

# Bodily-Social Copresence Androgyny: Rehabilitating a Progressive Strategy

Joshua M. Hall

William Paterson University

**ABSTRACT:** Historically, the concept of androgyny has been as problematic as it has been appealing to (especially white) Western progressives. The appeal clearly includes, *inter alia*, the opportunity to abandon or ameliorate certain identities (including essentialized femininity and toxic masculinity). As for the problematic dimension, the central problem seems to be the reduction of otherness (often unconscious and unwitting) to the norms of straight white middle/upper-class Western cismen, particularly because of the consequent worsening of actual others' marginalization and exclusion from social institutions. Despite these problems, I wish to suggest that androgyny—as evidenced by the enthusiasm felt for it by many Westerners—bespeaks something larger and more important than the concept itself, and that modified conception of it might be helpful in pursuit of social justice.

**KEYWORDS:** androgyny, Iris Marion Young, social justice

Historically, the concept of androgyny has been as problematic as it has been appealing to (especially white) Western progressives. The appeal clearly includes, *inter alia*, the opportunity to abandon or ameliorate certain identities (including essentialized femininity and toxic masculinity). As for the problematic dimension, the central problem seems to be the reduction of otherness (often unconscious and unwitting) to the norms of straight white middle/upper-class Western cismen, particularly because of the consequent worsening of actual others' marginalization and exclusion from social institutions.<sup>1</sup> Despite these problems, I wish to suggest that androgyny — as evidenced by the enthusiasm felt for it by many Westerners — bespeaks something larger and more important than the concept itself. To wit, there is something in the being-in-the-world of many (especially white) Westerners which yearns to divest of the lingering injustices connected to (especially white) Western identities.

The status of the concept of androgyny in present-day, social justice-oriented philosophy is a marginalized and complex one. It is marginalized because there is currently almost no discussion of androgyny in the philosophical literature. And it is complex because there is tremendous interest today in transgender, which is

related to androgyny in complex ways (to which I will return in detail shortly). For starters, the modern concept of androgyny has its origins in first-wave feminism, sometimes called "liberal feminism." As the Greek etymology of the word suggests (*andros* = "man" and *gynos* = "woman"), this concept was derived from Greek mythological representations of beings who literally incorporated gender and/or sexual characteristics associated with men and women. One influential example of this mythological influence is found in Plato's *Symposium*, where the character of the comedic poet Aristophanes claims that humans were originally two-part creatures, male and female, and that erotic desire manifests the enduring desire to be restored to our other half.<sup>2</sup> The modern concept of androgyny, however, as articulated by first-wave feminists, can be more appropriately described as "psychological androgyny." Though I will turn below to several analyses of the complexity of this concept, on its surface, it means something like the possession by a man of psychological traits predominantly associated with women, and vice versa.

Moving from these first-wave origins to today's era of third-wave (or "radical") feminism, androgyny has been eclipsed, specifically by a cluster of concepts that has most recently been grouped under the heading of "transgender and gender nonconformism" (abbreviated as "TGNC"). To unpack this label, "transgender" refers to a person who does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. This lack of identification could range anywhere from a feeling of discomfort or tension with their gender identity, all the way to a strong identification with another gendered identity. And anyone who does not fit TGNC descriptions is now, by default, known as "cisgender."

Turning to the other half of TGNC, a gender nonconforming person is someone who performs their gendered identity in ways that do not fully align with current gender norms in their society. For example, someone who identifies as a woman, and lives in a society where women almost always wear dresses or skirts, may wear pants exclusively. Or someone who identifies as "gender neutral," meaning that they do not identify with any current gender, might avoid any clothing, accessories or styling (such as conventional makeup) that is strongly associated with any gender.

My intention is certainly not to advocate replacing this very recent label of TGNC with "androgyny," but merely to justify giving androgyny a seat at the contemporary table, for those for whom it is more appealing than other atypical gender identities. More precisely, I will suggest a new conception of androgyny that I term "bodily-social copresence androgyny." As I will relate below, Lorenzi-Cioldi identifies "co-presence" androgyny as one of three historical types of psychological androgyny. What makes copresence androgyny distinct in his system is the presence of both stereotypically male and stereotypically female traits in the same person. Where I differ from Lorenzi-Cioldi is captured in the adjective "bodily-social," which registers that my conception goes beyond mere psychological traits to include bodily comportment and social practices. Put simply, a bodily-social copresence androgynous man not only possesses psychological traits predominantly associated with men and women, but these traits are also manifested in and through his body and social practices. For example, he might

perform his gender in a generally conventional way (short hair, pants instead of dresses, drinks beer and watches lots of American football), except that he wears colors and fabrics associated with women in his culture (such as, in the U.S. today, pink and lace), engages in activities such as babysitting, and works as a flight attendant.

Since, to repeat, I am suggesting that bodily-social copresence androgyny is an alternative to the exiting framework of TGNC, it might be helpful to clarify how bodily-social copresence androgyny differs from both transgender and gender nonconformism. What makes the former different from transgender is that the androgynous man (in my sense) does not experience a misfit or positive conflict/tension with the male gender he was assigned at birth; instead, he merely wishes to complement his maleness with traits, forms of embodiment, and practices coded as female/feminine. In other words, the issue for the androgynous man is not the imposition of an alien gender but a lack of one or more features associated in some sense (by himself or others) with women. Turning to gender nonconformism, the difference is that the androgynous man is not failing to conform (nor trying to reject) at least certain aspects of what is understood (by himself or others) to be manhood/maleness. Instead, he wishes to possess or perform, in addition, phenomena that are not associated with men.

At the risk of oversimplifying, what makes him different from TGNC folks is that where they are (in metaphysical jargon) "nominalists" or "irrealists" about gender, the androgynous man is a "realist" about it, although exactly what it is and how he deploys it varies widely from person to person. I make no judgment here as to whether this difference is or should be axiologically loaded — whether, that is, it is "better" or "worse" to view gender the way that TGNC people do or the way I am suggesting aligns with bodily-social copresence androgynous men. My hunch is that the TGNC view is probably superior, and likely to become the new norm for gender in the near future, but even if that hunch is correct, that does not mean that androgynous is not a worthwhile option at present for straight men who would otherwise feel (or be) forced to settle for what has come to be known as toxic masculinity. By the latter, I mean a traditional or conventional conception of masculinity throughout white supremacist patriarchal history, along the following lines: "the diametric opposite of femininity, metaphysically superior thereto, characterized by unfeeling rationality, the suppression of all negative emotion but anger, a denial of vulnerability, and the pursuit of psychological and political mastery by any means, including lethal violence.

For reasons of both clarity and intellectual responsibility, it is crucial to note the complexity of the history of androgyny, and to locate my new conception thereof in relation to the feminist traditions from which it was born. As the aforementioned etymology of "androgyny" already suggests, its oldest meaning appears to be something like "the copresence of 'masculinity' and 'femininity.'" The latter terms, however, as is clearer to feminists today than during the first wave, are at the very least extremely vague and polysemous (and at most entirely arbitrary and counterproductive). It is unsurprising therefore, that they have been understood variously, across the history of feminism, as metaphysical and/ or psychological, as biological or cultural, and as substantial or strategic. Since

this original “copresence” model of androgyny would appear to allow a man to maintain any desired aspects of his “masculine” identity while also supplementing those desired aspects with other aspects he understands as “feminine,” it might be particularly appealing to at least some straight men. Speaking anecdotally, this has certainly been my experience for many years now.

There are, however, several important objections that have been raised to the copresence model of androgyny. Put in the form of three central questions: (1) Does androgyny concern the copresence of stereotypically masculine and feminine traits, or instead the transcendence of such traits and/or categories altogether? (2) Does androgyny facilitate greater inclusiveness in feminism, or instead undermine the struggle against institutionalized gendered injustice? (3) Does differing access to androgyny, as a function of embodiment and social position—with wealthy white Western men having the most capital to dedicate to androgynous expression—make androgyny complicit with patriarchy and imperialism?<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps some readers will also object that there is something problematic about the interest that straight men in particular might have in androgyny. Perhaps, that is, the appeal of androgyny (as copresence) is that it allows a straight cisman to assert partial identification with an identity (female), a total identification with which identity is for him ontologically impossible (as well as politically counterproductive). One might think it would be preferable for straight cismen, therefore, to renounce altogether any attachment they might have to masculinity—including not only those qualities in themselves (which is relatively straightforward), but also to the things in the world that are coded as “masculine” (which would be a much more difficult and complex process). Even if that masculinity-less alternative would be ideal, however, I would argue that the androgynous ideal remains a more practical third alternative that is clearly superior to the currently-dominant model of toxic masculinity.

Moreover, whatever its flaws and shortcomings, copresence androgyny seems to bespeak something larger and more important than the concept itself, namely the opportunity to abandon or ameliorate certain identities that are complicit and perpetuating gender injustice. Even if the reader is willing to entertain the possibility that there is something valuable in the concept of androgyny, they might nevertheless (and justifiably) object that the term is problematically vague, which vagueness might exacerbate problematic features associated with the concept. To that end, sorting out the good from the bad in androgyny, I now turn to a more detailed history of that concept, as captured in the secondary literature on the subject in the discipline of academic philosophy.

To begin with, the Swiss social psychologist Fabio Lorenzi-Cioldi identifies three phases in the history of “psychological androgyny,” namely (the aforementioned) “co-presence,” along with “fusion” and “transcendence,” in chronological order (137).<sup>4</sup> On the oldest, “co-presence” model, in Lorenzi-Cioldi’s articulation, an androgynous person manifests stereotypically “masculine” and “feminine” traits differentially based on the social context (often masculine at work and feminine in the home, with family). On the subsequent, “fusion” model, the androgynous person creatively hybridizes stereotypically masculine and feminine behaviors. This appears to align most closely with the current concept of

“gender queer,” “nonbinary” individuals, and with transgender—if the latter is not understood as leaving gender behind altogether. And on the “transcendence” model, which for Lorenzi-Cioldi is the current one among androgyny theorists, the person experiences the concept of gender as entirely meaningless, irrelevant, and indifferent to their behavior. This third conception appears to align most closely with the label gender nonconforming (and especially the subgroup of those people who self-identify as “agender”). For the latter folks, to reiterate, gender is meaningless and undesirable.

From Lorenzi-Cioldi’s perspective, this historical progression of “androgyny” constitutes a trajectory toward “lesser substance” in the concept, more precisely as the result of social scientists’ attempt to resist popular and mythological depictions of androgynous figures (including Plato’s in the *Symposium*) as supernatural and/or monstrous (140). Lorenzi-Cioldi’s objection to this evolution, and especially the third/current version, is that he understands “transcendence” androgynes to be, by definition, scientifically and politically invisible as a group. Put positively, transcendent androgynous individuals amount to the most atomized individuals of all. In other words, transcendence androgyny removes all the tools and resources with which to construct a coherent subjectivity or group identity, and in his view such subjectivity and identity are necessary for pursuing social justice. Ironically, Lorenzi-Cioldi notes, social justice is the very thing that pulls many androgynous persons away from stereotypical gender. In short, androgyny has evolved to the point where it is too insubstantial and unstable to support social justice work.

One massively influential feminist theorist who shares Lorenzi-Cioldi’s concern about the macro-level effectiveness of abandoning gender altogether is Iris Marion Young. Most famous for her essay “Throwing Like a Girl” (which explores the effects on the bodily comportment of women under patriarchy), Young was a groundbreaking philosopher in the areas of social justice, with dual emphases on gender and race/ethnicity.<sup>5</sup> It is in this vein of gendered and ethno-racial social justice, therefore, that Young takes up her critique of androgyny. Like Lorenzi-Cioldi, though, Young nevertheless affirms the historical efficacy of androgyny, at a critical prior phase in the history of women’s liberation.<sup>6</sup> “Androgyny,” she writes, “named the ideal that many feminists theorized, a social condition in which biological sex would have no implications for a person’s life prospects, or the way people treated one another” (412). However, she adds, “this ideal of androgyny was short lived” (413). Although Young views this move to androgyny, part of a larger project to abandon gender altogether, as ultimately positive in regard to “identity and subjectivity,” she objects as follows: the way that “large scale social structures differentially position people in relations of privilege and disadvantage has been ignored” (410).

Put in terms what Young’s critique of androgyny shares with Lorenzi-Cioldi’s, going beyond gender has undermined feminism’s positive identity politics based on a shared group membership. Further buttressing Young’s critique, albeit from a different methodological starting-point, is Rosi Braidotti’s analysis of Deleuze’s infamous androgyny-related concept of “becoming-woman.”<sup>7</sup> Braidotti, born in Italy and raised in Australia, is a pioneer of Women’s Studies in Europe. Her body of work blends continental French and German philosophy with sociopolitical

theory (especially regarding gender and race/ethnicity), focusing on a conception of the subject and subjectivity that is more affirming of difference, while still robust enough to be deployed effectively on the ground in pursuit of social justice. In other words, Braidotti's life's work is an attempt to address Lorenzi-Cioldi's objection regarding transcendence androgyny (i.e., that it has too much postmodern slipperiness and transience to achieve the great modernist dream of justice).

In what could be read as an acknowledgment of Lorenzi-Cioldi's concern, although Braidotti praises Deleuze's deconstruction of a rigid gender binary, along with that binary's negative political consequences, she nevertheless calls out what she terms Deleuze's "willful disavowal" of the concrete political reality. In said reality, according to Braidotti, cisgender male and female bodies are not equally positioned to empoweringly deconstruct their gender identities (51). Quite the contrary. "In order to announce the death of the subject," Braidotti observes, "one must first have gained the right to speak as one" (52). In conclusion, for Braidotti, "Deleuze becomes caught in the contradiction of postulating a general 'becoming-woman' which fails to reckon with the historical and epistemological specificity of the female feminist standpoint" (52). Thus, Braidotti agrees with both Lorenzi-Cioldi and Young that, despite androgynist advocates' good intentions, and despite some appealing features in the concept, androgyny fails as an effective political tool for social justice.

One concrete response to this triply-affirmed objection (from Lorenzi-Cioldi, Young, and Braidotti) would be that the non-essentialist feminism of the LGBT+ movement—deploying the kind of coalitional politics advocated by feminist philosophers such as Judith Butler—has scored major victories for the feminist movement. Admittedly, as numerous critics within the LGBT+ movement have pointed out, the different identities represented by the letters of that acronym have never yet been equally represented or respected (especially the "B" of bisexual, and the "T" of TGNC folks). This does not mean, however, that women in general have been undermined by the LGBT+ movement, in the way that Lorenzi-Cioldi, Young, and Braidotti warn may result from contemporary feminism's rejection of a stable or essential concept of gender or "woman."

Even supposing the latter three theorists' critique is justified, and that we therefore should strategically retain the concept of gender for liberation purposes, this would not rule out refurbishing the historically original, copresence conception of androgyny (as opposed to the current transcendence conception, or the intermediary fusion conception), since the copresence conception retains to some degree the meaningfulness of traditional gender concepts. Nevertheless, other feminists have raised additional objections to androgyny, over and above its allegedly counterproductive political implications. I will now consider two such theorists.

Kathryn Pauly Morgan argues that, in addition to what she sees as androgyny's odious political effects, it is also, conceptually, an incoherent "mirage" (246).<sup>8</sup> Thus, any political appeals to androgyny amount to mere "linguistic camouflage" (246). To defend this conclusion, Morgan begins by identifying ten distinct theoretical assumptions made about androgyny (including that it is either "psychological" or "comprehensive," either "innate" or "acquired," and either "pan-cultural" or



"culture-specific") (247). She then goes on to explore the disagreements among androgyny advocates (from multiple disciplines) about these alleged characteristics (247). Later in her article, Morgan argues that each of these ten assumptions, beyond just conflicting with its contrary term, already tends to self-destruct on its own. Unlike Lorenzi-Cioldi, therefore, Morgan think that none of three versions of androgyny in his historical survey (namely co-presence, fusion, and transcendence) is internally coherent.

Morgan's second objection to androgyny is that its advocates commit what she calls "the black and white fallacy," and which she describes as follows: "assuming that the negation of a particular item or thesis is equivalent to a unique, specific contrary" (254). Granting that "sexual polarization" is linked to social injustice, Morgan suggests the following four alternate tools (in place of androgyny) for resisting said polarization: (a) the advocacy of "feminized men and masculinized women" without seeking "balance or inclusiveness" of gendered traits, (b) expanding the "number of sexes that we recognize," (c) "a stage theory of Sex-role Transcendence," and (d) "institutionalized degenderization" of all human behavior (255).

In response to these alternatives, I note, first, that Morgan's option (c) seems roughly equivalent to Lorenzi-Cioldi's three-stage theory of androgyny's history. Thus, androgyny already has a solution to that problem. Secondly, Morgan's option (d) summarizes the negative political consequences that Lorenzi-Cioldi, Young, and Braidotti all predict if society abandons the concept of gender altogether, and thus her "institutionalized degenderization" is just as vulnerable as androgyny to their objections. Moreover, thinking my two responses together, it appears that the range of Morgan's use of the word "androgyny" is much narrower than that of Lorenzi-Cioldi, et al. Consequently, if Morgan were to accept a version of androgyny that is as inclusive as theirs, then her second objection (that is, the alleged "black and white fallacy" committed by androgyny theorists) would logically evaporate.

Morgan's final critique of androgyny homes in on "psychological androgyny" theorists (such as Lorenzi-Cioldi, though she does not mention him by name). She criticizes these psychological androgyny theorists for offering what she terms "a kind of Cartesian transcendental androgyny" (258). To do so, Morgan continues, is to "eliminate the body from any consideration whatever" (258), and also to "either ignore or explicitly reject" the social per se (259). "Ultimately, and ironically," Morgan concludes, "by proposing a relatively disembodied, nonsocial, depoliticized notion of psychological androgyny, androgynists constrict and disintegrate our experience while trying to accomplish precisely the opposite" (260). As with my response to Morgan's second objection to androgyny, however, if one simply broadens the conception—in this case, beyond psychological traits, as does my own bodily-social copresence conception—then this final objection by Morgan to androgyny dissipates as well.

Dovetailing with Morgan's final critique, targeting only the asocial and non-bodily conceptions of androgyny (associated with the current transcendence model) is Fidéla Fouché's essay "A Critique of Androgyny."<sup>9</sup> Fouché cites groundbreaking feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar in rejecting androgyny in favor of "a

dialectical view of sex and gender," according to which genuine biological-sexual differences can influence social-gendered differences, and vice versa (92). In other words, Fouché wants to maintain that while (a) sex is inherently biological and real, and while gender is inherently cultural and artificial, nevertheless (b) by influencing each other, sex becomes partially cultural and artificial as surely as gender becomes partially biological and real. Like Morgan, Fouché criticizes what she terms androgyny's "idealist dismissiveness of the body" (96). Put differently, androgyny in her view is metaphysically committed to idealism, with its attendant nominalism or irrealism about gender (as I discussed above); and the cost of this commitment is an underestimation and denigration of the body, including what Fouché views as the bodily dimensions of sex and gender.

In loyalty to the biological/real dimension of her view of sex and gender, Fouché rejects androgyny by echoing the call of Australian ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood for what Plumwood terms "regendering" instead of "degendering" (95). That is, we need positive new gendered content, complete with bodily dimensions, rather than trying (à la transcendence androgyny) to reject gender wholesale. In this vein, Fouché concludes as follows:

To assume that androgyny would destroy sexism is rather like assuming that apartheid can be destroyed simply by persuading people to *believe* that desirable psychological qualities are evenly distributed: the existing political and economic structures would remain intact. The powerful would remain in power (95).

At first blush, this argument from analogy from Fouché (analyzing sexism as analogous to racism), which echoes the conclusion of all the previous authors I have considered here, may indeed appear powerful. Note, however, that Fouché assumes here an exclusively psychological model of androgyny (or an exclusively psychological model of anti-racism).

Thus, one can concur with Fouché that the majority of a society's conscious belief that black and white folks are psychologically equal has indeed not by itself solved racism. At the same time, changes in bodies and social practices, including marriage and child-bearing across racial lines, as well as the integration of vital institutions such as churches and schools, has consistently led, historically and globally, to greater racial justice. (That is, the more integrated a society's racially-identified communities, and the more ensuing overlap or mixing of racially-coded practices, the less racial injustice in that society.)<sup>10</sup> The case is analogous with gender; yes, the mere predominance of a belief that men and women are psychologically equal may not by itself end sexism, but men wearing skirts and dresses, and women being allowed into institutions that have historically only accepted men (like the Scouts, formerly "Boy Scouts"), seem poised to make gains for gendered justice similar to Civil Rights movement's gains for black people.

In light of the foregoing analyses, I will now recapitulate my modified version of androgyny as a potentially efficacious social justice strategy to be practiced by straight cismen. It has two central defining traits. First, in sympathy with Lorenzi-Cioldi's "co-presence" model of androgyny, my conception involves the presence of both "masculine" and "feminine" traits, as these two terms are defined,



in a fluid and revisable way, by each androgyny-seeking straight cisman in his cultural environment. Second, in contrast to Lorenzi-Cioldi and other theorists of "psychological androgyny," my conception goes beyond mere psychological traits, to emphasize the inclusion of bodily and social characteristics.

By "bodily characteristics," I mean things like wardrobe (e.g., wearing colors and styles that one/one's culture associates with "femininity"), personal grooming (e.g., wearing one's hair long, wearing some makeup, fingernail polish, etc.), and comportment (e.g., gestures, mannerisms, styles of walking, sitting, etc., that one/one's culture associates with "femininity"). Crucially, in order to distinguish my concept of androgyny from concepts such as "genderqueer" and "gender non-conforming," the bodily changes in my conception of androgyny are not intended to constitute, and not understood by the androgynous person as constituting, a wholesale rejection of his masculinity or maleness — nor as constituting a torsioning of masculinity/maleness into something that differs from both masculinity and femininity. Instead, this androgyny is understood as the addition of "feminine" bodily characteristics to his preexisting "masculine" bodily characteristics.

As for "social characteristics" here, I mean both (a) taking a role or position understood by the androgynous man as "feminine," and (b) entering into personal and institutional relationships perceived as inherently "feminine." Examples of (a) might include listening to another man complain while offering emotional support and reassurance, or agreeing to be an adult sitter for a friend's aging relative. Examples of (b) might include seeking out a friendship revolving around play dates for children, or sharing feelings over coffee and meals, or applying for a job as a restaurant host or nail salon worker.

In conclusion, the meaningful differences that my conception of androgyny introduces, as a product of its emphasis on bodily and social characteristics, are that (c) the androgynous man's gender is visibly/perceptually altered, including in social spaces, and (d) the different and differently performed personal and institutional relationships constitutes qualitative changes in the political sphere, and thus move beyond mere identity, subjectivity, and beliefs—to reach the level of institutional sexism, misogyny, and discrimination.

## ENDNOTES

1. By "straight" here, in accordance with the spectrum conception of human sexuality (as illustrated by, for example, the Kinsey scale), I mean predominantly straight, closer to the imaginary straight pole than to the center of the gay-straight continuum. To put it personally, I do not self-identify as "straight" in any sense of purity, or of a total absence of gayness.

2. See Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (New York: Hackett, 1989).

3. As this third question implies, the dynamics of androgyny are even more complex for gay and bisexual men, women, transmen, and other gender non-conforming people. For that reason, I will not attempt here to pass judgment on the appropriateness of androgyny

for anyone in those groups, and will limit myself in the present article to considerations of androgyny vis-à-vis straight cismen.

4. Fabio Lorenzi-Cioldi, "Psychological Androgyny: A Concept in Search of Lesser Substance: Toward the Understanding of the Transformation of a Social Representation," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 26.2 (1996): 137–55.

5. See Iris Marion Young, *Throwing Like a Girl: And Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990).

6. Iris Marion-Young, "Lived Body vs. Gender: Reflections on Social Structure and Subjectivity," *Ratio* 15.4 (2002): 410–28.

7. Rosi Braidotti, "Becoming-Woman, or Sexual Difference Revisited," *Theory, Culture and Society* 20.3 (2003): 43–64.

8. Kathryn Pauly Morgan, "Androgyny: A Conceptual Critique," *Social Theory and Practice* 8.9 (1982), 245–83.

9. Fidéla Fouché, "A Critique of Androgyny," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 11.4 (1992): 91–5.

10. Compare, for example, Cuba or Brazil to Alabama, or more generally former British colonies to former Spanish colonies, given that the latter involved much more intermarriage and intermixing between European and indigenous peoples).