

THE APARTHEID OF SEX:
A Manifesto on the Freedom of Gender
by Martine Rothblatt
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Reviewed by PEG TITTLE

Back in the late 70s or early 80s, when the title 'Ms.' was becoming part of our vocabulary, I wrote a 'letter to the editor' (and actually sent it to *Ms.* magazine) protesting that while the term was an improvement over 'Miss' and 'Mrs.' because it at least stopped labelling us according to our marital status, 'Ms.' (and 'Mr.')

persisted in labelling us according to our sex. How, I wondered, in the feminist fight for a gender-neutral society, could we ignore this sexism in our very names? (*Ms.* never responded.)

Rothblatt explores the same question, "If sex-based differences are irrelevant, then what is the point of saying one is either male or female?" (13), in a book very aptly titled *The Apartheid of Sex*: it is an apartheid indeed when we are segregated from the moment of birth (literally) into male and female.

Rothblatt's main argument against this apartheid of sex is quite simple: sex is a complex continuum from very male to very female (sexual continuism) rather than a simple duality of male or female (sexual dimorphism); therefore, any labelling of individuals as male or female is an injustice to those individuals, especially if such labels are to have social, economic, or legal importance.

Several aspects of sex are dealt with--genitalia, chromosomes, hormones, reproductive capacities, and thought patterns. In every case, Rothblatt reveals the continuum and the consequent injustice of using that aspect to categorize people as either/or.

Along the way, most causal connections between those aspects are examined and found to be not at all clear. There is no causal connection between genitals and thought patterns, for example; as the Olympic testing committees have found, there isn't even a clear connection between genitals and chromosomes.

Also along the way, Rothblatt points out that any 'biology is destiny' argument is simply out of touch with current reality: science and technology can change biology (consider plastic surgery); it can also make it irrelevant (consider bottled infant formula and backhoes).

Several suggestions are made for dismantling this apartheid: adopt laws that prohibit the classification of people according to sex except for bona fide medical reasons--this would especially include the elimination of sex on marriage applications; encourage the concept of self-defined sex; create gender neutral pronouns (though I prefer expanding use of the one we already have--'it'); desegregate public washrooms; replace the sex categories in sport with weight- or height-based categories.

What makes this book especially good, for me, are the simple counterexamples Rothblatt presents to undermine traditional arguments (and so many traditional arguments are undermined in this book!). Consider, for example, this comment about keeping women out of combat positions during the Vietnam war because of their size: "Yet the Vietnamese *won* that war with male soldiers who, on average, were *shorter* than the average American woman" (61, my emphasis). (I've often wondered who Japan gets to be their police officers and firefighters!) Or consider this rebuttal to the insistence on *heterosexual* marriage because the purpose of marriage is to raise a family: "Were childbirth still the reason for marriage, then postmenopausal marriages would be illegal and nonprocreative marriages could be annulled in secular fora" (67).

Rothblatt's summary is clear: "The legal separation of people into male and female sexes is unfair because it deprives everyone of the right of creative self-expression. It is also unfair because separate is never equal" (155). I think I'll start using 'it' more often; and next time I'm asked to check 'male' or 'female', I'll check 'other'.