

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF GENDER IDENTITY:
A CHALLENGE TO TRANSGENDERISM

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Several years ago, Trans Student Educational Resources introduced the Gender Unicorn, a tool to help students discover their gender identity, gender expression, and sexual and emotional attractions.¹ In a recent study that used the Gender Identity Scale of the Gender Unicorn, Felicity Ho and Alexander Mussap were able to group 269 participants into seven broad gender classes. They also gave the participants an opportunity to write in their own gender identities. Over fifty distinct gender identities were given.² We live in age of rapidly proliferating gender identities.

In the recent past, it was widely assumed that there were only two genders, male and female, which were based on one's biological sex. Aside from individuals who had ambiguous genitalia (a condition known as intersex or disorders of sexual development, or DSD), each person was clearly either a boy or a girl, a man or a woman. This view is still held by many today, of course. For those who held, or continue to hold, such a view, knowledge of one's own gender or the gender of another is straightforward: we know gender by knowing the body.

Yet today young people are being encouraged to question their own gender identity, and it is no longer assumed that one's gender is based on biology. Accordingly, now people are asking a question that was rarely voiced in the past: "What is my gender?"

¹ Trans Student Educational Resources, "The Gender Unicorn," <http://www.transstudent.org/gender>.

² Felicity Ho and Alexander J. Mussap, "The Gender Identity Scale: Adapting the Gender Unicorn to Measure Gender Identity," *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity* 6, no. 2 (2019): 217–231. Answers to the question, "How would you usually describe your gender?" appear on p. 227.

Questions about gender identity are also being asked in schools, courtrooms, airports, and even in the halls of Congress.³ In short, whenever accommodations, institutions, and competitions involve gender distinctions, the question, “What gender are they?” is being asked. Questions about gender identity are important because, according to Anna Fast and Kristina Olson, “Gender is perhaps the central way in which children and adults carve the social world into categories.”⁴

In this paper, I will attempt to examine various ways of knowing one’s own gender identity or the gender identity of another. I will assume that gender is a property, though I wish to beg no metaphysical questions. Yet any way of knowing must assume some metaphysical truths.⁵ Therefore, I will consider how one might know one’s own gender if gender is based on an objective physical reality (one’s body), an objective immaterial reality (one’s mind or soul), a subjective social construction (how one society defines gender), or merely a personal subjective feeling. Likewise, I will consider how one might know another person’s gender given the same four possible bases for gender identity.

I do not claim to have all the answers regarding the hotly debated issues of sex and gender. I will likely raise more questions than I can answer. However, I will conclude that if gender is not based on an objective physical reality, then we are swimming in murky epistemic waters. The most reliable method of knowing gender (one’s own or that of others) is related to biological knowledge. All other means of knowing gender identity are based on questionable

³ To see how “the epistemic uncertainty of classification” (p. 557) occurs at the airport, see Paisley Currah and Tara Mulqueen, “Identity, Biometrics, and Transgender Bodies at the Airport,” *Social Research* 78, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 557–82. Senator Marsha Blackburn recently asked Supreme Court nominee Ketanji Brown Jackson to provide a definition for the word “woman.”

⁴ Anna A. Fast and Kristina R. Olson, “Gender Development in Transgender Preschool Children,” *Child Development* 89, no. 2 (March/April 2018): 620.

⁵ According to Robert C. Koons and Timothy J. Pickavance, “any epistemology must presuppose the truth of some metaphysical principles, for example, that there are truths and minds.” Koons and Pickavance, *Metaphysics: The Fundamentals* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 240.

epistemic (as well as metaphysical) grounds, which presents a problem for transgenderism. However, if knowing one's biological sex is the most reliable way of knowing one's gender identity, then this fact, if it is one, serves as supporting evidence for a particular ontology of gender, one that is part of a theistic worldview.

Definitions

One difficulty in writing about issues of sex and gender is keeping track of an expanding list of terms, the definitions of which seem to change, and sometimes rapidly so. To help the reader, I will now define some key terms used in this paper.

Sex refers to biological categories of human beings, typically male or female. Sex is based on chromosomes, hormones, gonads, and genitals.⁶ Men and women have different *primary sex characteristics* (body parts directly involved in sexual reproduction) and different *secondary sex characteristics* (those biological characteristics not involved in sexual reproduction, but typical of either sex, such as facial hair and larger muscle mass in men, and breasts, the ability to nurse children, and menstrual cycles in women). I will do my best to clarify when I am referring to sex and when I am referring to gender.⁷

Mark Yarhouse provides the following definition of *gender*: “The psychological, social and cultural aspects of being male or female.”⁸ Here, “male or female,” at least in the eyes of

⁶ Females typically have two XX sex chromosomes, whereas males have one X sex chromosome and one Y sex chromosome. Individuals with DSD may have different chromosomes. For example, those with Klinefelter Syndrome have XXY chromosomes. However, those individuals are unambiguously male. Speaking of individuals with DSD who truly have an ambiguous sex, Leonard Sax claims that “such individuals account for less than 0.02% of the general population.” Sax, “How Common Is Intersex? A Response to Anne Fausto-Sterling,” *Journal of Sex Research* 39, no. 3 (2002): 175. Individuals with DSD also may have atypical genitalia. In my discussion of sex and gender, I will not focus on these individuals, for two reasons: the vast majority of those with DSD are unambiguously male or female, and the rarity of this condition seems to be the exception that proves the rule.

⁷ Typically, writers will use *male* and *female* when referring to sex and *masculine* and *feminine* when referring to gender, though these conventions are by no means universally adopted. Some use the terms *natal male* or *natal female* or *assigned male at birth* (AMAB) and *assigned female at birth* (AFAB) when referring to sex.

⁸ Mark A. Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 17.

some, need not refer to sex. Some think that gender is based on biology.⁹ Others think that gender is a social construct, such that a biological man can be a woman (a trans woman) and a biological woman can be a man (a trans man), or that either could be nonbinary or possess some other gender identity. According to Jack Drescher, “*Gender identity* refers to one’s persistent inner sense of belonging to either the male or female gender category.” He also hastens to add that gender is not to be confused with sexual orientation. “Gender identity can be an independent variable in relation to sexual orientation. For example, some people can be born with a male body, have a female gender identity, and, in some cases, be attracted to men (androphilic) while others may be attracted to women (gynephilic).”¹⁰

Finally, it is important to define the terms *transgender* and *transgenderism*. Yarhouse provides the following definition of *transgender*: “An umbrella term for the many ways in which people might experience and/or present and express (or live out) their gender identities differently from people whose sense of gender identity is congruent with their biological sex.”¹¹ I define the term *transgenderism* broadly. It can be understood as a proposition: it is possible for an individual to have a gender identity that doesn’t match their sex. Transgenderism can also be understood as a movement that gives voice to that proposition. The number of individuals who

⁹ Christopher West puts it rather bluntly: “Contrary to widespread secular insistence, a person’s gender is not a malleable social construct. Rather, a person’s gender is determined by the kind of genitals he or she has.” West, *Our Bodies Tell God’s Story* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2020), 28. He points out that the *gen-* prefix means “to produce” or “give birth.”

¹⁰ Jack Drescher, “Queer Diagnoses: Parallels and Contrasts in the History of Homosexuality, Gender Variance, and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 39 (2010): 438 (italics added to the first quotation).

¹¹ Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, 19–21. It should also be noted that while all trans people experience incongruity between their sex and their perceived gender identity, not all trans people experience gender dysphoria, a condition in which people feel psychological and emotional distress because of that incongruity. Some refer to biological men and women who have a gender identity that matches their sex as *cisgender*. The prefix, *cis-*, is derived from the Latin word meaning “on this side” or “on the near side.” *Trans-*, by contrast, is derived from the Latin prefix meaning “across,” “on the other side,” or “on the far side.”

identify as transgender is relatively small, but there are many more cisgender people who believe that transgenderism (the proposition) is true and are part of transgenderism (the movement).¹²

How Do I Know My Gender?

With those basic definitions in mind, let us now turn to the question of how one can know one's own gender. For those who believe that gender is based on sex, one knows one's gender by knowing one's sex. We are aware of our bodies through proprioception—each of us has a privileged first-person awareness of the location and movements of our body's parts. We are also aware of our biological sex through years of looking down at our bodies or looking in the mirror. If we happened to be one of the rare people who have ambiguous genitalia, we could undergo genetic testing to uncover whether we are genetically male or female.

Though much is still unknown about the development of a child's own sense of gender identity, it seems that the child's biology plays a strong role.¹³ Infants become aware of the sex differences of others and begin to become aware of their own bodies. The child's gender identity is also likely shaped by the testimony of adults, who reinforce whether the child is male or

¹² While we do not know exactly how many people identify as transgender, surveys indicate that 0.6 percent of American adults identify as transgender. See "How Many Adults Identify as Transgender in the United States?" Williams Institute, June 2016, <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/trans-adults-united-states>. Surveys also indicate that 1.8 percent of American high school students identify as transgender. See Michelle M. Johns et al., "Transgender Identity and Experiences of Violence Victimization, Substance Use, Suicide Risk, and Sexual Risk Behaviors among High School Students—19 States and Large Urban School Districts, 2017," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 68, no. 3 (2019): 67–71.

¹³ Carol Lynn Martin and Diane Ruble state that "it is not yet known at what age children begin to identify with gender in some form. . . . Such questions have been asked for decades, and have critical implications for health and mental health, but convincing answers have remained elusive." Martin and Ruble, "Children's Search for Gender Cues: Cognitive Perspectives on Gender Development," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 13, no. 2 (April 2004): 70. However, they indicate that infants begin to discriminate between male and female voices by 6 months and can discriminate between pictures of men and women by 9 months (p. 69). Fast and Olson also report such findings, adding that by age 2 children are familiar with gender labels, "display preferences for objects and people associated with their own gender . . . and show rudimentary gender stereotyping" ("Gender Development in Transgender Preschool Children," 621). By age 3, "children display a strong preference for same-gender people" and begin to "use gender to guide their expectations of others' appearances and activities" (p. 622).

female with countless utterances of sentences like, “What a beautiful boy!” and, “You’re such a good girl!”

It is also possible that one can have a biologically based direct awareness of one’s gender even in the absence of proprioception, visual recognition of genitalia, and the testimony of others. The case of David Reimer indicates that this might be so. David was born Bruce, an unambiguously male baby. A horrific accident that occurred when Bruce was being circumcised left him without a penis. Under the advice of John Money, a psychologist at Johns Hopkins University, Bruce’s parents had him castrated when he was 22 months old. From that time, he was raised as a girl named Brenda. Money strictly warned Mr. and Mrs. Reimer never to tell their child what had happened or to treat him as anything other than a girl. However, Brenda never felt at ease as a girl. This didn’t change when he took estrogen (from ages 12 to 14). Finally, after years of psychological difficulties, his parents decided to tell him the truth. At about the time he was 15, he began living once again as a boy, now deciding to take a different name, David. Though David had no conscious remembrance of the months that he was raised as a boy, or the tragic accident that changed the course of his life, he seemed to have a sense that he wasn’t really a girl. David “says he knew something was amiss, even before he fully understood the concept of boy and girl.”¹⁴ David’s twin brother, Brian, said, “I recognized Brenda as my sister. . . . But she never, ever acted the part.”¹⁵

It is possible that David retained some awareness of his early life as a boy. It might be argued that his sense of gender identity was not based on some innate, biologically based sense of sex/gender, but was based on a subconscious knowledge of the seven months that he lived as a

¹⁴ John Colapinto, *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 60. The book was first published by Harper Collins in 2000, and it was reprinted six years later with a tragic update on David, who committed suicide at the age of 38 in 2004.

¹⁵ Colapinto, *As Nature Made Him*, 57.

fully intact boy, and/or the fifteen months that elapsed between his accident and his sex-change surgery.¹⁶ Perhaps there is no biologically based innate awareness of one's gender in the absence of sensing or seeing one's genitals and in the absence of the testimony of others. Yet there is another case of an apparent girl who, at the age of 14, announced to a school nurse, "I am not a girl, I am a boy." This "girl," referred to in a case study as "V.P.," realized at the age of 10 that he was a boy. Prior to V.P.'s declaration, he was raised as a daughter and had what appeared to be female genitalia. Subsequent genetic testing revealed that V.P. was male, with XY chromosomes. Exploratory surgery showed that he had both male and female primary sex characteristics. V.P. was granted surgery and testosterone replacement therapy to live his life as a male.¹⁷ From all outward appearances, this child appeared female, was raised female, and yet had a strong intuition that he was actually a boy, an intuition confirmed through medical testing. This indicates that there may be some physical basis, such as a genetic hardwiring of the brain, for knowing one's own gender.

There is another theory, also rooted in biology, that might support transgenderism. Though trans people have gender identities opposite their chromosomes, gonads, genitals, and hormones, it is possible that their brains are more similar to the brains of members of the opposite sex than they are to the brains of members of their own sex. Brain sex hypotheses predict that the structures of the male and female brains are different, and that trans people have brains more similar to the brains of the opposite sex than to brains of their own sex.¹⁸

¹⁶ Colapinto admits that later there were "environmental cues" that might have led Brenda to become aware that there was something abnormal about his gender identity, including his scarred genitals, which had not been fully transformed to female ones (Brenda refused to have vaginoplasty); annual trips to see Dr. Money, during which Brenda was asked questions about her gender identity and sexual desires; and the way that her peers acknowledged her masculine tendencies (*As Nature Made Him*, 279).

¹⁷ William George Reiner, "Case Study: Sex Reassignment in a Teenage Girl," *Journal of the Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 35, no. 6 (1996): 799–803.

¹⁸ For discussions of the brain sex hypothesis, see J. Alan Branch, *Affirming God's Image: Addressing the Transgender Question with Science and Scripture* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 68–80; Preston Sprinkle,

If these brain sex hypotheses could be confirmed, then there is a physical basis for transgender identities. Just as V.P. somehow knew that he was a boy, despite outward appearances and the testimony of others, a trans man, for example, though biologically female, knows that he is indeed a man because he has a male brain in an otherwise female body. If this is so, then knowledge of one's own gender might very well be grounded in the brain.

However, studies have not demonstrated that there are such things as male and female brains. Studies that set out to confirm brain sex hypotheses have used very small sample sizes, and the brains of transgender individuals might have been changed by years of cross-sex hormone therapy.¹⁹ According to Alan Branch, “The use of cross-sex hormones appears to induce changes in the brain, and it is possible such changes do not reverse with the cessation of hormonal therapy.”²⁰ Therefore, it is unlikely that any differences in, for example, the brains of trans men and cisgender women (both biologically female) caused the trans men to have different gender identities. It seems likely that causation ran in the opposite direction, so that testosterone taken by trans men changed their brains. At this time, brain sex hypotheses are far from confirmed, which puts any biological basis for transgender identities in doubt.

If gender is based in biology, then there are some straightforward ways that one can know one's gender. This can be verified by genetic testing or inspection of sex characteristics (assuming that these have not been altered by sex reassignment surgery). Yet at this time, transgender identities are not objective conditions that can be diagnosed through medical tests.

What if, however, gender is not based on an objective *physical* reality, but on an objective *immaterial* reality? Perhaps the mind or the soul is gendered, such that it is possible for

Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church, and What the Bible Has to Say (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2021), 129–41; and Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, 67–74.

¹⁹ Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, 72.

²⁰ Branch, *Affirming God's Image*, 72.

a biological man to have a female mind or a biological woman to have a male soul. Of course, those who hold to worldviews that eliminate immaterial entities cannot make this appeal, at least not while being consistent in their beliefs. However, on some form of substance dualism, it is possible for a gendered soul to be matched with the body of the opposite sex. Joshua Farris admits that “on Cartesian dualism, there is a metaphysical possibility that the soul, if souls are gendered, could have inhabited an incompatible body; for example, a woman could be in a male body.”²¹ On other anthropological views, in which humans are composites of soul and body, it seems unlikely that there would be such a mismatch. On a Thomistic, hylomorphic model, the soul informs the body: “The bodily sex type is a manifestation of a deeper fact about the person: he is a *he* and she is a *she*, and the two cannot be confused.”²² On an emergentist account of the soul, according to which the soul emerges from the body, it would seem unlikely there would be a mismatch.²³ This view does not look promising.

If the soul is gendered, and if it is possible for the soul to be matched with a body of the opposite sex, then this would have negative implications for a theist’s view of God. For according to some forms of theism, God is the one who matches the soul with a body. According to Edward Furton, “Any claim that a sexed soul could be infused into the wrong body would adversely affect one of the central dogmatic teachings of the Catholic Church, namely, that God immediately infuses the soul into the body. Under this doctrine, if there were true cases of sexed souls in the wrong bodies, God would be responsible for the mistake.”²⁴ Protestant theology allows for two possible ways that the soul could originate. One is traducianism, in which the

²¹ Joshua R. Farris, *An Introduction to Theological Anthropology: Humans, Both Creaturely and Divine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 209n4.

²² Farris, *An Introduction to Theological Anthropology*, 224.

²³ Farris, *An Introduction to Theological Anthropology*, 227. For an emergentist account, see William Hasker, *The Emergent Self* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

²⁴ Edward J. Furton, “The Soul Is Not Sexed,” *Ethics & Medics* 41, no. 11 (November 2016): 4. Furton seems to use “sexed” in a way synonymous with “gendered.”

souls of children are generated from the souls of the parents. The other is creationism, according to which “God creates the soul directly and immediately and attaches it to the body.” If creationism is true, then “God would then be directly responsible for placing a male soul in a female body or a female soul in a male body.”²⁵

Still, it is conceivable that a gendered soul could be mismatched with a sexed body. Therefore, it is at least logically possible. If it were true that such a mismatch could occur, how would we know? Again, the epistemic question arises. As Farris asks, “How could I or we make determinate that a soul is mismatched with its body? Is there some feature or property that one could point to in order to make determinate one gender that is distinct from biological sex? It is not entirely clear what epistemic resources one could point to in order to determine a fact of the matter about one’s gender that is not consistent with one’s biological sex.”²⁶

Perhaps the only way that one could know that one has a mismatched soul is through an individual’s privileged first-person awareness. The individual might simply have a basic belief that he or she is a male or female soul, even if he or she has a body of the opposite sex. This is certainly a possibility. One could believe that one is what we might call a trans soul. But do we have reason to believe that such beliefs are true?

Perhaps gender is not grounded in an ontological reality. Perhaps gender is simply a social construct. If that were true, then we could know our gender identity in two steps: first, we could learn our society’s definition of various genders (male, female, nonbinary, etc.); and, second, we could then reflect on our own dispositions and behaviors. In such a case, we would make inferences based on our likes and behaviors in order to know our own gender identities. Perhaps, upon reflection, a biological boy realizes that he likes playing dress-up, adorning

²⁵ Farris, *An Introduction to Theological Anthropology*, 227.

²⁶ Farris, *An Introduction to Theological Anthropology*, 226.

himself in his mother's clothes, playing with dolls, and having tea parties. He then concludes, "I must be a girl," because his society deems that such behaviors are feminine.

While it is possible that gender could be a social construct, there are multiple problems that arise if this were true. First, how are genders defined? If gender is not based on sex, then any definition of gender seems to be rather arbitrary. Second, nonbiological definitions of *boy* and *girl* and *man* and *woman* seem to reinforce cultural stereotypes. But why should we believe that only boys should like, for example, sports and rough-and-tumble play, while girls like dolls and dresses? Furthermore, cultural norms regarding what is masculine and feminine come and go, and they vary throughout the world. Third, "if gender is a social construct," as John Skalko observes, "then a person's gender could change depending on physical location and the surrounding culture, even without his or her consent."²⁷ Such a possibility is absurd. Fourth, while advocates of transgenderism claim that gender is a social construct, they aren't consistent in maintaining that belief. As Benjamin Arbour and John Gilhooly observe, "Trans persons seem to claim that there is a deep ontological reality that would transcend particular cultures or individual societies. The testimonies of trans persons suggest that their self-understandings aren't merely surface level claims about their identities with respect to some particular culture or society. Therefore, it seems that transgender persons are less likely to buy into the idea that all genders are socially constructed."²⁸ Fifth, if gender is merely a social construct, and not grounded in biology, then why do so many who experience gender incongruity and dysphoria wish to receive cross-sex hormone therapy and gender reassignment surgeries?²⁹

²⁷ John Skalko, "The Incoherence of Gender as a Social Construct," *Ethics & Medics* 45, no. 4 (April 2020): 2.

²⁸ Benjamin J. Arbour and John R. Gilhooly, "Transgenderism, Human Ontology, and the Metaphysics of Properties," Evangelical Philosophical Society, [https://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/Arbour%20and%20Gilhooly_Transgenderism%20\(Final2019-1\).pdf](https://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/Arbour%20and%20Gilhooly_Transgenderism%20(Final2019-1).pdf), 13.

²⁹ Arbour and Gilhooly make a similar point ("Transgenderism, Human Ontology, and the Metaphysics of Properties," 10).

In short, there are many problems with the idea that gender is a social construct. However, if it were, then knowing one's gender would be a matter of knowing a particular society's understandings of gender and then reflecting on which socially constructed gender one best matches.

The only other alternative, it seems to me, is that one could have a strong sense of personal gender identity that is not biologically based, not based on an objective immaterial reality, and not dependent upon whatever definitions of gender society has constructed. A boy may simply say, "I feel like a girl." But does this statement count as knowledge of gender identity? Certainly, the individual knows what he is feeling. But knowledge of a feeling is quite different from knowledge of gender identity.

Subjective feelings can be irrational, and not representative of reality. We know that to be true with respect to other conditions. Body integrity identity disorder (BIID) is the persistent "desire to become physically disabled, such as being an amputee or a paraplegic, in an otherwise unaffected individual. For such individuals, the primary conscious reason for wanting to become disabled is a sense that their anatomical configuration as an able-bodied person is somehow wrong or inappropriate and that they were meant to go through life as a disabled person."³⁰ People with BIID are healthy individuals who strongly identify as being disabled, and who desire to alter surgically their bodies in order to bring them in line with their own sense of identity. Such individuals claim to know something that isn't rooted in anything other than their desires. They know how they feel, but they don't seem to know something very important about themselves: that their bodies are not meant to be disabled. The same could be true of those who claim to know that they have a gender identity that doesn't align with their sex.

³⁰ Michael B. First and Carl E. Fischer, "Body Integrity Identity Disorder: The Persistent Desire to Acquire a Physical Disability," *Psychopathology* 45, no. 3 (2012): 3.

How Do I Know Their Gender?

We often think we know the gender identity of others based on inspection of their secondary sex characteristics. We seem to detect quite easily whether a person is a man or a woman, usually based on a combination of factors such as size, facial features, facial hair, a laryngeal prominence (a.k.a. Adam's apple), breasts, and perhaps the way that a person moves. We also listen: when that person speaks or sings, we are usually able to determine whether the person is male or female. We don't normally see a person's primary sex characteristics, nor do we see someone else's genetic profile, but these could be used to verify gender. At present, brain scans cannot indicate a person's gender.

But what if gender isn't grounded in biology? Perhaps gender identity is grounded in a gendered soul. If that is the case, we would have no way of knowing another person's gender apart from their testimony. The same would be true if gender identity is nothing more than how someone feels, apart from any objective physical or metaphysical reality.

When it comes to personal truth claims, "In general, we accept another's first-person belief report unless we have positive reasons for rejecting it."³¹ However, in this case, we do have positive reasons for rejecting such a claim. We don't have good reason to think that people have gendered souls that are misaligned with their sex. On physicalism, there is no soul, no immaterial entity that could bear the property that is gender. On theism, it is unlikely that God would match a soul with the wrong body.³² It's even debatable whether the soul itself is gendered in any sense. While a person may think that he or she has a transgendered soul, we have no reason to believe that such a claim is true. As Arbour and Gilhooly state, "Since a claim

³¹ Sanford Goldberg, "Self-Knowledge," in *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Sven Bernecker and Duncan Pritchard (New York: Routledge, 2011), 308.

³² If traducianism is true, then it is possible that somehow a soul could be mismatched with a body, a state of affairs that could be attributed to the ravaging effects of sin.

about one's gender can be construed as a metaphysical claim, people's testimonies about their own genders are not epistemically compelling insofar as these testimonies make metaphysical claims for a couple of reasons. First, people can deceive themselves. Second, people do not have special metaphysical expertise on the basis simply of having privileged access to the contents of their mental lives."³³

Another possible way to know the gender of someone else is to believe that person's testimony regarding the way they feel. We should take seriously the claim, "I feel like my true gender identity does not align with my biological sex." But that statement can be understood simply to express a proposition regarding how that person feels. And such a proposition would normally be regarded as true. We usually take people at their word when they tell us how they feel. However, we would need a more compelling reason to believe that statement to be a true proposition regarding the ontology of gender identity. If someone said their true identity was being disabled when we could see that their body was healthy, we would have no reason to believe their identity claim. We would believe that they are having a feeling of incongruency between their psychological identity and their physical condition, and we should treat such a person with compassion and respect.

Finally, assuming that gender is a social construct, we could observe a person's behavior to discover their gender. Many surveys regarding childhood gender identities ask questions about the playmates a child chooses to play with, the toys he or she gravitates toward, the clothing the child likes to wear, and so forth.³⁴ Sometimes, these questions ask with whom a child identifies, such as which characters in television shows and movies the child imitates. But many of the

³³ Arbour and Gilhooly, "Transgenderism, Human Ontology, and the Metaphysics of Properties," 7.

³⁴ One example is Laurel L. Johnson et al., "A Parent-Report Gender Identity Questionnaire for Children," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 33, no. 2 (April 2004): 105–116. The questionnaire given to parents appears on pp. 114–15. Another example is Fast and Olson, "Gender Development in Transgender Preschool Children."

questions rely on socially constructed gender stereotypes. In fact, when we don't allow biology to guide discussions of gender, ironically enough, we tend to reinforce gender stereotypes.³⁵

Evaluation

If gender is grounded in biology, then our source of knowledge is the body: primary and secondary sex characteristics and genes. In rare cases, genetic testing might be needed to determine the sex of individuals with ambiguous sex characteristics. Brain sex hypotheses are not likely to be confirmed, and it is difficult to imagine producing technology that would enable us to see beyond reasonable doubt that one has a male or female brain.

If gender is not grounded in biology, then we might know our own gender identity through a direct awareness of one's own gendered soul (if souls are indeed gendered), through observations regarding behavior (ours or someone else's), or through the personal testimony of others. Multiple problems are present if gender is not biologically based. One, we could never assume anyone's gender based on observations of physical appearance or even based on DNA testing. Two, many people will not likely accept the notion of a misaligned gendered soul: physicalists will deny there is a soul, and theists will likely deny a mismatch between gender and sex for theological reasons. Three, if behavior determines gender, we would need to know how men and women act, which would require knowing who men and women are in the first place. Additionally, gender-determining behaviors could not include sexual attraction and activity,

³⁵ Mark A. Yarhouse and Julia Sadusky have worked with many young people who have experienced gender incongruity and dysphoria, and they have this concern. "We wonder if, for some teens, adopting an emerging gender identity is a way of making meaning out of the sense that they do not fit into rigid stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. A teenage boy who isn't drawn to sports will likely feel out of place among his male peers when the conversation turns to football. A teenage girl who isn't drawn to makeup might feel inadequate among her female peers when they start discussing *Cosmo* magazine. The more stringent their community's gender expectations—especially women who are told that they must be either stylish and fashionable or, conversely, meek and homely in order to be godly women—the more heightened their sense of displacement may be." Yarhouse and Sadusky, *Emerging Gender Identities: Understanding the Diverse Experiences of Today's Youth* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2020), 26–27.

since gender is not identical to sexuality. Four, the notion that gender is socially constructed means that definitions of gender are constantly changing: different societies do not agree on gender identities and gender-appropriate behavior. Even within American history, what is considered to be acceptable feminine behavior has changed substantially. Additionally, the notion that gender is socially constructed could yield absurd results (a person's gender changes based on a change of location). Five, we have no reason to believe that gender identity claims based on subjective feelings should be treated as metaphysical claims. Rather, they are statements regarding how one feels, not what one is.

When people sincerely claim that they feel that they are transgender, they are relating a subjective feeling to which they have privileged first-person access. However, as stated above, that does not mean that they are in a privileged position to make metaphysical claims about their gender identity. They might be in a position similar to the person who experiences pain though there is no physical cause of the pain.³⁶ We should treat such a person with compassion and respect, but we need not conclude that such a person must have a medical condition and should be given opioids. The issue is psychological, not physical; it is an issue of how they are feeling, not about their metaphysical identity. Similarly, people with BIID may feel that they ought to be disabled, but surgeons should not amputate healthy limbs in order to align the body with one's personal sense of identity.³⁷ The person who claims to have a transgender identity may be in a

³⁶ "Many people report pain in the absence of tissue damage or any likely pathophysiological cause; usually this happens for psychological reasons. There is usually no way to distinguish their experience from that due to tissue damage if we take the subjective report." Rafał Gorczyca1, Rafał Filip, and Ewa Walczak, "Psychological Aspects of Pain," *Annals of Agricultural and Environmental Medicine* 20, Special Issue 1 (2013): 23. Maryann Ayim and Barbara Houston liken gender identity claims to first-person claims of experiencing pain in "The Epistemology of Gender Identity: Implications for Social Policy," *Social Theory and Practice* 11, no. 11 (Spring 1985): 36. The paper is dated, but it is telling that this was the only paper about the epistemology of gender identity that I could find. This is a largely unexplored field of study.

³⁷ It would also be unlikely that the government would issue someone with BIID a handicapped parking permit.

similar position. They clearly feel something, a sense that their core identity is not reflected in their body. Though we should treat such people with compassion and respect, this does not mean that this is their true gender identity.

Conclusion

It seems that the most reliable way of knowing one's gender is available to us only if gender is grounded in sex. If gender is not biologically based, then we cannot assume to know the gender of anyone, at least not by observing physical traits. If gender is socially constructed, knowledge of gender depends on the shifting sands of a society's definition of manhood and womanhood (or any other gender, for that matter). If gender identity is a subjective feeling, then we are not obligated to think that such a feeling reflects reality. If we have good reasons for thinking that reality is other than the way we or others feel, then we can acknowledge that feeling without basing any ontology of gender upon it.

One final note: I write from the perspective of a Christian, and it is worth mentioning that Christianity can affirm that gender is based on sex. Traditional Christian doctrine, developed on the basis of Scripture, has maintained that much. Additionally, Christianity can also explain why our beliefs, even regarding something to which we would appear to have privileged first-person access, such as our gender identity, can be mistaken. The noetic effects of sin damage our ability to know ourselves truly,³⁸ and can even lead to self-deception.³⁹

³⁸ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford, 2000), 213.

³⁹ Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 235–36.

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