



John Stoltenberg

The End of
Manhood

parables on sex and selfhood

REVISED EDITION

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THE END OF MANHOOD

In this practical follow-up to *Refusing to Be a Man*, John Stoltenberg speaks to men—so that women can overhear—about how the social construction of manhood operates in ordinary relationships. Using a variety of stories and illustrations, he makes everyday sense of interpersonal conflicts and internal dilemmas that distress men’s lives, and he shows how the same dynamics drive the behavior of gangs, race-hate groups, and other warring male factions. Readers will find here new perspectives on intimacy, gender, and violence and be pushed to re-examine their ideas of manhood and gender identity generally. Stoltenberg’s new introduction sets the book in academic context, summarizing the game theory of gender that underlies his work.

John Stoltenberg is the radical feminist author of *Refusing to Be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice* (rev. edn, London and New York: UCL Press, 2000) and *What Makes Pornography “Sexy”?* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 1994). He is cofounder of Men Against Pornography.

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Parables on Sex and Selfhood

Revised Edition

JOHN STOLTENBERG



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For Andrea,
who means courage

THE CORE OF ONE'S BEING
MUST LOVE JUSTICE MORE THAN MANHOOD.

—*Refusing to Be a Man*

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INTRODUCTION TO THE REVISED EDITION

Gender theory in the academy is sometimes like a private joke: You can “get it” if you are in on the jargon; but if you are not, you can’t. Gender theory is rarely simply *told*. More often it is willfully obfuscated, propounded in sentences so packed with self-referential abstraction that they seem never to be *about* anything. Academic gender theory’s relationship to people’s real lives can seem as tenuous as its hold on recognizable human speech.

I do not believe this must be. I believe that a radical investigation of gender—a look at it by its roots—can be done with everyday language about everyday experience. This method not only makes more sense, it also more accurately reflects our social reality. We all first learned to find a suitable niche inside the gender system through narratives of real life: stories and dramas in which we were shown our part and how to play it. This learning was interactive, for as we played our part well or poorly, we were made ever more mindful of what bad things can happen to us if we do not do better. As we acted in accord with our own designated niche, so also we acted in our dealings with other people in accord with theirs. The prescripts of transactional conduct not only kept everyone who abided by them stationed somewhere in the gender system; these rules also gave the whole system its narrative meaning and force. To step outside the strictures of gender—to opt out of its demands in confidence, not disgrace—we do not need esoteric theory, some cerebral mumbo-jumbo, but we do need to know how to reread those narratives of everyday life.

At no time in history have so many humans felt such a gaping discrepancy between the gender system that is given us and the selves we long to be. At no time in history have so many yearned for alternatives: ways to truly be oneself, without fear of failing at fitting into one’s gender niche, without being punished, without being cast into exile. Especially among young people, pressing new questions about the meaning of gender and one’s bodily experience of it have erupted in classrooms and chatrooms, in music and poetry, in costume and adornment, in memory and imagination, in sensation and sexuality. Some fine teachers have conscientiously responded to students’ questing with a host of new courses, based in feminism, that take a political and historical look at the lives of women. Such courses have functioned for many students as an autobiographical correlative, or as a lens through which to examine their own unease about the gender setup. Other academicians, starting from the standpoint that gender is socially constructed (something feminists first figured out), have developed complex new theoretical discourses that promise if not answers at least rarefied ways of recasting the questions. You may not ever actually *get* practical answers to whatever first drew you to the study of gender theory, but by god you’ll be taught ways to ponder the perplexities so that you too can be as prolix as the professionals who have tilled and fenced the field. Regrettably, such obscurantism has often displaced feminism’s more concrete critique.

The seekers who flock to the academy today, as much to find explanatory sanctuary from their gender dilemmas as to enjoy the company of one another, have a myriad of inward questions— about erotic desire

and desirability; about the size, shape, and look of their flesh; about their sexual rights and status, in both intimacy and the body politic; about feeling at odds with a gender ideal; about feeling one's niche does not fit. Frequently academic gender theory helps these seekers frame their burning questions inside "larger" issues with ever more gravity, and occasionally a seeker finds satisfaction in the cogitation—perhaps even a career path. But if one's soul or selfhood is parched and thirsty for a solution to one's private disquiet in the gender setup, such curricular approaches—deriving academic respectability in direct proportion to their opacity—can appear like the mirage of an oasis, promising to slake one's thirst just because they are the only watering hole around.

But academic credibility and radical inquiry are not necessarily compatible. Nor, for that matter, are complexity and personally applicable truth.

What I propose in *The End of Manhood* is a personal methodology for a radical new look at gender. It begins with the notion that gender is an *ethical* construction. This starting point both refines and differs from the understanding, now widely accepted in the academy, that gender is socially constructed. Permit me to explain.

To say that gender is an ethical construction is to say that tracking all the familiar façades of gender as a social construct—so-called sexual identities, sexual orientations, body types, self-presentations or performativities, communication styles, and so forth—cannot disclose the dynamic transactional structure by which gender is constructed, just as a bookshelf full of dictionaries in different languages cannot explain what makes a sentence mean. As grammar makes sense of vocabulary, so too there is an underlying syntax that makes the surface markers of gender cohere and make sense. To say that gender is an ethical construction is to say that what fundamentally grounds gender personally and socially as a hierarchical binary is a system of valuing conduct, a codification of acts, which underpins all the trappings now recognized as gender expression. Once we parse the embedded value system in that conduct—once we learn to read the systematic ethics that render gender meaningful in human affairs—we can grasp the "genome" of gender, the foundational scripts whereby gender comes to act, look, feel, and seem real.

Many people in the academy who are theorizing gender are conspicuously incurious about the systematic ethics that under-gird gender. Even academics who appear persuaded that gender is socially constructed resist interrogating gender as an ethical phenomenon. I have tried to understand why.

When gender as a late twentieth-century concept began to attract researchers, theorists, and scholars, their first project was to liberate it from ontology—to distinguish what we now know as gender from the panoply of corporeal and anatomical traits that have evolved in our species. Yes, there is metaphysical human matter, the reality of our anatomies, and there presumably always will be so long as *Homo sapiens* walks the earth: our brain pathways, neurological networks, hormones, gonads, genitals, and such. But thanks to an unprecedented inquiry undertaken largely within the academy and generously informed by the life experiences of people who do not neatly fit the categories "man" and "woman" (here I reluctantly use the medical establishment's terminology: intersexes, transsexuals, homosexuals, and so forth), we now know that all our metaphysical stuffness—including the "secondary" characteristics that we bracket off and call "sex," as if one's sex can be severed from, say, one's armpits or earlobes—is only relativistically germane to our epistemology of gender. We may *think* we know someone's gender when we see them—indeed we may at times think we know our own—but we cannot any longer presuppose that gender correlates with metaphysical stuffness in our species in any uniform, absolutist, either/or, one-to-one way. A few controversies continue to swarm around this historically unprecedented observation, typically in fundamentalist religious and partisan quarters, but there is now a credible consensus in academia that categories of "sex" have as little scientific validity as do categories of "race." Put another way: A gender

identity and ideology such as “man” has, just like a racial identity and ideology such as “Aryan,” no metaphysical foundation. It is a social construction. It gets made up. It is collective make-believe.

If gender is not essentially based in metaphysics because, as the academy generally concedes, it is not essentially any *thing*, what then *is* gender? To a growing extent, especially in such new discourses as postmodernism and its offshoot queer theory, the answer that has attracted the most professorial attention, the most student seekers, and the most book contracts is the notion that gender is, at bottom, an *esthetic* construction. When you come right down to it, according to this thought fashion, gender is merely a matter of putting in an appearance. It is performance. It is signs and signifiers with no intrinsic substance. It is some drag, dress-up, or other camouflage that creates the visual and tactile impression of gender specificity, averts confusion in others, and fends off the discomfort of ambiguity in oneself. It is an art form, a body art, exercised and fed or starved, sculpted by scalpels, adjusted by drugs, and accessorized. It is fantasy, sex object, fetish. It is subversion of the normative, normalization of the subversive. *Naturally* gender is not real, the pomos exclaim. But by god let it be good looking.

Whether at the experimental fringes, where gender expression is play-acting whoever and whatever one wants to be, or at the ground zero of orthodoxy, where conventions of costume and mien impart to each generation the masque of “man and wife,” the public and private face of gender is, at first glance, an esthetic. And exactly like beauty—that elusive distillate which classical estheticists eulogized and sought—it is in the eye of the beholder.

To be fair, the notion that gender is fundamentally esthetic is a reasonable inference in an era defined as never before by the camera. The image and the technology-mediated gaze have irrevocably altered our species’s epistemology of gender. We all see through viewfinders now; and we are all on view, in someone else’s sight. Fewer and fewer people escape self-consciousness about whether they appear adequately gendered, especially in youth. Exposed film stock, videotape, snapshots, half-tone printing, lit-up pixels—these are not only what matters; they *are* the matter that makes *gender* matter; they are the last residue of meta-physical stuffiness that reliably encodes and reveals to us the esthetic paradigms “masculinity” and “femininity.” In real life, we resemble or conform to these gender standards well or poorly, and we are more or less bothered by our greater or lesser remove from them. But according to the dominant esthetic, now stamped like a diktat across capitalist cultures, representations are *always* better renderings of gender than anyone’s flesh-and-blood body can possibly be. Little wonder that today so many academics are pursuing the study of gender as an esthetic construction. And little wonder that so many young seekers, ill-at-ease with both the gender schema and their own morphology in it, are also enthralled by that pursuit. They grew up, after all, bombarded by idealized images of gender that at some level they all know and fear will never be reflected back to them when they stand naked before a mirror.

The investigation into the *ethics* that construct gender is a far less popular and placating pursuit. Partly, I suspect, this is because doing so would seem dead-ended and dispiriting rather than enlightening, fun, and useful. Certainly, once one begins to look at the values in the conduct by which gender is constructed, inescapable questions of politics and power arise, and in mainstream culture, where male supremacy is god (and vice versa), such questions are unwelcome. Political inquiries are fine so long as they are about governments, nations, wars, trade, elections, and such, goes the *Zeitgeist*, but political inquiry into the gender system—into what really happens to women in it, for instance—is an unpleasantness to avoid thinking about and a discourse to be discouraged. Especially in the academy, where radical feminism is to career as the pox is to complexion, there is little institutional incentive to interrogate the moral values in conduct as it reifies gender—behavior that is recognizable as, say, “acting like a man.” Wide-ranging analysis of gender as an ethical construction would require a sort of academic freedom that almost nowhere exists: an intellectual climate in which when the subject is gender there are not penalties for speaking the

truth to power, and where a cohort of thinkers have not been cowed into changing the subject. Ethics is necessarily about acts and consequences—what happens to whom is one way of knowing what the values in any act are. But there seems now a consensus in the academy, perhaps because so much is already known tacitly about the consequences of gendering behavior, that on this perturbing topic no more shall be known.

Approaching gender as appearance rather than act, a matter of esthetics rather than ethics, therefore has academic appeal. But it also avoids understanding how conduct lends force to the gendered meaning of appearance. Our reverence for, or attraction to, various gender-coding images is not what is transmitted through media. The images and representations travel that way, but not how we feel about them, not how they make us feel, and not what they mean to us viscerally. Such subjective significances—perhaps as variant from person to person as our signature irises—arose historically, biographically, interactionally, narratively. The meanings and feelings that the esthetics of gender have for us are among the consequences of actions that are done to us and actions that we do to others.

My approach to gender theory in *The End of Manhood* identifies and demonstrates one particular transactional dynamic that is central to understanding and experiencing how gender is socially constructed. I imagine other such dynamics are likely to be discovered, other ways by which a specific ethics, recognizable in a variety of acts, makes the binary gender schema seem real. But because the ethical dynamic I explore here has what seems to me an extraordinary explanatory reach—from everyday domestic disputes to racial animosities to international power plays—I suspect it would be helpful to explain a few things about my method first.

The book is written very simply, about everyday life; the gender theory is embedded, unannounced. As I wrote each successive chapter, as if staging scenes in a gathering drama, I accumulated a list of words that I forbade myself to use: “patriarchy,” “male dominance,” and “sexism,” for example. Any time I was tempted to fall back on such an abstraction, I tried to say what I meant in a more immediate and graphic way: a story, a fable, a diagram, a rhyme. I considered no literary genre off limits (except academese), because though ethics by definition is about human interaction, *perceiving* ethics is never a linear mental event. A mental picture of the ethics in interaction occurs to us as we attend to something that happens. It is recognizable in acts, but it is more than a matter of assessing a particular act as “right” or “wrong” or “good” or “bad.” Instead, because the same act can be right/good in one ethical system and wrong/bad in another, perceiving ethics involves a metaquestion: “Right or wrong, good or bad, according to *which* ethics, according to *which* system of valuing conduct?” An act that transgresses one ethics can be the apotheosis of another. And an act that is completely congruous within one system of valuing conduct can be an outrage outside it. In order to contemplate in this sense the ethics of acts, including our own, we need first to perceive other people in action—as if we were spectators in the “seeing place” that was the ancient Greek theater. We need to attend to other actors, what they do, and what their doing does. Next we need to perceive ourselves in our own narratives. We need to attend to our acts from that inner point of view we first adopted as spectators to interhuman interaction. To communicate a theory of gender as an ethical construction, therefore, I chose a method that is dramatic (rather than, say, linear, argumentative, or documentary), because I believe it is the method that most closely resembles the way in which we learn of ethics in life.

The book is written in a form that is both modeled on and a send-up of a “self-help book,” and its gender theory proceeds by problematizing “manhood.” I wrote aware that this apparently “single-sex” tactic flies in the face of certain conventional wisdom, according to which the meaning of gender may be found, on the one hand, in the social construction of “men” and, equivalently on the other, in the social construction of “women”—as if the gender binary were a two-party government or bicameral parliament. I do not believe that this bifurcated and purportedly parallel form of inquiry accurately gets at the ways that gender is constructed ethically, for it evades the values in the conduct by which the meaning of manhood

overdetermines whatever meaning people—women primarily but also many with male anatomy— have in a host of subordinate categories and classes. The construction of manhood as an identity, as I show, results from a particular transactional dynamic: one that requires *proving* manhood according to a distinctive ethic. Among the consequences of that ethic is the social construction of the identity “woman” as well as other categories indexed by genetic traits, creed, strength and size, and such. Put another way, the ethics undergirding the social proof of manhood produces the identities of “men” and “women” both. Further, the exact same ethics that produces the paradigmatic identities “man”/“woman” produces the identities “white”/“colored,” “normal”/“homo,” “Aryan”/“kike,” “healthy”/“crip,” and so on.

What distinguishes the ethics that constructs manhood is a particular if/then drama, a sort of game theory, which I reiterate, examine, and apply throughout *The End of Manhood*. For anyone raised “to be a man,” the rules of the game go like this: *If* someone impugns or threatens your manhood and challenges you to prove it, *then* you have two choices: (1) to rise to the challenge or (2) not to (an option that necessarily risks confirming the challenger’s imputation that your manhood is absent or defective). *If* you choose to rise to the challenge, *then* there are (apparently) two possible outcomes: either (1) you will prove your manhood is greater (by some act that disparages/dominates/damages your challenger) or (2) your manhood will be proved lesser (by dint of your having been disparaged/dominated/damaged in some conflict or combat from which the challenger emerges victorious, however scathed). Note that this is a familiar, recognizable, and coherent system of ethics in which the set of acts that prove manhood is valorized and the set of acts that concede inferiority of manhood is deplored. Within this behavioral code (which all combatants for manhood necessarily subscribe to) and within the context of a manhood contest (which all aspirants to manhood must episodically engage in), any act that disparages/ dominates/damages someone else is “good” and “right” (meaning: “utilitarian, warranted, justifiable”). There are no exceptions, no nettlesome gray areas, for this ethics is rigorous, internally consistent, and evident throughout so-called civilization. Note also that this gender ethics bears a striking resemblance to the code by which male mammals of many other species vie for rut rights—think rams battering and stags cracking antlers in the woods.

To my surprise, in writing *The End of Manhood* I chanced upon what may be a human evolution of the mammalian code by which male dominance is acted out literally and seasonally—a distinctly human elaboration of it. What I discovered is that in the human species there is actually a *third* possible outcome to a male-dominance contest, an option lower mammals rarely employ. It goes like this: *If* one party challenges another to prove “manhood,” *then* both challenger and challengee have the option of engaging *together* in an act that proves their manhood mutually. They may gang up to *jointly* disparage/dominate/damage *some third party*; someone over and against whom they can collaboratively demonstrate the superiority of their manhood; someone, for instance, anatomically female. In the human species, the systematic ethics of manhood-proving not only permits conduct pursuant to this third option; this ethics fosters it.

How did this species-specific systematic ethics arise among our forebears? The question is impossible to answer, of course, but an intriguing hypothesis presents itself. In evolutionary biology and paleoanthropology, it is an uncontroversial given that the absence of estrus is among the features that distinguish our mammalian species. But unlike other humanoid traits that can be explained as evolutionary variations on a higher-primate theme (large brain size, upright gait on two feet, and such), our species’s peculiar lack of estrus is a puzzler. Among other mammals, females have zero tolerance for copulation except at particular, cyclical times, when they physically advertise that they are ovulating, and males are notably hardwired to know what time that is and isn’t. No such biorhythm organizes *Homo sapiens*’ etiquette of penetrative sex—our species, basically, does not have one. During a female’s fertile years, there is approximately a time of the month when conception can occur, but it neither tracks nor trumpets the time

for fucking. Some scientists speculate that humanoid females once had an ovulatory signal but lost it over time. Others believe the reverse: that primates' ancestors gradually developed such a signal but that prehumans never had one. No tissue remains to tell the tale. The only hard evidence is bones, and they demonstrate that way back in humans' lineage, sexual dimorphism was extreme: females then were less than two thirds as large as males (whereas today, females and males are, on average, much closer in size). Moreover, the cranium was relatively puny. Over eons, as the human brain ballooned, the female pelvis became too small to give birth to the size of skull required for it (which is why babies today are born with unfinished brains—it is our evolutionary tradeoff for bipedalism). But back then, judging from skeletal sources, hominid infants exited the womb far more prepared to perambulate, which means that their period of postnatal dependency was much shorter than now (hence, presumably, mamas did not need papas past the point of conception). The strong implication, by analogy to the behavior of primates who are our near relatives, is that in those days there was male-male battle, literal and bloody, for coital access to females.

In contemplating the systematic ethics of manhood-proving as identified and articulated in *The End of Manhood*, I thought to trace it backward to the beginning of perceptibly human life. Speculating rather wildly, I admit, I guessed that the absence of estrus in the human species, in evolutionary terms, made male-male combat for rut rights an enormous waste of energy—for if the coveted window of opportunity for copulation can be opened all year round, males had more need of unlocking *it* than of locking horns with one another. Following upon that speculation came another—that ganging up to perform penile, penetrative sex with females held for males a classic sociobiological advantage: When prehumans roamed the mists of prehistory, before there was group living or tribal life, bonding together to fuck females not only *increased* males' odds of getting their genes into progeny (which, according to evolutionary biologists, is the big bingo) but—much more to the point—*decreased* their risk of being injured, perhaps mortally, by other perfervid males. From these *ad hoc* male alliances could well have emerged marauding packs, and the status that then obtained *among* members of the pack could have become, over time, that which was at stake whenever challenged by any *other* pack—fertile males who were also in solidarity over and against females in order to avert bloodshed among themselves. In an early flash of human intelligence, it could have dawned on the roving males that what worked so efficaciously with females (ganging together to inseminate) worked resourcefully against rival packs (ganging together to terminate); well enough, at any rate, to inspire (at least among survivors of such run-ins) the drama called war. This bellicose saga must have unfolded on the very cusp between primate and human, prior to the invention of the distinctly human concept of ownership of land and of other people's bodies, after which it would have become reproductively advantageous not to gangbang females but to keep them as private chattel, necessitating policies against poaching. There would then have arisen such chiefdoms, patresfamilias, clans, and dynasties as are nowadays familiar to anthropologists and archeologists. But from earliest times, all such social configurations remained modeled on the game theory that is the ethics of the humanoid male bond: Defeat your challenger, be defeated by your challenger, or team up to disparage/dominate/damage some third party. According to this unpretty but plausible hypothesis, the cradle of civilization was gang rape.

Such speculation about our social origins—alluringly alluding to our material stuffiness, including our species's reproductive anatomy (the very metaphysical fallacy that has now convincingly been exposed by those who recognize gender as a social construction) cannot by itself help us understand, solve, or evolve out of our contemporary gender dilemma. If ever this male-bonding based system of manhood-proving had a material foundation, that time was long, long ago. The system has persisted beyond the circumstances in which it arose. Today, as I dramatize in *The End of Manhood*, this male-bonding system of ethics is being driven by a historically unprecedented gender panic, the inward anxiety felt by more and more persons around the globe that one may not be fitting into one's specified gender niche convincingly—the achingly

unanswerable question, for instance, “What is a real man?” (Not incidentally, this burgeoning gender anxiety is also driving a thriving consumer market in goods and services that promise the impression of authentic genderedness—the metaphysical fallacy again, now retooled for profit.) As belief in the material foundations of manhood withers, as more and more discern that manhood is a mirage and “there’s no *there* there,” focus has understandably shifted to the esthetics that mark out masculine and feminine, lest manhood evaporate or perish. The trouble is, the esthetics of gender do not go very far as evidentiary proof. They are not, as lawyers like to say, dispositive. Putting on the proper attire, crossing one’s legs a certain way, assuming a gender-specific affect, owning a particular automobile or sound system—all such grooming tips and buying guides, no matter how rigorously one obeys them, cannot convincingly prove one has one gender not some other. Clothes do not make the man. The ethics of acts do: the cult of the pack and its behavioral code.

The End of Manhood is premised on the belief that that code must now be abandoned for the sake of our species’s survival, and that to that end, there is enormous practical value in unencrypting the system of ethics by which human males are yet conditioned to try to resolve an irresolvable gender panic. “Conditioning,” although among the words I assiduously avoided in writing this book, is a key concept here, as it is more generally in gender studies, where social learning is emphasized as much as, or more than, humans’ biological heritage. But because *The End of Manhood* looks at gender as an ethical construction, it connects “nature” and “nurture” in a brand-new way: It offers a physically graphic explanation of how the ethics of manhood-proving become sensorially resonant in a human body born male. Through narrative example, it shows how that code can biographically be inscribed on the eroticism of an anatomically male body, such that sexual sensation and this system of ethics can seem virtually indistinguishable. Step by step, *The End of Manhood* viscerally sorts out the ethics of manhood from the ethics of selfhood, so that subjective sexual feelings need not be bound to domination.

The game theory of the proof of manhood, seen as a transaction with a distinctive ethics in which right/good and wrong/bad share a uniform utility, does several things that other theories of gender do not. It presents a unified way of interpreting what happens to anyone who has ever been disparaged/dominated/damaged—which is very probably everyone. Other ways of approaching gender tend, by bifurcating the classes “men” and “women,” to explain what “men” do to “men” or what “men” do to “women” (and sometimes what “women” do to “men” and what “women” do to “women”) as if these notions of gender specificity were metaphysically separable spheres and as if whatever “oppressions” happen to “women,” on the one hand, or to some “men,” on the other, are somehow contrastable because the spheres are ultimately divisible. While acknowledging that the spheres “men” and “women” bear some relationship, such liberal approaches cannot positively identify what that relationship actually is.

The radical approach to gender employed in *The End of Manhood* demonstrates dynamically and transactionally how whatever “men” do to “women” is intrinsically related to what “men” do to “men,” and vice versa; it forges a tangible and verifiable structural link. It reveals in everyday detail how and why, for instance, men’s violence against women is inextricably located in and driven by men’s violence against other men. It shows why almost no one escapes the ravages of the ethics of manhood-proving. It makes such questions as “Which sex is more powerless?” moot. But, most important, this radical approach to gender opens space for dissidents—conscientious objectors to a hegemonic, anachronistic ethics—in a way that would be utterly inconceivable under rubrics of gender as an esthetic construction or as a metaphysical artifact. *The End of Manhood* calls that oppositional space “selfhood.” My book *Refusing to Be a Man*,* the philosophical precursor and companion volume to *The End of Manhood*, calls that space “moral identity.” Various philosophical and spiritual traditions have called that space the “self,” the “person,” the “soul,” and such. The notion of that space is not new. The longing to inhabit it confidently and fully is among the

deepest cravings of our age. But as *The End of Manhood* helps readers realize, through narrative details of daily life, conformity to the myth of gender binarism—in particular to the mandates of manhood—is inevitably an impediment to one’s sure stance in that space. Anxiety about whether one conforms esthetically or metaphysically to the mythology of gender binarism has no esthetic or metaphysical resolution. Only in acts with consequences to others is manhood made flesh, and so long as manhood is believed to be worth proving, and the game worth playing, the code of the pack will determine who wins and who loses.

The question “Who am I?” has taken on a perplexing new edge: It has now been hijacked and transformed into the question “What is my gender?” For those, for instance, who have been raised “to be a man,” the identity question “Who am I?” cannot sensibly be broached without insistent whispers in the next breath: “Am I man enough?” “Is my manhood real?” “Do I seem like a real man to you?” The identity question and gender anxiety have become twinned, sutured together; where one goes, the other follows. Even as gender has lost its material moorings, we cling to it lest we drown; we fear we will be no one if we do not stand surely to one side of a demarcation that has all the permanence of a line etched in sand already damp from surf.

The theory of gender as an ethical construction is writ small and large. It illuminates transactions between parents and children, among lovers and friends; it exposes the commonality in what happens whenever any agglomeration contests manhood—for instance gay-bashing gangs and race-hate groups; it applies also nation to nation, to affairs of state, to any time, any assemblage—in a pact together, having mutually disparaged/dominated/damaged others—jockeys for power over any other assemblage. But most pragmatically, this theory of gender makes sense not only in the head. It translates easily to real life.

I wrote in hope that one could reread the narratives of one’s life in terms of the ancient ethics of manhood-proving (as I did myself while writing) and thereby see one’s way toward living by a different ethics entirely (as I myself continue to try to do). *The End of Manhood*’s vision of the ethics of selfhood (“loving justice”) is by no means original; the language used to speak of it is, but the humane aspiration expressed has been around a long time (“Love your neighbor as yourself,” “I-Thou,” and more). The moral breakthrough here, if there is one, is a demonstration that gender stands in the way of humanity’s insistent longing for sharable and safe space. We are social creatures, after all. But we are yet on the brink of knowing how to be together. May this book help.

John Stoltenberg
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PROLOG

The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde is often invoked, in everyday chat, to explain why men suddenly seem to change personalities. This eerie nineteenth-century tale has crossed over from literature into life, becoming an apt metaphor for men's apparent switch of behavioral identities—as if mysteriously—from one moment to the next.

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote the story—about a man “committed to a profound duplicity of life”—in 1885, when he was thirty-five. In it, Dr. Henry Jekyll, an upstanding physician in Victorian England, becomes from time to time a deformed, sadistic murderer, Edward Hyde. The doctor concocts a bubbly potion that at first reverts him to his more humane self. But eventually the drug's effectiveness wanes, and Hyde, the horrific double, claims Jekyll more and more of the time. In an anguished letter composed while “losing hold of my original and better self, and becoming slowly incorporated with my second and worse,” Dr. Jekyll tries to comprehend this terrifying split, “this incoherency of my life”: “Both sides of me were in dead earnest; I was no more myself when I laid aside restraint and plunged in shame; I was no more myself when I laboured, in the eye of day, at the furtherance of knowledge or the relief of sorrow and suffering.” Applying his full intellect and moral intelligence, he attempts to grasp the meaning of his dilemma the only way he knows how: “I thus drew steadily nearer to that truth by whose partial discovery I have been doomed to such a dreadful shipwreck: that man is not truly one, but truly two. I say two, because the state of my own knowledge does not pass beyond that point.”

This explanation rings somewhat hollow today, even though Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde have become an everyday figure of speech for a man who seems split in two. In more than a century since the story's first publication, its central metaphor seems to have spoken more and more vividly to the sometimes profound contradictions that can be observed in men's behavioral identities. Yet the story's religiously inspired premise—“the duality of man's nature,” “good” versus “evil”—no longer accounts for such contradictions sufficiently. Whether we seek a personal understanding from within (because, for instance, we live life *as* such a man) or whether we seek a useful explanation from without (because, for instance, we live *with* such a man) the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde works better as truism than as practical insight. Despite something vaguely recognizable about these now cartoonish alter egos, we cannot learn from them what we need to understand most—and the everyday experience of duplicity in men's behavior still prompts haunting questions without credible answers.

Why, for instance, does an ostensibly “honorable” man do something that betrays? Why does an apparently “honest” man do something deceitful? Why does a generally “kind” man do something that wounds? Why does a reputedly “caring” and “decent” man commit an act so steeped in contempt that it is as if someone else had done it, for he himself could not possibly?

Those of us raised to be men must ask such questions of ourselves if we are to be at all honest with ourselves. And all of us must ask such questions about the men we observe and the men we know—perhaps especially the men whom we believe we know most intimately.

Sometimes a man will defend the discordant behavior. Challenged to acknowledge some injury that his act resulted in, he denies any wrongdoing, he recognizes nothing out of character in his doing it, and he may even displace responsibility for the act, laying the blame for it with someone else. This dodge comes as a shock. How can he possibly be so committed to it? Doesn't he experience his displacement of responsibility as a wedge that splits his own self—a wedge that he hammers in further with each and every evasion?

Sometimes, perhaps after a grueling interchange, a man will finally concede that “he wasn't himself,” and he may express a perplexed sort of remorse, admitting a deflected sort of responsibility by not comprehending “what came over him.” He will acknowledge that the egregious act was “out of character” but profess to have no clue as to what on earth “made him do it.” Then, if he can successfully ensnare his challenger's fascination in this moral mystery, he will summon the conundrum the way one might cite a handy escape clause to get out of a contractual obligation: So you see, he'll say, I can't really be held accountable; I didn't really have any idea what I was doing; I certainly didn't intend whatever bad happened; I can't really have done what I didn't really mean—

Just who *is* this “I”?

I myself have been astonished to realize I have done something to someone that I would never “in conscience” do, much less recommend. I have been puzzled, too, as much by my own moral inconsistency as by my quite adroit ways of dodging responsibility for my own behavior. And I have occasionally despaired, as much at the seeming inability of other men to grasp and remember even the simplest issues of interpersonal conscience as at my own demonstrated lapses, my own forgetting to remember.

Why I have wondered, are “good” men sometimes so completely unreliable morally? Why do we sometimes act as if we have lost our values moorings, lost sight of our beacon convictions, lost hold of our sense of self? What is going on in us? Why do we evidence such wanton behavioral swings—such unpredictable splits in who we are?

Sometimes, if we are honest, it seems as if we too may have exhausted our personal supply of Dr. Jekyll's restorative elixir—and we too are doomed to be overcome by the persona of our own private Hyde. Sometimes, in the torpor that seems always to accompany such introspective musing, such self-involved self-reflection, there seems to be no alternative. Perhaps, we consider, it is in our “nature” after all—as “men”—to be utterly split in two. Perhaps it is a fate peculiar to our “sex”: never to be able to truly say “I” with any constancy, with any consistency, with any integrated conviction whatsoever—and therefore never able to address anyone else as “you” with any honesty in our mind or with any continuity in our heart.

This book is written in the firm belief that our humanity—our authentic selfhood—can be honored and understood only through loving justice.

This book's main theme is that all we know and recognize as “manhood”—the personal, behavioral identity that is committed to gender, committed to “being the man there”—cannot possibly coexist with authentic and passionate and integrated selfhood.

This book is thoroughly informed by the radical feminist critique of gender—information that Robert Louis Stevenson could not of course have known but probably the most astute and personally useful set of ideas I have been exposed to in my lifetime.

This book therefore rejects the widespread notion that “manhood” can be somehow revised and redeemed—the contemporary project variously described as “reconstructing,” “reinventing,” “remythologizing,” “revisioning,” and rewhatevering gendered personal identity so as to bring its hapless adherents back into the human fold. That project is utterly futile, and we all have to give it up, as this book will carefully explain.

My heretical hope is that as more male human beings understand the fundamental dichotomy between manhood and selfhood—and learn in our everyday relationships to apply the practical lessons of that insight—there will be among us all more and more loving justice, and more and more of us will say “I” and “you” as if we each are equally real.

This book is written for people who believe it really matters right now that some humans raised to be a man learn how to live as men of conscience. Learning how to live as a man of conscience goes beyond one’s reading, one’s opinions, one’s charitable contributions, one’s community service, and so forth. Learning to live as a man of conscience is also about the personal, the private—one’s full range of choices in everyday relationships—one’s decisions about *what to do*, whether major or moment-to-moment.

This book is written as if such a life is possible. And this book is written as if all our lives depend on it.

Justice between people is perhaps the most important connection people can have. Sex too is important. But sex and justice have been ripped apart. In many people’s experience, a sharp edge seems to have sliced between the possibility of experiencing our full humanness, including our sexual humanness, and our fundamental need for fairness and complete respect together.

We need fairness and respect as much as we need food, air, shelter. No one is an organism in a void.

For anyone who cares passionately about reconnecting sex and justice in our world, these are difficult times. We live in a world where human sexuality and humane justice hardly ever happen at the same place and the same time. If you have ever experienced them both at once, you have been lucky. Very lucky indeed. When sex and justice are ripped apart, human beings are sometimes hurt so bad they don’t even know what hurt them. If an event like that has ever happened to you or to someone you love, you especially know why this book is written in urgency; you especially know firsthand why there need to be people in the world ready now to create loving justice between as many human beings as humanly possible.

The End of Manhood: Parables on Sex and Selfhood is the practical sequel to my first book, *Refusing to Be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice*. The two books are complementary, though they are quite distinct. *Refusing to Be a Man*, which originated as speeches written and delivered between my thirtieth and forty-fifth years, is somewhat more earnest, more about public policy and activism than the personal. *The End of Manhood*, conceived and written between my forty-sixth and forty-eighth years, is explicitly about the interpersonal—what happens between us—and more about issues of sexuality and identity. Whereas *Refusing to Be a Man* is more philosophical, *The End of Manhood* is more informal and experiential. Structured like a sequenced meditation, *The End of Manhood* comprises diverse voices (from erudite to earthy) and types of text (by turns antic and analytic), but always practical, here-and-now. I had fun writing it, and I decided to let the fun show.

But I could not possibly have written *The End of Manhood* before I had worked through the liberation theory that I articulated in *Refusing to Be a Man*, both in terms of its profound implications for my own self-understanding and in terms of its broad political implications for social change and activism. When I decided to write this practical sequel to *Refusing to Be a Man*, I found its beginning in a single sentence from that book, now the epigraph to this one: “The core of one’s being must love justice more than manhood.” In those words I found the genesis of this book’s passion and also a kind of koan—an encrypted, enigmatic message—the full meaning of which I could only realize in my own life through the writing of this book. Writing *The End of Manhood* thus became a deliberate personal and political choice to apply the liberation theory articulated in *Refusing* in everyday human interaction—to apprehend what we mean when we think and say “I,” and what we mean when we regard one another as “you.” I am a different “I” for having written it. I hope some similar transformation awaits those who read it.

lov·ing jus·tice (*luhv-ing juhs-tiss*) *n.* **1.** An act of intense desire for, and attraction toward, fairness. **2.** That quality of fairness which exhibits love as well: *As a society of sovereign selves, we desperately need loving justice.* —**Idioms.** **to love (someone) justly.** *v.* To have an intense emotional attachment to someone's human selfhood, such that fairness never disappears. **to love justice.** *v.* To have an intense emotional attachment to the principle of fairness between human selves: *For any precious one of us to become fully human, some of us must learn to love justice more than we love manhood.*

AN AUTHOR'S NOTE TO WOMEN READERS

This book is written to men—but so that women can overhear every word.

Throughout the book I address readers as “you”—meaning someone raised to be a man, not to be a woman. I talk directly to such readers who may have already tried very hard to embody abstract manhood, zealously believing that the ideal *can* be embodied, inwardly fearful that *not* to seem a real-enough man is to risk being deemed a worthless nobody. I offer practical and personal advice about how to become one’s own best self. And I explain the ethical essence of “manhood”: whenever any human tries to act like a real-enough man, his action must have negating consequences for someone else or the act does not work.

I intend this book to be of use to everyone who has ever experienced such consequences, which is, of course, nearly everybody. Therefore I hope very much that this book will be read and evaluated by women.

There is much information here that may interest a woman who is (or would like to be) in a relationship with a “man of conscience”—whether he is her son, her brother, her father, her friend or lover. I talk about what you can tell about a man by how he apologizes ([Chapter Two](#)), how he pays attention to children ([Chapter Six](#)), how he makes love (Chapters [Twelve](#) and [Nineteen](#)), and why other men may seem more important to the man you love than you are ([Chapter Five](#)). I explain the secret social truces among men that cannot occur unless someone female or less manly is put down ([Chapter One](#)).

Growing up to be a real-enough man means having a lifelong problem with the manhood standard, as this book plainly acknowledges. And this book explains *what men can do about it*. Nowhere in this book do I try to explain or interpret “womanhood,” or what it means to be raised to be a woman; many fine feminist books already do that. Nor do I say anything about what women should or should not do. Unlike many other books and articles that counsel a woman how to mend what’s broken between herself and a man in her life, this book says unequivocally that you cannot fix it. You cannot change him—*he* has to change *himself*. The choice to live as a “man of conscience” is always his, in each moment, every day.

I must alert you that some parts of *The End of Manhood* may not be as relevant or recognizable to you as they could be to a reader whose life history has been as a man. This book is written to men in terms that will be emotionally familiar; therefore many references are specific to the culture that only exists whenever seekers after manhood meet or compete. This social zone intimidates *many* humans, whether they appear to qualify in it as “real men” or not. This book discloses many things within this separate sphere that men are never really encouraged to understand—and that women are not supposed to know about at all.

1

HOW CAN I BE LESS AFRAID OF OTHER MEN?

All humans who grow up to be a man are raised to pass tests of loyalty to manhood. These tests can be routine ones; these tests can be episodically treacherous. However great or small, these tests have one thing in common: they cancel out some loyalty to selfhood that the human being might have felt before.

This may have happened to you in one of the most common tests of your loyalty: when you are confronted by another man who intimidates or scares you.

In the moment of the confrontation—when another man’s threat rears up, when his opportunity to hurt or humiliate you becomes clear to you both—no amount of mental or physical preparedness seems to prevent your falling for the test and somehow attempting to prove your loyalty to manhood. Naturally you wish to save your neck. But more important, you wish to pass the test of your loyalty to manhood, which another man may have impugned. At the flash point of confrontation, it is unlikely that your mind has time to reflect on the fact that this test of your loyalty to manhood also tests your disloyalty to selfhood. But consider these next ten points—and consider them as if you are but a heartbeat away from some escalation in such a confrontation. Perhaps you will find yourself recalling an event from your life, a specific moment in which you were faced with another man’s anger and potential to hurt you.

Ten Things to Remember When You’re Faced With Another Man Who Intimidates or Scares You

1. You learned to fear other men very early, when you were a child. So did he. You both had to figure out how to be more threatening than threatened.
2. What you are getting from him now—in this edgy encounter—is how he’s acting like a man so you won’t suspect it’s all just an act for him.
3. One of the main reasons you’re frightened is that his behavior makes you feel he suspects that you haven’t got your manhood act together as well as he has.
4. He seems to be testing you, challenging you, passing a judgment on your manhood. He wants *you* to be afraid of *his* manhood because then *he* won’t have to be afraid of *yours*.
5. Though he is trying not to be afraid of *your* manhood, he is trying to stop feeling another fear as well: his fear you’ll find out that he’s just acting at manhood himself.
6. He is trying to confuse you into thinking that he *is* his manhood act. He does not want you to suspect he isn’t who he seems.
7. You do not want him to suspect that you are not who you seem either. You may in fact be afraid or ashamed that your manhood act is inadequate, or even bogus, especially compared with his.