

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Venus and Mars: Why Women and Men Choose Differently

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Welcome everyone.

Tonight we're going to be talking about Venus and Mars and why it is that women and men make different moral as well as spiritual choices.

This is a fascinating and large topic. It's also a new kind of topic for us since The Seekers Forum is focused on spiritual and philosophical questions, universal concerns that really transcend things like gender and gender politics. The contrast between the sexes has never seemed especially relevant to our conversation about how to live an awakened life.

And yet, as I discovered while I was researching my book *Ethical Wisdom*, as much as we would like to imagine that sex and gender have no bearing on the inner life or how we approach matters that are essential to the wisdom path, this is simply not the case.

What we do know from a growing body of psychological as well as sociological studies, is that Venus and Mars while sharing many commonalities, actually differ very sharply on matters involving empathy, relationship, as well as what we consider to be right and wrong.

We have contrasting views all too often – Venus and Mars – that what constitutes kindness and fairness in different situations and how we define the greater good. These are vast generalizations, of course. They're full of exceptions and sliding scales. There are men who are more drawn to what might be called a feminine perspective and women who gravitate more toward values that are considered traditionally male. And our intention here is not to split humanity in two or to create some sort of false duality, not at all, since we all contain aspects of both sexes.

However, we do need to look at the fact that physical differences do play a significant part in how individuals view the world and the values they bring to bear on their moral and their spiritual lives. In other words, as much as we might strive for gender equality in our politically correct post-feminist world, our ethical lives as well as our spiritual lives are not immune to our mammalian biology. This is very important.

Tonight I want you to listen when I mention Venus and Mars – think of them as orientations and we both have both orientations. We just may err more on one side than the other. Let's just look at this with an open mind.

The first thing we need to understand is the idea, which is very controversial, that personal character is largely determined by biology. This is a hot-button issue. It's a very hard thing for lots of folks to take in.

The great Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson is the one who popularized this idea in a discipline that he called sociobiology. Sociobiology posits simply that genes play an important role in human behavior. Genes play an important role in human behavior.

Unfortunately, this idea that our bodies are part of our destiny goes against everything that progressive thinking is about in the consciousness movement, which is premised on the idea that it's mind over matter and that we are capable of transcending our animal natures.

By suggesting otherwise, E. O. Wilson was compared to a fascist, to a racist, to people who believe in eugenics. There was a huge backlash against this very simple idea that gender and sex and the physical body are part of our destiny.

In fact, this animosity toward E. O. Wilson, who by the way is a very gentle man, a very gentle openhearted, open minded man, but this animosity toward him reached such a crescendo that after one of his talks, someone in the audience actually came up and poured a bucket of water over his head, that people were absolutely infuriated.

Unfortunately, far from disproving Wilson's ideas about sociobiology, that random act of aggression only confirmed how influenced we are actually by hormones and our power drives and the ways of biology.

The question is why are we so frightened of our biological inheritance? Why is it so offensive to admit the limitations and the particularities of our own vehicle, of our own gender?

And that's what Wilson wanted to understand.

Why is there something wrong with us playing roles if those roles are empathic and connected to raising the fitness of the group? And isn't it a wasted opportunity not to understand our biological differences when they impact our choices and our behavior and how we view ourselves in relation to the rest of the world? Isn't that a wasted opportunity?

These are fair and important questions to ask. And however averse we may be to the notion that nature is as important as nurture, we need to look at the facts.

And a great place to start looking at the facts and looking at sex as a metaphor for the way we approach our lives is by looking at sex itself. Our sexual apparatus determines much more than we realize about our emotional lives and our ethical and our spiritual proclivities.

For instance, just consider the numbers. Let's look at the numbers. There's an extreme contrast between the basic sex cells of men and women. A human egg is eighty-five thousand times larger than a human sperm. Think about that a moment – eighty-five thousand times bigger. Not only that, but a woman produces only about four hundred eggs during her entire lifetime, of which only about twenty or so can actually become viable babies. Compare this to the sexual inheritance of men, who release in the neighborhood of a hundred million sperm every time they have sex. So, men produce a hundred million sperm every time they have sex. Women produce four hundred eggs in their entire lifetime.

And what this means, as E. O. Wilson put it, is that “if a man were given total freedom to act, he could theoretically inseminate thousands of women in his lifetime, while women must protect their precious few children. Therefore,” as he says, “it pays males to be aggressive, hasty, fickle, and indiscriminating, and for females to be coy and to hold back until they can identify the males with the best genes.”

This throws a whole new light on infidelity, on betrayal, on trust, and on care. Not that men aren't caring, but that women are wired for connection; they're wired for sustenance and solidarity in ways that men are not and that's why they exercise what's known as the ethic of care as a general rule, over the ethic of justice, which is considered more of a male tendency. Once again, this isn't to say that there aren't nurturing men and unmaternal women. These are just principles that we are considering in understanding ourselves and how we operate.

It's funny that female humans are relative prudes compared to our ape cousins. Did you know that chimpanzees, during their thirty-six day cycles, female chimps spend about ten days a month copulating several dozens a day, a dozen times a day with every male she can get her hands on. Human females are much choosier and tend toward monogamous behavior, while human males tend to be what's known as moderately polygamous or, in today's parlance, monogamish, and the males tend to initiate most of the changes in sexual partnership.

Three-fourths of the human societies on this planet permit the taking of multiple wives and actually encourage it by law and by custom, whereas a woman's marriage to multiple husbands is sanctioned in fewer than one percent of societies. These numbers start to give us a sense of what we are working with in the dance between the sexes and in the way we make moral choices in our lives.

It's no wonder that fifty percent of marriages end in divorce and that love relationships are so complex or that we see so much hypocrisy in our public servants and our religious organizations, folks who say one thing with their idealistic selves but do another with their clay feet. And, these are most of the time men.

In a couple of months, we're going to be looking more deeply at the question of emotion and how even though we like to think we're reasonable people, our moral and ethical behaviors are far more determined by emotion than we want to admit. But for now it's enough to remember that this animal, this physical self, with its passions and proclivities and sexual orientations largely holds sway and that our differing bodies hold very important information that can help us in our own awakening.

For example, because women's bodies have seven times more oxytocin than men's – oxytocin is the love molecule – females commit more readily and easily than men do. While males tend to focus on autonomy, females emphasize relationship. That's because women need to be more selective about choosing partners because they're the ones who must care for the young. It's men who get to have the commitment issues. Women can't often afford that luxury.

It's also interesting that psychologists have proven that men tend to react more aversively to physical, sexual infidelity, whereas women are more thrown by emotional jealousy. That's because emotional jealousy can lead to desertion and for a man, before there was DNA testing, he could never be sure about a child's paternity and he ran the risk of supporting another man's offspring if his female mate was sexually unfaithful.

So there are these biological reasons for why we make emotional choices are so fascinating and really take the onus off a lot of the judgment that we have about why we react in these irrational, emotional ways that we do.

That's not to say that women are okay being cheated on or that men are fine when they're emotionally displaced, just that women do tend to focus on threats of abandonment while males, territorial possessive males, are fixated more on the violation of the female body. So when we look at someone like a fellow who's driven to murderous jealousy over a dropped handkerchief, this over reaction, this chest-pounding male response makes more sense. It makes biological sense. That's not to excuse our behavior. It's simply to understand its origins.

It wasn't until the woman's liberation movement came along that our understanding of emotional connection and ethical choices began to change, when the female side of things began to be investigated. That's because like all other parts of the social fabric, studies in morality and psychology had been dominated by men and men's concerns and how to keep men in power.

Fortunately, this started to change in the mid 1970s when Carol Gilligan, who was a brilliant feminist psychologist, came along and really turned this patriarchal thinking on its head. What Gilligan did is introduce this revolutionary idea that care and kindness have as much to do with ethical wisdom as fairness and justice do. Let me just repeat that – care and kindness have as much to do with ethical wisdom as fairness and justice do.

This feminine perspective was so much more revolutionary than it sounds today because until Gilligan came along, the party line had been that being good depended mostly on rules and laws and the long arm of justice. This male-tilted emphasis focused much, much more on autonomy than on relationship, and much more on what's wrong with us than what's right. The emphasis on rules and punishment implied that the first concern of morality was to rein in human selfishness and brutality, rather than to enhance love. It was the law of the jungle, the male way.

Gilligan completely disagreed with this formulation and what she suggested instead was that empathy and connection and care were the starting point of the moral life, prefigured in the bond, of course, between mother and child, and radiating out from there. This ethic of care, as she called it, emphasized relationships and interdependence over ethical impartiality. It focused also on those individuals who were particularly vulnerable to our choices and gave extra moral consideration to the needy, the innocent, and the unprotected. Men were much more attached to abstract sentient notions of justice, in other words, whereas the female way was to focus on the individual.

There's a wonderful quote from Gilligan's great book, *In a Different Voice*, where she says, "Men do not know the women whom they say they love." While women have taken care of men, men have in their theories of psychological development, tended to assume or devalue that care, because, in other words, women's care was so ubiquitous and so much a part of the fabric, it went overlooked by men who were describing how we develop psychologically. It was so obvious that they didn't see it. They tended to take this caring orientation so much for granted.

But Gilligan's discovery injected emotional wisdom into this conversation that had been dominated by rational principles and abstract standards. The female way, the Venusian way, personalized the way we think about human nature and put the emphasis on context and relationship and the importance of being our brothers' keepers.

When I was doing the book, I had the opportunity to talk to Carol Gilligan about her ideas and she said a couple of great things to me. First, she said, psychologists were studying white men and talking about humans, which I thought was a great line and deeply true. And then she said that she always knew that when women's voices entered what's called the human conversation that it would change the voice of that conversation and that's why she called her book *In a Different Voice*.

As I said, it's hard today to appreciate how threatening this idea was at the time, but it was a major shocking idea, as shocking as E. O. Wilson's ideas about sociobiology, and that's because the male-dominated approach to morality and how we should judge our personal choices had been that individuals have certain basic rights which must be respected and that in order for a society to work, restrictions have to be imposed on what we can and cannot do. That's the male way and it's true as far as it goes, but it's not the whole story.

The feminist message that goodness is mirrored and cultivated and honed by the imperative to care for others, what they call the responsibility orientation, provided a humane balance to the predominately male rules-driven justice orientation.

This is so important. It goes to the heart of what we believe about human nature. If we have a basically pessimistic view of human nature, then the emphasis is going to be on rules and judgment and punishment. If we have a basically positive view of human nature as being good, then we're going to be more oriented toward a caring, loving orientation that's more about connection.

Of course, the male psychologists of Gilligan's day completely mocked her, what they called her touchy-feely approach to ethics.

However, she has turned out to be right and to have the last laugh. As she said in *In A Different Voice*, the blind willingness to sacrifice people to truth has always been the danger of an ethics abstracted from life.

Let me just repeat that because it's so powerful. The blind willingness to sacrifice people to truth has always been the danger of an ethics abstracted from life.

This is so important and I'll be talking later about the implications of these two orientations on our spiritual life and how we see God and what we understand our relationship to the world and other people as well as to the divine to be.

There was a famous study that was done which points to this difference between boys and girls and the fact that moral temperament actually begins to emerge at a very, very early age. Boys tend to be more focused on winning and girls tend to be more interested in maintaining relationships, even when it's at a high cost to themselves.

The great primatologist Frans de Waal talks about that impersonal rights and wrongs aren't the top priority for females and that compromises that leave social connections intact are. And the study involved what happens when a fight breaks out during a game. When a fight breaks out in a group of boys, the injured party is expected to get out of the way so that the competition can continue. But when the same thing happens among a group of girls, the game stops while all the players gather around to help the girl who's crying.

When you think about those two orientations, which are antithetical to one another, it's no wonder that Mars and Venus collide so often in their opposing orbits of fair versus care.

The good news is that men and women, masculine and feminine approaches, can benefit from each other's example and learn from one another. As I said, this isn't about polarizing or splitting the human race in two. It's about understanding that we have different orientations and that those orientations can learn and benefit from one another.

For men what that means is starting to grasp that there are no absolute moral truths, number one, and that not all people have equal needs. Men are very fond of saying "all things being equal," but all things aren't equal and there are no absolute moral truths.

For women, it means learning to separate feeling from thinking enough to be able to protect themselves from unfair treatment in relationships that discount their independence, because a women's biological nature is to connect, to stay connected, to preserve, to nurture, and all of those wonderful things. The shadow side of that tendency can be becoming a doormat, can be putting up with unjust treatment, and putting others generally before themselves.

Think about your own life.

- Are you aware of where your own stresses fall in this regard?
- How often do you, for instance, sacrifice friendships on principle?
- Are you a person for whom winning is everything?
- How willing are you to negotiate to achieve a win-win resolution?

- Are you someone who obeys a monolithic belief in Truth or are you okay with flexible case-by-case truths that take in the individual and the particularities of the example of the given situation?
- Ask yourself, are you someone who would rather be right or happy?
- Do you find yourself saying it's nothing personal a little too often? That's a very good question to ask.
- Or, are you the type of person who takes things too personally and lacks objectivity when you need it? Either of those exaggerations causes us suffering. When we believe that things aren't personal, nothing is personal; we treat people like objects and we allow ourselves to be treated like objects. When we take everything personally, we have no objectivity and we can't actually be compassionate because we're always putting ourselves first.
- Ask yourself are you a follower when you should be leading or are you someone who needs to be in charge even when you don't know what you're doing? If you've ever seen a man and woman in a car driving together you see this dynamic play out very, very often and then it's funny.
- Are you someone who tends to be loyal to your group whether it's a team, a company, a nation, or a faith, even when they're in the wrong – as we found, remember, the don't-snitch policy that was happening with gang members? Are you someone who puts loyalty and protection of the other before what's right?
- Or, are you willing to speak truth to power, even when it means standing alone and outside the in-groups popular ethic?

Of course, your answers to these questions are not going to correspond to black and white, male, female stereotypes. We all know overly devoted self-denying men and women who are philanderers.

What's useful to understand is how these orientations affect our ability to make ethical and spiritual choices. Neither approach is more right than the other because both are needed for moral integration. In the Talmud it says that the heart is the seat of the mind. That's another way of saying the same thing. One part without the other can't make a whole.

Now a word on how Venus and Mars affect our spiritual lives.

There's a profound difference between the patriarchal approach to religion, which is dominated by judgment and rules and doubt and this pessimistic view of human nature that I was just talking about, and what's known as the way of the mother, the matriarchal approach to religion. What distinguishes the matriarchal approach, the sacred feminine, as a principle is its inclusiveness, the absence of us versus them, the absence of fundamentalism and exclusivity and hierarchy and focus on punishment.

A Venusian spirituality is one that issues first and foremost from love and the mandate to realize the interdependence of all things, the mandate to build bridges and to look past differences, as E. M. Forster put it *In A Passage to India*, to only connect.

In the way of the mother, whatever divides us is a lie and whatever unites us is the truth. Form is much less important than content. And this is diametrically opposed to patriarchal religion, as you know, which focuses on form and ideology, on fidelity to your faith, and on obedience as the path to spiritual freedom.

I remember as a little kid sitting in temple and hearing the rabbi talk about a jealous and angry God, and knowing even at that very young age, that it was men who made this up, not women.

I'm not idealizing women, I'm not idealizing the Venusian way, I'm not saying that the Martian approach, the male approach, with its lessons of discipline and focus and playing the game how it's meant to be played, is without virtue or value. Of course not. That's not the case.

But in a culture that's saturated in patriarchy like ours, where the image of God the mother is almost entirely absent from our spiritual conversation, it really is vitally important that the sacred feminine be returned to her place at the center of an enlightened global spirituality. This will help us to heal the divisions that are causing so much terror in the world and also to save the planet by acknowledging that we are not and never were its masters. Indeed the future of our planet at the end of the day is the most urgent of all the reasons to question how Venus and Mars differ in their choice making and to self-correct in the direction of love and the feminine. The god of justice has had a long and a bloody reign and we're still fighting to the death over who's right.

It's time now to lay our need to be right and in our defending our ideas about justice, which actually change from culture to culture and circumstances to circumstances, to lay down this need to be right and balance it out with the need to be human, to have empathy, to be flexible and open and receptive – to stop the game every once in a while to take care of the player who's wounded, regardless of who broke the rules.

Can you imagine what a difference that would make in our lives and in our world?

The great sage and scholar Sri Aurobindo put it this way. He said, "If the future is to exist, it will wear a crown of feminine design."

A crown of feminine design. That doesn't mean that women will necessarily rule the world. What it does mean is that by bringing this expansive receptive Venusian approach to community, to worship, and to relationship, to the planet, that bringing that approach, it will balance out what we have today which is all about competition and all about the letter of the law and all about mastering this earth.

André Malraux, the poet, had a different way of saying the same thing. He said the twenty-first century will be mystical or not at all.

And in this context, mystical is actually a code word for feminine, for the way of the mother. Because what mystics are after all are folks who are attuned to the secret connections of all things, to the beautiful oneness of all being. That's what mysticism is about. That's what the feminine view is about and this is what we can learn from Venus in a world that is so dominated by Mars.

That's what I wanted to say to you tonight about the difference between the sexes and our gender orientations to ethics and to spirituality. It's a very, very big topic. It's a lot of information. Just let it set and take what's interesting and what you don't agree with please let me know. I'd love to continue having this conversation as an ongoing dialogue. And as I was saying, it's not about being right. It's about being human. It's about remaining connected.