit, recognition of masculinity being a *discriminative*
140 (n.b. I use this term in a value neutral fashion) characteristic. For example,
141 bipedality is something that is very strongly associated with men and boys;
142 yet, it is hardly something that anybody would note as a masculine trait.

¹See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masculinity>

143 Clearly, the very usefulness of the notion of masculinity, as any other notion,
144 is a consequence of it differentiating phenomena that conform to it and those
145 that do not, in a manner which is useful in some context. Hence, at the very
146 least, the definition should read:

147 “Masculinity (also called manhood or manliness) is a set of at-
148 tributes, behaviors, and roles associated with men and boys *but*
149 *not women and girls.*”

150 In other words, the notion is inherently relational in nature and a potentially
151 admissible definition of it must reflect this. I also note here that this does not
152 imply that either of the two notions, masculinity or femininity, are compact
153 and monolithic in nature. Each may very well be further best understood
154 as being comprised of sub-types which themselves stand in relational tension
155 with one another.

156 Still, this is not the only problematic aspect of the aforementioned defini-
157 tion. Another one, which too by virtue of its latency results in unrecognized
158 semantic confusions, concerns the word ‘associated’, which can be variously
159 interpreted. The first interpretation is that what is referred to is *perceptual*
160 in origin. In other words, the definition can be understood to mean that the
161 notion of masculinity arises from attributes and behaviours, which are *seen*
162 as being associated with men and boys but not women and girls, regardless of
163 the objective correctness of the said perception. Masculinity understood this
164 way would be ‘in the eye of the beholder’, so to speak. From this it should
165 not be concluded that such a definition would be trivial in that it would by

166 itself *explain* masculinity; no, the origin of the said perception would still
167 be a matter of scientific inquiry and permit explanations dependent both on
168 biology (genetics, epigenetics, *in utero* environment, etc.) or societal factors.
169 Another interpretation of the word ‘associated’ in the given definition, would
170 see it as a claim of an *objective* association. Though in this case the notion
171 of masculinity would pertain to an entirely different phenomenon than the
172 one rooted in the subjective, the explication of its origins would again be in
173 the realm of science and still permit explananda rooted both in the biological
174 and the social.

175 **2.3 Explaining vs defining**

176 To emphasise the point I made earlier, little attention has been given to
177 whether the aforementioned definition of the very notion of masculinity is
178 best, that is whether it is one which is most useful in addressing the various
179 injustices associated with it (e.g. violent behaviour, homophobia, control, the
180 imposition of ‘traditional’ gender roles, etc.). This question is one outwith
181 the realm of the scientific; it is a philosophical or ontological question, one
182 informed by the material reality and science, but inherently antecedent to
183 any study of masculinity. There has to be a clear understanding of what it
184 is that a notion subsumes before seeking to explain and understand it.

185 Yet, the existing literature on masculinity either sets off to explain it,
186 without making clear what definition of masculinity is presumed in the in-
187 quiry, or mingles the explanation and the definition, effecting a tautological

188 result (though in a convoluted manner, which makes this hidden from obvi-
189 ousness). Thus, Levant (2008) writes:

190 “...I see masculinity not as an essential component of men, but as
191 historically situated norms, ideologies, and practices that cultures
192 use to create various meanings of being a man. To the degree that
193 masculinities are restrictive and detrimental to well-being, they
194 need to be pointed out and deconstructed. To the degree that
195 they are adaptive, in particular contexts, they need to be defused
196 from their association with men, and applied more broadly to all
197 people.” [n.b. not the author’s own view, but a quote]

198 An important thing to note here is that the explanans is *not at all* admitting
199 of any influence of inherent biological differences between the sexes, but is
200 rather given as a purely social construct. If masculinity is understood as
201 being phenotypic, observable, then, as pointed out by others (Fine et al.,
202 2013), this explanation thereof will not do — biological constraints and pre-
203 dispositions cannot be ignored. However, the aim of divorcing the two, the
204 biological and the social, has value and will play a significant role in the
205 definition of masculinity that I will advance shortly.

206 The same views have been voiced by numerous other intellectuals, who
207 also do not offer any clarity on what the nature of the phenomenon they
208 seek to explain is, that is what the definition of masculinity they adopt is. A
209 similar trap is fallen into by those such as Burrell et al. (2019):

210 “ ‘Gender norms’ define the different practices that are expected
211 of women (i.e. what is understood as being ‘feminine’) and of men
212 (i.e. what is seen as being ‘masculine’)”,

213 who do not attempt to define masculinity themselves, but presume that mas-
214 culinity is defined in a particular way, failing to recognize what I emphasised
215 earlier, that is, that masculinity is most variously understood both in every-
216 day speech and in the academic literature, and that its definition as used by
217 a particular author is seldom stated explicitly and with clarity. Even more
218 oblivious of this are Konopka et al. (2021):

219 “...masculinity is socially constructed...”

220 whose writing is unclear in whether it is trying to explain masculinity or
221 making a claim regarding its definition, thus achieving neither.

222 In contextualizing the ideas described thus far, it is important to observe
223 the underlying ideological shift which is in part a consequence of different
224 understandings of masculinity as a concept. The change comprises, first, a
225 move away from the *definitional* to the *explanatory*, and then from the *de-*
226 *scriptive* (‘is’), to the *prescriptive* (‘ought’). This is most clearly evident in
227 Burrell’s use of the words “expected of”. I deal with this confounding, fa-
228 mously raised to the fore by Hume (Hume and Selby-Bigge, 1789; MacIntyre,
229 1969; Hunter, 1962), in Section 2.4.

230 **2.3.1 Masculinity as a social role**

231 Though different in nature, the problems of defining and then explaining a
232 defined phenomenon necessarily interact. Most obviously, the former sets the
233 stage for the latter. However, it is also the case that an understanding of the
234 world as it is, informs us as to what definitions are conducive to the attain-
235 ment of, say, various social goals, such as justice and fairness, etc. Hence, I
236 would next like to give an overview of two influential frameworks erected for
237 the understanding of muscularity as the concept is presently understood by
238 many. The first of these was developed by Connell (2020) and it focuses on
239 the idea of masculinity as a social role.

240 Connell’s thought has had major impact both on the scholarly treatment
241 of masculinity, as well as in practice, e.g. on the development of policies to
242 reduce domestic violence. She quite rightly rejects one of the dominant ‘mass
243 culture’ views, namely that of biological determinism of men’s behaviour:

244 “Arguments that masculinity should change often come to grief,
245 not on counter-arguments against reform, but on the belief that
246 men cannot change, so it is futile or even dangerous to try. Mass
247 culture generally assumes there is a fixed, true masculinity be-
248 neath the ebb and flow of daily life. We hear of ‘real men’, ‘nat-
249 ural man’, the ‘deep masculine’.”

250 What is widely seen as one of the key contributions of Connell’s work is
251 the rejection of masculinity as a monolithic concept. Instead she recognizes

252 multiple masculinities, which are also not fixed or static; rather, they are
253 fluid and dynamic, and they can change over time.

254 That the focus of Connell’s work is the realm of science, that is to say is
255 aimed at *explaining* masculinity, rather than at defining the concept itself,
256 is evident from the entire body of her work and illustrated by the following
257 passage (Connell, 2020):

258 “Two opposing conceptions of the body have dominated discus-
259 sion of this issue in recent decades. In one, which basically trans-
260 lates the dominant ideology into the language of biological sci-
261 ence, the body is a natural machine which produces gender dif-
262 ference — through genetic programming, hormonal difference, or
263 the different role of the sexes in reproduction. In the other ap-
264 proach, which has swept the humanities and social sciences, the
265 body is a more or less neutral surface or landscape on which
266 a social symbolism is imprinted. Reading these arguments as
267 a new version of the old ‘nature vs. nurture controversy, other
268 voices have proposed a common-sense compromise: both biology
269 and social influence combine to produce gender differences in be-
270 haviour.”

271 Though claiming to reject all of the aforementioned:

272 “...I will argue that all three views are mistaken.”,

273 her view is in the ‘common-sense compromise’ group, to use her own term-

274 nology:

275 “Gender is a way in which **social practice** is ordered. In gender
276 processes, the everyday conduct of life is organized in relation to
277 a reproductive arena, **defined by the bodily structures and**
278 **processes** of human reproduction.” [emphasis added]

279 More importantly in the context of the present article, here we can see an
280 example of the confounding of questions of how masculinity is to be defined
281 and what explains its manifestation. This is evident in the words: “Gender
282 **is...**” (emphasis added). That this is not how gender is widely understood
283 is clearly recognized by the wider context and the tone of Connell’s writing;
284 yet, the wording is that of a *claim*, one which permits and demands objec-
285 tive confirmation or rejection, which, as explained earlier, is not congruent
286 with an introduction of a definition. As such, we can see that the afore-
287 mentioned confounding results in the treatment of the notions of gender,
288 masculinity, femininity, and the like, as neo-Platonic concepts which exist
289 in some transcendental form and which human endeavour, philosophical and
290 then scientific, is aimed at apprehending. This is difficult to accept. What is
291 needed first and foremost is a clear definition, one which I argue, is focused
292 on practical desiderata of utility. As Marx famously said (Johnston, 1967):

293 “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various
294 ways; the point however is to change it.”

295 In summary, it is important to recognize that my thought does not stand

296 in opposition to Connell's, for our aims are different. In particular, with
297 a caveat noted previously, Connell's interest is firmly in the realm of the
298 scientific, that is, she seeks to *explain* the behaviour of the members of the
299 male sex and takes masculinity simply to refer to this behaviour as well as
300 its socially 'idealized' form (Connell, 2020):

301 "...research field of men's studies (also known as **masculinity**
302 studies and critical studies of men)..." [emphasis added]

303 "Discursive studies suggest that men are not permanently com-
304 mitted to a particular pattern of masculinity."

305 "Consequently, 'masculinity' represents not a certain type of man
306 but, rather, **a way that men position** themselves through dis-
307 cursive practices." [emphasis added]

308 As I have already stated, there is absolutely nothing inherently wrong with
309 the acceptance of this understanding of masculinity and the goal of under-
310 standing men's behaviour is undoubtedly worthwhile, intellectually and prac-
311 tically. That being said and with a reference to the positioning of the present
312 work stated in the introduction, in that my effort here is to argue for the
313 adoption of an alternative definition of the very notion of masculinity, my
314 thought should not be considered as standing against Connell's; rather, the
315 two can be seen as complementary. Indeed, this is why a brief discussion of
316 Connell's work is useful as an interlude to my contribution.

317 **2.3.2 Masculinity as performance**

318 The difference between the objectives of my work herein and those of Connell
319 are similar to those which can be recognized when the former is contrasted
320 with the writings of Butler (2013), another notable contributor to the discus-
321 sion. Butler’s analysis, much like Connell’s, has greatly contributed to the
322 erection of a framework for the examination and critique of masculinity as
323 the notion is presently understood. Like Connell, Butler too recognizes the
324 non-monolithic nature of the present-day notion of masculinity, as well as
325 its manifestation across different levels of social organization, from intimate
326 and personal, to macroscopic and political. A key notion in her work is that
327 of ‘performativity’, that is the ways in which socially constructed masculine
328 norms are repeated and reproduced through everyday behaviours. Through
329 behaviour, Butler argues, we are both expressing our identity within a com-
330 plex social milieu, with a possibility both of conforming to the expectations
331 of a particular society as well as of challenging these; the result, just as recog-
332 nized by Connell, is an ever-changing social construction of what masculinity
333 is, and, hence what it *should be*. In this, Butler’s work too serves to underline
334 the motivation and premise of my work, which is that a normative defini-
335 tion of the notion cannot be divorced from a prescriptive element, thereby
336 through its heteronomy limiting the self-actualization of an individual. In
337 that, the present work can be seen as advancing Butler’s stated aim (Butler,
338 1990), namely that:

339 “The task is not to essentialize gender, but to locate the possi-
340 bility of agency within the very practices that create the illusion
341 of an essential self.”,

342 by challenging the very essence of the present-day use of the word ‘masculin-
343 ity’ and freeing it from social imposition, allowing the individual truly to
344 pursue Sartre’s ‘authenticity’ (Sartre, 2015) “by recognizing ourselves as the
345 author” of the meaning of our actions. This would allow us to study emergent
346 behaviour in a far less toxic manner (noting that the abolition of values in
347 scientific inquiry is neither possible nor desirable (Dupre et al., 2007; Lacey,
348 2005)) and move away from a polemic discourse on masculinity vs femininity,
349 towards a constructive re-examination of the values that bind us as a society.

350 While consonant with Connell’s and Butler’s ideas, the present proposal
351 also directly addresses a valid criticism of these authors’ works, namely that
352 in the focus on the proximal — that is social — factors shaping the present-
353 day notion of masculinity, their distal causes — that is, those residing in
354 biology — are excessively sidelined. Yet, these are crucial in understanding
355 the origins of social phenomena, as well as the constraints of the same, and are
356 hence instrumental in guiding decisions aimed at effecting positive change.
357 Wood and Eagly (2002) express this well:

358 “When psychologists have addressed this causal question, they
359 have primarily considered the immediate, proximal causes for
360 sex-differentiated behavior, such as gender roles and socializa-
361 tion experiences. Many psychological theories of sex differences

362 have been silent with respect to ultimate, distal causes such as
363 biological processes, genetic factors, and features of social struc-
364 tures and local ecologies.

365 To produce adequate explanations of sex differences, psycholo-
366 gists need to relate the proximal causes of psychological theories
367 not only to predicted behaviors and other outcomes but also to
368 the distal causes from which these proximal causes emerge. Un-
369 derstanding the distal causes of sex differences constrains psycho-
370 logical theorizing to the extent that it enhances the plausibility of
371 some proximal causes and diminishes the plausibility of others.”

372 Social behaviours and structures do not emerge out of nothingness and arbi-
373 trarily. While there is no doubt that they are subject to a host of external,
374 circumstantial forces, these can only affect the trajectory of social phenomena
375 within the space shaped and limited by the underlying biology from which
376 any behaviour must emerge.

377 **2.4 Normative expectations**

378 When Burrell et al. (2019), Connell (2020), and others talk about the ex-
379 pectations placed on individuals of a particular sex, by this they refer to
380 normative societal pressures (Konopka et al., 2021). In that any expectation
381 of this nature is *restrictive* on the individual by its very character, to root
382 any discussion thereof necessitates that we start from the grounding point

383 of ethics, that is Schopenhauer’s ‘why’ “of virtue, the ground of that obli-
384 gation or recommendation or approbation” (Schopenhauer, 2009). Indeed,
385 like Schopenhauer and many since him, such as Kierkegaard and Dosto-
386 evsky, I too start from the principle that the basis of morality, its essence,
387 should be sought in sympathy (Cartwright, 1984), which ultimately rests on
388 sentience (Arandjelović, 2023,b), that is the recognition of others’ ability to
389 experience pleasure on the one hand and suffering on the other (Arandjelović,
390 2022). In the context of the present discussion, an important condition for al-
391 lowing minds endowed with self-consciousness to pursue happiness and plea-
392 sure is individual *autonomy* (Hegel and Inwood, 2007), that is the freedom
393 from arbitrary restrictions in one’s decision-making, which is well supported
394 by empirical evidence (Haworth, 1984; Chirkov et al., 2011; Chekola, 2007).
395 In that contemporary liberal values place an individual’s autonomy over their
396 choices at the heart of ethics (Varelius, 2006; Friedman, 2000), I believe that
397 I am on safe ground in stating that no expectation should be placed on any
398 person purely based on their sex, an expectation which would indeed impose
399 an arbitrary and needless restriction in how one leads their life. In that I
400 agree with the broad point made by Levant (2008) that behaviours which are

401 “restrictive and detrimental to well-being ...need to be pointed
402 out and deconstructed.”

403 and that those that are

404 “adaptive, in particular contexts, ... need to be defused from

405 their association...and applied more broadly to all...”

406 What the reader will notice is that in the quotes above I have removed any
407 specific reference to masculinity, and instead refer to behaviours in general
408 and without any further qualification, thereby divorcing the association of
409 the concept of masculinity from a prescriptive imperative.

410 For completeness, I would also like to note my disagreement with Levant’s
411 reference to *adaptive* behaviour. As I discussed in my previous work (Arand-
412 jelović, 2022), behaviours which are adaptive from the point of the agent
413 engaged in those behaviours, may in fact be ethically objectionable, even
414 grotesquely so (Schopenhauer, 2009); rape (Archer and Vaughan, 2001), in-
415 cest (Pinker, 2005), murder (Dahlén and Söderlund, 2012), theft (De Buck
416 and Pauwels, 2022) are just some readily evident examples. Thus, it is not
417 the adaptive nature that should be a motive for advocating and promoting
418 a particular behaviour, but rather *its positive moral substance*. In so much
419 that there is a conflation of that which is *moral* and that which is *ratio-*
420 *nal* and adaptive, the error committed here is not unlike that of Kant who
421 tried to seek the foundation of morals in universal duties emanating from
422 reason alone (Kant and Schneewind, 2002). The alternative advanced by
423 Schopenhauer (2009), following his rebuttal of Kant, that:

424 “...the intention alone decides on the worth or unworth of the
425 deed, which is why the same deed, according to its intention, can
426 be reprehensible or praiseworthy.”

427 is far more convincing (n.b. I am mostly, but not fully in agreement with
428 Schopenhauer as regards this stance).

429 That the understanding of masculinity as a descriptive rather than a pre-
430 scriptive notion is an idea which is far from foreign or objectionable even
431 to the general public is evidenced by the dramatic weakening of sex based
432 norms in the secular world in recent history (Boudet et al., 2013). Pres-
433 sures on women (as well as men) to dress in a particular manner on a day
434 to day basis have tremendously declined (Glascock, 2001) and at least some
435 of the remaining pressures (e.g. in specific professions) have an instrumen-
436 tal rather than a fundamentally sexist character (Arvanitidou and Gasouka,
437 2013; Arandjelović, 2023); erstwhile unthinkable (Stone, 1972) women’s as-
438 sumption of leadership roles both in the society and in the workplace has
439 not only become commonplace but an expectation (De Nmark, 1993; Baker,
440 2014); etc.

441 **2.5 Masculinity disentangled**

442 My aim is to disentangle the descriptive from the prescriptive, and the in-
443 nate and dispositional from the socially constructed, and to show how an
444 understanding of masculinity within this framework offers actionable means
445 constructive in the pursuit of the golden rule of ethics, namely: “Harm no
446 one; rather help everyone to the extent that you can.” (“*Neminem laede; imo*
447 *omnes, quantum potes, juva*”) (Schopenhauer, 2009). In that any sex based
448 prescription would be arbitrarily restrictive to one’s agency, freedom, and the

449 pursuit of happiness, I argue that masculinity (and with it femininity too)
450 should be defined in a purely objective sense, as a dispositional characteristic
451 discriminating the biologically male sex from the biologically female *on the*
452 *population level*. Lest my point be misunderstood, I stress again that I am
453 talking about population level differences, i.e. the claim is inherently about
454 the distributions of characteristics over the populations, which does not mean
455 that even on a descriptive level the difference is present for every individual
456 — the distributions can significantly overlap (and in many cases do (Fine
457 et al., 2013)), exhibit multi-modality, etc. Furthermore, the qualification by
458 dispositionality implies that what such ontologically reconstructed masculin-
459 ity is cannot be inferred by crude observational means, for any materialized
460 characteristic is contingent on the environment, that is it is a product both of
461 predispositions towards the characteristic and the social environment which
462 encourages and fosters, or inhibits and represses it as correctly pointed out
463 by Fine et al. (2013) amongst others. Hence, masculinity re-defined in the
464 manner I suggest can be understood as being characterized not by specific
465 traits and behaviours as such, but rather *predispositions* towards the same.

466 It is important to note that the proposed change of definition is respectful
467 of the notion's historical use, in that it retains an essence which is common
468 to all, implicit or explicit, understandings of masculinity to date — namely,
469 that it is something to do with men — which is key to the possibility of
470 its adoption in practice, while at the same time eliminating even the very
471 possibility of *appearing* masculine since the notion no longer describes an

472 observable trait. No longer can one *try* to appear masculine or be subject
473 to such pressure, since masculinity refers to something latent as opposed to
474 phenotypic. Thereby, this change shifts focus onto freely made, reason and
475 compassion driven choices rooted in morality.

476 Going back to the explanatory framework erected by Connell and Butler,
477 the notions such as gender and masculinity (lest there be confusion, note
478 that the contemporary concept of masculinity is different than that of both
479 sex and gender — a biologically female person, say, who also identifies as a
480 woman, can be characterized as being more or less masculine, whatever the
481 performative reality of a certain society may be), are in large part perfor-
482 mative in nature and as such malleable by the society. There is also much
483 to be objected to regarding what this performativity entails at present. But
484 let us suppose that the performative landscape is successfully altered, which
485 many see as the avenue for social betterment (c.f. the aforementioned calls
486 for ‘gentler masculinity’). Certain performative aspects are certainly morally
487 significant and unacceptable, e.g. non-defensive violent behaviour. The aim
488 of those advocating for a social moulding of masculinity is then to dissolve
489 these, and quite rightly so. If this is achieved, then they cease to be char-
490 acteristics of masculinity. Let us now suppose that the efforts of dissolving
491 all such morally objectionable traits (both on the side of masculinity and its
492 associated opposite, femininity) of masculinity are successful (by making it
493 ‘gentler’, etc.). Then the only remaining defining, performative traits must
494 be amoral in nature. At this point, whatever the performativity of the con-

495 cept ends up entailing, even if it is seen in a purely descriptive fashion, by
496 virtue of one's comparison of their self with any performative standard, the
497 person is socially pressured to comply. But how can that be right given the,
498 *ex hypothesi*, amoral aspect of the performative nature of the phenomenon?
499 Of course, one may choose not to comply, but at the cost of unnecessary
500 trauma. I say 'unnecessary' because there is no ethical dimension to such
501 compliance and pressure; as long as something is morally acceptable, the in-
502 dividual should be allowed to pursue it freely. A deviation from the socially
503 constructed norms, whatever we make them be, is pressure inducing. The
504 logical conclusion is that of an ultimate dissolution of the very concepts of
505 masculinity and femininity. While I find this desirable, given my contention
506 that an individual should be free of dictatorial social norms, it is in this con-
507 clusion that the idea of the advocated gradual change of masculinity falls on
508 itself: it is fantastical to believe that a concept can be dissolved by means
509 of a social process which constantly reinforces the existence of the concept
510 through a focus on the concept itself. Instead, my proposal can be seen as
511 *de facto* achieving the same goal by recognizing that the way of escaping the
512 "ought" is to divorce the notion from the observable and performative traits
513 altogether. It is an ultimate liberating act.

514 **2.6 Subjective desirability**

515 Having rejected any prescriptive content in the notions of masculinity and
516 femininity, and with it any duty or obligation that an individual of a partic-

517 ular sex should feel in matching the predispositions characterizing that sex
518 on the group level, I would now like to turn my attention to the *inherent*
519 material, that is practical constraints of a free individual's choices or indeed
520 the unchosen sex atypical traits they exhibit. As I detailed previously, my
521 aforementioned rejection of prescriptiveness in this context was erected on
522 basic moral arguments, and the widely recognized principles of individual
523 autonomy and freedom (Hegel and Inwood, 2007). However, this does not
524 imply that an individual's behaviour is free in the sense that their freely
525 made choices are void of potentially undesirable consequences in the world
526 as it is, even if incidental societal norms were to disappear.

527 For illustrative purposes herein I will consider one clear example, namely
528 that of sexual attractiveness. That sexual attractiveness is affected by culture
529 is beyond any debate: a look at the ideals of beauty in art over time (Creek-
530 more and Pedersen, 1979) or indeed those reflected in cosmetic medicine
531 (Oumeish, 2001) readily shows this to be the case. Equally indubitable are
532 the biologically driven preferences which are maintained across cultures (Jones
533 et al., 1995; Singh, 2002). Considering the central role that procreation plays
534 in the selection of behavioural and physical traits, this can hardly come as a
535 surprise (Cornwallis and Uller, 2010). It is no more surprising that these be-
536 havioural and physical traits differ between the two sexes for, as elucidated
537 by Dawkins (2016) with admirable clarity, the co-evolution of the sexes is
538 characterized both by their partial alignment in interests and thus cooper-
539 ation, *and* by the partial divergence of of their interests and thus competi-

540 tion (Wiley and Poston, 1996). These preferences are intrinsically amoral
541 in nature; yet, they have a profound effect on people’s life experiences. For
542 example, sexual attractiveness strongly influences one’s choice of a romantic
543 mate and plays a crucial role in romantic relationships (Singh and Young,
544 1995; Singh, 2004), and these relationships are, quite expectedly for all the
545 reasons highlighted already, instrumental in individuals’ feelings of happi-
546 ness and well-being (Locke, 2002; Demir, 2008; Arandjelović, 2023a; Demir,
547 2010). Consequently, any individual whose traits deviate sufficiently from
548 those which the opposite sex has evolved to prefer and which as such, con-
549 tribute to the stereotypes of their own sex, will encounter difficulties in the
550 pursuit of romantic fulfilment even if simply by virtue of reduced potential
551 partner availability and interest. As the analysis of Thornhill and Gangestad
552 (1999) finds:

553 “Adaptationists have examined a number of hypotheses subsumed
554 under the general notion that facial-attractiveness judgments serve
555 to discriminate an individual’s phenotypic condition and, broadly
556 speaking, health status. This review has suggested that these
557 areas of research have been fruitful. Some areas have found con-
558 siderable support for particular hypotheses (e.g. that facial sym-
559 metry increases attractiveness and an average face is attractive,
560 even if not the most attractive). Other areas have led researchers
561 to identify interesting patterns of preferences that are more com-
562 plex than was initially anticipated (e.g. that women’s preference

563 for masculine features is not unconditional but rather shifts with
564 women’s cycle-based fertility and that, generally, slightly femi-
565 nine male faces are actually preferred).”

566 A statement of this fact is by no means an implicit prescription either to
567 behave or to modify one’s appearance in a certain way; it is merely an im-
568 portant recognition of the complexity of the material world as it is, and of
569 the balancing act that individual freedom and autonomy must manage in
570 the weighing of the different preferences which pull one’s decision-making in
571 divergent directions.

572 **2.7 Effecting change**

573 Before concluding the article, I would like to return briefly to the increas-
574 ingly prominent advocacy for social change in the form of a “gentler mas-
575 culinity” (Jordan, 2019; Rogers, 2022; Greenwood, 2016; Nye, 2005). Well
576 meaning as this initiative may be, and I do not doubt the beneficency of the
577 motives underlying it, I trust that its fundamental philosophical flaws are
578 readily apparent from the the critical analysis I laid out in the present article.
579 As I emphasised right at the start of the discussion, like most of the authors
580 whose work concerns masculinity, those calling for a gentler form thereof fail
581 to give the notion due consideration, leaving it insufficiently clearly defined
582 and confounded by prescriptive notions which ought not be there (this is so
583 even if these proximally appear to be positive in their effect, for the trans-

584 gression of the principle itself is bound to result in harm in the long term).
585 If masculinity is understood as I proposed, then any calls for a change to
586 it cease to make sense, for the concept is fundamentally latent and unalter-
587 able. As such, this understanding transforms the conceptualization of one's
588 identity away from what is inherently amoral in nature, focusing on the true
589 crux of the problem which is that of acting in accordance with the Golden
590 Rule of ethics, that is simply, treating others kindly.

591 In short, if masculinity is understood in a principled and coherent man-
592 ner, attempts at change should not be directed towards the specific content
593 thereof, but rather towards the moral substance of behaviour which ought to
594 be wholly independent of one's masculinity.

595 **3 Conclusion**

596 The concept of masculinity, and to a lesser extent that of femininity often seen
597 as its antithesis, continues to attract an increasing amount of attention both
598 in the mainstream social discourse and in published academic work. While
599 the spirit of the former is getting ever more vehement, divisive, and uncon-
600 structive, the latter appears impotent in effecting a conciliatory resolution.
601 In this article I argued that there are several reasons for this ineffectualness.

602 Firstly, I highlighted the dire lack of inquiry into the foundation underly-
603 ing the very notion of masculinity, that is, its definition which must precede
604 any attempt at explaining its phenomenology, resulting in a great volume

605 of work contingent on unstated and poorly conceived premises. In a sense,
606 this is a semantic inquiry. However, I explain that it is important to appre-
607 ciate that this is no mere semantic quibbling, but rather that our semantic
608 choices have profound and long-reaching philosophical, instrumental, and
609 ethical consequences. Hence, I frame the task of formulating the best defini-
610 tion of masculinity in reference to real-world goals: the aim is to formulate a
611 definition which serves best both to provide a backdrop for the reinforcement
612 of morally good behaviour and the suppression of morally objectionable ac-
613 tions, as well as to guide scientific inquiry while removing from it the burden
614 of stifling social connotations. Secondly, with reference to influential work
615 on the explanations of masculinity, a task separate from that undertaken by
616 myself, I show how present-day understandings of masculinity fail to serve
617 best that purpose. My analysis elucidated the conflation of the descriptive
618 and the prescriptive, which I criticized on the basis that it transgresses the
619 very foundations upon which contemporary ethics stands.

620 Hence, I proposed a different conception of masculinity, understood in
621 a purely objective sense, as a dispositional characteristic discriminating the
622 biologically male sex from the biologically female on the population level
623 and as such characterized not by specific traits and behaviours but rather by
624 predispositions. Considering that the proposed understanding is empirical
625 in nature, albeit so in a nuanced manner, I also presented a rebuttal of
626 the previously expressed objections to empirical definitions of masculinity,
627 objections which were misled by poorly conceived empiricism rather than

628 empiricism *per se*.

629 What is appealing about the definition that I propose is that it inherently
630 eliminates the very possibility of *appearing* masculine through, say, violence
631 since masculinity is no longer something that is an observable trait, be it
632 behavioural or otherwise. No longer can one *try* to appear masculine, since
633 masculinity refers to something latent. And it is not only that an attempt
634 at masculine behaviour, the idea of ‘masculine behaviour’ being rendered
635 a meaningless construct, is eliminated, but there is also an opening to the
636 appreciation of cognitively driven, positive behaviour which combats any neg-
637 ative biological predispositions — the focus is shifted away from ill-founded
638 biological determinism to the morality of our conscious choices which through
639 behaviours which are generally virtuous (in Aristotelian sense), such as perse-
640 verance, temperance, etc., overcome any morally objectionable or otherwise
641 harmful biology (much like in the case of racism which I noted earlier). This
642 changes the semantic landscape of the related scientific inquiry, removing the
643 burden of so-called ‘baggage concepts’ (Groom and Webb, 1987). Thus, the
644 change I advocate does not diminish the need to study and to seek to un-
645 derstand the aetiology of violence in a specific context and to examine which
646 environmental (in the widest sense) factors serve to encourage it and which
647 to suppress it. In turn, I discussed a range of practical consequences of the
648 adoption of the proposed definition, and demonstrated its constructive and
649 actionable nature in the real world.

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