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CHAPTER FOUR

Phallacies of binary reasoning: drive beyond gender

Paul Verhaeghe

Taking Julia Kristeva's chapter as a starting point, I would like to embroider on a number of ideas in her work. Like her, I agree that woman, or the feminine component of human sexuality, cannot be understood in terms of passivity. On the contrary, I will argue that femininity is more open to the symbolic than to the real. In this type of discussion, a form of binary reasoning is always in attendance in one way or another. As I read her chapter and her latest work, Kristeva is still attempting to take leave from it, but she does not completely succeed in this. Each of us continues to wrestle with this inheritance of our patriarchal social system. Here I will discuss three critical propositions concerning this dualism and how it affects our conception of gender. I will then advance four theses designed, in some measure, to provide an answer to them.

My propositions regarding the gender/sex binary are as follows. First, classical dualism in general—and the division between anatomical sex and psychosexual identity in particular—imply an

endless mirroring that necessitates a final or ultimate element the function of which is to provide an ostensibly final ground and an ontology. Second, this dualistic mirroring process lends itself to a number of problematic analogies. Third, the focus on the phallus and masculinity itself is an artefact of this type of thinking.

1. Ever since Plato, Western thought has imposed some form of binary thinking in which two elements are opposed to one another: soma versus psyche, matter versus form, nature versus culture, semiotic versus symbolic, primary oedipal versus secondary oedipal, sex versus gender, masculine versus feminine. The system is created in such a way that it requires one final element to close and ground the binary. Without it, the system runs mad in an incessant mirroring process of ever more remote underlying elements, each resembling the other. This can easily be illustrated by a well-known critique of homunculus-theory: a man's headache is caused by a headache in a smaller man inside his head, indicating that this smaller man must have an even smaller man in his brain with a headache, meaning that an even smaller man in the head of the smaller man must have a headache, and so on (Lacan, 1946, pp. 160-161, 1998, pp. 96-100)¹.

For Aristotle, this final element was the unmoveable sphere, which was later interpreted as God: and, what is more, God the Holy Father. We can detect the same process in Freud, who was obliged to construct his myth of the primal father to ground the oedipal father. At the level of the subject, this has an ontological effect: through identification with the father, the subject copes with the drive and its divisive effects. Identity is experienced as substantial, authentic, pre-discursive, and so forth: "That's me!"—although, of course, it is not. It is a socially induced way of coping with the unbearable lightness of being.

This form of reasoning furthermore implies a presumed identity between the two terms. The psyche mirrors the body and must therefore be identical with this body. But in relation to the grounding term, this identity implies a reduction: the subject is

constructed according to the image of God, albeit in a lesser form; the child is the image of the father, albeit in a lesser form; and so on. In other words, the apparent correspondence between the two elements of binary thought is nothing but an imaginary implementation of the mirror stage through which the child acquires a hypothetical identity and unity from the big Other, if always in a slightly “lesser” form. As regards gender, this gives rise to a particular reading of the phallus (see Point 3), as the missing element the presence of which would complete the subject and permit it to attain the status of the father. No wonder, then, that there is a confusion of the father and the phallus, as the former needs the latter in order to take up his position.

2. My second point concerns the analogies that this type of binary reasoning induces. When we examine the original binary of biological sex versus psychosexual identity, it is clear that gender and constructivism have had the upper hand right from the start. Psychosexual identity is considered an effect of discourse, independent of the biological body that from then on can be discarded. Nevertheless, it did not take long for the original division between sex and gender to reappear in gender itself – more specifically, in the division of feminine and masculine identity. Woman became aligned with nature and the real, man stood for culture and discourse, and the same discussion resumed. In both binaries—the original sex/gender and the ensuing feminine/masculine within gender—one term appears to be the primary one. Thus considered, the introduction of the idea of gender as a solution turns out to be nothing but another formulation of the same problem within the same dual line of reasoning.

Closer scrutiny of the list of usual binaries (nature/culture, etc), moreover, reveals a number of curious analogies based on the patriarchal way of thinking from which we have not yet sufficiently extricated ourselves. It seems as if woman stands for nature, drive, body, semiotic, and so on, and man for culture, symbolic, psyche, and so forth. Yet this is not confirmed by day-

to-day experience, nor by clinical practice. Both feminine eroticism and feminine identity seem far more attracted to the symbolic than are their masculine counterparts. Biblically or not, woman conceives for the most part by the ear and is seduced by words. In contrast, an unmediated, drive-ridden sexuality seems much more characteristic of masculine eroticism, whether gay or straight. Nor does motherhood's apparent linking of woman and Nature stand the test. In my clinical practice, I have seen far too many mothers who reject their children or—even worse—had no interest in them whatsoever. The maternal instinct is a myth, and maternal love is an effect of an obligatory alienation. Many new mothers must face the fact that their reactions to their new baby fail to coincide with this anticipated love.

3. The presumed connection between masculinity and the symbolic is the result of a certain reading of the phallus, which brings me to my third point. The exclusive focus on the phallus and its accompanying privileging of man misses the point and is again an artefact of the reasoning itself. As we saw previously, in binary thought, the two terms require a supreme or grounding term that provides them with substantiality. The fullness of the supreme term involves the presence of an exceptional characteristic missing from the ordinary terms. For Aristotle, this came down to the immovability of the supreme sphere. In gender, it is called the phallus. Freud put this down to the absence of a penis in women; the early Lacan interpreted this as the lack of a signifier to signify femininity. The later Lacan makes it clear that the phallic interpretation of this lack is, once again, an artefact of a patriarchal thinking that is founded on the master discourse.

Clinical practice testifies to the fact that the only phallus that counts is the mother's phallus—in other words, the missing phallus. The sum of the mother plus the phallus would be the unbarred or non-lacking Other—that is, the phallic mother. Consequently, the phallus is always lacking, it is the One Thing that is not mirrored during the constitution of the subject. The

reason is very simple: the Other also lacks the phallus, so there is no question of mirroring it.

Such a concentration on the phallic is not very helpful, either for a man or for a woman. As a focal point, it belongs to the range of psychopathology. A man will never meet the phallic standard; the only result is an ever-increasing alienation because of the other's assumed phallic demand. Under normal—that is, neurotic—conditions, this leads to the typically masculine form of hysteria: the Guinness-Book-of-Records hysteria, with its emphasis on the biggest instrument. One step further, his desperate attempts to fuse with woman land us in the perverse structure (Lacan, 1974). That is, man identifies with the missing maternal phallus in a desperate attempt to make her whole. For woman, attempting to receive the phallus ends either in the phallic masquerade of the woman, or in maternity—as Freud long ago made clear—although the emphasis must be more on pregnancy than on maternity, which already contains a loss. Where woman tries to unite with the phallic master himself, the results is mysticism or psychosis (Lacan, 1974, p. 63).

In both cases, whether masculine or feminine, an endless *Encore* is put into play as an attempt to master what is lost. As we will see, this *encore*, which typifies the repetition compulsion, increasingly endorses the very problem it attempts to solve, providing an admirable illustration of the circular effects of this kind of binary thinking.

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These are my three critical propositions regarding the gender/sex dualism. In answer to them, I would like to develop four theses. First, I aim to show how the main problem confronting the question of sex and gender is in fact the drive and its antinomical aims. In this respect, Freud's original conceptualization of Eros and Thanatos will prove indispensable. Second, within the dynamics of the drive, gender is discovered to be a secondary issue, along with castration. Third, in place of the binary dualism

I propose to substitute a circular, non-reciprocal relationship between two elements, which are themselves less important than the representative relationship. Fourth, to the extent that a binary differentiation can be made, the main elements are considered not masculine/feminine but active and passive and are understood as such in the relation between the subject and the drive.

1. It is striking how little attention has been paid to the drive and to sexuality in contemporary gender studies. Freud himself provides us with two main points of entry: on the one hand we have the component or partial drives, most evident in clinical practice, which supply us with a direct link to sexuality. The aim of these partial drives is to recover and rejoin a supposedly original object through its different pregenital forms. By itself, the study of the partial drives is already enough to show the relative unimportance of the question of gender – there is no genital partial drive as such, the focus is on the various different bodily orifices. Nevertheless, what seems far more interesting to me is the second Freudian approach—namely, his concepts of the life and death drives, Eros and Thanatos.

With these concepts, Freud addresses the question of the fundamental aim of the drive or, to be more specific, the fundamental aim of the drive's primary element—that is, its driving force. In answer to this, he postulates the existence of two primary drives the aim of which is to return to a previous state (Freud, 1920g). The problem is that each drive aims at an opposite state, with the result that they work against each other.

The easiest one to understand is the Eros or life drive, which attempts to return to a previous stage of wholeness and fusion by linking together as many elements as possible, with coitus as the most salient example. It is striking how, even in Freud, the relation between Eros and the symbolic is clearly visible, together with its effect on identity formation. Freud first encountered it in his *Studies on Hysteria* where he called it “false connections”: a word-presentation is wrongly associated with another word-presentation for lack of an original, accurate

association with something that is inexpressible (Freud, 1895d, pp. 67-70). He generalized this tendency, which he called the “hysterical compulsion to associate”. Later, he was to encounter a variation of this compulsion: the repetition compulsion, a primary characteristic of traumatic neurosis, which attempts to master the real by binding it to word-presentations (1920g). Consequently he could no longer restrict it to hysteria but had to turn it into a general characteristic of the ego—that is, its proclivity to synthesis, to associate separate things into an ever larger synthesis, the One of phallic fusion.

The problem is that this Eros drive never succeeds in reaching its final goal. The failure of the pleasure principle has to do with the other drive: Thanatos, or the death drive, and its opposing aim. The death drive works against the tendency towards synthesis and induces a scattering of Eros. It disassembles everything that Eros brought together into One and makes this unity explode into an infinite universe. Moreover, this other drive works in silence; it has no connection whatsoever with the symbolic or the signifier (Freud, 1923b, p. 46, p. 56).

In our post-Freudian era, the concepts of the life and death drives have almost entirely disappeared. One of the reasons has to do with their names, which are misleading in their imaginary signification effect. As we will see, considering them from another perspective, one could just as easily say that the life drive aims towards death and the death drive towards life. Freud himself referred to another classic couple that implies a different signification effect—that is, *Philia* [love] and *Neikos* [strife]. By this it is clear that he is referring to something that supersedes mankind as such, something that must have to do with the bare properties of life (Freud, 1937c, p. 246).

For me, this opposition does indeed have to do with the question of origins—more specifically, the origins of sexually differentiated life forms. The original state to which Eros wants to return is the eternal life, the classic Greek *Zoë*, dating from before the introduction of sexually differentiated life forms through the particular form of cell division, which is *meiosis*. In

principle, sexually undifferentiated forms of life possess eternal life; death is an accident for them. After the introduction of sexual differentiation, however, death becomes a structural necessity. Interpreted in this way, Eros or Zoë aims at a return to a previous sexually undifferentiated state by fusing with the supposedly lost element. The price paid for this return is the disappearance of a sexually differentiated individual during the fusion; it must die so as to make the return possible.

This explains the opposite tendency: aiming at the continuation of life as an individual through defusion from the originally undifferentiated whole. The continuation of this form of life is always limited, because of the structural necessity of death, as introduced by sexual differentiation. Freud's Thanatos drive ensures the continuation of individual life against its disappearance in the other. Interpreted in this way, the death drive is a bios drive, *bios* being the ancient Greek name for the individual life that dies but also for how an individual conducts his or her own life. Zoë, on the other hand, is eternal life itself: the thread that runs through the limited bios and is not broken when the particular perishes. Read in this way, Freud's Eros is a Zoë drive, and Thanatos is a bios drive.

As I said, this antinomy in the drive is much more fundamental than the gender antinomy, which is itself a consequence of it. But before going into this, I shall address the question of the relation between the drive and identity formation. Reading Freud, it is clear that he links the formation of the ego to Eros and its tendency towards synthesis. This idea is confirmed both in Lacan's theory of subject-formation and by contemporary attachment studies.² Without going too far into this, let me just say that identity formation is based on the very same motives as those governing the two drives and implies the very same antinomy. Moreover, this connection permits us to discern a logical time sequence.

The child is born with an innate tendency to stick to the other as closely as possible. This is why primary anxiety concerns the separation from this other. As a result of this tendency, the child

incorporates and identifies with as many parts of the other as possible, thus trying to bridge the gap caused by birth. In the meantime, identity is acquired, which in my reading is an effect of Eros. Once this process has sufficiently taken place within a secure environment, the other tendency becomes patent, actively aiming for diffusion and autonomy from this other. It is not by chance that this takes place simultaneously with language acquisition and particularly with the emergence of the signifier “I” during the so-called period of negation. This is an effect of the Thanatos drive, privileging this time separation and a life of one’s own. These two tendencies will continue to function alongside one another in a peculiar way, which will not be very well understood if we continue to name it “dualism”. Even for Freud, the two basic drives were almost always commingled in what he called the “*Triebmischung*”. We return to this admixture in my third thesis, but let us now address the relationship between the primary drives and gender.

2. My second thesis reverses this relationship. The drive is not one element within the problem of gender; on the contrary, gender is just one expression of the larger problem of the drive. My thesis is that gender and sexuality are an attempt to regain the original Eros fusion, albeit in such a way that failure is structurally built in.

This is beautifully expressed in Aristophanes’ well-known fable in Plato’s *Symposium*. Reading the whole story, it is clear how gender and even sex enter the picture only at a secondary stage, being absent from the first part. Indeed, once the original double being was bisected, each half was perpetually searching for its corresponding half, but not, as we might think, for the purpose of having sex.

Now, when the work of bisection was complete, it left each half with a desperate yearning for the other, and they ran together and flung their arms around each other’s necks, and asked for nothing better than to be

rolled into one. So much so, that they began to die of hunger and general inertia, for neither would do anything without the other. [Plato, 1994, pp. 543-544]

Zeus took pity on them and introduced yet another change to their bodies: he moved their reproductive organs to the front (originally, they were placed on the outer side of the body), thus making sexual intercourse possible. This change, particularly the subsequent possibility for genital union, temporarily set the human being free from its longing and made it possible for it to turn to the activities necessary for survival.

The beauty of this fable is that the transition thus described is not from a 'rounded whole' to a bisection into a male and female differentiation, but from a rounded whole into two parts (of whatever gender), with a total longing for one another that renders all other considerations insignificant. The genital-sexual interest enters the scene at a later stage, turning the original total process into a partial one because of the lethal nature of this first process. Both gender and genital sex are a secondary although necessary issue, a kind of desperate solution for a primal division—this is Plato's message.

Looking at this fable from the perspective described above, it is clear that it corresponds perfectly with our previous thesis. The loss of eternal life is the loss of an original wholeness and simultaneously implies a gender differentiation. The solution for this loss is sought in phallic copulation; moreover, the original loss can be secondarily interpreted as a phallic loss or castration. The paradox of this solution is that this attempt re-endorses the original problem. Indeed, the differentiation into two different genders is precisely the cause of the problem. Trying to solve it through this gender differentiation is nothing but a repetition of the original loss. The net result is a never-ending repetition, because each phallic act repeats the loss and makes another attempt necessary—hence Lacan's stress on the "*Encore*" effect. One can even say that phallic sexuality in itself is aim-inhibited because it can never reach the original aim of enduring fusion.

It is instructive to reconsider the theory of the phallus and of castration in this respect. The foundation of human phantasy is that—if one did indeed possess The Phallus—it should be possible to reinstate the original union through The Perfect Sexual Relationship. Yet the phallus in itself is nothing but a reformulation of an original loss that was caused precisely by the introduction of phallic sexuality. As such, the phallus creates the illusion of a solution, while at the same time reintroducing it. Whatever solution there might be, it has to be looked for beyond the phallic imaginary.

If we return now to the relationship between the primary drives and gender differentiation, it can be said that the latter is a consequence of the death drive and its proclivity for defusion. Furthermore, it makes death necessary for every sexually differentiated individual life form. Sexual fusion and copulation are a consequence of Eros and are attempts to annihilate the differentiation. The relation between gender and drive is secondary, but nevertheless at a primary level—that is, male and female as prior to masculine and feminine—there must be some kind of link. It is as though the female had lost the male part and needs it in order to become whole again. This explains the female proclivity for fusion and Eros (and her propensity for the symbolic). The result is penetration and the swelling up of pregnancy, an attempt at fusion. Separation must be avoided. The male part, on the other hand, has differentiated itself from the original *alma mater*, hence its proclivity for separation and Thanatos: fusion must be avoided. The result is penetration and deflation. We find an echo of this in Freud's paper on the theme of the three caskets where he talks about the three women in man's life: the woman that gives birth to him, the woman he makes love to, and the woman to whom he returns after death (Freud, 1913f, p. 291).

The same line of reasoning can be expanded to psychopathology. There is an evident link between Eros, fusion, identification, hysteria and femininity, just as there is a link between Thanatos, separation, isolation, obsessional neurosis and

masculinity. Of course this may sound dreadfully politically incorrect [*mais ça n'empêche pas d'exister, dirait Charcot*³], but things are even more complicated than this. As I said above, gender differentiation is a *secondary* item that ought not to be interpreted in a binary fashion. On the contrary, male and female are always combined, just like Eros and Thanatos, and it is the peculiarity of this combination that gets neglected in binary studies of it. This brings me to my third thesis.

3. The life and death drives are not two separate entities. What Freud called the “*Triebmischung*”, the admixture of the drives, boils down to a circular but non-reciprocal interaction between two elements. One operates as a force of attraction for the other, which simultaneously tries to return and move forward. Their interaction is staged on a different level each time, which establishes and reiterates the fact that there is no reciprocal relationship between them.⁴

First, we have the appearance of the sexually differentiated life forms at the moment of birth. This implies the loss of the eternal life, Zoë. It functions as a force of attraction for the individual life, the Bios, that tries to return. The price that is to be paid for this return is the loss of individual life as such, and this explains the other tendency, the one that flees from it in the opposite direction. The usual solution reiterates the original problem, thus maintaining the interaction. Indeed, the Bios tries to join the Zoë through sexual reproduction, which involves a repetition of the original loss.

Second, we have the formation of the I—that is, the primary identification of the mirror stage. The living being acquires an initial identity through the unified image of his body coming to him from the Other, but at the same time this “I” loses the real of its body: hence its never-ending attempts to join its body again but, conversely, the price to be paid for this fusion would be the disappearance of the “I”—hence the tendency to flee in the other direction as well. Finally, the solution will only provide the “I”

with the body as prescribed by the Other, thus confirming the loss of its being.

Third, we have the arrival of the subject. The subject attempts to fuse with the (m)Other, but if it were to succeed, the result would imply a total alienation, meaning the disappearance of the subject. Hence the other tendency towards separation. Again, this solution implies a structurally impossible relationship, because the subject's attempts to fuse with the Other necessarily must pass through the symbolic, thus repeating and endorsing the original deadlock.

If we continue this series, we arrive at a fourth moment wherein the subject acquires a gender identity. This is what the Oedipus complex does, in its own peculiar way—that is, by interpreting the original loss in terms of castration. This phallic interpretation will be applied retroactively to all preceding occurrences, meaning that each loss is read in a phallic way. This process entails the construction of the body—not the body we are, but the body we *have*, which is clothed in a gender identity. This identity is the final stage of this circular but non-reciprocal relationship. The original gap between life and death, between the body and the I, between the subject and the Other is reproduced and worked over in the gap between man and woman.

Moreover, this repetition produces the same effect: no matter what efforts the subject makes to fuse his body by way of the symbolic, s/he will never succeed, because the gap is due precisely to the symbolic. Regardless of the masculine subject's efforts to fuse with woman by way of the phallic relationship, he will never succeed, because the gap is due precisely to the phallic signifier. The double-sided relationship between subject and drive reappears in the very same kind of relationship between a man and a woman.

4. More often than not, this relationship is conceived as a conflict, with patriarchy and female emancipation the landmarks of this battle. In light of what we saw above, this battle is just one

expression of the way the two primary drives relate to one another in every subject. This brings me to my final thesis. Rather than interpreting this opposition as masculine versus feminine, it is much more interesting to read it as active versus passive. However, this does *not* imply that passive represents feminine and active masculine. Freud describes a “drive for mastery” through which the subject tries to master the object. Both man and woman fear being reduced to the passive object of enjoyment of the Other because such a reduction entails the disappearance of a separate existence. As a result, every subject actively strives for independence and autonomy. At the same time, however, everyone—whether masculine or feminine—aims to fuse with the lost part and be reduced to its passive object. This explains why every subject suffers from separation anxiety as well.

The resulting ambivalence is present in every individual as the expression of the two primary drives. Its enactment between two different subjects, whatever their biological sex, is indeed an enactment of a more original problem. For as long as we can fight with our partner, we need not to address our inner division....

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By way of conclusion, let us return to the original problem. The tendency towards mastery and the fear of passivity has to do with our anxiety about death. All human activity, sexual or not, is directed against our final disappearance into the unknown, beyond the Symbolic.

NOTES

Julia Kristeva could not, a short notice and due to family reasons, personally attend the conference in Stockholm. Mariam Alizade, president of COWAP, presented a summary of her paper, and the full paper was distributed to all participants. Due to

the circumstances the organizers of the conference asked Paul Verhaegh not only to comment Kristeva's paper but also to present his own ideas [I.M].

¹ The page numbers refer to the original French edition, included in the English translation.

² For Lacan, see his theory on the mirror stage and on alienation and separation. For the attachment theory, see Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target (2002).

³ "But that doesn't stop it from existing", Charcot would have said.

⁴ For a larger discussion, see Verhaeghe (2001), pp. 65-133.

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