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Pronouns, Ordinary People, and the War over Reality

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Do not dismiss the pronominal wars as nonsense or assume that its warriors are merely daft.

Many years ago, the great British neurologist Oliver Sacks, a man with a flair for subtle observations and the clear prose to describe them, wrote a book about strange cases of mental confusion he had encountered. Its title seizes your attention instantly: *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*.

The title was no joke, nor was the man in question blind. His eyes registered the colors and the contours of his wife, but his mind had lost the capacity to interpret the messages correctly. The poor woman had to endure having her husband grasp her head with both hands as if to lift her and place her atop his head. Today, however, Dr. Sacks's title might not pass muster before the captains of the current sexual and linguistic guard. Let me grasp their preferred title with both hands: *The Adult Human Being Who Was Biologically Male but of As Yet Undetermined Sexual Preference and Sexual Identity Who Mistook His or Her or Zis or Xer Committed Life Partner Who Was Biologically Female but Also of As Yet Undetermined Sexual Preference and Sexual Identity for a Hat*.

The sane reader will note that the only clear item in that sentence is the hat. The sane reader will also note that, of the two madmen, the man who mistakes his wife for a hat is as clear in the head as a sunny day by comparison with a person who could conceive of that new and “improved” title. At least the man who mistakes his wife for a hat still knows what a man is and what a wife is, though he is unclear about *where* she or his hat might be. But the person who thinks himself into believing that we cannot tell from ordinary observation who is a man and who is a woman is mad in a special sense. The first madman’s reason is struggling in the fog. The second madman’s reason is gasping for breath, because the second madman himself is throttling it.

Actually, the second madman is doing something even worse than that. What exactly he is doing I will explain shortly. First, let me assert that the first madman is the more truly social of the two. The first madman, after all, assumes that everybody else in the world knows what wives and hats are, and when he speaks about them he takes for granted this common knowledge. Indeed, only common knowledge of objective reality can make language possible. If I say to you, “I tripped on a rock on my way to the school this morning,” you will know what I am talking about, because you know what a rock is and what it is like to trip on one. The statement is not ambiguous. You will not wonder whether the rock was a promontory like Gibraltar, or a fortress like the Masada. You will not wonder whether my trip involved the inhaling or venous injection of hallucinogenic chemicals. You will not wonder whether I was talking about a school of fish in the Mediterranean Sea. You will also not wonder whether “rock” meant “cat” or “Napoleon” or “n-dimensional pyramid,” depending upon my peculiar and idiosyncratic linguistic preferences, or upon my idiosyncratic view of reality. Language is not language unless it is communal, and it cannot be communal unless it can refer, quickly and clearly, to the things in front of our noses: to husbands and wives and hats.

Sex: The First Thing We Notice and the Last Thing We Forget

Now, sex is the first thing we notice about someone, and the last thing we forget. It’s easy to see why this should be so. It cannot possibly be to any living thing’s advantage to be confused about male and female. As it is, sex is far more strongly marked upon the human body than it is upon the bodies of dogs or cats or horses or many of the species of birds. A man’s face is not like a woman’s face. A woman’s voice is not like a man’s voice, even when the woman is Greer Garson and the man is Frankie Valli. A man’s shoulders do not look like a woman’s shoulders, and a woman’s hips do not look like a man’s hips. Men and women differ down to their very hair, as anyone can perceive who looks at a woman’s smooth chin or a man’s bald pate.

Ordinary and healthy people love that it is so, and on those exceedingly rare occasions when you cannot determine someone’s sex from a glance or from one moment on the telephone—and some people will go through their entire lives without a single such experience—we feel that it is strange and disconcerting, just as we would feel if we were in the presence of someone who was born without arms. We are not talking about a mere statistical norm here, but about what is paradigmatically human.

To pretend, therefore, that *we do not know* what we immediately and urgently perceive is to do violence at once to human nature, language, the possibility of a shared life, and the intellect’s capacity to apprehend reality. If I cannot say, “There is a man walking down the street,” then it

is hard to see how I can make any reliable judgment about anything at all that bears on human existence. If I cannot say, “Joey is going to grow up to be a fine man someday,” then what in life is left to talk about? Everything else is *less certain* than sex. We may disagree about whether President Eisenhower was a good leader of men, a loyal husband and father, or a pious Christian; but if we cannot agree that President Eisenhower was *a man*, then speech itself is but sound and fury, signifying nothing. Or, rather, speech collapses into action, and reason lies prone before appetite. Speech delivers the bribes and threats of people who want what they want and do not care overmuch how they get it.

Microaggressions Warrant Microattention

And here I return to what the second madman is doing. Or madwoman: it is more commonly *she* who is demanding that people undergo pronominal lobotomies. She says that she wants all people to feel “safe” and comfortable, regardless of their sexual identity. That is not true. What she wants is that ordinary people should feel *uncomfortable*. She wants to rob them of their ordinary perceptions. She sows the field of conversation with mines, glad if ordinary people learn to tiptoe around them, but much gladder still when they fail and blow themselves up, because that provides her with the opportunity for more “education,” which means a more aggressive campaign against our common grasp of objective reality and our ability to communicate with ease what we see.

Here is the connection between the multiplication of pronouns and the efforts to suppress truths about sex. The inventors of such ugly and meaningless collocations as “xe” and “zir” do not want to enrich the language, and they do not want us to probe more deeply and sensitively into the realities of male and female. They want to impoverish the language and to prevent us from acknowledging things about men and women that even little children perceive.

This is the sort of thing—and maybe the only sort of thing—that can really be called a “microaggression.” If there is a burr in my shoe, I do not make a federal case of it, suing my neighbor for not mowing his grass. I take off my shoe, get rid of the burr, and go about my business. If somebody says to me, “Italy never produced a mathematician worthy of the name,” I think of the Fibonacci family, roll my eyes, and go back to reading my book. Microaggressions warrant microattention: the elephant need not go on a stampede on account of the flea.

But this microaggression is like the deliberate injection of carcinogenic RNA into the healthy cells of the mind. It would infect common sense with confusion and madness. It would render people incapable of obvious judgments: so that you cannot say that Laurie is “strong for a girl” because she can do fifteen unmodified pushups, or that little Mike needs a father in his life, or that every culture known to man has celebrated the union of man and woman in marriage. And that prompts the question: why should anybody *want to do this to other people? Cui bono?*

What Ordinary People Get Right

The first answer is that the confusion redounds to the benefit of the self-confused, who get to compel other people to play along with their idiosyncratic dreams of unreality. Elwood P. Dowd not only has his invisible friend, the six-foot-tall rabbit named **Harvey**, but will take you to court unless you shake Harvey’s hand and register Harvey in at the hotel. Harvey must be your

friend too, or else. Christian bakers who have retained their hold on reality can tell us what will happen to you if you say, “But there is no Harvey here, nor will I pretend that there is.”

The second answer is that ideological rent-seekers benefit. I am thinking especially of certain college professors, directors of the hideously named “human resources,” compliance lawyers, federal bureaucrats, and captains of monofom diversity. They sow the mines and then sell you a map to the field. They poison one well, station a surveillance team around the others, and force you to drink from theirs—levying severe fines on you if you try to dip your pitcher into healthy water. They seek confusion and confrontation, because those bring them money and power.

But the third answer, I think, brings us nearest to the heart of the issue. The sexual revolution always has been a war waged against the ordinary family, against the ordinary ways of men and women and children. The moral law as regards sex is meant to protect that family from threats without and within: from the pseudo-marriage that is fornication, from the betrayal of marriage that is adultery, from the rickets and scurvy of impure habits, and from the mockery of the marital act that is sodomy. If a man’s home was his castle, then the walls round that castle were his people’s understanding of the moral law and the customs that gave the law vigor and force. Who then would benefit by riddling the walls with holes? All people who could not, because of their own failings and vices, enjoy the good of family life; all people who saw the family as the great opponent in the way of their statist ambitions; all rebels against Nature and Nature’s God, who would be happier to see a man leave his wife and children to take up with another man than to see a young woman turn away from the hothouse of a lesbian relationship to become a wife and mother after the ordinary way of nature.

Ordinary people get many things wrong, but they are not motivated by hatred of reality. They are too *ordinary* for that: too happily bound to the order of things. They see boys playing baseball in a field, and it cheers them up. They see girls chatting on the porch as they paint pictures, and it cheers them up. They *like* reality. They like boys and girls, men and women. They can imagine wanting to tear down a building because it is useless or ugly or dangerous. They cannot imagine wanting to tear down a building because it is beautiful. They cannot imagine anyone else wanting to do such a thing, either.

I am here to tell all such admirably ordinary people: broaden your imaginations. Do not dismiss the pronominal wars as nonsense. Do not assume that the warriors are merely daft. Do not mistake the pale horse and its rider for snowflakes or mittens or bunnies or anything else that is soft and inoffensive and trivial. The pale horse and its rider aim to destroy.

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