



## DOES MASCULINITY NEED “REDEFINING”?

*Tim Goldich*



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### ABSTRACT

*We don't need a redefinition of masculinity; we need an improved understanding of what masculinity truly is—an understanding divested of stereotypes and misandry. The distinction between defining and redefining masculinity is crucial. To define masculinity is to respect masculinity as something real, something that we are endeavoring to understand more deeply. To redefine masculinity is to assume that masculinity is purely a social construct with no reality and no meaning beyond what we arbitrarily assign to it. And therefore, masculinity becomes a mere plaything for would-be sociologists, feminists, and special interest groups to re-define at their whim. Efforts to improve our imperfect definition of masculinity are valid, but efforts to redefine masculinity are not to be trusted.*

**Keywords:** maleness, masculinity, misandry, stereotypes

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Is masculinity all washed up? Compared with femininity, in order to remain viable, is masculinity (so-called, “toxic masculinity”) in need of *redefining* for the new millennium? In the opening chapter of *Plato’s Republic*, three philosophers of the day rise to Socrates’ challenge to define *justice*. Each definition improves upon the last, yet each is revealed as woefully inadequate. It is difficult indeed to trap so high and elusive a concept as justice within an airtight verbal box. But this failure to define justice, does not erode Plato’s faith that justice is *real*. Would we not be suspicious of any governmental committee whose stated goal was to *re-define* justice? Redefine it how . . . to serve whose purposes? Here’s the distinction: Plato was attempting to *define* justice, not *redefine* justice. Humans can ponder the meaning of justice, and attempt to understand and capture that meaning in words, but according to Plato, the word *justice* refers to something real and eternal, and humans haven’t the authority to *redefine* it.

So . . . is masculinity also something real? Does this concept also have some sort of independent meaning that lies outside the reach of human interference? I believe that two million years of human evolution did indeed create something real, something that we label “feminine” and “masculine.” As is true of justice, we struggle and largely fail to contain these concepts within tight verbal boxes called definitions, but that, in itself, should not erode our confidence in their reality. The question is, are our definitions of feminine and masculine accurate? It seems to me that where gender is concerned, powerful psychic forces (including instinct, chivalry, Eros, sentiment, myths and mythos) tend to bias our perceptions and overpower reason. Masculine and feminine are real I think, but, at present, only imperfectly understood.

So, I’m all in with efforts to improve our imperfect *definitions* of masculine and feminine, but I regard current efforts to *redefine* them (or deny their existence) with suspicion.

Masculinity in particular is judged in the worst way. In some circles, masculine is synonymous with *macho* and widely regarded as the source of all evil: destructive, violent, false, immature, inferior, unnecessary, redundant, even obsolete. The prestigious American Psychological Association has officially declared “traditional masculinity” as “harmful” and advocates “Redefining Masculinity.” “We need a new definition of masculinity” intones the Daily Beacon. The International Boys’ Schools Coalition is all for “Redefining Masculinity: Helping Boys to be Better Men.” Even the ManKind Project (an organization that I’ve been part of since

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2000) is on about “Redefining Masculinity for the 21st Century.” With women supposedly rising and men supposedly in decline, the temptation to *redefine* and fix masculinity that it might better fit in with modern realities, is a temptation that runs deep. But I resist that temptation for a number of reasons.

First off, it would seem that every *redefinition* of masculinity heads in the same direction—less masculine, more feminine. But then, how could it be otherwise? There is only yin and yang, anima and animus, male and female; there is no third direction. If masculinity will undergo a shift, then where will it go; will men become more dolphin-like? One reason I’m suspicious of *redefining* masculinity is that I see nowhere else for the masculine to go but toward the feminine. I have no problem with men and women choosing to be balanced, but that has nothing to do with how we define *masculine*. Is shifting our definition of masculine toward the feminine a step toward *redefining* masculinity or a step toward *negating* masculinity? Does feminizing masculinity create a sustainable model of masculinity for the future or does it only take us a further step down the road toward male redundancy and obsolescence? I find these questions troubling.

Another reason I’m suspicious of *redefining* masculinity is that it seems all too closely aligned with feminist agendas. I think if feminists had their way, they would *redefine* *masculine* as safe, compliant, selfless, obsequious, sexless, and obeisant to every female complaint. As always, men would remain responsible for policing and succumbing to the dark side of the world and human nature. Men will perform those tasks most harsh and hazardous (battlefields, mining, sewers, firefighting, construction . . .). Males will be ten times more likely to die on the job (according to DeVore), but men will ask for nothing. Men will have no perspectives of their own, claiming only feminist (i.e., “female-ist”) perspectives for themselves. Well, I happen to think that men have gone too far down *that* road already! Maleness *redefined* in a manner that best serves feminist purposes, that’s what I’d regard as the worst-case outcome here. You know, women everywhere look around them and insist, “There are no men!” How feminized are men supposed to be?

A third reason to distrust *redefining* masculinity is that I don’t trust that humans are wise enough to take control of such a thing. *Redefining* is *not* defining; it is social engineering. And who do I trust to take charge of this social engineering? —*nobody!* No human entity can be

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trusted to redefine masculinity. Lao Tzu, Jesus, Leonardo, Shakespeare, Bach, Einstein . . . how did we ever allow ourselves to be brainwashed into believing that the masculine has no redeeming virtue?

A fourth reason to distrust redefining masculinity is that it is born of misandry. It is born of seeing the masculine shadow, but not the masculine gold; and seeing the feminine gold, but not the feminine shadow. It is gender bias and bigotry. It is sexism. It is an outgrowth of the escalating notion that masculinity is a defective anachronism that is at fault and to blame for all things bad, but cannot be credited for anything good. The urge to redefine masculinity is an urge to *purge* men of their masculinity, a so-called toxic masculinity that has *already been* redefined in the worst way.

The fifth and final reason to distrust redefining takes us back to where we started. I believe that, like the concept of *justice*, the concept of the *masculine* has an independent reality. Unless or until we are prepared to alter human DNA, we can *redefine* the *word* masculinity as we please, but the truth of masculinity will not be altered. We can defame and malign the masculine into ever greater levels of dysfunctional shame. We can undervalue the masculine contribution in parenting to the point that fatherless sons become the norm. Oh yes, we can certainly undermine masculinity, but we cannot change what masculinity is.

*Authentic* masculinity's not the problem. But how will fatherless boys learn authentic masculinity? The true problem with current masculinity is that it has been—and continues to be—undermined by powerful cultural forces, forces that result in male academic and economic decline plus a generalized contempt of the masculine. Yes, we are told that women are rising and men are in decline, but those in the know, know that females are so advantaged and males so disadvantaged that it could not be otherwise. Sadly, however, it feels simpler and a whole lot safer to lay all the blame on male defects than to respect womankind enough to hold her accountable as equal partner in the human system.

We don't need a *redefinition* of masculinity; we need an improved understanding of what masculinity truly is: an understanding truer perhaps than any prior understanding of masculinity, an understanding divested of stereotypes and misandry. What is *authentic* masculinity? I would struggle to define it. But I believe that qualities such as drive, honor,

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obsession, fairness, wisdom, integrity and accountability live at its core. These qualities are timeless. They add up to a definition of masculinity that is sustainable into any future—a masculinity that can *never* be rendered obsolete.

This is not the masculine *redefined* as feminist doormat; this is a strong masculinity—a masculinity that demands . . . wait for it . . . *justice!*

I believe that the distinction between defining and *redefining* masculinity is crucial. To define masculinity is to *respect* masculinity as something *real*, something that we are endeavoring more deeply to understand. To *redefine* masculinity is to assume that masculinity is purely a social construct with no reality and no meaning beyond what we arbitrarily assign to it. And therefore, *masculinity* becomes a mere plaything for would-be sociologists, feminists, and special interest groups to *re-define* at their whim.

So, I'm all in with efforts to improve our imperfect *definition* of masculinity, but efforts to *redefine* masculinity are not to be trusted.

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