Gender Nonbinarism: Immanent Pieces of the Subject

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In the field of metaphysics, speaking in terms of what can exist within a world, the characteristics of actual things may belong to either one of two groups or categories of properties: transcendence and immanence. “Immanence” is not the same thing as “iminence,” or inevitability. Rather, immanence (spelled with an “a”) refers to what is intrinsic or internal to the physical essence of objects. This might include the chemical properties of a certain material, or perhaps the relationship of an object’s interiority to its surrounding external environment (convex, concave, insulated, etc.).

Within the confines of formal philosophical thinking, this means that the immanent characteristics of objects are subjected to metaphysical “paradigm shifts” as these are analogously defined in linguistics. Linguists use paradigm shifts in order to study all of the differences that are found within the larger system of signifiers which makes up an entire language, and they can subsequently use these paradigmatic models to compare and contrast various languages with one another. Comparing the words “cat” and “cot” to one another, for instance, can empirically tell a linguist something about the difference between the “a” sound and the “o” sound in English. The transformation that occurs from the word “cat” to the word “cot” is therefore a shift in a certain paradigm of English spelling, namely, in its orthographic usage of alphabetic vowels. But this is also a shift in the meaning of the words themselves, and not only a shift in phonemes.

Counting the number of these types of shifts that can occur within a single paradigm shift of language is part of observing the various linguistic characteristics that are immanent to that specific difference between signifiers. The human brain is specially geared towards picking up on these differences by consistently noticing them whenever they are repeated often enough. The distinction between the letter “F” and the letter “E” is in just one tiny stroke of a pen, yet this miniscule difference in appearance somehow gives them both a completely different character.

Thus, when we classify letters and the meanings of words into the unchanging categories of their signifying properties, it is analogous to what metaphysicians would call transcendence, or to the transcendent characteristics of an object. The difference between the letters “F” and “E” can always be detected by the reader of a given text, whether the printed typeface is Times New Roman or Comic Sans. There is always a transcendent level of difference between the two of these very similar looking but completely different letters that both contain very unique sets of phonetic properties on their own.

The theory of sexual difference in Lacanian psychoanalysis is not at all a far cry from this transcendent difference between the letters “F” and “E.” This specific difference between their two appearances is absolute, which functions exactly like the difference between a “1” and a “0” in computer programming. Yet, Lacanian psychoanalysis is the primary source of poststructuralist feminist theories of gender and sexuality that arose in the late 20th century, beginning in the 1970’s when Jacques Lacan was still delivering his yearly seminar in postwar Paris. Doesn’t the apparent genesis of postwar feminism via the theory of “sexual difference” seem fundamentally cissexist if the sexual difference between “man” and “woman” is theoretically defined as metaphysically absolute, like the difference between “F” and “E”?  

It is more accurate to say that Jacques Lacan gave two formulaic variations on both of these transcendent categories of sex, “man” and “woman,” creating a sum total of four logical formulas. You could easily criticize Lacan for his overreliance on classical literature (e.g. Plato’s
Symposium, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, and *The Oedipus Cycle* of Sophocles), as well as for his preoccupation with Sigmund Freud’s canonical texts, in order to provide us with this schema of sexual difference which he separated into two sides.

From where did contemporary gender nonbinarism as we currently know it originate, then? How do we critique this two-sidedness of sexuation in order to produce a nonbinaristic conception of gender? In this writer’s opinion, the modern philosophical theory of gender nonbinarism mainly originated from Jacques Lacan’s designation of the algebraic value of the term “woman” with a lower-case italicized letter \( a \). The corresponding value of the term “man” was given the numerical value “1,” Thus, the algebraic representation of femininity within psychoanalytic circles, which was this letter \( a \), later became accepted as a kind of third possibility that could be admitted to the set of possible values for a boolean input. Femininity in the context of sexual difference indicates a value somewhere between “0” and “1” that was demonstrated at one session during Lacan’s seminar to be mathematically equivalent to the inverse value of the golden ratio, \( \varphi \) (Lacan, 1969).

\[
\varphi = \frac{1 + \sqrt{5}}{2} = (a + 1) \quad a = \frac{2}{1 + \sqrt{5}} = (\varphi - 1)
\]

However, a Boolean is necessarily always a value of either “true” or “false” which can also be denoted as “1” and “0” respectively, and never denoted as a random algebraic letter. The numbers “1” and “0” together also form the smallest natural number of digits (i.e. two digits) that is needed in order to express numerical values greater than either “1” or “0” by themselves. In binary, the value of “2” is written as “10.” So, this introduction of the letter \( a \) into the context of Boolean values and formal logic was actually a shift enacted within psychoanalytic theory in order to alter the logocentric edifice of philosophy in terms of shifting the gender binary towards other possibilities that tried to fragment the human body more explicitly by means of a ternary system.

This shift within psychoanalysis subsequently functioned to re-center the focus of human understandings of logic onto the systematic variability of our desires within the free play of linguistic constructs, and this further served as an exploration of how it is that the recognition and mimicry of other existent desires taken from the surrounding world is what originally creates the *immanent* characteristics of human subjects by fragmenting their bodies into different pieces.

That these bodily characteristics are “immanent” implies that they can be morphologically shifted somehow, of course. But the paradigmatic shifting of characteristics which attests to those same characteristics’ immanence also changes what the characteristics will signify in relation to the transcendent system of the gender binary, which the majority of people passively attribute to their own highly simplified explanations such as “nature,” “biology,” or “God’s creation.” Such lazy explanations are not the actual *sources* of the transcendent structures of signification which separate human bodies into terms such as “man” and “woman” that our physical bodies thereby unwittingly incarnate in accordance with how they are localized within linguistic meanings. Rather, bodily transcendence is itself a *scene* of immanent activity, and the expressions of immanence that are embedded within the assembled appearances of human bodies thereby make up a corresponding *stagecraft* of empirical phenomena. Femininity is simply the
invisible flux that occurs between all of the manifestations of variability that can be found within humans’ physical characteristics.

What this means in terms of human biology is that the Lacanian letter $a$ is a variable that holds the place of any and every allelic variation that can possibly be identified in the gene expression (or genome) of our species: eye color, skin color, height, shape, pre-existing medical conditions or anomalies, etc, etc.

With all that being said, there are but two ways to be logically nonbinary:

1. By adding a third term (of uncertain status) to an existent dualism of transcendent categories, or
2. By combining both terms of an existent dualism into a new category of higher transcendence.

The recognition of these two very precise logical mechanisms perhaps ought to become the primary focus of all further inquiry into studies of gender dysphoria. Through careful observation of these mechanisms of nonbinarism in relation to gender identities, deviations from the cissexist framework can be better identified and properly delineated for what they are, even if this ultimately means mounting a total transition away from much of the predominant gender binarism of our cissexist social edifices.

What also needs to become understood very radically well with regards to the political movements within which we seek to liberate ourselves from heteropatriarchal forms of hegemony and other similar kinds of subjective oppression is that the transcendence of binary systems (like “man” and “woman,” or “1” and “0”) can never be relocated anywhere “outside of” or “beyond” real existence (and thereby become altogether excluded from existing), and in terms of human sexual difference, this is mostly due to the structured multiplicity of the numerical operations involved in zygote formation. These qualities are intrinsic to the organic functions of biological reproduction in relation to the identification of our own bodies as having resulted or issued from the fact of parentage. But this also still doesn’t mean that “male” and “female” have to matter very much, even if they might never cease to provide the barest possible framework for understanding human phylogenesis.

Every species, whether it reproduces sexually, asexually, or in both ways (such as some species of fungi and sponges) has its own genome filled with unique manifestations of the little $a$ from Lacanian psychoanalysis; this is quite multifaceted, and all of these allelic facets are immanently hidden within the gene replicating mechanisms that all species’ individual members must somehow appropriate for their own various ends. On the other hand, it is not so much the act of “reproducing” as the accomplishment of having reproduced that is dependent on an intrinsic cellular annumeration of elements and events that marks the finitude of biological reproduction as belonging within a barren place that is sequestered from organic existence, and this finitude creates a system of indirect semantic control from which no organism can possibly escape. That is, not unless the organism somehow finds total isolation from the transcendent structures that shape its ecological community and that facilitate the applications of its cellular meiosis (or of its mitotic self-extension). In the case of humans, the larger part of our ecological communities coincides with numerically far simpler structures of transcendence (i.e. language) which overdetermine the count of our immanent bodily characteristics in advance of them being produced, whether by gene expression or by our ontogenetic processes of senescence. The other
part of human ecological communities that is more objectively “unconscious” or occulted by our history is found in the stages of zygote formation after a spermatozoon has entered an oocyte within a human fallopian tube. For the very vast majority of human existence, we had no idea specifically how this process happened or why. So, the details of these cellular mechanisms never entered the conscious life of humankind except within the speculative domain of mythology, which required that we somehow fully try to imagine the microscopic intermediate processes between fertilization and the implantation of the postzygotic cell mass into the lining of the endometrium.

Thus, the dialectic of “man” and “woman” throughout the remainder of our species’ history will unfold in terms of what I propose to call “immanent pieces of the subject.” (A “subject” in this sense of the word typically means an individual person, or a personal perspective, i.e. we are all assumed to be “subjective.”) This idea is derived chiefly from the philosophy of Alain Badiou, a student of Jacques Lacan who ended up writing an ontological account of many appropriations of formal logic similar to the ones that had already revolutionized French psychoanalysis (Badiou, 1982). “Immanent pieces of the subject” here means that there are conceptual pieces of gender embedded in all of the different parts of our bodies and in every variant scission of our tissues, but none of these immanent pieces metaphysically belong to the same transcendent categories that determine our sex or gender at birth. “Sex” itself is precisely the second way of being logically nonbinary (i.e. by combining both terms of an existent dualism into a new category of higher transcendence) that no individual member of any species could ever fully possess within itself. This is the only way to make sense of sex biologically, conceptually, philosophically, and ecopolitically.

References
