

# DEFINING MASCULINITY

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**Note: The format of the article was changed to fit the size and scope of an A5-booklet. In no way was the contents of the original article altered or changed.**

## A SINGLE DEFINITION OF MASCULINITY

A serious realist definition of masculinity would need to be more than a *singular* definition — it would need to be a single superstructure of concepts that explain the unity and diversity of male experience. The best definition of masculinity will maintain the ideal of the concept and still make space for the individuality of each man. To do this, we must first supply a *single* definition of masculinity, and thereafter unpack the complexity which makes this definition both match reality and workable for all men.

Our initial definition of masculinity will be this:

*Masculinity is a man's optimization of his capacity for fitness.*

There are three simple elements to this definition — optimization, capacity, and fitness. Let's consider them in reverse order.

### **Fitness**

**Fitness is the basic idea here — Fitness refers to one's ability to fulfil a role or task and overcome barriers in the pursuit of a particular goal compared to other men pursuing the same goal.** A high school student may be very competent in debating in his school's debate club, and utterly incompetent in a debate team at WITS. In both scenarios, his capability to overcome barriers is made up of his immediate peer context and his debating ability, both cultivated and natural. The barriers before him are not just logical and rhetorical, but *competitive* with peers, *testable* with regard to his lecturer, and *formative* with regard to himself. His fitness is measured by his fixed capacity to make logical deductions and follow arguments, combined with the production expected from him by his competitors, lecturers, and self.

### **Capacity**

**Everyone has a ceiling of competence; we call it their capacity. This capacity is both fixed and flexible.** A paralytic man will never run a 100m race in 12seconds, but he may find a way to strengthen his muscles over which he has physical control. The better I get at Olympic lifts, the higher the ceiling of my fitness grows — even if that ceiling has a set growth cap beneath Matt Fraser's.

It is here that the diversity of men, from individual to individual, finds its abstract home in defining masculinity. Not every man has the same capacity for fitness. Fixed and flexible ceilings for capacity is how we account for diversity among men.

### **Optimization**

**Optimization refers to making something as fully perfect, functional, or effective as possible. It is purposefully rising to the top of one's flexible ceiling of capacity through pursuing fitness.**

This is the GPS of masculinity. Fitness is to some degree an intangible concept, and every man has *some* sort of capacity. But optimization is always *a choice*. Optimization, then, is the proper domain of *responsibility* — it is the hinge upon which the futures "Great Man" and "Wasted Potential" both turn.

The clear weakness of this definition for masculinity is that it could be copied and pasted onto a definition for "Femininity." This is also why masculinity cannot just have a *simplistic* definition but requires an expanded definition to fully grasp what we mean by "masculinity".

## **An Expanded DEFINITION OF MASCULINITY**

Let us consider how this definition *really* works itself out in an intricate and diverse world that accounts for *every man everywhere*. To do this, we must clarify the three facets of masculinity which make our singular definition possible. These aspects are, so to speak, what masculinity is made up of.

The three facets of masculinity are: Maleness, Manliness, and Manhood.

### **MALENESS**

**Maleness is biological masculinity** — this is, most basically, a man’s XY chromosome. In the biological aspect, a man’s optimization of his capacity for fitness reveals itself as the pursuit of the *highest attainable* strength, speed, lodging, sexual and hunting proficiency, and other body-oriented skills that are primal. These are the least complex capacities. This isn’t to say that one cannot pursue them in a profoundly sophisticated way, but rather that *all other* fitness relies upon and presupposes the basic optimization of the ability to overcome the highest number of physical obstacles. This is why Scripture especially connects the biological aspect of strength with maleness, “Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong” (1 Corinthians 16:13 emphasis mine)

Maleness is fixed. There is nothing refutable about the distinctiveness of male biology from female biology. It is in fact the only God designed division in the human race (see Genesis 2-3). In this regard, maleness is the irreducible and crude evidence that the human species is divided along a single line — and not only are men *men*, but they equally are *not women*.

The distinction between maleness and femaleness is what allows masculinity and femininity to have the same definition, while differing significantly. That is: masculinity is a man’s optimization of his capacity for fitness, and femininity a woman’s optimization of her capacity for fitness. A man’s fitness is composed basically of a male genetic composition, from which the manly observable characteristics emerges — a woman’s fitness is composed basically of a female genetic composition, from which the female observable characteristics emerges.

Note that the formula is the same — the optimization of one’s capacity for fitness — but the variables are all different: male in one, female in the other, starting from different places, and running along parallel, but separate paths.

### **MANLINESS**

**Manliness is cultural masculinity** — this is a man’s ability to climb a societal ladder and overcome more abstract barriers related to social wellbeing and existence. This fitness is fundamentally creative — touching areas like critical thinking, persuasion and problem solving. If maleness is the masculine *genetic composition*, manliness is the masculine *observable characteristics* — the aspect of masculinity which crosses the fixed biological with the socially constructed.

Manliness is the cultural understanding of maleness that confirms the legitimacy of male fitness and measures their value. Manliness is the set of games used to test, nurture, and employ the brute capacity of maleness. So, while *strength* lies appropriately within the sphere of *maleness*, culturally defined *manliness* may quantify to what degree that strength can be reliably incorporated with other fitness in the form of work, combat, or provision.

*So I would say, manliness is a social construct, but so is an enchilada — and culinary rules have been adapted through practice over time to the unchanging palates of human biology.* In like fashion,

manliness is “relative” in a sense — its customs vary from culture to culture — but it remains accountable to fixed, unchangeable physical realities.

On interesting note, we can probably distinguish between two kinds of manliness — *fraternal manliness* and *paternal manliness*. These are two ways of looking at the same fitness. Fraternal manliness measures fitness relative to other men, whereas paternal manliness measures the usefulness of a man’s fitness in the sphere of his responsibility for his family and community. If we take the fitness of hand-to-hand combat, for example — with regard to other men, a man’s ability to fight with his hands is a primal motivation for other men not to disrespect him too much (fraternal manliness), while this same skill is a way of securing physical security for his family (paternal manliness). It is this paternal aspect of manliness and the responsibility of optimising it that makes sense of Douglas Wilson definition of masculinity, “...the glad assumption of the sacrificial responsibilities that God assigned to men.[\[1\]](#)”

Cultural masculinity (manliness) is something the Bible is concerned with preserving, in fact breaking the cultural manifestations of masculinity is considered a sin. Note the law in Deuteronomy 22:5, “A woman shall not wear a man’s garment, nor shall a man put on a woman’s cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD your God.” And what I believe is the New Testament repetition of this principle, “Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him,” (1 Corinthians 11:14). Both of these teach the adoption of cultural norms that expresses manliness, or at least not breaking cultural norms relative to ones gender.

However, the aspects of fraternal and paternal manliness are also seen in Scripture. Consider the appeal to paternal manliness in 2 Samuel 10:12, “Be of good courage, and let us play the men for our people, and for the cities of our God: and the LORD do that which seemeth him good” (See also 1 Samuel 4:9). Here the appeal is to men in competition with other men but with the purpose of securing physical security for their families and the cities in view. Nehemiah 4:14 repeats the same paternal manliness idea, “... Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.” We also see a more complex expression of paternal manliness in 1 Timothy 5:8 which says, “But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”

On the other hand, fraternal manliness seems to be behind the commitment shown in Jacob when he wrestles with the angel (read Genesis 32:22-31), and a blessing comes because of Jacobs fraternal manliness, “Then the man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have *struggled* with God *and with humans* and have overcome” (emphasis mine). Jacob earlier shows the cultural practise of brute strength when in Genesis 29:10 he singles-handily moves the stone off a well when a group of shepherds were waiting for more men to help them move it.

### **MANHOOD**

**Manhood is individual masculinity** — this is a man’s *making manliness his own*. It is in his manhood that a man *makes games for himself* which optimize the fitness of maleness and manliness. These higher fitness characteristics are soft relational skills such as sympathy, empathy, humility, and self-confidence, as well as beneficial skills such as emotional intelligence, goal-setting, and recovery from failure.

It is in this sphere that a man may also remove aspects of manliness ideals which are counterproductive to his manhood ideals. For example, a man may have made himself very strong through physical training (maleness) and winning physical confrontations (manliness), but this may

be indicative of a underlying aggression that compromises his ability to be at peace with himself and with his family. Take for example the account of David and Abigail. David has been disrespected by Nabal, thus with his strength and speed (optimized maleness) which have been forged in war and combat (optimised manliness), he goes out to express fraternal manliness – to use these optimisations for fitness in wrecking Nabal. Abigail comes and pleads with him in great humility. This action has the effect of cultivating David’s manhood (individual masculinity) and he realises that he needs to tweak this instance these aspects of manliness that will be counterproductive (see the account in 1 Samuel 25)

A man may therefore seek to optimize the complexity of his strength (maleness) and physical confidence (manliness) by seeking emotional security. By doing this, he learns that in the same way maleness fitness characteristics do not measure up to manliness competencies (if you are *strong but dumb*, or *weak but smart*, you will lack a degree of respect and confidence – See Saul as perhaps an example of this, strong but cowardly in 1 Samuel 10). So also manliness fitness characteristics do not measure to manhood fitness characteristics— protecting and providing for one’s family, and winning competitive matches with peers, does not directly translate into being a good husband, father, friend, or person.

We see this idea in Scripture in places like Proverbs 4:10–15 which describes a father who protects his son by passing on wisdom, helping him build godly character, and teaching him to reject the lies and temptations of the world. This father protects not only his son but the generations to follow as the wisdom he shares gets passed on. Also, while the Apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 5:23 that “the husband is the head of the wife,” he quickly puts to rest any notions that this leadership allows for selfish male dominance. He completes the sentence with, “as Christ also is the head of the church.” The passage goes on to say that husbands should love their wives “just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her” (verse 25). In addition, Micah 6:8 says, “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

It would be interesting in your reading of Scripture to see where this definition in its various substructures are exemplified for us. I think it is helpful in explaining and accounting for the standard realities of masculinity while allowing for individual expressions of it.

**The concepts of this article are a reworking and expansion of an article written by Paul Maxwell. Unfortunately at the time publishing I have been unable to find the original document and have been informed it is no longer available.**

[i] <https://dougwils.com/books-and-culture/s7-engaging-the-culture/masculinity-without-permission.html> (accessed 2020-09-06)