

What's left of gender?: The metaphysics of woman, man, and non-binary identities."

Gender is no longer what we once thought it was. Those who were once assumed to be women can now turn out to be men, those we once thought were men can now be women, and many others are coming out as neither. Gender as we know it and enforce it is undergoing a revolution. LGBTQIA+ movements are urging the acceptance of transgender and non-binary identities in which one can identify as something other than the male or female designation they were assigned at birth. With this uncoupling of assigned sex at birth from one's gender identity, it seems that the very basis for what makes someone of a gender is no longer clear, leaving many wondering if genders have hence become empty categories, soon to be obsolete. Post-gender revolution, what's left of gender? I argue that a metaphysics of gender kinds is still possible. I offer a pro-revolutionary theory of gender that encompasses both trans and non-binary identities as well as the traditional man and woman categories of gender, while still remaining coherent.

Before I posit my own theory, I will outline my guiding theoretical requirements. The desiderata I'm about to present are informed by three sociological groupings of commonly-held views about gender. One common view is the gender bigot or the reactionary view. These people frequently oppose movements towards accepting trans and non-binary identities. They believe that a coherent theory of gender is impossible if we are to accept that people can be a gender other than the male or female they were assigned at birth, and hence we must defend the traditional view. Gender under this view is both biologically determined and binary, meaning everyone is either a man or a woman with nothing in between.

However, the bigot-reactionary view falls apart once we break down the biological view of binary sex which it is founded upon, as I will do now. Many assume biological sex is a straightforward, primordial categorization, but this is not really the case. Biological sex apart from gender is actually a very recent concept, emerging from Western science only around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Gender bigots take biological sex to be the *basis* of binary gender, when in fact historically, prior-held notions

of gender informed the construction of biological sex. No biologist to this day has been able to locate any reliable factor that determines biological sex, though many have tried and failed. We commonly think of XX and XY chromosomes, genitals, and hormone levels as the primary determiners of sex, but none of these function as a central biological marker that can consistently indicate if someone is male or female. One of the many examples demonstrating this is that there are people with a condition called androgen-insensitivity who appear according to our societal standards to be indisputably female down to every characteristic from the wide hips to the female genitals to the feminine facial features, but they in fact have the characteristically male XY chromosomes and hidden testes. Even so, by our societally-instilled, common sense radars for tracking perceived sex, we are inclined to assign this person to be “female” and hence a woman. Cases like these reveal that there is no core determining characteristic to be found across all people we socially perceive as women in this way. To this point one might argue that these people of ambiguous sex, known as intersex people, are the rare, fringe in-between, and that their existence does not jeopardize the binary biological model for sex for the majority of the population. However, intersexuality is not as uncommon as one might think, with an estimated 1.7% of all births falling into this category. Considering how there are billions of people on this Earth, this seeming minority cannot be thought of as insignificant.

In everyday usage, we’re typically not even discerning a person’s sex using these now debunked “core determiners” anyways. We can’t see a person’s genitals or chromosomes upon meeting them, so really our intuitive radars are tracking masculine versus feminine secondary characteristics and trying to use those to make a guess at their sex. This method is even more inconclusive, seeing as virtually every one of these secondary traits attributed to either males or females can also be seen in the opposite sex. For example, a larger thyroid cartilage or Adam’s apple is typically thought of as a male physical trait because the average male’s Adam’s apple is larger than the average woman’s. However, there is a huge range of sizes observed across both sexes, and the largest female Adam’s apple is bigger than the smallest male Adam’s apple. If the binary view of sex were true, the statistical graphs comparing males

versus females on these secondary sex characteristics would look more like the top graph, but instead they all look like the bottom one, with an overlap and only a trivial standard deviation. I used a graph with dog breeds rather than sexes, but you get the idea.

The most nuanced and complete understanding of biology considering all these factors lends way to a continuous spectrum view of sex rather than the neat either-or of just male and female. It's time to accept that biological sex is extremely messy and provides no clear material grounding for the mainstream binary gender view as the gender bigots claim, because even biological sex *itself* is not binary after all. Now that I've debunked the biological basis for binary gender, we see that gender already is and always has been a socially-grounded rather than biologically-grounded category, and hence the progressive trans and non-binary inclusive perspectives cannot be dismissed on the basis of their being supposedly unscientific and counterfactual.

Now that I've put the bigot-reactionary view to rest, let's talk about the more favorable options. The other two views are both in the progressive camp, sharing a motive of liberating trans and non-binary people from societal oppression. However, they have different ideas of how this aim is best achieved. The abolitionist thinks that just the having of gender categories will always remain inherently restrictive of our freedom to look and express however we choose. To them gender creates unnecessary labels which are tending towards becoming empty categories anyways as we become more and more fluid with our use of them, so we're better off without them in the long run.

The third camp are the gender revisionists, who think that gender as a concept is not intrinsically restrictive, but rather, something to be revised in our theoretical understanding so as to be more inclusive of a greater diversity of identities. I endorse this view because demonstrably gender identity is not always a bad thing, but can be a good or neutral thing as a way to understand oneself and communicate how one would like to be regarded. Another reason is that we need to retain a working framework of language about gender in order to understand and communicate oppression on the basis

of gender, because the gender oppression will probably not go away even if we abolish gender categories. On the contrary, these issues will only become masked and inarticulable.

Informed by the progressive revisionist perspective, I've come up with these desiderata for the ideal definition of gender. D1: An adequate theory must understand gender as real, because it has real social effects, from discrimination on its basis to celebration. D2: It must understand gender as a potentially good or neutral thing. One of the most famous theories of gender was by feminist philosopher Sally Haslanger who argued that genders were kinds of social classes where what it means to be a woman is to be oppressed on the basis of one's perceived reproductive roles and what it means to be a man is to be privileged on the same basis. However, trans women *choose* to identify as women, which wouldn't make sense if all it means to be a woman is to be oppressed. Last requirement is D3: a theory of gender must accommodate trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming identities. Trans and gender non-conforming people face disproportionately high rates of violence, with at least 128 hate-motivated murders of trans people in the US recorded since 2013. In order to create a safer world for these people, we need to stop disregarding their identities as marginal and incorrect, and so an ideal theory of gender ought to validate everyone's identities.

I argue that what it means to be a member of a gender is to sincerely identify with that gender, and what it is to identify with a gender is to carry an ideal bearing some derivative connection to the history, community, or culture surrounding that gender. An ideal is a conglomeration of ideas about a subject that are considered emblematic of what it means to be that thing or what that thing involves. This ideal is not some universal notion of "the" ideal of that gender, but rather a personalized take on what that means for oneself. In the formation of a gender identity, one takes in all the ways in which this gender has been instantiated by others in the past and present as raw materials, noticing various characteristics, style choices, mannerisms, and so on associated with the gender then picking and choosing from these to collage into their own inspired definition of womanhood, or manhood, or demi-boy-hood, and so on.

Though genders are often a large and pervasive part of who one is that may inform many facets one's life, typically one does not wholly instantiate one's own ideal. To this point I introduce gender's analogy to spiritual totems, a feature common to many Indigenous religions and cultures. A totem can be defined as a plant or animal species, natural element, or spiritual being which represents the identity of either a group or individual. For someone whose totem is a tiger, they typically do not instantiate the majority of what it means to be a tiger of course, just some chosen core qualities like bravery maybe. However, that identity is still so strongly felt that they are inclined to say "I *am* a tiger person." The same is the case for gender identities. A person assigned female at birth for example who later comes to identify as a man *is* a man, whether or not they choose to transition or otherwise fulfill most or even any other societally-recognized norms of manhood. They are their gender because they carry that gendered ideal with them and interpret themselves through that lens.

To conclude, I implore you to reflect: why not allow people the full freedom to be and become who they are? Why not be fluid, creative, or even avant garde? Why not play with the available gender motifs as if they were painting styles or music genres, mixing and matching, while also poetically evolving our language to reflect that? Let's not be art nazis or gender gatekeepers, but visionaries and revolutionaries because...why not?