

**John Rowan**

## **AGAINST YIN AND YANG AND ANDROGYNY**

In the summer of 1980 I went to the AHP conference at Snowmass, and attended a couple of workshops on sex roles and that kind of thing. And I got more and more worried about the lack of political insight which I found in those workshops. Although at least one of them was led by a supposed feminist, there was a marked lack of feminist bite - that acute sensitivity to the political implications of the personal which feminists have given to the world. There was a kind of vague line which seemed to be floating around, which doesn't seem to be written down anywhere, but is just taken for granted. I think it's misleading, harmful, liberal, wet and comforting. It goes something like this:

*"Masculinity and femininity are very complicated and confusing culturally-influenced matters. It would be better to talk about yin and yang as the eternally valid feminine and masculine qualities underlying all the cultural overlays. We can then say that certain qualities (which we used to call feminine) are yin qualities, which are culturally associated with women, but can be found in both women and men. Similarly certain contrasting qualities (which we used to call masculine) are yang qualities, which are often attributed socially to men, but can be found in women too. All that is wrong is that these two sets of qualities have become too separate and specialised. If we could encourage men to develop their yin qualities, and women to develop their yang qualities, we would achieve a healthy form of androgyny. This kind of androgyny means that people have a well- rounded character, with yin and yang qualities well-balanced and integrated. This means a better life and a better society for us all".*

Now in its original derivation, yin is "the cloudy" or "the overcast", and yang is "banners waving in the sun", and hence anything shone upon or bright. Soon the terms came to mean the shaded side of a hill, and the bright, sunlit side of it. The Shuo Kua says:

*In ancient times the holy sages . . . determined the tao of heaven and called it the dark and the light. They determined the tao of the earth and called it the yielding and the firm. They determined the tao of humanity and called it love and rectitude.*

It can be seen that at this early date there was nothing about the feminine and the masculine - this was a later addition and interpretation.

Nor is it true that yin and yang have a fixed connotation, applying to women and men alike. A yin man is very different from a yin woman; and a yang woman is very different from a yang man.

No doubt one of the things which often happens in therapy is that men get more in touch with their feelings, including grief and hurt, fear and guilt, and hence become more like women; just as women get more in touch with their power of self-determination, and hence more like men. But none of this affects the patriarchal system - it is more a difference of style than of structure.

It may well be true, as Sandra Bem and others have found, that people who possess both strong "masculine" characteristics and strong "feminine" characteristics are mentally healthier than people who are more one-sided and stereotyped, but this too does not make any difference to the patriarchal structure of our society.

And so it does not surprise me too much when I find a highly conservative textbook of psychology\* advocating psychological androgyny (not identifying exclusively with either the male or the female sex-role stereotype) and saying - "*Striving for androgyny is not a simple solution, but we feel it is a good one*". It will make you more popular, and more well-adjusted.

Androgynous people are probably nicer and more effective than gender-stereotyped people, and in a non-patriarchal society it would be easier for people to be androgynous, but it seems clearer and clearer to me that in itself it means very little on a social scale. Joan Baez once said: "*I remember the first thought I ever had about women's lib was that if women could teach the men to cry, maybe we wouldn't have to go to war*". I don't know how she feels now about that statement, but what I believe is that men can cry and cry, and still pull

---

\*Herbert Harari & Robert M. Kaplan. **Psychology: Personal and social adjustment.** Harper & Row 1977.

the trigger; can tremble with fear and still drop the bomb; can go into paroxysms of guilt and still push the button. Just as women can be strong and fearless, and still let a man walk all over them.

There seems to be no evidence that men can get so yin and women so yang that they meet somehow in the middle. There are a few men about who can be mistaken for women, just as there are a few women about who can be mistaken for men, but this is not a trend, it is just a few exceptions. In any case, this seems, as an ideal, suspiciously close to the sixties idea of Unisex, which I think was always an illusion. Men didn't cease to be oppressive just by wearing pink shirts, long hair and flowered ties, any more than women ceased to be oppressed just by wearing jeans, short hair and teeshirts.

And this leads me to wonder whether there really are any *"eternally valid masculine and feminine qualities, underlying all the cultural overlays"*.

Certainly the Jungians think there is: Esther Harding sees the feminine qualities as "emotion and relatedness" which is personal in character, and the masculine qualities as "thinking, impersonality and spirit, leading to a concern for justice, logic and a cause". Certainly Charlotte Bach thinks there is - she talks of the feminine as "the steam-roller" and the masculine as "the racing car". Many spiritual disciplines see the feminine as "passive" and the masculine as "active". It seems to me, on the other hand, that because of the prevalence of patriarchy, and because of its all-pervasive influence (even extending into areas like the Tarot and astrology) we really have no idea of what females are really like under all the conditioning, or males either. Over the past few years, feminists have been struggling and wrestling with language and culture to try and discover what being a female might be: the latest and bravest effort being Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology*. And it may be noted that in that book she says: *"Experience proved that this word" (androgyny) "which we now recognise as expressing pseudo wholeness in its combination of distorted gender descriptions, failed and betrayed our thought"*.

So I now want to say that masculinity and femininity are fatally flawed concepts, culturally loaded, patriarchally based, unusable except as names of harmful stereotypes. Male and female are more biological terms, which bear no definite cultural meanings, other than those we build, discover, choose, co-create and explore. And yin and yang

are potentially misleading terms which really have nothing much to do with any of these four concepts: just a way of avoiding all the real and painful difficulties of redefining ourselves against the grain.

No answers are offered. I have nothing positive to say. Books like Casey & Miller's **Words and women** and Dale Spender's **Man and language** show how enormous the problem is, of rescuing human beings from patriarchal bias and distortion. For women, there are some inspiring clues in **Gyn/Ecology**; for men, there is virtually nothing as yet. All I have tried to show, in this article, is where **not** to look for the answer.

---

**WHIRL-Y-GIG** is an alternative disco for people who enjoy dancing as a form of self-expression, creativity and fun. It will provide the space for you to transport yourselves to a Viennese ballroom, into an African tribe or for you to create your own individual fantasy dance. We will have music of many styles, eras and countries for you to dance to: Greek, Irish,,Jazz, Reggae, Punk - you name it - we've either got it or will get it!

This is intended to be a regular AHP event for both members and non-members. It will provide an informal setting for members to meet and communicate through dance as well as verbally. It will hopefully also introduce new people to humanistic psychology and the AHP. Humanistic psychology is about human potential and creativiity! In this context too there will be the chance for budding musicians, singers, clowns or cabaret artistes to try out their skills. Anyone who would like to perform or give active support in this venture should contact the AHP Administrator. Also anyone outside London who would like WHIRL-Y-GIG to come to their area should also contact Roslyn, c/o AHP 66 Southwark Bridge Road London SE1 0AS