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■ Book Review ■

The End of Gender: Debunking the Myths about Sex and Identity in Our Society

by Debra Soh, Threshold Editions, 2020, 332 pages

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I remember reading Judith Butler's book, *Gender Trouble*, and feeling deeply regretful about my doctoral thesis. This is because the feminist theory that I had studied while exploring the “female figures” in the Korean War period and post-war novels was not utilized properly. Of course, I marveled at Butler’s ability to take a critical look at modern philosophers—Beauvoir, Freud, Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault—but she was also amazed at her bold attempt to subvert the order placed on conventional feminism and gendered life. During the COVID-19 pandemic, 10 years after I read *Gender Trouble*, I discovered Debra Soh’s book, *The End of Gender: Debunking the Myths about Sex and Identity in Our Society* (Threshold Editions, 2020. 8), and, out of curiosity to see if, indeed, the “end of gender” was possible, and started reading it.

In “Foreword: The Battle of Biology,” Debra Soh describes her graduate life this way: “Graduate school is made up of countless long nights and weekends of work, constantly moving targets, endless bureaucracy, and grappling with an unpredictable job market after graduation,” she said. It seemed to represent the graduate school life I had experienced, so I naturally nodded. She went to graduate school to ignite her passion for her major, but the process of writing her thesis brought back memories of having to deeply feel the stereotypes of academia as well as its social and political limitations.

However, Soh is much more courageous than me, using her expertise to criticize the myth of gender. She received her Ph.D. in Sexual Neuroscience from York University, Toronto, Canada, with her thesis “Functional and Structural Neuroimaging of Paraphilic Hypersexuality in Men,” in which she studied abnormal paraphilia to elucidate neurological conditions. Her thesis has implications for judging the abnormality of paraphilia. From 2021 onward, as a journalist, she has been criticizing the myth (misunderstanding) of gender identity through neuroscientific verification in the “Doctor Debra Soh” podcast. In this process, she published *The End of Gender*.

On her website (<https://www.drdebrasoh.com/book>), Soh gave the title of this book and explained that in it, she shows how the denial of science, biology, and reason reflects our inability to understand gender.

She acknowledges that sex studies are controversial and politically influential. However, unlike gender studies that use qualitative methods, it is emphasized that sexual studies are special because they are rigorously scientifically tested while eliminating bias and confounding variables. In the Internet age, social media promotes the idea that scientific research makes people happy, saying, “Gender has become a cult concept, and public knowledge is overturned to reflect the delightful affirmation of the feelings and beliefs of a particular group.” (Soh, p. 9). In the book, nine “myths” surrounding gender are criticized from a scientific point of view.

The first chapter, “The Foundation,” criticizes the proposition that “Biological sex is a spectrum.” as the first myth. Soh asks us, “What does it mean to feel like a woman? Or to feel like a man?” (Soh, p. 15). Biological Sex only exists as male or female. On the other hand, some may believe, “Sex is defined by the gametes, the mature gametes, not the chromosomes or genitals or hormonal profiles.” (Soh, p. 17). The gametes consists only sperm and eggs, therefore there is no intermediate type of gametes(male and female). That is, biological sex is dichotomous, and gender identity is about whether we feel masculine or feminine. And gender expression is a way to express gender through

appearance. In that way, Just like sex, in terms of identity and expression, gender is inevitably biological. As Soh said that animals, including humans, are divided into males and females. However, some people are born with sexual development disorders and differences and show atypical features in the sex structure or sex chromosomes (intersex). But even intersex people are either male or female. Although there are a few cases where male and female sexual characteristics are mixed, Soh argues, that in such cases, the individuals should be allowed to change the gender they are recognized as to their preferred gender or the gender that appears on their birth certificates.

The second myth is that “Gender is a social construct.” Soh says that she herself believed that gender was a social construct and that biology was inherently oppressive. However, while studying sex science, she said that she realized that gender was based on biology and that gender equality did not need to be denied. Whether a trait is considered “masculine” or “feminine” is culturally defined, but whether a person is attracted to traits considered masculine or feminine is biologically determined. In a study of visual sexual stimulation using fMRI, the amygdala, which encompasses the emotional component of sexual arousal, tended to show greater activation in men than in women. According to Soh, even if neuroscience showed that all parts of the brains of women and men were identical, it would still not end sexism. Moreover, acknowledging gender differences did not lead to sexism. Sexism argues that women must be equal to men to be treated equally as men, but rather that it ultimately undermines women’s ability to make autonomous and enlightened choices.

The third myth is that “There is more than one gender”. Non-binary identification labels may seem endless, but they all mean that a person identifies as either male or female to some extent. From a scientific perspective, sexual orientation plays an important role in the decision to identify an individual as non-binary. With today’s new variant of misogyny, young women seek to break free from sexist stereotypes that often accompany being female. At the same time, many non-binary peo-

ple will say they hate being stereotyped as women, saying they have decided to designate themselves as a third gender category. Soh says that gender norms are intrinsically harmless, saying that, unlike female femininity or male masculinity being ridiculed, when a person labels as a non-binary gender in any direction, both are suddenly acceptable. Perhaps what people call gender can be more appropriately considered as a character or mood. However, many seem to mistake gender identity as a much more diverse type of expression.

In the chapter “The Frontier,” the fourth myth criticizes that “Sexual orientation and gender identity are unrelated.” Soh says that she learned a lot about thinking differently about gender and subverting expected norms by immersing herself in gay culture. Sexual orientation refers to the sexual attraction to women, men, or both. This is innate and does not change. According to Soh, gender identity is flexible for pre-pubertal children and becomes more stable through puberty and adulthood. Higher prenatal testosterone exposure is associated with male-specific interests, behaviors, and sexual attraction to females, regardless of whether individuals are male or female. Gender identity is an essential part of who we are because our experiences with gender are determined by the biological influences exerted upon us before we are born. In 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) redefined “gender dissonance” as a variant of gender dysphoria as a condition related to sexual health rather than classifying it as a mental illness in the International Classification of Diseases. This is presumably intended to remove the stigma common to people with mental illness and provoke a backlash against those who dismiss the transgender community as mentally ill. However, gender dysphoria is problematic because it stigmatizes mental illness, and with growing public awareness about gender dysphoric children and the challenges and stigma they face, parents will receive more respect and support when raising transgender children. In fact, transgender ideology has allowed young women to choose a woman’s intuition and have a woman’s body.

The fifth myth is that “Children with gender dysphoria should

transition.” Are transwomen the same as women-born females? The problem is that this topic has become a landmine that affects gender-segregated spaces such as toilets, locker rooms, prisons, sports events, and sexual lives.

The sixth myth states that there is “No difference exist between transwoman and woman who were born women”. Radical feminists who oppose transgender ideology resent the treatment of women and girls in their spaces as second-class citizens. In fact, “womanhood is redefined by those whom they consider to have male privileges.” (Soh, p. 195). The use of women’s language to describe women’s experiences is seen as empowering and validating, especially on issues related to reproductive rights. Soh raises, on the other hand, the issue of gender-neutral spaces while discussing transphobia and transgender. In both research and clinical capacities, the hallmarks of men who sex offenders are that they are antisocial and have an outright lack of remorse for hurting others. In particular, she argues that the sex crime rate occurring in sex-neutral spaces is high, so separate facilities should be increased for safety reasons.

In the chapter “The Future,” the 7th myth is both given and refuted that “Women should behave like men in sex and dating.” Soh is positive about sex and advocates inclusive sex education. The idea that “the focus of sex should be on pleasure, and consensual sex without intimacy or commitment is perfectly acceptable” indicates that men only need to invest a few minutes in sex. In contrast, she points out that while women dating wealthy men are usually ridiculed as gold spoons, men who prefer dating young, attractive women are eye-catching at best. Therefore, if we pursuing gender equality, we have to fight back and ask why women should apply different standards or be punished for what they value. This criticizes contemporary feminism for compelling women to physically let themselves in instead of traditional femininity, otherwise viewing them as victims of social indoctrination. Soh then asks, “Who really benefits from these changes?” Even in the 21st century, men must move first in the relationship between men and women. Touch or romantic interest is also a small act that shows a man’s willingness to invest in a woman.

Women do not want their men to treat them like other men. However, truly successful relationships are only possible when we have a healthy and accurate understanding of human behavior as well as of each other. Soh understands why some women dislike evidence of gender differences based on evolutionary explanations for behavior. However, denying this pure truth, she says, only undermines the argument for gender equality.

The eighth myth is “Gender-neutral parenting works,” and Soh posits that the efforts of parents and educational institutions promote gender equality. It is said that the times have changed from a period when toys and clothing were classified by gender and either pink (female color) or blue (male color). This is an example of proof that the idea that masculinity and femininity are learned is a myth that never disappears. Gender is no longer imposed on children through parental messages, teachers, culture, or the media. Parents hope to prevent their daughter from being passive and self-sanctifying and to equip their son with proficient verbal and emotional expression skills. Parents want to give their children the best possible lives. However, Soh suggests exposing children to a variety of activities and methods of expressing their gender-typical and atypical selves. If your child adheres to stereotyped gender norms, not to panic but to love and support them rather than to scrutinize the gender roles they accept or express.

As the ninth myth, she suggested that “Sexuality and social justice make good bedfellows,” and criticizes this myth. As children are the most vulnerable victims of cultural warfare, we believe that educators have chosen them as part of the social justice movement. The Board of Education educates children on the themes of organizational oppression, anti-bias, and alliances, claiming to be working toward social justice. They rely on parents, teachers, caregivers, and healthcare professionals to make decisions based on this misinformation. Meanwhile, sensitive young graduate students learn that even scientists from respected institutions must yield to social justice doctrines and fundamental truths.

In this way, Soh sarcastically criticizes the socialization of gender and the myth of social justice and accuses reality with the title of “the

end of academic freedom” in the conclusion. However, she moves away from misinformation and predicts that fact-based science will eventually triumph. “The truth can be suppressed, but the truth will always be revealed,” she said.

Debra Soh writes this at the beginning of the book, *“For Everyone Who Blocked Me on Twitter”*. She is not afraid of people protesting against her arguments if scientific evidence supports her.

The myths of gender that Debra Soh exposes raises a question about what is normalized in social structures and political contexts at the expense of scientific viewpoints such as biology. Myths #1 and #2 present the conceptual limits of sex and gender, and Myth #3 acknowledges the gender dichotomy that classifies men and women into male and female, pointing out that the myth of gender is a problem stemming from the confusion of “The Foundation” concepts and terms. Based on this, the concept of gender identity, which is different from innate sexual orientation, is explained in Myth #4, which is the “The Fronter” of gender; children with gender dysphoria are discussed in Myth #5, and the differences between transwomen and women are shown in Myth #6. This myth covers the limitations of “conversion” and criticizes the perception of women’s gender discrimination. Myth #5 in particular asks the question, “How can a 3-year-old child know how he or she feels about his/her sexuality?” According to Sprinkle's review of the book, even 3-year-old children can feel their feelings. Even in my view, I think that emotions can be felt by humans, and the way they express them may be a little different.

So, what kind of sexual myth does Debra present in relation to the “future”? In Myth #7, she discusses the problem of women related to sex and dating, in Myth #8, she puts forth the dilemma of “gender-neutral parenting” (once again targeting children), and in Myth #9, she criticizes the political purpose of linking gender and social justice. And she thinks the “end of gender” is possible only these critical and biological perceptions. Therefore, she points out that breaking away from the idea that “masculinity and femininity are learned” is a way to properly recog-

nize gender discrimination.

The notion of “sexual fluidity” in Debra Soh’s assertion was unfamiliar to me. I was able to resolve this unfamiliar feeling by reading Preston Sprinkle’s review (2021). Soh states, “Sexual fluidity’ claims that anyone can be gay, and that human sexuality is actually free-flowing and can be anything it wants” (Soh, p. 101). However, according to Sprinkle, sexual fluidity is related to changes in sexual desire and is caused by unexpected situations and various social contexts rather than by choice. Thus, it should not be taken to imply that “anyone can be gay.”

At the same time, I was surprised to hear a report that a child with gender dysphoria in North America was prescribed puberty blockers and intersex hormones and eventually moved on to surgery to remove secondary sexual characteristics such as breasts. In Korea, I heard that if breast development in girls starts before the age of 8, and in boys when the testicles start to grow before the age of 9, they are diagnosed with “precocious puberty” and receive puberty-blocking treatment. In this regard, I wonder how seriously Korea is thinking about the “gender” of children and understanding the problems from a biological point of view. According to Jen Gerson (2020), if puberty blockers are administered too early, the opportunity to resolve gender dysphoria may be lost without serious medical intervention. This is because the side effects of lifelong dependence on exogenous hormones cause sexual dysfunction, infertility, and organ and bone damage.

It seems that we also need to consider how to recognize the gender of children and find and solve problems in the future from a scientific point of view. It is necessary to objectively reflect on ourselves whether we are raising gender-neutral children for our children’s successful lives, or whether we are injecting stereotyped gender stereotypes into our children and emphasizing that they are female or male.

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