

John Stoltenberg

The End of  
**Manhood**

parables on sex and selfhood

REVISED EDITION

# THE END OF MANHOOD

*Parables on Sex and Selfhood*

Revised Edition

JOHN STOLTENBERG



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## THE END OF MANHOOD

In this practical follow-up to *Refusing to Be a Man*, John Stoltenberg speaks to men—so that women can overhear—about how the social construction of manhood operates in ordinary relationships. Using a variety of stories and illustrations, he makes everyday sense of interpersonal conflicts and internal dilemmas that distress men's lives, and he shows how the same dynamics drive the behavior of gangs, race-hate groups, and other warring male factions. Readers will find here new perspectives on intimacy, gender, and violence and be pushed to re-examine their ideas of manhood and gender identity generally. Stoltenberg's new introduction sets the book in academic context, summarizing the game theory of gender that underlies his work.

**John Stoltenberg** is the radical feminist author of *Refusing to Be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice* (rev. edn, London and New York: UCL Press, 2000) and *What Makes Pornography "Sexy"?* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 1994). He is cofounder of Men Against Pornography.

For Andrea,  
who means courage

THE CORE OF ONE'S BEING  
MUST LOVE JUSTICE MORE THAN MANHOOD.  
—*Refusing to Be a Man*

## INTRODUCTION TO THE REVISED EDITION

Gender theory in the academy is sometimes like a private joke: You can “get it” if you are in on the jargon; but if you are not, you can’t. Gender theory is rarely simply *told*. More often it is willfully obfuscated, propounded in sentences so packed with self-referential abstraction that they seem never to be *about* anything. Academic gender theory’s relationship to people’s real lives can seem as tenuous as its hold on recognizable human speech.

I do not believe this must be. I believe that a radical investigation of gender—a look at it by its roots—can be done with everyday language about everyday experience. This method not only makes more sense, it also more accurately reflects our social reality. We all first learned to find a suitable niche inside the gender system through narratives of real life: stories and dramas in which we were shown our part and how to play it. This learning was interactive, for as we played our part well or poorly, we were made ever more mindful of what bad things can happen to us if we do not do better. As we acted in accord with our own designated niche, so also we acted in our dealings with other people in accord with theirs. The prescripts of transactional conduct not only kept everyone who abided by them stationed somewhere in the gender system; these rules also gave the whole system its narrative meaning and force. To step outside the strictures of

gender—to opt out of its demands in confidence, not disgrace—we do not need esoteric theory, some cerebral mumbo-jumbo, but we do need to know how to reread those narratives of everyday life.

At no time in history have so many humans felt such a gaping discrepancy between the gender system that is given us and the selves we long to be. At no time in history have so many yearned for alternatives: ways to truly be oneself, without fear of failing at fitting into one's gender niche, without being punished, without being cast into exile. Especially among young people, pressing new questions about the meaning of gender and one's bodily experience of it have erupted in classrooms and chatrooms, in music and poetry, in costume and adornment, in memory and imagination, in sensation and sexuality. Some fine teachers have conscientiously responded to students' questing with a host of new courses, based in feminism, that take a political and historical look at the lives of women. Such courses have functioned for many students as an autobiographical correlative, or as a lens through which to examine their own unease about the gender setup. Other academicians, starting from the standpoint that gender is socially constructed (something feminists first figured out), have developed complex new theoretical discourses that promise if not answers at least rarefied ways of recasting the questions. You may not ever actually *get* practical answers to whatever first drew you to the study of gender theory, but by god you'll be taught ways to ponder the perplexities so that you too can be as prolix as the professionals who have tilled and fenced the field. Regrettably, such obscurantism has often displaced feminism's more concrete critique.

The seekers who flock to the academy today, as much to find explanatory sanctuary from their gender dilemmas as to enjoy the company of one another, have a myriad of inward questions—about erotic desire and desirability; about the size, shape, and look of their flesh; about their sexual rights and status, in both intimacy and the body politic; about feeling at odds with a gender ideal; about feeling one's niche does not fit. Frequently academic gender theory helps these seekers frame their burning questions inside “larger” issues with ever more gravity, and occasionally a seeker finds satisfaction in the cogitation—perhaps even a career path. But if one's soul or selfhood is parched and thirsty for a



solution to one's private disquiet in the gender setup, such curricular approaches—deriving academic respectability in direct proportion to their opacity—can appear like the mirage of an oasis, promising to slake one's thirst just because they are the only watering hole around.

But academic credibility and radical inquiry are not necessarily compatible. Nor, for that matter, are complexity and personally applicable truth.

What I propose in *The End of Manhood* is a personal methodology for a radical new look at gender. It begins with the notion that gender is an *ethical* construction. This starting point both refines and differs from the understanding, now widely accepted in the academy, that gender is socially constructed. Permit me to explain.

To say that gender is an ethical construction is to say that tracking all the familiar façades of gender as a social construct—so-called sexual identities, sexual orientations, body types, self-presentations or performativities, communication styles, and so forth—cannot disclose the dynamic transactional structure by which gender is constructed, just as a bookshelf full of dictionaries in different languages cannot explain what makes a sentence mean. As grammar makes sense of vocabulary, so too there is an underlying syntax that makes the surface markers of gender cohere and make sense. To say that gender is an ethical construction is to say that what fundamentally grounds gender personally and socially as a hierarchical binary is a system of valuing conduct, a codification of acts, which underpins all the trappings now recognized as gender expression. Once we parse the embedded value system in that conduct—once we learn to read the systematic ethics that render gender meaningful in human affairs—we can grasp the “genome” of gender, the foundational scripts whereby gender comes to act, look, feel, and seem real.

Many people in the academy who are theorizing gender are conspicuously incurious about the systematic ethics that undergird gender. Even academics who appear persuaded that gender is socially constructed resist interrogating gender as an ethical phenomenon. I have tried to understand why.

When gender as a late twentieth-century concept began to attract researchers, theorists, and scholars, their first project was to liberate it from ontology—to distinguish what we now know as

gender from the panoply of corporeal and anatomical traits that have evolved in our species. Yes, there is metaphysical human matter, the reality of our anatomies, and there presumably always will be so long as *Homo sapiens* walks the earth: our brain pathways, neurological networks, hormones, gonads, genitals, and such. But thanks to an unprecedented inquiry undertaken largely within the academy and generously informed by the life experiences of people who do not neatly fit the categories “man” and “woman” (here I reluctantly use the medical establishment’s terminology: intersexes, transsexuals, homosexuals, and so forth), we now know that all our metaphysical stuffness—including the “secondary” characteristics that we bracket off and call “sex,” as if one’s sex can be severed from, say, one’s armpits or earlobes—is only relativistically germane to our epistemology of gender. We may *think* we know someone’s gender when we see them—indeed we may at times think we know our own—but we cannot any longer presuppose that gender correlates with metaphysical stuffness in our species in any uniform, absolutist, either/or, one-to-one way. A few controversies continue to swarm around this historically unprecedented observation, typically in fundamentalist religious and partisan quarters, but there is now a credible consensus in academia that categories of “sex” have as little scientific validity as do categories of “race.” Put another way: A gender identity and ideology such as “man” has, just like a racial identity and ideology such as “Aryan,” no metaphysical foundation. It is a social construction. It gets made up. It is collective make-believe.

If gender is not essentially based in metaphysics because, as the academy generally concedes, it is not essentially any *thing*, what then *is* gender? To a growing extent, especially in such new discourses as postmodernism and its offshoot queer theory, the answer that has attracted the most professorial attention, the most student seekers, and the most book contracts is the notion that gender is, at bottom, an *aesthetic* construction. When you come right down to it, according to this thought fashion, gender is merely a matter of putting in an appearance. It is performance. It is signs and signifiers with no intrinsic substance. It is some drag, dress-up, or other camouflage that creates the visual and tactile impression of gender specificity, averts confusion in others, and fends off the discomfort of ambiguity in oneself. It is an art form, a

body art, exercised and fed or starved, sculpted by scalpels, adjusted by drugs, and accessorized. It is fantasy, sex object, fetish. It is subversion of the normative, normalization of the subversive. *Naturally* gender is not real, the pomos exclaim. But by god let it be good looking.

Whether at the experimental fringes, where gender expression is play-acting whoever and whatever one wants to be, or at the ground zero of orthodoxy, where conventions of costume and mien impart to each generation the masque of “man and wife,” the public and private face of gender is, at first glance, an esthetic. And exactly like beauty—that elusive distillate which classical estheticists eulogized and sought—it is in the eye of the beholder.

To be fair, the notion that gender is fundamentally esthetic is a reasonable inference in an era defined as never before by the camera. The image and the technology-mediated gaze have irrevocably altered our species’s epistemology of gender. We all see through viewfinders now; and we are all on view, in someone else’s sight. Fewer and fewer people escape self-consciousness about whether they appear adequately gendered, especially in youth. Exposed film stock, videotape, snapshots, half-tone printing, lit-up pixels—these are not only what matters; they *are* the matter that makes *gender* matter; they are the last residue of metaphysical stuffiness that reliably encodes and reveals to us the esthetic paradigms “masculinity” and “femininity.” In real life, we resemble or conform to these gender standards well or poorly, and we are more or less bothered by our greater or lesser remove from them. But according to the dominant esthetic, now stamped like a diktat across capitalist cultures, representations are *always* better renderings of gender than anyone’s flesh-and-blood body can possibly be. Little wonder that today so many academics are pursuing the study of gender as an esthetic construction. And little wonder that so many young seekers, ill-at-ease with both the gender schema and their own morphology in it, are also enthralled by that pursuit. They grew up, after all, bombarded by idealized images of gender that at some level they all know and fear will never be reflected back to them when they stand naked before a mirror.

The investigation into the *ethics* that construct gender is a far less popular and placating pursuit. Partly, I suspect, this is

because doing so would seem dead-ended and dispiriting rather than enlightening, fun, and useful. Certainly, once one begins to look at the values in the conduct by which gender is constructed, inescapable questions of politics and power arise, and in mainstream culture, where male supremacy is god (and vice versa), such questions are unwelcome. Political inquiries are fine so long as they are about governments, nations, wars, trade, elections, and such, goes the *Zeitgeist*, but political inquiry into the gender system—into what really happens to women in it, for instance—is an unpleasantness to avoid thinking about and a discourse to be discouraged. Especially in the academy, where radical feminism is to career as the pox is to complexion, there is little institutional incentive to interrogate the moral values in conduct as it reifies gender—behavior that is recognizable as, say, “acting like a man.” Wide-ranging analysis of gender as an ethical construction would require a sort of academic freedom that almost nowhere exists: an intellectual climate in which when the subject is gender there are not penalties for speaking the truth to power, and where a cohort of thinkers have not been cowed into changing the subject. Ethics is necessarily about acts and consequences—what happens to whom is one way of knowing what the values in any act are. But there seems now a consensus in the academy, perhaps because so much is already known tacitly about the consequences of gendering behavior, that on this perturbing topic no more shall be known.

Approaching gender as appearance rather than act, a matter of esthetics rather than ethics, therefore has academic appeal. But it also avoids understanding how conduct lends force to the gendered meaning of appearance. Our reverence for, or attraction to, various gender-coding images is not what is transmitted through media. The images and representations travel that way, but not how we feel about them, not how they make us feel, and not what they mean to us viscerally. Such subjective significances—perhaps as variant from person to person as our signature irises—arose historically, biographically, interactionally, narratively. The meanings and feelings that the esthetics of gender have for us are among the consequences of actions that are done to us and actions that we do to others.

My approach to gender theory in *The End of Manhood* identifies and demonstrates one particular transactional dynamic that is

central to understanding and experiencing how gender is socially constructed. I imagine other such dynamics are likely to be discovered, other ways by which a specific ethics, recognizable in a variety of acts, makes the binary gender schema seem real. But because the ethical dynamic I explore here has what seems to me an extraordinary explanatory reach—from everyday domestic disputes to racial animosities to international power plays—I suspect it would be helpful to explain a few things about my method first.

The book is written very simply, about everyday life; the gender theory is embedded, unannounced. As I wrote each successive chapter, as if staging scenes in a gathering drama, I accumulated a list of words that I forbade myself to use: “patriarchy,” “male dominance,” and “sexism,” for example. Any time I was tempted to fall back on such an abstraction, I tried to say what I meant in a more immediate and graphic way: a story, a fable, a diagram, a rhyme. I considered no literary genre off limits (except academese), because though ethics by definition is about human interaction, *perceiving* ethics is never a linear mental event. A mental picture of the ethics in interaction occurs to us as we attend to something that happens. It is recognizable in acts, but it is more than a matter of assessing a particular act as “right” or “wrong” or “good” or “bad.” Instead, because the same act can be right/good in one ethical system and wrong/bad in another, perceiving ethics involves a metaquestion: “Right or wrong, good or bad, according to *which* ethics, according to *which* system of valuing conduct?” An act that transgresses one ethics can be the apotheosis of another. And an act that is completely congruous within one system of valuing conduct can be an outrage outside it. In order to contemplate in this sense the ethics of acts, including our own, we need first to perceive other people in action—as if we were spectators in the “seeing place” that was the ancient Greek theater. We need to attend to other actors, what they do, and what their doing does. Next we need to perceive ourselves in our own narratives. We need to attend to our acts from that inner point of view we first adopted as spectators to interhuman interaction. To communicate a theory of gender as an ethical construction, therefore, I chose a method that is dramatic (rather than, say, linear, argumentative, or documentary), because I believe it is the method that most closely resembles the way in which we learn of ethics in life.

The book is written in a form that is both modeled on and a send-up of a "self-help book," and its gender theory proceeds by problematizing "manhood." I wrote aware that this apparently "single-sex" tactic flies in the face of certain conventional wisdom, according to which the meaning of gender may be found, on the one hand, in the social construction of "men" and, equivalently on the other, in the social construction of "women"—as if the gender binary were a two-party government or bicameral parliament. I do not believe that this bifurcated and purportedly parallel form of inquiry accurately gets at the ways that gender is constructed ethically, for it evades the values in the conduct by which the meaning of manhood overdetermines whatever meaning people—women primarily but also many with male anatomy—have in a host of subordinate categories and classes. The construction of manhood as an identity, as I show, results from a particular transactional dynamic: one that requires *proving* manhood according to a distinctive ethic. Among the consequences of that ethic is the social construction of the identity "woman" as well as other categories indexed by genetic traits, creed, strength and size, and such. Put another way, the ethics undergirding the social proof of manhood produces the identities of "men" and "women" both. Further, the exact same ethics that produces the paradigmatic identities "man"/"woman" produces the identities "white"/"colored," "normal"/"homo," "Aryan"/"kike," "healthy"/"crip," and so on.

What distinguishes the ethics that constructs manhood is a particular if/then drama, a sort of game theory, which I reiterate, examine, and apply throughout *The End of Manhood*. For anyone raised "to be a man," the rules of the game go like this: *If* someone impugns or threatens your manhood and challenges you to prove it, *then* you have two choices: (1) to rise to the challenge or (2) not to (an option that necessarily risks confirming the challenger's imputation that your manhood is absent or defective). *If* you choose to rise to the challenge, *then* there are (apparently) two possible outcomes: either (1) you will prove your manhood is greater (by some act that disparages/dominates/damages your challenger) or (2) your manhood will be proved lesser (by dint of your having been disparaged/dominated/damaged in some conflict or combat from which the challenger emerges victorious, however scathed). Note that this is a familiar, recognizable, and

coherent system of ethics in which the set of acts that prove manhood is valorized and the set of acts that concede inferiority of manhood is deplored. Within this behavioral code (which all combatants for manhood necessarily subscribe to) and within the context of a manhood contest (which all aspirants to manhood must episodically engage in), any act that disparages/dominates/damages someone else is “good” and “right” (meaning: “utilitarian, warranted, justifiable”). There are no exceptions, no nettlesome gray areas, for this ethics is rigorous, internally consistent, and evident throughout so-called civilization. Note also that this gender ethics bears a striking resemblance to the code by which male mammals of many other species vie for rut rights—think rams battering and stags cracking antlers in the woods.

To my surprise, in writing *The End of Manhood* I chanced upon what may be a human evolution of the mammalian code by which male dominance is acted out literally and seasonally—a distinctly human elaboration of it. What I discovered is that in the human species there is actually a *third* possible outcome to a male-dominance contest, an option lower mammals rarely employ. It goes like this: *If* one party challenges another to prove “manhood,” *then* both challenger and challengee have the option of engaging *together* in an act that proves their manhood mutually. They may gang up to *jointly* disparage/dominate/damage *some third party*; someone over and against whom they can collaboratively demonstrate the superiority of their manhood; someone, for instance, anatomically female. In the human species, the systematic ethics of manhood-proving not only permits conduct pursuant to this third option; this ethics fosters it.

How did this species-specific systematic ethics arise among our forebears? The question is impossible to answer, of course, but an intriguing hypothesis presents itself. In evolutionary biology and paleoanthropology, it is an uncontroversial given that the absence of estrus is among the features that distinguish our mammalian species. But unlike other humanoid traits that can be explained as evolutionary variations on a higher-primate theme (large brain size, upright gait on two feet, and such), our species’s peculiar lack of estrus is a puzzler. Among other mammals, females have zero tolerance for copulation except at particular, cyclical times, when they physically advertise that they are

ovulating, and males are notably hardwired to know what time that is and isn't. No such biorhythm organizes *Homo sapiens'* etiquette of penetrative sex—our species, basically, does not have one. During a female's fertile years, there is approximately a time of the month when conception can occur, but it neither tracks nor trumpets the time for fucking. Some scientists speculate that humanoid females once had an ovulatory signal but lost it over time. Others believe the reverse: that primates' ancestors gradually developed such a signal but that prehumans never had one. No tissue remains to tell the tale. The only hard evidence is bones, and they demonstrate that way back in humans' lineage, sexual dimorphism was extreme: females then were less than two thirds as large as males (whereas today, females and males are, on average, much closer in size). Moreover, the cranium was relatively puny. Over eons, as the human brain ballooned, the female pelvis became too small to give birth to the size of skull required for it (which is why babies today are born with unfinished brains—it is our evolutionary tradeoff for bipedalism). But back then, judging from skeletal sources, hominid infants exited the womb far more prepared to perambulate, which means that their period of postnatal dependency was much shorter than now (hence, presumably, mamas did not need papas past the point of conception). The strong implication, by analogy to the behavior of primates who are our near relatives, is that in those days there was male-male battle, literal and bloody, for coital access to females.

In contemplating the systematic ethics of manhood-proving as identified and articulated in *The End of Manhood*, I thought to trace it backward to the beginning of perceptibly human life. Speculating rather wildly, I admit, I guessed that the absence of estrus in the human species, in evolutionary terms, made male-male combat for rut rights an enormous waste of energy—for if the coveted window of opportunity for copulation can be opened all year round, males had more need of unlocking *it* than of locking horns with one another. Following upon that speculation came another—that ganging up to perform penile, penetrative sex with females held for males a classic sociobiological advantage: When prehumans roamed the mists of prehistory, before there was group living or tribal life, bonding together to fuck females not only *increased* males' odds of getting their genes into progeny



(which, according to evolutionary biologists, is the big bingo) but—much more to the point—*decreased* their risk of being injured, perhaps mortally, by other perfervid males. From these *ad hoc* male alliances could well have emerged marauding packs, and the status that then obtained *among* members of the pack could have become, over time, that which was at stake whenever challenged by any *other* pack—fertile males who were also in solidarity over and against females in order to avert bloodshed among themselves. In an early flash of human intelligence, it could have dawned on the roving males that what worked so efficaciously with females (ganging together to inseminate) worked resourcefully against rival packs (ganging together to terminate); well enough, at any rate, to inspire (at least among survivors of such run-ins) the drama called war. This bellicose saga must have unfolded on the very cusp between primate and human, prior to the invention of the distinctly human concept of ownership of land and of other people's bodies, after which it would have become reproductively advantageous not to gangbang females but to keep them as private chattel, necessitating policies against poaching. There would then have arisen such chiefdoms, patresfamilias, clans, and dynasties as are nowadays familiar to anthropologists and archeologists. But from earliest times, all such social configurations remained modeled on the game theory that is the ethics of the humanoid male bond: Defeat your challenger, be defeated by your challenger, or team up to disparage/dominate/damage some third party. According to this unpretty but plausible hypothesis, the cradle of civilization was gang rape.

Such speculation about our social origins—alluringly alluding to our material stuffness, including our species's reproductive anatomy (the very metaphysical fallacy that has now convincingly been exposed by those who recognize gender as a social construction) cannot by itself help us understand, solve, or evolve out of our contemporary gender dilemma. If ever this male-bonding based system of manhood-proving had a material foundation, that time was long, long ago. The system has persisted beyond the circumstances in which it arose. Today, as I dramatize in *The End of Manhood*, this male-bonding system of ethics is being driven by a historically unprecedented gender panic, the inward anxiety felt by more and more persons around the globe that one