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“THE ONE TRUE MASCULINITY”

Peter Wright



ABSTRACT

Underlying physiological structures, the base unity of masculine potentials, are shared among all males: a Y chromosome, androgens, muscles and a penis. But this tells us little about how individual men will behave in the real world – and behave individually, and variably, they certainly do. Masculinity is more than one thing – more than testosterone, more than intelligence, more than muscle mass, more than status-seeking, and more than a powerful urge to have sex and reproduce. Its more than the sum total of these things, and individual men’s expression of them will widely vary. Viewing masculinity as plural can be as simple as returning to ancient Greek culture, or to any other classical culture, or even Bible-based cultures in which varieties of masculine styles are showcased.

Keywords: feminism, gynocentrism, male, masculinity, masculinities, mythology

Have you noticed everyone attempting to nail down the one true definition of masculinity? It's a bit like arguing which is the One True God. Likewise, with every earnestly researched and precisely crafted definition of masculinity, a broad acceptance of any single definition seems out of reach.

If you have an hour to waste on the internet you can discover hundreds of competing definitions of masculinity, each one vastly different, which raises the question of why we can't agree on a singular, universal statement. Why the ongoing lack of agreement, even within the men's movement which sets out to champion that very topic of men and masculinity? There's no doubting that underlying physiological structures, the base unity of masculine potentials, are shared among all males: a Y chromosome, androgens, muscles and a penis. But this tells us little about how individual men will behave in the real world – and behave individually, and variably, they certainly do.

Defining masculinity appears doomed because we tend to rely on singular expressions of it – and singular definitions likewise follow; “masculinity is to be interested in things, not faces” “masculinity is striving for status,” “masculinity is to be more rational and less emotional” (etc.). Are some men like this? sure. Are all men like that? Hell no – far from it. And, naturally, in response to such monocentric definitions the disagreements come lightning fast, with detractors claiming that masculinity is something far more, or something other, than the reductive definition offered.

When we seek singular stereotypes (whether they be based on some example of a traditional male social role, or on some author's view such as “the way of men,” on singular evopsyche¹ fantasies, or on singular fixations on testosterone as the whole picture) – in such

¹ Evolutionary Psychology (“evopsyche” or “EP”) is the study of human behaviour viewed through the lens of evolutionary biology and psychology. Evopsyche theorists, say critics, tend to exaggerate various sex differences and thereby invite narrow and misleading stereotypes about masculinity. See Miller, G. F. (2013) and Stewart-Williams, S., & Thomas, A. G. (2013).

mono-models we will never feel settled on the question of masculinity because there are too many outliers from whatever singular definition we've chosen. Obviously, masculinity is more than one thing – more than testosterone, more than intelligence, more than muscle mass, more than status-seeking, and more than a powerful urge to have sex and reproduce. Its more than the sum total of these things, and individual men's expression of them will widely vary. On that basis a plural understanding of masculinity appears to be the only way to save the concept, though I don't for a second subscribe to feminist ideas of masculinities with their convoluted and unscientific hierarchies of good and bad instances of masculinity.

Viewing masculinity as plural can be as simple as returning to ancient Greek culture, or to any other classical culture, or even Bible-based cultures for that matter in which varieties of masculine styles are showcased. The Greeks for example had many gods, each expressing a different archetypal face of masculinity. Those expressions ranged from effeminate Dionysus to macho Ares, from instinctual Pan to the ordered and intellectual God Apollo. There is Zeus and his concerns for leadership and hierarchy, and Hephaestus with his labor consciousness, and so on and so forth. Instances of masculinity, never all seen together in one character, each god or man tending to specialise in one way or another.

It might be argued that because feminists have seized the term masculinities and subsequently twisted the concept into perverted, misandric typologies, that we should shy away from plurality and stick instead with the traditional idea of a masculine singularity – a kind of Vitruvian man who displays all masculine behaviours at once. That'll teach those femmos! But this defensive retreat from feminist dominance over the gender discussion is a needless one that throws out the baby with the bathwater. That retreat avoids forthright celebration of male plurality and leads not to better understanding of various masculine dimensions of behaviour, but rather to singular and often reductive definitions that few men can relate to. Furthermore, insisting (as some have) that many expressions of masculinity can be accounted for within a singular definition of masculinity hasn't helped to provide an agreed definition thus far, so why would we believe it can do so in future? Fighting over the One True Definition rages on.

Nailing down a singular definition of masculinity that everyone will agree with reminds increasingly of Sisyphus rolling his boulder up a hill, only to have it roll back down to the bottom before he starts rolling a new definition up the hill – over and over ad infinitum. Isn't the definition of insanity that of repeating the same process over and over but expecting a different outcome? This is why personally I'm an advocate of classical models over modern monocentric ones – people relate to them, and tend to agree with them.

Feminists can never own the concept of masculine variety, even if they have seized on the plural masculinities. Ironically, their attacks on masculinity tend to be one-dimensional caricatures, and when they do get around to exploring plurality of male expression, they tend to make value hierarchies out of the different masculinities, dividing them into good and evil according to arbitrary misandric criteria. For example, the more typically effeminate male = good, and the less typically effeminate = bad. This is why their attempt at a plurality of masculinities is junk science and why we men are turned off from celebrating our very real diversity – i.e., even though it's a fact of life, it has been poisoned with needless ideology.

The word masculinities has been around for at least a few hundred years, referring in the 1800s to any behaviors deemed a departure from the narrowly assigned gender roles of the day, or alternatively to any male behaviors considered inappropriate for polite society. Feminist activists from the gender studies world revived the word during the 1980s and 1990s, basically reaffirming the practice of deeming some masculinities toxic (e.g., “hegemonic masculinity” – R. Connell) and others as non-toxic. One academic, Eric Anderson, who was embedded in the scene during that period of “problematizing” masculinity, broke ranks with the obsessive pathologizing narratives and emphasised rather that men of different styles can and are forming what he calls “inclusive masculinities.” This approach admits that men are more accepting, or at minimum more tolerant of differences than we were led to believe by the misandric character assassins Robert Connell, Michael Messner and Michael Kimmel et al. who portrayed the vast majority of men as ruthlessly intolerant.

This approach, celebrating masculine variety, is not new to the non-feminist men's movement. The wider men's movement has honoured the very plurality I'm describing, and it

has done so consistently for decades, with the trend increasing since the turn of the millennium. Men, strong and weak, stoic or sensitive, physical or intellectual, gay, or straight... the men's movement has demonstrated inclusive masculinity from the outset. This article serves as a reminder of the importance of those values, while introducing the concept of masculine variety to new readers.

When it comes to terminology, we need not rest only on the loaded term masculinities. Well before Connell and his henchpersons began to discriminate and denigrate so many examples of masculinity, the Jungian and archetypal psychologists already viewed men in terms of masculine variety, and they didn't apply any of the familiar pathologizing narratives – they simply referred to them as male archetypes. For example, the Archetypal Psychologist Adolf Guggenbuhl-Craig wrote the following statement in the year 1976, which is long before sociology got onboard with its plurality of masculinities:

It should be clear that there is not only one masculine archetype and one feminine archetype. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of feminine and masculine archetypes. Certainly there are many more of them than we usually imagine. But not all archetypes are dominant at a particular period in the life of an individual. Moreover, every historical epoch has its dominant masculine and feminine archetypes. Women and men are determined in their sexual identities and behavior by only a select number of archetypes.

Behavior is determined only by those patterns that are momentarily dominant in the collective psyche. This leads to a grotesque but understandable error: the archetypes that dominate masculine and feminine behavior in a particular time come to be understood as the masculine and feminine archetypes. And from this limited number of archetypes it is decided what “masculinity” and “femininity” are. This misunderstanding has led, for example, to the assumption in Jungian psychology that masculinity is identical with Logos, and femininity with Eros. It is assumed that the essence of femininity is personal, related to one's fellow man, passive, masochistic, and that the essence of masculinity is abstract, intellectual, aggressive, sadistic, active, etc. This naïve assertion could have been made only because the masculine and feminine archetypes that were dominant at that time and in that culture were understood

as the only valid ones.

A contrast between feminist and archetypalist views is that the latter admits that archetypal styles arise from biology even if they are socially manipulated; that they are not socially conferred onto blank slates by society, as some sociologists might view it. Our biology-based archetypes may lay dormant if not facilitated by culture, or they may arise at certain stages and phases of life, and of course we are each born with our peculiar masculine predilections, or style, that may not be the lot of the next man. Despite that complexity, biology remains a fundamental factor in the theory of archetypes – and yes, environment remains important too.

While the mythopoetry movement of the 1980-90s emphasised singular masculine archetypes, such as Robert Bly's "Wild Man," the movement also tended to follow the Jungian tradition of honouring a variety of male archetypes and expressions. For those who are new to the men's movement, it might be worth studying this aspect of the mythopoetic tradition to help you avoid the pitfalls of an overly singular view of masculinity.

Ultimately, it's a personal choice whether to see masculinity as one or many, or as both, but in my experience an overemphasis on 'the one' tends always to swallow the many, and in the process, we lose too much.

An earlier version of this article was published by [Gynocentrism and Its Cultural Origins](#).

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