Gendered Language, Equality, and History

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It is with great trepidation that I wade into any discussion on discriminatory language and discriminatory practices in psychoanalysis. The acrimony in them is palpable and seems unresolvable, almost certainly because of the depth of the injuries involved as a result of the long history of pejorative psychoanalytic views of women, gays and lesbians, and persons of variant gender identity, and here I am, a white cis-gendered heterosexual male of upper-middle-class background, hence privileged in almost every conceivable way, and Jewish to boot, another thing that gives me privilege in the psychoanalytic world, even as it also makes me a member of the religious group most frequently the target of hate crimes in the United States. I mention all this because the identity of the speaker, sadly, sometimes matters as much the content of the speech, as the ideas themselves.

My conclusion, nevertheless: I will not be the arbiter of anyone else's psychological injuries from racism, sexism, heterosexism, or any other form of false privilege because I have not lived those injuries, but I wish to put forth, with absolutely no Swiftian irony, a modest proposal—that we respect the historical record, in part because history is an evolving process, in part because we live in an age in which our political leadership in the United States is assaulting truth on a daily basis, basically engaging in a national gaslighting. To deal with the historical record as it is means to recognize that great thinkers, both inside and outside of psychoanalysis, used language that we can now reasonably regard as exclusionary. No matter how great their ideas, we must respect the actual language that they used. These thinkers all had blind spots, many of them historically and collectively shared, such as the use of male terminology to apply to all humans, without consideration, for example, that there are times when female and male

experience might converge (i.e., for experiences that are common to nearly all of humanity) and times when they might diverge (i.e., for experiences that are gendered). Now this giant, collectively shared, historical blind spot should always be subject to vigorous critique, as should all forms of domination by linguistic exclusion, but the fact remains that great thinkers said what they said as they said it and also that, until recently, nearly all of the people given the privilege of public or intellectual speech were men.

I would here argue that history is always more complex than we want it to be, as are individual humans. That is one of the reasons we have psychoanalysis anyway. Thus, consider the following statement: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal." There is no doubt that Thomas Jefferson, the author of this statement, was, to be charitable in how I put this, a deeply flawed human being, among other things a racist and a slaveholder who had children with one of his slaves, and also that the statement itself is deeply flawed, limited by what is now clear to us is a masculine bias, an exclusion of women. Although the ideas underlying the feminist movement have their origins in the same Enlightenment that made the Declaration of Independence possible and are indeed contemporaneous with the Declaration, Jefferson, the historical record indicates, was not an adherent of such views and always saw women as having a rightful place inferior to that of men.

Nevertheless, for all of the problems we now see in both Jefferson's famous statement and in Jefferson himself, the radicalism of his words, even if we construe "men" to mean "male human beings," rather than "humans" or "humanity," is profound. In 1776, it was by no means "self-evident" that all humans, or even all male humans, were created equal. Although such ideas were increasingly common among Enlightenment thinkers, they were not shared by the majority of the populace, and they would have been considered utterly mad if uttered a mere 150

years earlier, prior to the revolution in thought that begins in the early 1600s. Yet every struggle for equality since 1776 rests on them. It was Thomas Jefferson, taking the suggestion of Benjamin Franklin to change "sacred and undeniable" to "self-evident," who took this idea and turned it into one of the most powerful pieces of rhetoric the world has ever known.

But then consider this: At least to my knowledge, the idea of human equality has its origins in Genesis (*Bereshit*) 1:26-28, the passage in which God (*Elohim*) says, "Let us create humankind (*Adam)* in our image, after our likeness." Here I will stand corrected by any and all whose knowledge of Hebrew and Tanakh is greater than my rather rudimentary understanding, but a careful reading of the text indicates God creates *Adam*, meaning "humankind" or "humanity" not *Ish*, meaning "man" (male humans) in the image of God. Therefore, every year, in teaching predoctoral psychology interns about the ethics of multiculturalism, I use this passage as a crucial text for considering where we get the idea that all humans are equal: if all humans are created in the image of God (*b'tzelem Elohim*), then all humans are equal before God. And to think that it took only approximately 3000 years or more for Jefferson to come up with a piece of rhetoric equal in its power to that found in Genesis.

As far as I know, the best solution to the problem of gendered language is to state things as the authors wrote them and then to take the next step of restating these things as we might now better understand them, of never omitting that next step. But we should also understand, and even hope, that 200 years from now, if humanity is still around, if we have not been wiped out by global warming or other catastrophes, that our descendants will look at our work with some bemusement at how blind we were to the "obvious" discriminations we were perpetuating that we were simply incapable of seeing, even though they were hiding in plain sight.