

# OMUK Precepts Group: Interlude

## *Prison Face: Working with the Zen Precepts*

### Interlude: Gender, Inequality, Emptiness

If in the global scheme of things it is finally the distinctions between human and non-human, and between citizens and aliens that most clearly articulate our world, then *within* our societies it is pre-eminently *gender*. It is one of the *most* ancient and *most* durable of the durable inequalities. Worth pointing here to the scope for misunderstanding the way these inequalities operate, and their relation to a Zen approach to the world. Whatever we do or don't want to assert about the importance of biological sex (and I'm staying well clear of all that here), gender is *conventional, fabricated, arbitrary* by its nature as an inequality. It is *empty* in the philosophical sense of Zen, because it is something *we attribute* to others or to ourselves, it comes 'from *our side*'. Zen would suggest that *all* our naming is of this kind (that nothing has a fixed, bounded, inner nature), but in the case of gender and the other inequalities this becomes self-evident. Seeing another human being, my very first instinctive, reactive, involuntary response will be to see them *as* a 'man', *as* a 'woman'. Important to realise then that this is not 'natural' or 'innate', but something I *learn* to do by recognising this person '*as*', using a wealth of cultural signs that have to be first understood. Yet when I *see* you, I immediately and without any thought *see* a 'man' or 'woman', in the same way I experience 'myself' as male or female: most, *most* intimate! *Unless*, of course, I experience deeply enough the complexity and contradiction within attempting to live on only *one* side of this line that holds the genders apart... If men were innately and essentially men, and thereby something innately and essentially *different* from women, they would and could only always appear and behave *only* as men, and of course the same would apply to women. That I have to dress, walk, talk, cut my hair, sit *as* a man suggests in the strongest possible terms that this is not the case. Being a man, being a woman, these are *empty* categories I *assign* to myself, or am *assigned to* by others...

There are two other related aspects of gender arising from its emptiness, its conventionality: *any potential* difference can be appropriated to the logic of gender, can come to manifest inequality. The strength of gender as an inequality is as a *pattern* of relationships rather than the individual elements forming the pattern, and so *complexity* and *contradiction* can be tolerated and even assimilated without threat to the pattern as a whole. Gender is a system that embodies an oppressive hierarchy. Women can wear trousers and cut their hair short, men can wear pink and grow their hair: the world will not end. But then neither will gender as we know it.

*Before we begin: what does the word 'gender' make me feel, think of, how do I react to it?*

## A Violent Gender

Gender, at least in our societies, has a quite specific relationship to violence, and will inevitably loom large in our work on the Third Precept that deals with our sexual and sensual expression, so it seems appropriate here to look in a little detail at how gender actually works: the instinctive and reflexive ways in which both others and I myself recognise, think of, and act towards me as being a 'man' or a 'woman'. As we shall see, the prison system offers us an important insight into how gender operates, and how what we might think of as merely 'natural', 'biological' difference is in actual fact a strictly conventional symbolic structure built around a binary inequality. This symbolic structure is embodied in every aspect of my experience and behaviour: so much so that the experiencing of my own gender comes to seem a core part of my most intimate *self*. Whether I see myself as straight, gay, bi, queer, asexual or whatever.... gender plays a central and crucial role in relation to this sexuality. In fact all of these identities and orientations are *defined* by our gender, whether that's the one we were assigned at birth, the one we feel we 'truly' are, or by our questioning or rejection of the gender binary itself. (It's not just a grammatical issue: to be gay or straight I need to *recognise* myself as being gendered, and as *sharing* that gender with others; I have also to recognise as *different* those others I do *not* recognise as sharing the same gender I hold myself to be, and so on...) In fact this aspect of our early childhood is central to coming to frame ourselves as a person placed within family and society: I am the 'same' as *which* of my parents/carers? Which of my parents/carers am I 'different' from? Which of them do I desire/desire to be like? What is required of me, what forbidden?

Whatever we might think of our own identification with, or repudiation of our assigned gender, the reality is that it has been carefully crafted for us, fitted to a pattern that evolves only within a surprisingly consistent basic form. Although assigned to us on the basis of the presence, absence or precise conformation of minor tissue, our gender will *demand* much of us and *assume* still more. As a culturally fabricated identity, determining (although always subject to individual and collective challenge and refusal) the acceptable limits of how I should walk, sit, speak, gesture, dress, wear my hair, have sex... our gender will offer us great scope for *failure* of all kinds, a failure, or worse, a *lack of will* to measure up to the way nature (for which read 'society') 'intended' me to be. This failure can easily become a source of deep and hidden shame: our gender comes at a cost, whether we experience that cost as primarily emotional or political, or indeed, whether we actually celebrate the loss as the mark of being a 'real man' or 'real woman'. We will all have questioned and continue to question some or many of the gendered responses and expectations we encounter and experience in ourselves, while we knowingly or unknowingly acquiesce, to many others. We can, as with all other inequalities, frame this questioning at different levels — for example the values, qualities and capabilities we assign to each gender in common situations — “why do you, as a man, seem to feel that I, as a woman, need you to stand there giving me directions to 'help' me park my car?” We might question how *objects* are gendered “who says my son can't wear a princess dress and play with dolls?” ...or even limited aspects of our *process* of gendering: “why *are* there separate aisles for boys' and girls' clothes in this store?” ... or... “why *do* you insist that I state my gender on this job application form?”. But, only those of us for whom our

assigned gender really *doesn't* seem to fit will normally question the whole business of singularly and permanently assigning gender to every individual human. To *live out* this particular questioning as trans, non-binary, gender non-conforming or whatever is inevitably to risk being *pathologised* as one more example of our society's determination that it is solely and always the individual's responsibility to conform to our collective expectations, especially those *cultural* expectations that we insist are *natural*.

To anticipate the inevitable question: isn't gender really just a different word for our biological sex? Well, no, for a variety of reasons. Whatever the importance of biology to gender, gender functions independently of it, as we shall see. Gender is a binary opposition that works symbolically and systematically to create and reproduce difference in a hierarchical way and one which itself changes over time. Even over the last three or four hundred years the conditions under which one could act as or be considered a 'man' or 'woman' in Western culture have varied widely, and of course in other cultures do and have varied more widely still. It was only in the nineteenth century that there was the attempt made to identify what we now think of as gender exclusively with our 'biological' sex, as one aspect of the modern idea of the unique individual and unchanging essence of 'self'. Judith Butler's argument that gender is something we (both unconsciously and consciously) *perform* captures the distinction well: gender is when I am *being* a 'man' in my own or someone else's eyes, whatever my biology.

I grew up in a culture in which the very strong assumptions (often unspoken) about the different roles, desires and capacities of men and women were highly evident. Simply put, (white) men should hold and exercise power in society, and (white) women might share a little of that power if they were pretty enough and compliant enough (and hence child-like enough?). *Women* of colour were clearly assumed to be subservient to both, which left *men* of colour both *with*, and *as*, a *problem*... This attitude extended to every aspect of life...when I was a teenager it was still completely normal for men to talk of '*women drivers*' (the *marked* term, to take us back to the Second Precept discussion) as if they were hopeless children, or even 'unfeminine', and in any event foolish and even dangerous to put in charge of such a symbol of male virility as a motor vehicle. And of course even today *all* cars, vans and trucks themselves are still *designed* around the body an 'average' *man*, the presumed purchaser and user. As we noted in the Second Precept commentary, 'man' is the *normal, unmarked* term, against which '*women*' are defined as *other*. This correlation of our language to everyday reality is no coincidence, and will not simply be conjured or legislated away. This is not simple 'difference', and it is not 'biology'. It is part of the persistent structure of gender as we live it in relation to the hierarchies I have been calling, for want of a better term: *patriarchy*.

Patriarchy? While there are many possible ways of describing the social structures that we are both framed by and resist against, I think this familiar term is still far more appropriate than we might wish. The most useful way of understanding it is: *rule by a hierarchy of men over other men, in which women figure as objects of various kinds of use, and as the supposedly willing providers of diverse forms of service to men in general*. Competition is embedded in such a system: men will compete for dominance and for the patronage of men farther up the

hierarchy, women for support and protection. We saw one ancient form of patriarchy in our brief look at ancient Rome, and another more modern in relation to the conquest and genocide that have defined the modern period. This system is complex and nuanced: depending on the context many men will figure as equal to or less than some women, for example those men who live as slaves, servants, subject races. 'Their' women will of course rank lower still. We saw that emotional dissociation, the development of active ignore-ance and the atrophy of empathy figure highly in achieving such a society's ends: the expansion, control and unequal distribution of resources, the creation of multi-generational dynasties, and the reproduction of existing social values. We have glanced at the central role of shame and shaming in establishing and maintaining such societies, and will look in more detail here at how shame works in relation to gender. We shall see that *biology* is less important here than the assigning and even the reassigning of *gender*. No, I'm not talking trans rights here, but about a symbolic violence intimately related to the central question of male violence itself: why is physical violence an overwhelmingly *male* issue? We know that in our present societies physical violence is an overwhelmingly male trait, and a glance at prison statistics will confirm this: only 4% of those in prison in the UK are women, and of these the proportion of women imprisoned for violent offences is significantly lower than for men. We noted above that we can trace gender-based shaming back at least as far as the militaristic society of ancient Rome, and as we shall see below, the connection between male shaming and male violence proves to be anything but accidental.

Patriarchy never was simply about the oppression of all women by all men, but rather about organising different roles for men and women to specific ends that differentially benefit specific groups, in a world where political and economic power were held overwhelmingly by (some) men. Hence, as the philosopher Kate Manne among others has argued, *misogyny* has little to do with the *hatred* of women and much more to do with men's *expectation* of the services and attitudes to be offered freely by women, and the emotions and actions resulting from the frustration of those expectations. It's in this context that the examples of gender entitlement (manspreading and mansplaining) in the previous commentary come to make sense. To *be* a 'man' is to compete with other 'men' to own space and speech: it is no simple matter to change how we figure 'man' and 'woman' so that this is no longer the case.

I'll emphasise again the almost incomprehensible but vitally important fact that this basic gender structure is embodied in every aspect of my experience and behaviour, and so comes to feel like my most *intimate* 'self'. Our own experience of being gendered begins in the delivery room — if not before — with that cry of "it's a boy / girl!", and "is it a boy or a girl?" will be the first question asked of our new parents. Our assigned gender will shape every aspect of our physical and emotional environment and each new individual's response to us. As remarked, our experience of *others* as being gendered begins with our parents and/or other close carers, individuals who themselves were gendered and learnt to gender others in similar ways; hence gender is naturally regressive and conservative: we learn a pattern that has come down the generations. We learn *same* and *other*, and learn too what sameness and otherness require of us. We learn this thoroughly, so thoroughly

that it becomes routine and reflexive, and hence almost unconscious. It's part of the background to our lives, always active but never noticed until we draw attention to it, and so our gender is something that most of us take absolutely for granted, part of the bedrock of our identity. We *perform* our gender in all the ways mentioned above, and perform it both for *ourselves* and for similarly and differently gendered *others*: in our speech, our gestures, the way we sit, the way we walk. In fact even at the level of perception, our *vision itself* is gendered, not through 'nature', but by exactly those assumptions I've been talking about. From early childhood we learn to *see* any human being *first* as 'boy or girl', 'man or woman', and any ambiguity or difficulty in our doing this this may feel exciting, confusing or disgusting to us according to the individuals and context involved.

This aspect of gendered *seeing* and being seen is very important to the way gender works to create the experience of 'being a man' and 'being a woman', of how we perform our gender. Written in the early 1970's (originally as a television series for the BBC), the critic John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* introduced the concept of the *male gaze*. Although he doesn't differentiate between gender and biological sex, his argument clearly applies to the logic of gender as *performance*:

According to usage and conventions which are at last being questioned but have by no means been overcome, the social presence of a woman is different in kind from that of a man. A man's presence is dependent on the promise of power which he embodies... By contrast, a woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can or cannot be done to her. Her presence is manifest in her gestures, voice, opinions, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings, taste — there is nothing she can do which does not contribute to her presence... To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split in two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually...

She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another...

One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear*. This determines not only most relations between men and women, but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. This she turns herself into an object — and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (WOS 46-7)

We might want to qualify this from the man's side: his is no less an appearance, but unreflectively so, as he is not normally appearing 'for another'. And there again, men have

traditionally presented themselves as *not* presenting as appearance: ‘functional’ and ‘practical’ clothing in a highly restricted palette and styling... I am not here to be *seen*, but to be seen *as acting*. *By contrast*, ‘women’ *appear* because of their dependency enforced through the restrictions placed on their actual agency. That we are in the world of gender rather than biology is made clear in the gendering of the gaze: she has not acquired male DNA in her organs of sight... There is also an consequence for the gendering of the experience of shame: for a ‘man’ it is about his ability to *act* in and on the world, for a ‘woman’ it is about how she *appears* in the world. We shall come back to this. Of course in reality we all subtly shift gender positions moment by moment, but within a consistent overall frame. I’ve quoted Berger at length because his prose is so economical and precise, and because in these few paragraphs he communicates how an abstract-seeming structure becomes embodied in our most intimate feelings and deeply held ideas and ways of behaving, in our very sense of self.

**Practice Question:** *Remembering back, or looking out for:*

*notice an instance of feeling **resistance** around your own or another person’s gender.*

*That might be feeling uncomfortable, shocked, surprised or any other emotion.*

*It might be about someone you misgendered, or couldn’t gender.*

*Or simply noting how the things in the room you are in do or don’t gender you yourself,*

*particularly if you live with a partner of the ‘opposite’ gender...*

*Observe the way you are sitting, the way you walk.*

*How would this change if you were of a different gender?*

*How would this feel in your body?*

*Emotionally?*

## **Inside Gender**

To clarify further how the logic of gender is emphatically *not* simply that of sexual biology, we’ll return to prison, by way of Ancient Rome. Wealthy Roman men expected to gain sexual pleasure from their *male* slaves rather than their wives, and the symbolic binary inequality of domination — of Master and Slave — was a significant part of this pleasure itself, a domination made concrete by the *fact* of slavery. In an extreme form of the gendered binary underlying misogyny, slaves were obliged to offer *any* kind of service required without challenge or opposition, while women — wives and daughters — had more specific duties in the bearing of children and management of the home. The taking of pleasure involving the assertion of domination over other, weaker, men was, like warfare itself, the deepest and more profound demonstration and performance of one’s true masculinity. Patriarchy is always as much about domination by men over other *men* as it is of the domination of women by men. Gender is the articulation of the conditions of both.

To move forward to the present day, decades of working with violent offenders in US prisons brought psychologist James Gilligan to a startling conclusion: that a pivotal role in our (male) violent behaviour is played by the emotion of *shame*, and this around a single core *story*: ‘I am *not* a woman’. Let’s pause for a moment to consider this astonishing claim:

physical *violence* is something men do to demonstrate to themselves and others that 'I am not a woman', and that they do this primarily as a rejection of the *shame* of being symbolically re-gendered *as* a 'woman', or the *fear* of the shame of being so re-gendered.

In the US jails and prisons in which Gilligan carried out his research in the 1980's and 90's, *rape*, male on male, was very frequent and even 'epidemic'. Although, obviously, a *sexual* act, neither desire nor pleasure were seen as the primary aim, and those who committed the rapes did not see themselves as in any way gay or homosexual, quite the reverse. Their acts were the demonstration, the *performance* of their virile and active normative masculinity, through establishing agency and *dominance*. The form of this domination was explicitly to symbolically and physically *re-gender* their victims, thereby *performing* the perpetrator's own gender as male. Through both the act itself and the violence of the *penetration*, the perpetrator showed his ability to *control* the *other* (the *penetrated*, and hence *weak, dominated, submissive, powerless, other*), who so became symbolically *feminine*, 'female' to his 'male'. What is important to understand before we explore this idea further is that what occurs in our prisons is not some wild descent into 'the jungle', but the direct consequence of placing men predisposed to violence into an intentionally 'emasculating' environment under closely managed conditions, one which requires at least the complicity of prison staff. Gilligan quotes Wilbert Rideau, himself an inmate in the United States:

'The act of rape in the ultra masculine world of prison constitutes the ultimate humiliation visited upon a male, the forcing of him to assume the role of a woman. It is not sexual and not really regarded as 'rape' in the same sense that society regards the term... both prisoners and personnel generally refer to the act as a 'turning out', a nonsexual description that reveals the non-sexual ritualistic nature of what is really an act of conquest and emasculation, stripping the male victim of his statuses a 'man'. The act redefines him as a 'female'...and he must assume that role as the 'property' of his conqueror... who arranged his emasculation. He becomes a slave in the fullest sense of the term.' (Quoted in V, p.180)

Discussing this passage Gilligan writes of how prisons:

are not only a laboratory for the study of violence, but a subterranean index of what is both expressed in our wider culture, and at the same time buried deep within the collective unconscious of patriarchal culture. ...Any reader of Rideau cannot fail to see both the deep misogyny and misanthropy...which...inevitably accompanies the rampant fear on the part of these men (perhaps most men?) of being shamed by being seen as less than a 'man'. If for these men, to be ... turned 'into' a 'woman' is the ultimate denigration, consummated through the act of rape, then this may tell us something about the patriarchal legacy and making of 'manhood' which is at the heart of 'civilisation' as we have known it, with all its violence between men; its class structure and racial prejudice, and its asymmetrical treatment of women and men.' (V, 180-181)

Prison rape in this sense is not a series of isolated acts committed by individuals. Their wider purpose is to establish relationships and networks of domination which follow the lines of the re-gendering they establish. All this was specifically acknowledged in the language used to describe the victims by perpetrators, other prisoners and even by prison staff. Gilligan quotes another inmate, Haywood Patterson, who argued that in his experience:

...rape was not only tolerated but actually encouraged by prison authorities, primarily because "it helped them control the men. Especially the ones they called devils. They believed that if a devil had a galboy (a sex slave) he would be quiet. He would be like a settled married man." He stated that the most valued galboy was a young teenager. "A fifteen year old stood no chance at Atmore", he wrote. "I've seen young boys stand up and fight for hours for their rights. Some wouldn't give up" — though eventually they would be overpowered, or lose consciousness. He reported that both prisoners and security guards would watch the assaults with impassive interest. "They knew a young woman was being born. Some just looked forward to using her a little later themselves". Once they were symbolically — socially and psychologically — emasculated in this way, the newly created 'galboys' were combination prostitutes and slaves, who could be bought and sold by their various pimps, masters or owners. (V. 169-70)

Rideau reports that officers in his prison were equally aware of what was going on. These staff members 'used to perform prison marriages in which the convict and his galboy-wife would leap over the broomstick together in a mock ceremony'. (Quoted in V. P170) Worth emphasising that none of this is the work of some evil mastermind, either criminal or in authority, but the semi-spontaneous self organisation of prisoners and guards along very conventional, if exaggerated lines of gender. What is at ultimate risk is one's sense of manhood, a risk experienced as *shame*. In order to protect that manhood, others *must* lose theirs and *become* 'women', and so endure the consequent shaming. What makes the difference is simply the willingness and ability to be *more* violent, to use force in a more extreme and sustained way, to be able to enlist others to be violent on your side, and to intimidate bystanders. *Violence*, and its threat, is the essence of gender under patriarchy.

It's a shocking but telling demonstration both of the ultimately arbitrary nature of gendering and the enormous real-life consequences this arbitrary assignment: if there are no biologically female human beings to gender negatively as feminine, then biologically male but symbolically identical replacements will be found for them. What is important to the men carrying out the rapes (and to those others who actively or passively subscribe to the re-gendering of individuals through their attitudes towards and treatment of them) is the binary of *domination* that gender represents. It is the ultimate act of *shaming* to so violently re-gender another man, and the ultimate form of *being shamed* to be so violently re-gendered; the only way to attempt to undo this and reassert one's masculinity is through the performance of an equal or greater violence: a dangerous strategy in itself, likely to result in further harm to oneself. The consequences of this re-gendering are far



from purely symbolic: leading directly to a life of continued abuse amounting to slavery, but a slavery that amounts to an extreme version of 'normal' gender roles.

### Being Normal

Most of us can probably remember frequent gender-based banter/shaming from our time at school onwards: failure to display sufficiently clearly masculine or feminine appearance/gestures/behaviour has consequences, especially among those still negotiating their own gender, sexuality and the role of these in a social hierarchy. 'Banter' slides between and perhaps often *combines* something of both a corporate *bonding* and disciplining integral to the group involved, and a *shaming* of specific individuals that may have long-lasting consequences for them. Most of us who fail to perfectly embody gender ideals learn to 'deal with' this in some way or another: humour, distraction, or repression; perhaps also, and more damagingly, low self confidence, depression... or worse. But our responses overall are *themselves* gendered. Because 'being a man' is to have control, agency, power, so for a *man* the last available resort to deflect his experience of being shamed is the option to resort to *violence towards others*, and the more extreme the violence, the clearer the demonstration, the more powerful the performance. We glimpsed this with my father's hypothetical response to my mother's hypothetical infidelity: 'I would kill him and then kill you!'. We saw the *reality* of such a violent acting out in Lee's story in the first section of these commentaries, where actual sexual and gendered violence played an important role. Note that in this context my father's threat, however improbable, has an entirely different value from a wife making the *same* remark to her husband. In real-life cases that continue to be only too frequent there is sympathy and understanding from both judges and (mixed) juries for the man who admits he 'lost control' or that *she* was (literally or not) 'asking for it', while a woman who kills her husband is too often regarded as a 'monster' and sentenced accordingly, whatever the provocation or mitigating circumstances. Boys will be boys, and *men* will be violent.

Rape is only the clearest demonstration of this process of shaming, and Gilligan concluded that the same gendered logic of symbolic masculinity underlies, in one form or another, all male violence, whether it is as a response to a specific act of being shamed, the establishing of higher and lower status, or as a reaction to experiencing a general sense of (un-masculine) *vulnerability*, such as that experienced in prison. Within this structure the qualities of strength, of agency, potency, independence, invulnerability, mastery and control all figure on the masculine side; to be weak, lacking agency, vulnerable, servile and being submissive to the control of others are assigned to the feminine. While we see this logic played out, and of course also infinitely contested, in many different ways, violence of all kinds nevertheless remains the ultimate performance of masculinity: the warrior still being, despite everything, our core image of what it is to be a man.

#### *Practice Questions: For 'men':*

*How far to I unconsciously accept this image of masculinity?*

*And my experience of my own failure to conform to it, or attempt to actively reject it?*

*How does it feel to 'be' a 'man'?*

*To be **this** man?*

For 'women':

*How far to I unconsciously accept this image of masculinity?*

*Is there anything 'attractive' about it, anything that invites my complicity?*

*For the 'men' I know well: how do I see and experience their attempts to conform to it, ignore, or actively reject it?*

So what is 'woman's' role within this symbolic logic? Twofold, if we take into account the logic of the gender binary reflects *seeing* and *appearing*. That of *object* to be competed for as prize, and hence as symbol of attainment or object for barter, but also as an object whose role is to be *seen*, and to be seen as *desirable*, and who must *see* her *own* being seen as desirable. *Or*: as the provider or services, who will witness his victories, mop his brow, salve his conscience, hear his confession. Cook the food, raise the children and do the laundry (or arrange to have these done by those still lesser than herself). He as public actor, she as private. This is the binary logic that underlies contemporary misogyny. As mentioned above, the philosopher Kate Manne has shown convincingly that misogyny emerges out of the *expectation* of men to receive whatever services they wish of women: sexual, emotional or simply their willingly adopting the role of servant. Within the logic of gender, to be refused such services is to be not only frustrated, but *un-manned* (to fail to be *treated* as a 'man', fail to be able to *perform* one's masculinity by receiving the services of a woman) and hence potentially *shamed*.

For a man 'secure' in a version of his masculinity — in his identity and status, in his relationships — this shaming will remain *potential*. Secure in his sense of autonomy (however restricted), able to access services (whether through position, finance, education...), having fulfilling relationships, and a sense of the arc of a life that has direction and meaning... his gender will not normally be experienced as under threat, as something which needs to be *performed* through extreme and dramatic actions. But for a man already feeling vulnerable, insecure, exposed, this *potential* may become something more. And there is *so* much to feel insecure about as a man: any failure to be in command of oneself and one's world, whether economically, with one's peer group, or in one's professional or intimate relationships. To be male in our society (or for that matter to be 'white' in a multicultural society) is to engage with a fantasy of universal privilege and entitlement that can never be fulfilled, whatever the real benefits one has acquired through the reality of actual privilege. As outlined in the previous commentaries, 'success' in our society can only ever be partial and provisional, the 'higher' one appears to have climbed, the greater the apparent depths below, and the potential for the anxiety of vertigo. Competition within a hierarchy that appears as 'open' (our much vaunted by largely illusory 'social mobility') is relentless, and permanent. There can be no final winners. For those on the 'bottom' already living out the reality of a life without the material signs of the *universal* privilege that being born 'male' *appears* to offer, (command, autonomy, high status, to be one of 'us') things are much worse. Frustration, hopelessness and despair can all too easily transform to anger, an anger focussed not on the actual circumstances or causes of an unliveable life, but on those whom the logic of gender itself holds as responsible for the maintenance of that privilege: those symbolically gendered as 'women'. *Or...* That anxiety and insecurity might take the similarly gendered form of the

expectation of emotional support in the form of tenderness, or genuine caring, whether expressed sexually or otherwise. And the denial or frustration of that expectation for 'love' might lead to it being looked for and demanded inappropriately or even violently... *Vulnerability* itself, if it cannot be owned and expressed, (and within the logic of the gender binary it is inexpressible for men) may too easily flip to denial, repression and the violence of the acting out of its opposite: control as domination. The logic of gender as a durable inequality has infinitely many expressions. What is constant is the paradox that within a hierarchical patriarchal system 'men' will reflexively look to 'women' for affirmation of themselves *as* 'men', both to ease the experience of shame, and provide the actual services that are the physical expression of that affirmation.

And for 'women'? If anything the situation is still more convoluted and double-bound. Within the existing logic of gender, women are encouraged to affirm themselves as 'women' primarily by *appearing* as a desirable body and so as worthy to be competed for (and desirability *is only* appearance); To appear desirable is to be seen as willing to offer the services men require... And if *appearance* is still close to the heart of a woman's self-experience, (as the sheer quantity and complexity of the different industries around women's physical appearance might tend to confirm, let alone the preoccupation with creating the perfect photographic image of a perfect face/body), then we might expect the governing emotion of shame to be experienced differently by women and men. A 'man' is shamed by what he does or does not *do* (his ability to act); the ultimate performance of *doing* is asserting dominance over another through violence, as *my* ability to act is performed by cancelling *yours*. For a 'woman' whose social and self affirmation is through appearance, shame will be experienced primarily through one's failure to *appear* as a perfectly desirable *body*. Hence *body shame* is a characteristic form of female shame, and of course especially among the young who lack many of the other means of self-affirmation available: career, partner, home... However widespread, however actually diminishing destructive to those who experience it, body shame will not fill our prisons, will not have politicians demanding ever more draconian measures to control it. Body shame instead fuels the infinite need for purchased remedies: cosmetics, diets, clothing, exercise regimes. And of course this is accompanied by the constant attempts of media and trolling to reduce even powerful or autonomous women once more to a mere *appearance* by insistently implying or explicitly stating that it is primarily their *appearance* that defines them as human beings. One thinks of the treatment of most female politicians, or prominent academics like Professor Mary Beard as obvious examples. Emancipation has meant having to work hard within the ambivalence, ambiguity and contradiction inherent in the logic of gender to create spaces in which to live more liveable lives. Hard work indeed. Where do, and where might women look to for social and self-affirmation beyond the logic of gender, beyond being the object of a man's desire, or the actual provider of services to him?

***Practice Questions: For 'women':***

*How far to I unconsciously accept this image of femininity?*

*And my experience of my own failure to conform to it, or attempt to actively reject it?*

*How does it feel to 'be' a 'woman'?*

*To be **this** woman?*

For 'men':

*How far to I unconsciously accept this image of masculinity?*

*Is there anything 'attractive' about it, anything that invites my complicity?*

*For the 'women' I know well: how do I see and experience their attempts to conform to it, ignore, or actively reject it?*

I have intentionally chosen not to explore here the rich and deep theme of motherhood, which paradoxically stands somewhat to one side of the gender binary. Feminism has often seen patriarchy as *primarily* about the control of women's bodies in terms of sexual reproduction — bearing and raising children — and my purpose here is to point out that gender extends far wider and independent of this. Motherhood is of course potentially deeply subversive at every level, and although the gender binary has indeed tried to co-opt it as simply one more reason for women to remain within the home, motherhood in its fullest sense *has* been a source of the greatest affirmation for countless women over the millennia of patriarchy, even if it always brings its own complexities and contradictions with it.

It is precisely *because* we are complex embodied beings that although this logic of gender is part of our everyday self-experience, it is never uncontested, and can rarely completely mask that complexity, that richness we are as both individuals and communities. For some women and men — especially for educated, white, middle class women and men in the global North — this gender binary has at least softened, weakened, has even begun to blur. But it would be a dangerous mistake to imagine it is not still at work globally, both in the sense of across all cultures but also as a reflexive pattern that still frames much of the pattern of our experience. Our children, reared on Instagram and other social media, perhaps understand this better than do we: they are only too quick to pick up on the logic of *appearing* and *being* (and appearing to be...): on both the adoption of normative modes of image and behaviour that bind us to that logic, and on the always provisional, partial routes out: gender insecurity or questioning, subculture as resistance to gender norms... Because gender is *not* biology, *not* in any way 'natural', and in it's present form is inextricably linked the status and hierarchy inherent in patriarchy, the working of gender is *also* always moment by moment fluid and provisional. We all in reality embody *all* those characteristics assigned to *both* sides of the gender divide, *and* constantly exchange roles of dominance and vulnerability, of activity and passivity and of all the rest. This might be as lovers' touch, as co-workers, as members of a family, or in any of our sharing of the everyday physical and emotional tasks of our real lives. The question is, do these lines of difference remain *fluid, permeable, mobile*...or do they harden into the fixity of frozen *identity*? They frame us, and we become ourselves both through and against them.

Do we *need* gender? Clearly we as embodied thinking beings need structures, but these have to serve us. Few if any of us would want to own the full gender binary as I have sketched it out here, but all of us, to one degree or another, and from one moment to another, are owned by it. Will this binary change? Undoubtedly. It's relation to what we now see as biological sex has been fluid over time and across cultures, and we are emerging from a period unusual in its insistence on the simple equation that gender =

biological sex. Gender may shift its scope and meaning, diversify or simply fade in importance, depending on how we as a society evolve. But this transition is slow: the gender binary as sketched here is innately and profoundly conservative, and transmits itself from generation to generation seemingly despite our best efforts.

*Practice Questions: Is gender important to me? How?*

*Can I imagine a world without gender?*

*What might this look like, feel? Would I 'like' it?*

*Can I imagine a world in which gender categories were more non-hierarchical?*

*What would I have to change in my own sense of self?*

*In my behaviour and attitudes towards others?*

As I write this at the beginning of January 2023, there has been unfolding a story which demonstrates exactly what is at issue here. There's been worldwide coverage, and I quote from Rebecca Solnitt in the *Guardian*:

On 27 December, former kickboxer, professional misogynist and online entrepreneur Andrew Tate, 36, sent a boastfully hostile tweet to climate activist Greta Thunberg, 19, about his sports car collection. "Please provide your email address so I can send a complete list of my car collection and their respective enormous emissions," he wrote. He was probably hoping to enhance his status by mocking her climate commitment. Instead, she burned the macho guy to a crisp in nine words.

Cars are routinely tokens of virility and status for men, and the image accompanying his tweet of him pumping gas into one of his vehicles, coupled with his claims about their "enormous emissions", had unsolicited dick pic energy. Thunberg seemed aware of that when she replied: "yes, please do enlighten me. Email me at [smalldickenergy@getalife.com](mailto:smalldickenergy@getalife.com)." Her reply gained traction to quickly become one of the top 10 tweets of all time; as I write, it's been liked 3.5 million times and shared directly 650,000 or so, and the interchange became the topic of countless news stories around the world, from India to Australia.

There's a direct association between machismo and the refusal to recognize and respond appropriately to the climate catastrophe. It's a result of versions of masculinity in which selfishness and indifference – individualism taken to its extremes – are defining characteristics, and therefore caring and acting for the collective good is their antithesis.

Thunberg's takedown clearly stung Tate, who 10 hours later tweeted out a pompous video in which he tried to reassert his masculinity and status by blathering on in a dressing gown, with a cigar and a pizza box as props. Not long after that, he and his brother Tristan Tate were arrested by Romanian authorities in connection with appalling allegations of sex trafficking. Tate is a troll and a creep; he's also alleged to be a pimp and rapist. Tate denies all wrongdoing.

Tate is part of a huge network of far-right men online and he'd been banned from most social media platforms. Elon Musk's Twitter let him back on not long before the tweet that was heard around the world.

He was hoping to promote himself with his sneer at Thunberg; he managed to raise his visibility just in time to make news of his arrest and the charges international news. By at least one account, the Romanian-brand pizza box in his video helped cue police to his location...Thunberg drily tweeted the morning of the 30th: "this is what happens when you don't recycle your pizza boxes," mocking her own earnest public image. (*Guardian Editions*, Tuesday 3rd Jan 2023.)

Solnitt draws the lines clearly, makes the connections. It's worth emphasising that Tate was the *most googled man in the world* over the summer of 2022, and videos with his hashtag have had over 13 *billion* views on TikTok. His mentoring scheme for young men currently has over 160,000 paying subscribers. He has recently 'converted' to Islam, and in doing so has sparked deep controversy between those Muslims who feel he should therefore be supported as one of the Faithful, and those who consider his beliefs profoundly un-Islamic. All this may be entertaining drama, but it is no sideshow.

So it is within and across these lines, fluid and mobile, or crystalline in their rigidity, that aspects of our 'self' are fabricated and re-fabricated in each moment. Gender is one dimension of the problematic field as which we perform our lives, and on which we form the relationships, alliances and liaisons that make a real life of open-heartedness, of shared *love* and active *caring*, actually possible within this impossible, violent and unfeeling frame. How will we be and act as 'men', as 'women', as other?