Conceptual Engineering of Gender Identity

MSc Thesis (*Afstudeerscriptie*)

written by

Emma Batistoni
(born August 19, 2000 in Firenze, Italy)

under the supervision of **Dr Karolina Krzyżanowska**, and submitted to the Examinations Board in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MSc in Logic

at the *Universiteit van Amsterdam*.

Date of the public defense:	**Members of the Thesis Committee:**
April 8, 2026	Dr Maria Aloni (chair)
	Dr Karolina Krzyżanowska (supervisor)
	Dr Gulzaar Barn
	Dr Luca Incurvati

INSTITUTE FOR LOGIC, LANGUAGE AND COMPUTATION

Orlando had become a woman – there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing to alter their identity.

Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (1928)

Girl, how do you feel being a girl?
How do you feel being a girl?
Man, I don't know, I'm just a girl

Charli XCX & Lorde, *Girl, so confusing featuring lorde* (2024)

Abstract

Gender identity is typically understood as one's innate sense of themselves as some gender, and being trans as identifying as a gender other than one's assigned gender at birth. I argue that a lack of explanation as to what it is to have a sense of oneself as some gender has two major shortcomings: it is not useful in gender questioning experiences, and it does not show that gender identities merit respect. I therefore propose an ameliorative analysis of the concept of gender identity that aims to fix these defects, starting from primitive commitments to trans rights, to taking self-identification as sufficient to gender categorization, and to first-person authority over gender self-identification.

My novel insight is a social constructivist perspective on gender identity and on the experience of transitioning, and my main contribution is twofold. First, I argue that sex and gender ought to be viewed as social properties that are conferred to us by others, following Ásta, and that under this view, we can meaningfully say that transitioning may alter both sex and gender. I contrast this view with gender-critical understandings of sex as an immutable binary natural kind, showing that these conceptualizations can only serve the purpose of marginalizing and excluding trans and intersex people, and I tentatively suggest that these philosophical views may be partially grounded in factually wrong worldviews.

Second, I defend an account of gender identity as self-identification that is non-deflationary in the sense explicated by Florence Ashley: gender identity is the gender that one self-identifies as, and it is constituted by the personal significance that one assigns to their gender subjectivity, meaning the totality of their experiences onto which some understanding of gender is imposed upon. Under my proposed social constructivist understanding of sex, gender, and transitioning, I suggest to flesh out Ashley's original account by adding sexed embodiment, understood as a collection of sex-stereotypical traits, and gendered social positioning, understood as one's conferred gender status, as components of one's gender subjectivity. I argue that this account of gender identity is consistent with first-person authority over gender self-identification, is useful in gender questioning experiences, and shows that gender identities merit respect.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my family and my friends, both those in Amsterdam, home in Florence, and everywhere else in the world, for all their love and support, especially throughout the time it took me to finish this thesis from home, and the two years I spent in Amsterdam before then. I also wish to thank Karolina for her kind and helpful supervision, and for allowing me to work on a topic that is very dear to me.

Contents

Introduction

This thesis is an inquiry into the concept of gender identity, with the overarching aims of laying strong normative foundations for the philosophical and medico-legal justification of trans rights, and of making sense of the lived experiences of trans individuals. In particular, my goal is to provide an ameliorative account of the concept of gender identity that is consistent with a moral commitment to first-person authority over gender self-identification, constitutes a useful tool in gender questioning, and shows that gender identities merit respect and often come with urgent needs, such as timely access to gender-affirming medical care.

Typically, gender identity is understood as one's innate sense of themselves as a man, woman, both, neither, or perhaps some complex combination of all the previous options (Stonewall UK, 2025; United Nations Free & Equal, 2025), and gender terms are understood in terms of gender identity. This means that, under this view, to be *G is* to identify as *G*, where *G* is a gender term such as woman. So, for instance, the class of women is defined as the class of all those who identify as women. I will refer to this as the *folk conception* of gender identity. By *trans rights*, I refer on a broad level to rights of self-determination, bodily autonomy, access to adequate medical care, and protection from discrimination. These include, to give a few examples, the right to access gender-affirming medical care in due time (meaning, possibly as early as the onset of endogenous puberty), the right to self-determination of one's legal name and sex/gender without invasive and unnecessary scrutiny by the authorities, the right to access facilities in accordance with one's self-identified gender, the right to amend all previous official documents with one's new legal name and sex/gender for privacy reasons, and the right to not be discriminated against in various contexts specifically because of being trans.

The state of trans rights in the world is quite dire. According to the United Nations, "trans people in all parts of the world are at heightened risk of violence and discrimination. This includes bullying and verbal abuse, discrimination in healthcare, education, employment and housing, so-called 'conversion therapy', criminalization, arbitrary arrests and detention, violence including sexual violence, torture and murder" (United Nations Free & Equal, 2025). Especially in many Global South countries, cross-dressing and same-sex relationships are illegal, and there are no safe or attainable pathways to medical, social, or legal transition. Trans people (and queer people in general, for that matter) are most often either forced to live deep in the closet, or live at the margins of society, and face excedeengly high risk of violence and discrimination (Human Rights Watch, 2022). In most Global North countries the situation, although still quite unsatisfactory, is comparably much better. Concerningly, many important rights are being rolled back at the time of writing. The United States under the latest Trump administration possibly constitute the worst example of this trend, with policies including sweeping bans on gender-affirming care for trans youth in several states (yet curiously, the same puberty blockers are still used for non-trans youth), that are "ruining people's lives" (Human Rights Watch, 2025a),

passports being required to show one's assigned sex at birth, putting trans and intersex travellers at risk (Human Rights Watch, 2025b), and a wave of bills prohibiting people from using public facilities in accordance with their gender identity now affecting approximately a third of the entire US population (Movement Advancement Project, 2025). Just at the time of finishing my thesis, the Kansas legislature invalidated the driving licenses of trans people with gender markers different from their assigned sex at birth as stated on their birth certificate, without any grace period, and demanded trans people to surrender them (Reed, 2026).

My own country, Italy, recently rejected a bill that would have made discrimination or incitement to violence based on sex, gender, sexual orientation or gender identity a crime, and make such bias an aggravating factor in sentencing, claiming concerns on the right to free speech (Bonali, 2021). Moreover, Meloni's right-wing government recently proposed a bill that would institute a national centralized database of trans youth taking puberty blockers, and make their prescription subject not only to an interdisciplinary diagnosis by a psychologist and an endocrinologist, as it is now, but also to the approval of a national centralized ethics committee. This not only potentially constitutes a dangerous precedent in making access to some medication monitored and subject to an extra step of approval than just one's doctor(s) (which is again a little puzzling since the same medication is routinely prescribed to non-trans children going through precocious puberty with much fewer concerns), but also adds significant obstacles to families seeking care for their children that is very urgent (Biaggi, 2025). Timely access to puberty blockers and hormonal therapies is of vital importance. This is not only because they significantly improve the well-being of both trans adults and youth (Tordoff et al., 2022) but also because, just like those from externally induced puberty, the changes from natal puberty are irreversible, or may require expensive and potentially invasive interventions later on in life to be reversed (and only partially in many cases). For instance, a trans man who never undergoes female puberty will not have the need to undergo chest masculinization (colloquially referred to as top surgery). These examples show that concerns for trans rights are concrete and very pressing – they have an extremely significant impact on people's lives, and they are being routinely violated (and even rolled back) to various extents in the world.

As for making sense of the lived experiences of trans individuals, I want to point out here that I am writing this thesis as a trans person myself. To anticipate some of my criticism of the folk conception of gender identity in the upcoming chapters, I personally had and still have some reservations about the idea of "identifying" as some other gender – in my own very personal experience, it was not so much about identifying as something rather than something else, or not identifying as anything at all. I felt some ultimately inexplicable distress about my assigned gender at birth, both towards my body and towards my place in a very binarily gendered world, and that was in the end what made me want to medically, legally, and socially transition. My personal dissatisfaction with gender identity (at least in its folk conception) as a conceptual tool to make sense of my own experience is one of the many reasons which pushed me to write this thesis.

As Talia Mae Bettcher writes in the introduction to *Beyond Personhood*, "any philosophy, whether acknowledged or not, draws from a worldly experience that shapes intuitions and interests, and it's methodologically honest, in my view, to make plain the experiential basis of one's philosophizing" (Bettcher, 2025, p. 7). That I will do too – I am writing this thesis as a white able-bodied Italian trans non-binary person who has lived across Western Europe their entire life. I say *person* because that

feels the most accurate to me, and I (sometimes, somewhat redundantly) say *trans non-binary* (rather than simply *non-binary*) only to emphasize that I have also medically transitioned (where I find that information to be relevant). I relate to and identify most with the experiences and struggles of trans women and non-binary people. I have medically, legally, and socially transitioned and I feel close to being done with it, so to speak, and so long as one is ever really done with transitioning. I am thankful and thrilled to get to live as Emma in the daily, and to have an extremely supportive family. By sheer luck and through no merit of mine, being born in a good place and at a good time, I admittedly did not have to deal with a lot of the struggles that many trans people have to go through. This thesis mostly originates from my own reflections on the topics of gender identity and transitioning, my own experience as a trans person, and my discussions with my friends, or occasionally kind online strangers. One might perhaps rightfully worry that it is too much of a work of armchair philosophy. With this in mind, I will largely refrain from making any universal claims in my thesis. I will sometimes make reference to my own experience to back up certain existential claims, since that is after all what I am by far the most familiar with.

My novel insight in this thesis is a social constructivist perspective on gender identity and on the experience of transitioning, aiming to bridge the gaps between social constructivist conceptualizations of sex and gender (Ásta, 2018, 2023; Haslanger, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2015) and recent developments on gender identity in analytic philosophy (Ashley, 2023; Bettcher, 2017; Cosker-Rowland, 2023, 2025; Jenkins, 2016, 2018; McKitrick, 2015). In particular, my main contributions are the defence of a conferralist understanding of sex and gender, i.e. as properties that are conferred to us by others (Ásta, 2018), that allows us to meaningfully say that transitioning alters both sex and gender, and an ameliorative account (cf. Cappelen, 2018; Haslanger, 2000) of gender identity as self-identification that is non-deflationary as proposed by Florence Ashley (2023), and that incorporates a conferralist understanding of sex and gender.

First, I argue in favour of a conferralist account of sex and gender as proposed by Ásta (2018), according to which sex and gender are properties that are conferred to us by others. Sex is conferred on the basis of certain sex-stereotypical traits, whereas gender is argued to be a highly contextual property that tracks different base properties across different contexts. For instance, it may track one's legal sex assignment in some context or, as a limit case, simply track one's self-identification is some trans-friendly contexts. I argue that if we accept a conferralist view on sex and gender, then we can meaningfully say that transitioning can alter one's sex, as well as change their gender. I contrast this with the gender-critical views on sex and gender, showing that these can only serve the purpose of trans exclusion, and that we should therefore reject them. I also tentatively suggest that these philosophical views may be partially grounded in worldviews that are factually wrong.

Second, I defend an ameliorative account of gender identity as self-identification, meaning that I argue that we should take gender identity to simply be the gender that one sincerely self-identifies as. Because I hold that gender identity should serve as a conceptual tool to guide individuals through gender questioning (whether that ends up in them realizing they are trans or not, and whether they decide to medically and/or socially transition or not) and that our concept of gender identity should show that gender identities merit respect and often come with urgent concrete needs (such as timely access to gender-affirming medical care), I argue that we should not decline to explain what having a sense of oneself as some gender consists of, *contra* Hernandez and Bell's (2025) recent suggestion.

It is in this sense that the account that I defend is non-deflationary. In particular, I defend Florence Ashley's (2023) of gender identity as the stance that an individual personally takes towards the significance of their gendered experiences, meaning their experiences onto which some understanding of gender is imposed upon. Moreover, I argue that if we accept a conferralist view on sex and gender, a non-deflationary account of gender identity as self-identification should further include a notion of transition goals in terms of embodiment (i.e. sex) and social positioning (i.e. gender), and that one's gender identity is also determined by the stance that one personally takes towards these concrete goals. This is compatible with the large variety of embodiment and social positioning goals that trans people have, which need not be tied to a specific gender identity. This results in an account of gender identity that, I contend, is consistent with a moral commitment to first-person authority over gender self-identification, constitutes a useful tool in gender questioning, and shows that gender identities merit respect and often come with urgent concrete needs.

My thesis is structured as follows. In chapter 1, I provide background by introducing the basic concepts relating to gender identity, gender, and sex, and I define my primitive commitments. Next, I motivate my inquiry into gender identity in chapter 2 by arguing that our intuitions about gender identity are flawed, and that we should retain a concept of gender identity for pragmatic reasons. I also outline two desiderata for a project of conceptual engineering of gender identity: our target concept of gender identity should constitute a useful tool in gender questioning, and show that gender identities merit respect. In chapter 3, I defend a conferralist understanding of sex and gender, and reject gender-critical views of sex and gender. Lastly, I bring all these considerations together to defend an ameliorative account of gender identity as self-identification that is non-deflationary and that incorporates a conferralist view of sex and gender in chapter 4, which satisfies the desiderata that I proposed and is consistent with my commitments, including in particular a moral commitment to first-person authority over gender self-identification.

Chapter 1

Gender identity: the conceptual landscape

The concept of gender identity plays a very important role in the self-determination of the identities and lives of trans individuals. I will be referring to trans people very frequently in my thesis, hence why I begin by defining what I mean by being trans. Being trans(gender) is defined as a mismatch between one's assigned sex/gender at birth (typically assigned by simply inspecting the infant's external genitals) and their gender identity, whereas being cis(gender) may conversely be defined as not being trans[1]. Note that this definition technically remains neutral on how one is to exactly define gender identity, and thus in particular does not rely on the folk conception of gender identity. In the literature (e.g. Mikkola, 2016), some authors use *trans** to explicitly include all non-binary identities, such as genderqueer, genderfluid, and agender[2]. Because these are already clearly included by my definition of trans as having a gender identity that differs from one's assigned sex/gender at birth, I choose to refer to trans *simpliciter* in my thesis.

1.1 Gender identity, gender, and sex

I have been referring to sex/gender so far because it is unclear what it is that is being assigned at birth to a baby. After all, our sex categorizations themselves arguably already bear, to a certain extent, the imprint of certain cultural norms – it is in this sense that perhaps sex "was always already gender" (Butler, 2006, p. 9). For now (until chapter 3), an intuitive understanding of sex and gender suffices, as having to do with biology and culture respectively. In particular, I will be working for now with our folk intuitions about sex and gender, according to which sex is a natural kind, i.e. something that is, so to speak, out there in the world (Putnam, 1973). Gender, on the other hand, may be viewed as socially constructed, in the sense that our categorizations of individuals into genders are to some extent contingent on our cultural practices (Haslanger, 1995). While I only outline my critique of these folk intuitions in §3.1 and put forward a different understanding of sex and gender in §3.2, it should already be clear that this is an inadequate distinction for many purposes (Mikkola, 2024), and especially from the point of view of making sense of the experiences of trans individuals, and showing that their identities merit respect.

[1]The cis/trans dichotomy is not exclusive: as Barnes (2022, p. 853) convincingly argues, people with cognitive disabilities that render them incapable of genuine gender self-identification cannot be said to be cis, nor can they be said to be trans.

[2]Typically, genderqueer, genderfluid, and agender respectively refer to a gender identity that is neither comfortably masculine or feminine, that fluctuates over time, or to having a sense of oneself as no specific gender (Jenkins, 2018, p. 722; also see Stonewall UK, 2025).

As for terminology, because of this (working) sex/gender distinction, I choose to use *woman/man* as gender terms exclusively, and *female/male* as sex terms exclusively. Most authors in the analytical philosophy literature on gender identity (e.g. Cosker-Rowland, 2025, p. 2, fn. 4; Jenkins, 2018, fn. 3) use "*P* identifies as a woman" interchangeably with "*P* has a female gender identity", since they do not speak of sex specifically, and therefore have no need to reserve *female* as a sex term. Because I choose to do so, I will instead say "*P* has a *feminine* gender identity" in order to be consistent with my choice of terminology. Note that I use *feminine* as a gender term rather than a gender attribute, which is how it is perhaps most commonly used in everyday discourse (such as in, say, referring to a *feminine* man, i.e. a man with a feminine gender expression).

Again because of this ambiguity between sex and gender, I choose to use the term *trans* rather than *transgender* or the more old-fashioned *transsexual*, which is sometimes used to emphasize that one has undergone a medical transition (Bettcher, 2007, p. 46), or that one has a desire to live as a different sex than the one they were assigned at birth – this, Serano argues, results in a markedly different kind of discrimination than just transgressing gender norms (Serano, 2007, pp. 3, 25–27). Here, while I do not assume that being trans necessarily implies wanting to live (under ideal circumstances) as a different sex than the one that was assigned at birth, I will operate under the assumption that it does *in most cases*.

Since the most widely used terminology, especially in the medical literature, seems to be *assigned gender at birth*, or AGAB for short, I choose to stick to that for consistency, although I do acknowledge that it is at the same time inconsistent with both the defective folk understanding of the sex/gender distinction that I am (for now) working with, since we say that one is assigned *female/male* at birth and not *woman/man/girl/boy*, and the understanding of sex/gender that I put forward in chapter 3. The terms *assigned male at birth* and *assigned female at birth* are sometimes used in the literature, and very often in everyday discourse, and shortened as the acronyms AMAB and AFAB respectively, especially in online communities. I have some reservations about the use of these terms, mostly having to do with the fact that in the vast majority of cases, they pick out groups of individuals that I do not think have good reason to be grouped together.

For instance, in the World Professional Association for Transgender Health's (WPATH) Standards of Care 8th Edition, AFAB seems to be used as coextensive with "has functioning ovaries" in places[3] (for instance, Coleman et al., 2022, p. S157). I find this use of AGAB terminology problematic and inaccurate, as it risks erasing the experiences of intersex individuals, who may for instance be assigned female at birth, but not have functioning ovaries. For instance, certain individuals with XY sex chromosomes and (undescended) testes are assigned female at birth because of a genetic disorder called Complete Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome – as the name suggests, they are completely insensitive to the masculinizing effects of androgens, and they therefore develop a typical female external phenotype, possibly without ever knowing they have XY chromosomes and undescended testes (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). AGAB terminology is here also unnecessary, since an individual with functioning ovaries may not identify as a woman nor live as a woman, and referencing their assigned gender at birth does not seem to serve any meaningful purpose compared to the most medically accurate terminology. This is all the more so in cases such as this, when we already know that we are dealing with trans people,

[3]Elsewhere in the document, however, terminology that I find much more appropriate is used, for instance "individuals with functioning ovaries" and "individuals with testes" (Coleman et al., 2022, p. S118).

whose expected anatomy may be at odds with their gendered presentation (Bettcher, 2007).

I believe AGAB terms to be relevant in their literal sense of "assigned *G at birth*" – picture the person delivering the baby saying "it's a *G*!", and *G* being reported on the baby's birth certificate. This groups together those who share the common experience of being assigned *G* at birth, with the expectations that are often tied to being a baby *G*, and being raised as *G*, at least until they are old enough to show potential signs of not identifying as *G*. In most other conceivable scenarios, using these terms runs the risk of conflating vastly different experiences. For instance, both a trans man who has, so to speak, fully transitioned and has had a hysterectomy, a trans man who has not medically transitioned yet (but wishes to do so) and a healthy cis woman all equally count as assigned female at birth. Under the vast majority of conceivable circumstances, I do not see valid reasons to group them together under this label – even in medical context, as in the example just above, I find it more appropriate to just refer to the patient's exact anatomy. This is why I will only use AGAB terminology in the sense I explicated above of "it's a *G*!" *at the moment of birth*.

1.2 Gender identity: the basic concepts

Under the folk conception of gender identity, the class of trans individuals thus defined contains everyone whose gender self-identification does not match their assigned gender at birth. The WPATH's Standards of Care 8th Edition (Coleman et al., 2022) speak of "transgender and gender diverse" (TGD) people, in order to "be as broad and comprehensive as possible in describing members of the many varied communities globally of people with gender identities or expressions that differ from the gender socially attributed to the sex assigned to them at birth", thus including "experiences, identities or expressions . . . that are not based on or encompassed by Western conceptualizations of gender, or the language used to describe it" (p. S11). The authors argue that "the term transgender and gender diverse was chosen with the intent to be most inclusive and to highlight the many diverse gender identities, expressions, experiences, and health care needs of TGD people" (p. S11). In this thesis, however, since my focus is on the concept of gender identity, I choose to limit my discussion to trans people, as defined above as those whose gender identity does not correspond to their assigned gender at birth. Still, I do acknowledge that the experiences, goals and needs of trans and gender-diverse people have very significant overlaps, and that mine is a very limited Western (or, perhaps more precisely, "WEIRD": Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) perspective on these complex issues (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan, 2010).

Trans people come in all shapes and sizes. They include the mainstream narrative of the child who always knew and fully, so to speak, transitions to the other sex/gender, as well as people who do not fully identify with either binary sex/gender, who may or may not decide to medically transition via hormonal replacement therapies and/or gender-affirming surgeries, who may or may not alter their presentation in a variety of ways, who may or may not decide to go by a different name and/or a different set of pronouns. The only common thread and requirement, if you will, to be a member of this class, under the folk conception of gender identity, is to have a gender identity that does not correspond to one's assigned gender at birth.

The feeling of a mismatch between one's gender identity and their assigned gender at birth is referred to as *gender incongruence*, and if it causes feelings of distress (as it very often does) it is referred

to as *gender dysphoria* (Coleman et al., 2022, p. S59). The primary goal of gender-affirming medical care (including hormonal replacement therapies and gender-affirming surgeries) is typically understood (although not uncontroversially: see Ashley and Ells, 2018) as reducing one's gender incongruence or dysphoria, by bridging the gap between their gendered presentation and their gender identity. These concepts moreover play an important role in being used as eligibility conditions for gender-affirming medical care, usually in some variation of the form "marked and sustained gender incongruence" or dysphoria[4] (Coleman et al., 2022, p. S256). To give a few examples, a trans woman who has previously undergone (parts of) male (i.e. testosterone-based) puberty may feel dysphoric about a number of primary and secondary male sex characteristics, and may desire to undergo feminizing hormonal therapy in order to change their appearance and functioning, possibly feminizing surgeries, as well as some other non-medical interventions. For instance, following the voice deepening typical of male puberty, a more conventionally feminine voice may be achieved by voice training (a non-medical intervention) or voice-feminization surgery. If body and facial hair growth is not slowed enough already by a feminizing hormonal therapy, hair may be removed with laser or electrolysis treatments. People who have undergone (parts of) female (i.e. estrogen-based) puberty may conversely desire masculinizing hormonal therapies promoting voice deepening, as well as facial and body hair growth, and a double mastectomy to remove breast tissue and achieve a flat chest. It is however important to note that every individual has their own specific needs with regards to whatever kind of gender-affirming treatment they may wish to undertake, medical or not, and may wish for some changes but not others, or for a slower onset of such changes, and their needs and desires do not have to depend on their gender identity (see Coleman et al., 2022, p. S254 for an overview of some of the most recent options for gender-affirming medical treatments and their effects). Moreover, one's needs and desires may change with time – for instance, one might desire to medically transition only at a certain point in life, for a multitude of reasons, such as wanting to be financially independent first, or not being in a safe environment to do so, or simply not having figured out their goals yet.

Gender euphoria is typically understood as the definitional opposite of gender dysphoria. Florence Ashley and Carolyn Ells (2018, p. 24) define it as "a distinct enjoyment or satisfaction caused by the correspondence between the person's gender identity and gendered features associated with a gender other than the one assigned at birth".[5] It is worth mentioning that there is clearly a wide spectrum of possibilities as to how someone might feel about certain bodily features and how they relate to their assigned gender at birth and their gender identity, between the two extremes of gender dysphoria and gender euphoria. It is entirely possible, and it does happen, that a trans person feels neither overly euphoric nor overly dysphoric about certain features that are typically associated with their assigned gender at birth, especially once they are altered to some extent by hormonal replacement therapy. For instance, to anticipate an example from chapter 4, some trans people are happy with their natal

[4]The stricter dysphoria requirement was dropped in some recent classifications such as the World Health Organization's 11th Edition of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11). A child who for instance grows up in a very supportive environment and is allowed timely access to puberty blockers and hormonal replacement therapies may not necessarily feel distress about their gender incongruence, and therefore "the ICD-11 classification of gender incongruence may better capture the fullness of gender diversity experiences and related clinical gender needs" (Coleman et al., 2022, p. S59).

[5]Although this is outside the scope of my thesis, it is worth mentioning that Ashley and Ells (2018, p. 24) also introduce the concept of *creative transfiguration* to refer to an experience "that centers on creativity and aspirational aesthetics". In their view, "trans embodiment can be irreducibly creative. Creativity is one of the manifold ways in which we may assert ownership over our bodies, transforming them into an art piece that is truly ours out of previously alienating flesh".

genitals as altered by hormonal replacement therapy[6], or may judge the costs and risks that come with genital surgery (colloquially termed bottom surgery) to outweigh any discomfort they may feel about them. Conversely, someone who identifies as non-binary may feel gender euphoria about the idea of having features that are typically associated with one specific binary sex/gender.

We may contrast this gender euphoria/dysphoria model with the older narrative of trans people being born in the "wrong body". According to Talia Mae Bettcher (2014), under this model being trans "involves a misalignment between gender identity and the sexed body" (p. 383). Such a narrative presents two serious problems: it has pathologizing aspects (p. 384) in its viewing, say, a trans woman's pre-transition (traditionally) male morphology as something that ought to be *fixed*, and it takes "the dominant meaning of gender terms for granted" (p. 390), meaning that it effectively assumes that, say, being a woman is also a matter of having or at least desiring a (traditionally) female morphology. As I have already suggested in my discussion of gender euphoria and dysphoria, and to anticipate a crucial point that I make in §4.2, the gender that one self-identifies as and their (medical and social) transition goals ought to be thought of as distinct (although they are indeed often related). In other words, we want to be able to say that a trans woman is a woman by virtue of her self-identification as a woman, regardless of what she might want from her transition.

What, then, are the goals of transitioning? One may change their name, pronouns, undergo a number of gender-affirming treatments, medical or not, change their presentation, do some combination of these things, including all of them, or even none at all. Keeping in mind that there therefore is no one way to transition, so to speak, I am hard pressed to identify a set of goals, if not simply to be more at ease with oneself and one's body, and with one's place in the world as a gendered being. Andrea Long Chu, anticipating some of the critiques of the folk conception of gender identity that I will elaborate in §2.1 and some of my own account of gender identity in §4.3, eloquently puts it as follows.

> "I doubt that any of us transition simply because we want to 'be' women, in some abstract, academic way. I certainly didn't. I transitioned for gossip and compliments, lipstick and mascara, for crying at the movies, for being someone's girlfriend, for letting her pay the check or carry my bags, for the benevolent chauvinism of bank tellers and cable guys, for the telephonic intimacy of long-distance female friendship, for fixing my makeup in the bathroom flanked like Christ by a sinner on each side, for sex toys, for feeling hot, for getting hit on by butches, for that secret knowledge of which dykes to watch out for, for Daisy Dukes, bikini tops, and all the dresses, and, my god, *for the breasts*." (Chu, 2018)

This brings me to a final point about the concept of *passing*, which is an important goal to many trans people, though not all. Anderson et al., citing Moynihan (2013), define passing as "appear[ing] to belong to one or more social subgroups other than the one(s) to which one is normally assigned by prevailing legal, medical and/or socio-cultural discourses" (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 49). Applied to our case where the social subgroups are gender classes, this may read as something like "consistently appearing to unknowing strangers as a cis person of the same gender one identifies as". Yet we do not say that a gender non-conforming cis person such as a cis butch woman *passes* as a man, suggesting

[6] As a side note, since in my experience many people are not aware of this even if they are well-intentioned: hormonal replacement therapy changes both the appearance and functioning of natal genitals to a certain extent. I have not found this to be widely documented in the literature, so I refer to the community project of the Gender Dysphoria Bible, in particular §§20-21, for further details – link accessed on March 5, 2026.

that we integrate some notion of intentionality into our concept of passing. Moreover, a non-binary person who is assigned male at birth may want to be read as a woman despite not identifying as a woman, but our current definition would only allow them to pass as their self-identified gender (and it is furthermore unclear how someone can be said to pass as non-binary, as I elaborate below). Because of these considerations, I suggest to define passing as follows: P passes as G if P consistently appears to unknowing strangers as a cis person who was assigned G at birth, in a wilful manner. If P is a trans person with a binary gender identity (i.e. P identifies as a man or a woman), then we may simply say that P passes, if the conditions are met. To give an example, a trans man passes (as a man) if unknowing strangers consistently recognize him as a cis man, which may be made evident by, for instance, certain assumptions about his anatomy, or references to his imagined childhood as a (cis) boy.

It may seem that the concept of passing is somewhat problematic, and I think that this may have to do with three main reasons. First, one usually says that a person P with gender identity G passes only if P was not assigned G at birth, i.e. only if P is trans[7], thus creating a *prima facie* problematic double standard: we say that a trans woman *passes* or *does not pass* as a woman, but we would simply say that a cis woman *is* a woman or *is mistaken* for a man. According to Julia Serano (2007), "the concept of passing is steeped in cissexual privilege, as it's ever only applied to trans people" (p. 176). By *cissexual privilege*, Serano refers to "the double standard that promotes the idea that transsexual genders are distinct from, and less legitimate than, cissexual genders" (p. 162); in Serano's terminology, a transsexual person is someone who lives as a member of the sex other than the one they were assigned at birth (p. 25). While I am very sympathetic to Serano's arguments, I think that the concept of passing can perhaps be salvaged here, at least in the binary case where G is either man or woman, by making an appeal to speakers' extensional intuitions to explicate the meaning of G in the context "passing (as G)", as opposed to the contexts "being G" and "identifying as G". In the first context, the meaning of G is determined by what a particular community thinks a woman (or a man) is and looks like, so to speak, while in the second and third, we can view G as a gender identity term whose extension depends exclusively on P's mental state (conscious or not), broadly speaking. This view is compatible with the idea that trans gender identities are just as legitimate as cis gender identities, yet acknowledges that trans people are not always read as their self-identified gender, especially under dominant, oppressive understandings of sex and gender.

Second, it is unclear how someone who identifies as some non-binary (i.e. neither man nor woman) gender can be said to pass as their self-identified gender. One could suggest that a non-binary person passes if they are not consistently recognized as either a man or a woman, but this is clearly a very onerous requirement with very limited applicability in many contexts[8], especially considering how wide the non-binary umbrella is. It is indeed all the more unclear how such suggestion would apply to someone who is, say, genderfluid (i.e. whose gender identity fluctuates over time) or agender (i.e. who does not identify with any gender).

Third, a widespread tendency to see passing as such an important goal in one's transition (at least in the binary case) can be argued to systematically reinforce "gender conforming, binary reinforcing mechanisms" in a vicious cycle (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 50). Yet I find it obviously unfair to expect

[7]There is, for instance, an entire subreddit (r/transpassing) dedicated to getting advice on passing for trans people – link accessed on January 2, 2026.

[8]In some very trans-friendly contexts, there might be some recognizable relatively clear cues to one's non-binary identity (such as hair, makeup, clothing, pins, and so on). I, for one, have on occasions been told that I pass as non-binary.

a single trans person who desires to simply pass and live, so to speak, a normal life in a deeply transphobic world to be challenging the dominating gender norms. Passing simply makes trans people's lives significantly less hard: as Serano (2007) puts it, "being accepted as members of our identified sex makes it infinitely easier for us to gain employment and housing, to be taken seriously in our personal, social, and political endeavors, and to be able to walk down the street without being harassed or assaulted" (p. 178). Passing can also be an important source of feelings of validation for many trans people, and a crucial goal in their transition. In any case, I acknowledge the potential problems with the concept of passing, which is why I will only be using it sparingly, in the cases where I see no other sensible alternative.

1.3 Primitive commitments

The concept of gender identity plays a prominent role in campaigns for trans rights, and it has recently begun to receive more attention within analytic philosophy as well (Cosker-Rowland, 2023). The folk conception of gender identity is surely attractive because it is very simple, and certain desirable trans rights follow rather trivially from it and from other primitive commitments that I will tacitly take for granted. Consider, for concreteness, Rawls's two basic principles of justice: that everyone has certain basic liberties that may not interfere with those of others, and that material inequalities are permitted only so long as these liberties are granted for everyone, these inequalities most greatly benefit the least advantaged, and fair equality of opportunity for offices and positions is ensured (Rawls, 1971, pp. 53, 72). While this is not a work in political or moral philosophy, my point is that a very general understanding of a theory of justice suffices to lay normative foundations for certain trans rights, paired with a suitable[9] understanding of what being trans consists of, which the folk conception of gender identity aims to do. Under a broadly Rawlsian understanding of justice, if it is accepted that to be a woman is to identify as a woman and that a thus defined woman who was not assigned female at birth (i.e. a trans woman) does not pose an existential threat to other (cis) women[10], then the right of trans women to be included in women-only spaces immediately follows, and so does the right to self-determination of one's legal sex/gender.

My focus here will be on whether the folk conception is suitable for our purposes and on questions of which categorizations are most appropriate for which purposes in general, and I will only consider disagreements that arise at this level, and not at that of justice[11]. To that end, I will take some commitments as primitive. My first commitment is to what I defined as trans rights in the introduction, and we may state it as follows.

[9]By suitable I also mean metaphysically not overly controversial, since according to Rawls, "as far as possible, the knowledge and ways of reasoning that ground our affirming the principles of justice and their application to constitutional essentials and basic justice are to rest on the plain truths now widely accepted, or available, to citizens generally" (Rawls, 2005, pp. 223-224).

[10]That a legal shift to self-identification would pose a significant threat to cis women seems to be one of the core assumptions of gender-critical feminism (see for instance Chappell and Lawford-Smith, 2018 – it is interesting to note that gender-critical feminist Holly Lawford-Smith in 2018 seemed open to the possibility of allowing some trans women who have transitioned into female-only spaces). In §3.3, I will (tentatively) suggest that this is to a large extent simply a factually wrong worldview, and not a matter of diverging philosophical opinions. A full defence of this claim is unfortunately outside the scope of my thesis.

[11]Some believe, for instance, the inclusion of trans women within women's quotas to be unfair – I will only view this as a disagreement on who counts as a woman, rather than a disagreement about the fairness of women's quotas themselves.

(Rights) Everyone has a right to self-determination of their gender, to bodily autonomy, to timely access to quality gender-affirming medical care, and to protection from discrimination on the basis of their gender identity, and more specifically on the basis of being trans.

My second commitment is meant to exemplify the popular trans rights campaigns slogan "trans women are women". A little more formally, I wish to explicitly commit to the centrality of genuine gender self-identification to our target gender categorization practices.

(Self-identification) Genuine gender self-identification is a sufficient (though not necessary) condition for being categorized as one's self-identified gender.

I emphasize that genuine gender self-identification is not a necessary condition for gender categorization because, as Elizabeth Barnes (2022) argues, many cognitively disabled individuals do not have the capability to genuinely self-identify as some gender, yet they are nonetheless gendered in ways that are morally and philosophically relevant, because their experience of the world is shaped by the way they are gendered. For instance, Barnes explains, many cognitively disabled women and men face oppression because of their social role as women and men (pp. 847-851). As Barnes puts it, "the general idea is that we can maintain *both* that gender identity isn't merely one among many features that matter to gender – that gender identity is special, and structures other aspects of gender – *and* that someone can have a gender without having a gender identity" (p. 861). My focus in this thesis is on gender identity specifically, and I take the upshot of Barnes' argument to be that while gender identity is not *necessary* to have a gender, we can still coherently maintain that gender identity holds some special status among other features that matter to gender, and in particular that *where it is available*, it should be taken to fully determine one's gender categorization. In this sense, we can maintain that trans women are women by virtue of their genuine self-identification as women, and that individuals who are socially positioned as women because of their anatomy, yet lack the capability to self-identify as women, are nonetheless women. This idea is summed up in my primitive commitment to (Self-identification).

It is worth mentioning that while I take (Rights) and (Self-identification) as primitive, they have been argued to follow from some other arguably less contentious commitments. In particular, Rach Cosker-Rowland (2025) has recently argued that basic liberal rights entail both trans rights and the sufficiency of gender self-identification to gender categorization. However, I think that these discussions are outside the scope of my thesis – I do not think it matters for the validity of my arguments whether we take my commitments are primitive or not, although showing that they follow from other less contentious commitments (such as basic liberal rights) would certainly strengthen them.

Lastly, I will be assuming that anyone's identity labels are legitimate, and not to be policed in any way. A label G being legitimate means that if P utters a self-identification statement of the form "I am G" or "I identify as G", we have no grounds to deny these statements with a statement such as "P, you are mistaken, you are not G". This corresponds to assuming first-person authority (FPA for short) over gender self-identification, meaning that we take P to be the final and decisive authority over their own gender identity.

Epistemic first-person authority over phenomenal states and mental attitudes is in general not infallible, as the countless forms and degrees of self-deception that we are prone to suggest (Heil,

1988). What I focus on is the narrow case of first-person authority over gender self-identification, and following Talia Mae Bettcher (2009), I will suggest that this is ultimately an ethical authority. Now, the same gender term *G* in a self-identification "I am *G*" statement may be used somewhat ambiguously, to refer both to the gender class of *G*s and the gender identity *G*[12], which do not necessarily coincide (for instance, if one does not endorse the folk conception). In this sense, it is not entirely clear how a self-identification statement "I am *G*" or "I identify as *G*" may be viewed as *P* being in a particular mental state (having gender identity *G*), rather than a claim about the state of the world (being a member of the gender class of *G*s). If it were the former, then *P* would enjoy first-person authority over their claim, but in the latter case it is more contentious, as there might be different conceptions of the gender class of *G*s (although we can argue that we should hold one conception over another on different bases – I will come back to this idea in chapter 3).

Following Bettcher (2009), I therefore distinguish between metaphysical and existential self-identification claims (p. 110), which broadly correspond to the distinction I made above between a claim about the state of the world and a claim about a particular mental state respectively. As defined by Bettcher, a metaphysical self-identity claim "involves an overall picture of the world (including categories such as men and women) in which one then locates oneself", whereas with existential self-identity claims "the fact that one holds all of the beliefs that one holds (true or false, self-regarding or not) goes into the set of facts that determines 'who one is, really'" (p. 110). In short, existential identity in Bettcher's terms has to do with *who* one is, rather than *what* (p. 99). I will be assuming that we hold first-person authority over genuine existential self-identity statements, meaning that no one has any grounds to deny them. Importantly, according to Bettcher, FPA over gender identity is "ultimately a kind of *ethical* authority" (p. 100), meaning that we should accept it because denying *P*'s self-identification necessarily involves a failure to take their statement as decisive and therefore an infringement on their autonomy, which is ethically objectionable. Mine is therefore a commitment to FPA over gender self-identification on moral grounds.

Now, I take *policing* to be a more nuanced form of denying a self-identification statement, which again relies on the ambiguity in the usage of *G* as both a gender identity term and as reference to the gender class of *G*s. A self-identification statement may be policed with a statement of the form "*P*, perhaps you are not really *G*, because *G*s have such and such property, which you do not have".[13] According to Bettcher (2009), with an existential self-identification statement *P* "can truthfully claim 'I am a woman' before any sort of transition *at all*" (p. 111). This statement, I will assume, may not be policed by ❀[14], who believes for instance that the class of women is defined by production of large gametes, with a statement such as "perhaps you are not really a woman, because you do not produce large gametes". *P*'s statement need not run into conflict with ❀'s conception of the class of

[12]Jenkins (2016) argues that we should use gender terms to denote gender identity rather than membership to gender classes – here, I only wish to emphasize that in practice, we use them interchangeably for both purposes.

[13]This is a rather important point to emphasize for me, as in my experience, there is sometimes a tendency within certain online trans communities to view self-identified trans people who do not wish to transition medically in order to be read as a different gender than what they were assigned at birth as "not really trans", or even as bad representation for the entire (self-proclaimed) trans community (see for instance r/truscum and r/transmed – both links accessed on January 8, 2026). I believe this to be completely unwarranted, in light of my commitment to FPA over gender identity. I do think that some experiences differ insofar as (say) someone who is happily read as a gender non-conforming cis person may be argued to navigate life in radically different ways from someone who is medically transitioning to live as a member of a different sex/gender (cf. Serano, 2007, pp. 25-27), but this does not warrant policing anyone's self-identification.

[14]I use ❀ to indicate a fictional speaker.

women (as those who produce large gametes, however legitimate one might find ❀'s conception to be – I will argue in §3.3 that it is not), because it does not rely on a broad conception of the gender class of women, but rather on *who P* believes and/or feels themselves to be, so to speak, however this feeling might ultimately be grounded in *P*'s own mind. To give an example[15], consider the statement "I am a teacher" uttered by someone whose job is not that of a teacher. Interpreted metaphysically, a second speaker may have grounds to police this statement and may rightfully reply "perhaps you are not a teacher, because you do not work as a teacher", because to them, being a teacher involves, say, working as a teacher. Interpreted existentially, however, the statement may make sense: perhaps one is an "unactualized teacher", and never got the chance to be who they really are (p. 111).

It is easy to see how the same reasoning can be applied to gender self-identification statements. A metaphysical "I am *G*" claim could be policed on the basis of an alternate conception of the gender class of *G*s (however legitimate that conception may itself be), whereas the same "I am *G*" statement, interpreted existentially, cannot be policed compatibly with my commitment to FPA, since we may conceptualize the utterance as the speaker expressing their belief about being in a particular mental state, so to speak. Summing up, then, my third primitive commitment to FPA over gender identity may be stated as follows.

(FPA) We may not deny nor police any genuine[16] existential self-identification statement of the form "I am *G*" or "I identify as *G*" that does not rely on a broad conception of *G*s as a gender class.

My commitments (Rights), (Self-identification), and (FPA) obviously, and sadly, are not shared in the vast majority of real-world contexts outside the most trans-friendly ones, which strictly limits the applicability of my thesis, in the absence of a full philosophical defence of them, which is well outside the scope of this work. Still, this is where I choose to start from, as I take these commitments to be widely and relatively uncontroversially shared at least by trans, trans-friendly philosophers, and allies alike.

[15]The range of relevant analogies between "I am *G*" and general "I am *X*" existential self-identification statements is admittedly rather limited. In some cases there are rather uncontroversial external criteria for assessing the truth of statement such as "I am a natural-born leader", unlike "I am a woman", where first-person reports are arguably the best we have as to how someone feels with respect to their gender, as opposed to being able to externally assess whether one has the (somewhat objective) qualities of a leader. At least at an intuitive level, this might provide further justification to endorse FPA over gender self-identification, although a full exploration of this line of argumentation is outside the scope of my thesis, where I simply take FPA over gender self-identification as primitive. Thanks to Dr Luca Incurvati for pressing me to clarify this during my defense.

[16]I take FPA to apply to *genuine* existential self-identification statements to simply exclude cases in which there may be demonstrably malicious intents behind such claims. But the burden of proof is clearly on those who claim that there are such intents. Absent any demonstrably malicious intent behind one's existential self-identification claim, we have no grounds to deny nor police it.

Chapter 2

Gender identity matters

What purposes could the concept of gender identity serve, and why would an inquiry into it be worth our time? My goal in this chapter to make a case why talk of gender identity is important and why the folk conception is unsatisfactory for our ends.

2.1 The limits of the folk conception of gender identity

It should already be clear that the folk conception of gender identity leaves a lot to be desired, from various perspectives. To begin with, what does it mean exactly to have an *innate sense of oneself* as a man, woman, . . . ? According to Jenkins (2018, p. 714), the folk conception "is not complete until some account is offered of what it is to have a sense of oneself as 'a man, woman, or some other gender'".

The problems with this definition, even at a first glance, are not purely theoretical, as this conception has potentially objectionable practical implications as well. My focus here will be on critiquing the folk conception of gender identity, meaning again an understanding of gender identity as one's innate sense of themselves as some *G*. Recall that being trans is understood as a mismatch between one's gender identity and their assigned gender at birth, so there does not seem to be any way other than someone explicitly uttering "I am *G*" or "I identify as *G*", where *G* is not their assigned gender at birth, for them to count as a trans person, for the purposes of accessing (say) gender-affirming medical care, or a legal sex/gender change.

This, I contend, might be an onerous and unwarranted requirement. I, for one, never made sense neither of the idea of *identifying* as some gender *G*, nor of the idea of *being* some *G* that was not how I effectively lived and was perceived at large in my community as a necessarily gendered person. Robin Dembroff speaks thus of their personal experience, which I find fairly similar to mine, especially in finding my gender classification by broader society perhaps not immutable, but surely *inevitable*, in the sense that it alone defined my gender at any given moment.

> "Until I was in my mid-twenties, I begrudgingly reported to those who asked . . . that I was a girl or a woman. I accepted this classification, prescribed to me by my family, church, and broader society, as immutable and inevitable. I did not have the conceptual tools or community that I would have needed to step outside of these prevailing ideas of gender. . . . I call myself 'transgender' as shorthand for a personal history, both painful and joyous, that is saturated with self-directed gender non-conformity. Whatever the categories,

though, I know what I am." (Dembroff, 2024, p. 27)

Moreover, I felt as if I had to lie to the doctors who had me in care and to the state officers who were in charge of my legal name and sex change and say that I identified as a woman[1]. Much like Andrea Long Chu in §1.2 and Robin Dembroff above, my own transition was not about wanting to be some other gender in an abstract way, but rather about concrete desires, that were not necessarily spelled out in terms of *being* or *identifying as* something, and self-directed gender non-conformity, meaning an internal rejection of my assigned gender at birth. This is independent of whatever label I find best to describe and position myself in a gendered world and included, for instance, living perceived as a woman rather than a man, especially where those are the only two options available.

Now, there surely are problems with outdated medical and legal practices that effectively require people to adhere to stereotypical narratives of trans experiences, yet this is not my focus here. At the conceptual level, which is my focus, I believe that the term of *identity* itself may be somewhat ambiguous, which broadly reflects the ambiguity between existential self-identity and metaphysical self-identity from §1.3. Appiah (2018) notes that the notion of identity, until the middle of the last century, was "utterly particular and personal", whereas "the identities we think of today . . . are social"[2] (p. 3). In Appiah's view, every identity (i) "comes with labels" as well as "some idea about how to apply them" (p. 8), (ii) "shapes your thoughts about how you should behave", and (iii) "affects the way other people treat you" (p. 12). Appiah's distinction between what we may call personal and social identity is obviously to be understood as analytical, as the two are clearly intertwined in complex ways. Still, I find that this distinction can help at least make sense of my own experience. To me, the idea of *being* or *identifying as* something coincided with Appiah's notion of social identity. So until I was effectively able to live and be perceived in all relevant contexts as a member of a different gender class than that of my assigned gender at birth (by socially, legally and medically transitioning), it did not make much sense to me to say that I identified as or was something other than what I lived as and was perceived as in the world at the time. That, in accordance with Appiah's theory of identity, came with (i) the label that others, including the state, applied to me, (ii) how I was, to a certain extent, expected to behave, and (iii) how that affected how others treated me. In other words, to cast it again in the same terms as before, perhaps I could not see nor feel the force of an existential self-identity claim on my gender identity over a metaphysical one: I could not see how my own self-identification could possibly override the social identity that was conferred to me (on the basis of certain visible and/or perceived features – I will come back to this in §3.2).

This is not to cast any doubts on my primitive commitments to (Self-identification) and (FPA); rather, I believe this points again towards the necessity of explaining what having an "innate sense" of being G ultimately consists of, and especially how that comes apart from how we are socially positioned within a group in terms of our gender status. It is important to remark here that our gender status, i.e. to anticipate the terminology that I will introduce in chapter 3, the gender that is *conferred* to us by others across various contexts, does not as a general rule track self-identification. In certain trans-friendly contexts, self-identification is taken as sufficient for gender categorization, which

[1]There are only two options for a legal sex/gender marker in my home country, though I am not sure whether I would have preferred a third option in the current political climate.

[2]It is perhaps in the former sense that Virgina Woolf, as cited in the epigraph of this thesis, can say that Orlando's change of sex "did nothing to alter their identity".

corresponds to my primitive commitment (Self-identification), but in most other scenarios, it does not: a trans person, especially if they have not medically transitioned or even come out, may be socially positioned as their assigned gender at birth. But (FPA) requires us that one can meaningfully identify as some gender other than their assigned gender at birth before any transition *at all*. It is therefore clear by now that the *identity* in the notion of gender identity is not to be understood as Appiah's notion of social identity, but perhaps rather as the other notion of identity: something "utterly particular and personal". This is still consistent with the idea that our social positioning may also shape our deep sense of ourselves to some extent: my point (which I will further substantiate in §§4.1-4.2) is that a suitable conception of gender identity should primarily be about our sense of ourselves as some gender (which we still need to provide some explanation for, as I argue in the next section), rather than the ways in which we are socially positioned in terms of our gender as our social identity. If considerations about our social positioning in terms of gender enter our conception of gender identity, as I think may happen with the folk conception because of the ambiguity surrounding its usage of the notion of *identity*, then it becomes less clear how one can meaningfully identify as some gender other than their assigned gender at birth before any sort of transition.

This lack of conceptual clarity as to what this "innate sense of oneself as *G*" consists of, and the conflating of our social and personal identities that may come from the ambiguity in the usage of the notion of identity, I contend, has negative real-world effects as well. Again in my own personal experience, I found that the step of relating the distress that I felt about my assigned gender at birth to my gender identity, at least in its folk conception, which is what I was presented with, was not only unnecessary, but possibly hindered and delayed my transition as well. For instance, what in the end made me decide to medically transition was simply making a list of pros and cons about it, and realizing that I had only listed pros. I thought of this in terms of *identity* only insofar as transitioning meant that I would assume a new *social* identity that I would have surely felt more comfortable in.

This is of course not to say that the folk conception of gender identity (or perhaps the very notion of identity itself) cannot adequately conceptualize many trans experiences, but simply that there are some that it explains poorly and that this, again, may have negative consequences, especially in cases where one is questioning their gender. Consider, for instance, someone who is not able to explicitly identify as *G* because of internalized transphobia: because they are not perceived as a member of the gender class of *G*s, they fail to explicitly identify as a *G*. But to be perceived as a *G* that is not one's assigned gender at birth at large in society (or pass, if you will), one virtually always needs some forms of gender-affirming care, which they may deny themselves because they "are not really *G*" – a bit of a catch-22. And yet they may have a desire to be perceived as a member of the class of *G*s and to live as a *G*, which should not at all be dismissed. Francisca Silva contends that such a scenario – an oppressive society that does "not allow for (or punish) experimentation with gender roles and expression[3], and that [has] restrictive, essentialist and subordinating dominant conceptions of gender" – "creates a particular kind of hermeneutical injustice" with respect in particular to "gender questioning experiences" (Silva, 2025, p. 425). This hermeneutical injustice (cf. Fricker, 2007; Mason, 2021), in Silva's

[3]Gender roles and expression are arguably a component of gender identity: as I argue in §4.2, what should enter a suitable conception of gender identity is the significance that an individual assigns to their own roles and expression in terms of gender, not the dominant understanding of the same roles and expression. This is so that our conception of gender identity is consistent with a primitive commitment to (FPA). To give a quick example: we want our conception of gender identity to be so that one can meaningfully identify as *G* even when their roles and expression in terms of gender are read as $G' \neq G$ under the dominant understanding of gender within their socio-cultural context.

view, "can be felt . . . in lacking the right conceptual resources to make sense of gender experiences, [so that] agents are prevented from engaging in gender questioning or, when not prevented from doing so, . . . might be kept in a process of gender questioning" (Silva, 2025, p. 425). Concretely, the scenarios that Silva describes would include someone who believes they cannot be anything other than their assigned gender at birth (say, because they hold some essentialist beliefs), but would perhaps rather have been assigned a different gender at birth if they could magically change that, or someone who desires to be some other sex/gender[4], but finds it impossible to commit to that idea because they do not *identify* as such, like in my simple example above, because they conflate their personal and social identities. I find that the idea of desire may serve as a much better basis to understand certain trans experiences such as these examples and my own, rather than the idea of an innate sense of oneself as some *G*. As Andrea Long Chu (2018) put it, "what makes women like me transsexual is not identity but desire"[5].

In addition to all these considerations, I believe it is not clear how exactly gender dysphoria fits into the conceptual framework that I have outlined. If all there is to being *G* is simply identifying as *G*, then how we can we understand the need of (many, though not all) trans individuals for gender-affirming medical care? What exactly would be the nature of the dysphoria that, for instance, a trans woman may feel about having certain male sex characteristics? Why is passing such an important goal for so many trans people? Perhaps we are, again, simply referring to different things: the gender term "woman" might just have different extensions in the contexts of "being a woman" and "identifying as a woman". In the former case, that might have to do with being perceived and effectively existing as a woman in society at large (cf. Haslanger, 2000); in the latter, it is one's sense of themselves as a woman, however they are to interpret it. Outside of the most trans-friendly contexts, these tend to not coincide. And again, the folk conception does not seem to fully capture such nuances, by fully characterizing gender terms in terms of gender identity, and gender identity in terms of an unclear "innate sense of oneself as *G*". Perhaps even more worryingly, I find it unclear how access to gender-affirming medical care may be conceptualized as a right and as something trans individuals may need urgent access to for their well-being, under the folk conception. Gender identities matter, also in this very concrete sense; this, as Rach Cosker-Rowland (2025, p. 4) puts it, "marks gender identities out as different from other beliefs that we have: for instance, I might think I'm very tall but my beliefs and understanding regarding my tallness do not merit respect. In contrast, trans people, trans communities, and trans allies, at least, take our gender identities to be worthy of respect".

In short, the folk conception of gender identity is, broadly speaking, defective in two main ways. From a theoretical perspective, it is unclear as to what *having an innate sense of oneself as G* consists of, and it conflates our sense of ourselves as some gender with our social positioning as (in some cases) some other gender. From a practical perspective, these theoretical defects generate a number of undesirable consequences with respect to my commitments (Rights), (Self-identification), and (FPA), including a particular kind of hermeneutical injustice with respect to gender questioning, and an

[4] I say *sex/gender* because, as I argue in §3.2, transitioning may be said to (potentially) alter both one's sex and gender.

[5] Andrea Long Chu does not seem to define transsexuality explicitly here, but it is plausible that she is referring to either someone who medically transitions or wishes to do so, or someone who desires to live as a different sex/gender than what they were assigned at birth (cf. Serano, 2007, p. 27). Either way, these are subsets of the category of trans people as I have defined it. Therefore, I do not think this detracts from my point – that there simply are *some* trans experiences that are better captured by the notion of desire. The notion itself may in part ground some other notion of identity that is not simply one's innate sense of themselves as some *G*, as I argue in §4.3.

unsatisfactory normative basis for access to gender-affirming care. These preliminary reflections, I contend, prompt us to take a step back, and discuss a comprehensive set of desiderata against which to evaluate a concept of gender identity; to engage, in other words, in a project of *conceptual engineering* of the concept of gender identity (Cappelen, 2018). This means, in some more detail: stating the purposes and goals we want the concept of gender identity to serve, showing that the folk conception of gender identity is defective with respect to these, providing a new concept – which need not necessarily be gender identity, but perhaps a new one altogether – that satisfies our desiderata, or perhaps a set of concepts that fulfil our different purposes (Jenkins, 2016), and discussing how this may be implemented in practice in a linguistic community, and as a legal basis for granting rights and access to medical care.

2.2 Motivating gender identity

Now, some of the criticism in the previous section may seem to point us towards abandoning the very notion of gender identity, perhaps in favour of some other concept(s). In particular, Hernandez and Bell (2025) have recently sought to unmotivate the project of providing a substantive account of gender identity, meaning of what it means to have a sense of oneself as some *G*. In this section, I will reconstruct their argument and argue why their proposal is not at odds with mine. My primary goal is therefore to motivate, via this discussion, my inquiry into gender identity.

Hernandez and Bell (2025) begin by pointing out, as I did in §2.1, that the nature of the folk conception of gender identity is unclear, pushing theorists towards two possible directions. On the one hand, a skeptic may question the legitimacy and coherence of the very concept of gender identity; on the other, one may seek to substantiate it in order to provide a strong theoretical basis for trans rights and for the recognition of trans people's identities. In Hernandez and Bell's view, this is a frustrating dialectic (p. 1314), as much theoretical preoccupation with gender identity only caters to the curiosity of cis people. Hernandez and Bell indeed suggest that "gender identity just is the gender one identifies as" (p. 1327) or, in other words, that we should deflate gender identity, meaning that "gender identity itself has no specific nature that requires philosophical theorizing" (ibid.). In their view, the concept of gender identity has a "morally and politically fraught" history (p. 1314), and it has only come to serve the purpose of making the experiences of trans people intelligible to cis people via, in particular, the outdated "wrong-body" model (discussed in §1.2) in which being trans is conceptualized as being born in the wrong body (ibid.). Moreover, they argue that we do not need a concept of gender identity to metaphysically ground trans people's genders as their identified genders, because respecting them is a pre-theoretical commitment (p. 1332). Gender identity is not needed to normatively ground trans rights either, because trans rights are human rights rooted in a basic right to autonomy (ibid.). We may therefore reconstruct their argument as follows.

(1) The history of the concept of gender identity is morally and politically fraught, and its primary use is to render trans experiences intelligible to cis people via, in particular, a problematic wrong-body model.

(2) Respecting trans people's genders is a pre-theoretical commitment that does not require a substantive conception of gender identity to validate them.

(3) Trans rights (i.e. use of correct name and pronouns, access to gendered spaces, access to medical care) are simply human rights that follow from a basic right to autonomy, which does not require a substantive conception of gender identity.

(4) Therefore, we should deflate gender identity: theoretical preoccupation with a substantive conception of gender identity is unmotivated. Gender identity just is the gender one identifies as.

If successful, Hernandez and Bell's argument may seem to undermine my project of conceptual engineering of gender identity as defined in §2.1: perhaps my theoretical preoccupation with gender identity is entirely unmotivated. However, I do not think this is the case: while I do acknowledge their criticism of the concept of gender identity and agree with it to a large extent, I hold that we still can and have reason to retain a concept of gender identity, and that we can meaningfully pursue a theoretical inquiry into it.

To see why, consider again my arguments from the previous section. I have argued that the folk conception's lack of clarity as to what having an innate sense of oneself as *G* consists of generates two main practical shortcomings: (i) it is not useful in gender questioning, and may even generate a kind of hermeneutical injustice in gender questioning scenarios, and (ii) it does not convey the idea that gender identities are worthy of respect and often come with urgent concrete needs, such as access to gender-affirming care.

Hernandez and Bell's argument outlined above may seem to immediately imply that my second concern is unwarranted: that trans identities are worthy of respect (in the sense that we ought to respect them) is a pre-theoretical commitment, and that satisfying the concrete needs that they come with constitutes rights simply follows from a more primitive commitment to a right to autonomy – these correspond to claims (2) and (3) respectively. Now, that trans identities ought to be respected is already exemplified by my commitments (Self-identification) and (FPA), and I am also pre-theoretically committed to trans rights via (Rights). Regardless of whether these commitments can be argued to follow from more primitive commitments[6], it may seem that we can, after all, do without the concept of gender identity to address my second worry. However, I hold that this argument only supports the weaker claim that we can (and perhaps should) do without gender identity *under ideal circumstances*. In other words, what I believe this argument shows is only that gender identity is *theoretically* superfluous for one to show, or even just axiomatically hold, that trans identities ought to be respected and that trans rights are human rights.

My contention here is that we may still have reason to retain a concept of gender identity for very practical purposes. As I have briefly discussed in the introduction, trans rights are routinely violated, to varying extents, everywhere in the world. So while it may indeed be theoretically superfluous to rely on a concept of gender identity to do the work of showing that we ought to respect trans identities and that trans rights are human rights, there might still be reason to retain it as part of a set of transitional policies that are dictated by the unfortunate state of the world. This is compatible, as a short-term strategy, with Hernandez and Bell's suggestion that we should deflate gender identity, which we may

[6]These commitments have indeed been argued to follow from other primitive commitments, as I briefly mentioned in §1.3: first-person authority over gender self-identification has been argued for on moral grounds by Bettcher (2009), while Cosker-Rowland (2025) has recently proposed that trans rights and the sufficiency of self-identification to gender categorization follow from basic liberal rights.

understand as a long-term deconstructive strategy (cf. Fraser, 1995).

As for my other concern – that the folk conception's lack of clarity makes it not useful in gender questioning – I believe that deflating gender identity would do nothing to address it. Even if we accept Hernandez and Bell's argument that gender identity was primarily devised to cater to the curiosity of cis people, the fact remains here that gender identity may be a useful tool for those who are going through gender questioning, whether they in the end realize that they are trans or not. To avoid giving a circular account of gender questioning in terms of gender identity and a sense of oneself as *G*, we may here understand it as questioning one's relationship with their own assigned gender at birth, the physical traits that come or that are expected to come with it, and the social norms and expectations that are contextually imposed on its basis. Moreover, I believe that my definitions of gender incongruence and dysphoria in §1.2 shows that we can talk about gender identity without making an implicit or explicit reference to a problematic wrong-body model. We can coherently say that one feels an incongruence between their body and their gender identity and that it causes discomfort to them without subscribing to a born-in-the-wrong-body narrative. So claim (1) does not justify entirely giving up gender identity and adopting a deflationary view either.

Therefore, even if we accept claims (1)-(3), the strong conclusion (4) does not follow. Rather, I have argued that a weaker conclusion follows. I do agree with Hernandez and Bell that we may indeed take respect of trans identities and trans rights as axiomatic without the need for a concept of gender identity, or even normatively ground them onto some more primitive commitments. However, we can still retain a concept of gender identity for very practical purposes: specifically, to ground respect for trans identities and trans rights, as part of a short-term strategy that is motivated by just how little trans identities and trans rights are respected in the world at large today, and that is in theory compatible with Hernandez and Bell's deflationary view, understood as a long-term deconstructive strategy. Moreover, some concept of gender identity may be useful as a tool to guide one's gender questioning, even if Hernandez and Bell are right in saying that the concept itself has so far mostly catered towards the curiosity of cis people[7]. Therefore, *contra* Hernandez and Bell, I hold that deflating gender identity is an unwarranted theoretical move: if anything, these considerations seem to provide all the more reason to conceptually engineer gender identity to best address these issues.

2.3 Engineering gender identity

Herman Cappelen (2018) broadly defines conceptual engineering as the practice of "assessing and improving our representational devices" (p. 3). Notably, mine is not (at least not primarily) a descriptive project aiming to elucidate our understanding of gender identity, but rather a revisionary project seeking to put forward the conception of gender identity that, in my view, best serves certain purposes that I will shortly outline, and that is consistent with my commitment to (FPA). I have already been referring to it as *conceptual engineering of gender identity* and *ameliorative account of gender identity* interchangeably. The project of an *ameliorative analysis* has famously been described by Sally Haslanger

[7]The very concept of gender identity, after all has been independently introduced in the medical literature in 1964 by Ralph Greenson, who wished to investigate "the etiology of homosexuality as a threat to stable gender identity", and Robert Stroller, who was interested in "the 'natural experiment' of intersex people who have binary gender identities, where gender identity has the potential to re-stabilize the sex that is thrown into question by intersex status" (Hernandez and Bell, 2025, p. 1322).

(2000) as follows: "what is the point of having a concept [of gender identity]? What concept (if any) would do that work best?" (p. 32), and it is arguably an instance of conceptual engineering that has broadly political motivations (Cappelen, 2018, p. 14), much like mine. I have already answered the first question of what is the point of retaining a concept of gender identity in the previous section, and the rest of my thesis will be devoted to answering the second question of *what concept* of gender identity would do the work that I think it should do best.

What is it that we are actually doing when we conceptually engineer gender identity, or provide an ameliorative account of gender identity? According to Cappelen (2018), the label *conceptual engineering* is relatively infelicitous, as what is actually being engineered, so to speak, or in other words what actually changes, are the intensions and extensions of a certain expression. In particular, I think that we can understand a project of conceptual engineering of gender identity as providing an account of *what it is to have a sense of oneself as G*. In order for this account to be consistent with (FPA), to put it in more formal terms, the expressions "*P*'s genuine self-identified gender" and "*P*'s gender identity" must be coextensive (and as I argue in §§4.1-4.2, this can only be done by fully deferring to self-identification).

Moreover, this account of gender identity will also have to serve some other political purposes. Let us then turn to my desiderata for a target concept of gender identity. Given the shortcomings of the folk conception outlined in §2.1, I begin by proposing the following two desiderata that my target concept of gender identity will have to jointly satisfy (cf. Jenkins, 2018, pp. 723-724), in addition to consistency with (FPA).

(D1) A suitable conception of gender identity should be a helpful tool in guiding one through their gender questioning, in particular by helping them figure out their motivations and desires with regards to a possible transition.

(D2) A suitable conception of gender identity should be able to convey the idea that gender identities are worthy of respect and that they often come with concrete needs, such as timely access to gender-affirming care.

Moreover, while this does not strictly pertain to gender identity as a representational device, I wish to clarify the relationships between gender identity and the concepts of sex and gender. So far, I have worked with an intuitive understanding of the two as having to do with biology and culture respectively. We may perhaps say, in more familiar philosophical terms, that folk intuitions view the first as a natural kind, something that is out there in the world, so to speak (Putnam, 1973). Gender, on the other hand, may be viewed as socially constructed, in the sense that our classification into genders is to some extent contingent on our cultural practices (Haslanger, 1995). My second main aim in this thesis is to argue that this distinction is inadequate to understand the realities of trans people and of transitioning specifically – both as a theoretical and as an explanatory tool. This is especially relevant because while being trans, defined in terms of having a mismatching gender identity, does not necessarily imply that one will be transitioning or even has the desire to, I work with the assumption that it at least implies a *desire* to transition *in most cases* (and that if one is transitioning, they obviously had the desire to). As I argue in §4.3, I think that a suitable conception of gender identity must incorporate a suitable understanding of sex and gender in order to satisfy (D1)-(D2). To sum up, the goals of my inquiry into gender identity are the following.

1. Provide a theoretical framework that can shed light on the relationships between sex, gender, and the realities of transitioning, and that can be useful both as a theoretical and explanatory tool (in chapter 3).

2. Defend an account of gender identity, and in particular of what it is to have a sense of oneself as *G*, that jointly satisfies (D1)-(D2) and that is consistent with (FPA), within the sex/gender framework that I will have provided in chapter 3 (in chapter 4).

Yet even assuming that I succeed in attaining the two goals that I have set out above, how would these conceptual changes translate into real-world changes? Even if the account of sex, gender and gender identity that I defend is theoretically sound, the actual uptake of novel concepts and frameworks surely depends on various different empirical considerations. According to Bettcher (2013), these conflicts over meaning are deeply intertwined with skewed power dynamics. In particular, we may say that meaning can effectively be enforced by those in positions of power. As a recent example, newly elected president Donald Trump made it the official policy of the United States that there are only two immutable genders (Pengelly, 2025), which is a kind of authority that I obviously do not have. This is to say that without changes in our background social conditions, philosophy will only get us so far here. But just how far exactly?

My aim here is more modest: to put it in similar terms as Haslanger (2005), I wish to give an account of gender identity, gender, and sex as target concepts that we can adopt to attain our goals. In this chapter, I have outlined their folk conceptions, which broadly correspond to our intuitions and current practices with regards to gender identity, gender and sex. These folk intuitions, we may again say in Haslangerian terms, correspond to a combination of our manifest and operative concepts. There will obviously be wide gaps between our folk intuitions and our target concepts, which may again give rise to feasibility concerns. But it is precisely these gaps that give us ground for political actions that are outside the scope of a project of conceptual engineering (Cull, 2024). As Mari Mikkola (2016, p. 115) puts it, "in fixing social kind boundaries it is also politics, and not just semantics, that matters". So philosophy will indeed only get us this far, but it is a good starting point for further action.

Chapter 3

Gender identity, gender, and the many kinds of sex

Before engaging in an ameliorative analysis of the concept of gender identity, which will be the topic of next chapter, we need to explicate how one's gender identity may be conceptualized in order to make sense of the idea that *being categorized as G*, understood as membership to the gender class of *G*s, may be thought of, to a certain extent, as *having gender identity G*. There has indeed already been some tension between these two notions, which reflects the distinction between social and personal identity respectively from §2.1. I am committed to the sufficiency of gender self-identification to gender categorization, but in the vast majority of real-world scenarios, having gender identity *G* is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for being categorized as *G*. Someone who has not changed their legal gender, for instance, will count in many scenarios as their assigned gender at birth, regardless of their gender identity.

This picture is further complicated by the relationship in which the concept of gender itself stands to that of sex and, more broadly speaking, to the materiality of the body (Butler, 2011). After all, "there *are* hormones, genes, prostates, uteri, and other body parts and physiologies that we use to differentiate male from female, that become part of the ground from which varieties of sexual experience and desire emerge" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 22). But these body parts and physiologies can and often are altered by trans people via medical interventions, and this is what in most cases ultimately allows us to feel good (or at least better) about our bodies, possibly pass, and effectively live as our identified genders in most or all social contexts. Moreover, the only single physiological trait that may reasonably be used to define a sex class that cannot be changed by any medical intervention is one's sex chromosomes (Chappell, 2025, p. 13). Intuitively, then, the claim that medical (i.e. hormonal and/or surgical) transition alters one's sex starts to make some sense. Variation in sex chromosomes is also far greater than a chromosome-based understanding of sex might at first glance suggest (Blackless et al., 2000): to give an example, some individuals with XY sex chromosomes, undescended testes, and Complete Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome are assigned female at birth and grow up as women, and they might never know their karyotype unless they get a test (see for instance the case of Olympic athlete Maria Patiño in Fausto-Sterling, 2000, pp. 1-3).

Additional clarity over what we take sex to be and what we perhaps *should* take it to be (if anything at all) is further motivated by other empirical considerations, such as the prevalence in public discourse

of the trope of trans people (and especially trans women) as pretenders or deceivers whose gender presentation contrasts with their sexed body (Bettcher, 2007). Moreover, the very nebulous concept of "biological sex" has recently been employed in legislation in certain countries. For instance, the UK Supreme Court ruled just last year that the legal definition of woman relies on "biological sex", thus excluding trans women, and the full ramifications of this change are still to be felt (Carrell, 2025). As already mentioned in §2.3, on his first day in office last year Donald Trump sought to restore "biological truth" to the federal government by declaring that there are only two immutable genders (or perhaps sexes?), and that sex on official documents such as passports must reflect assigned gender at birth (Pengelly, 2025). Similar positions, which seem to deny the relevance of the concept of gender identity to trans people and seek to reduce gender to "biological sex", are also endorsed by so-called gender-critical authors – here, I will be focusing on works by Kathleen Stock (2019; 2021) and Holly Lawford-Smith (2022). Importantly, these philosophical positions can and do influence policymaking to a certain extent. For instance, gender-critical philosopher Alex Byrne was one of the authors of the very controversial report on gender-affirming care for trans youth that was commissioned by Donald Trump last year shortly after he took office via Executive Order 14187, titled "Protecting Children from Chemical and Surgical Mutilation" (Weinberg, 2025).

In this chapter, I will therefore focus on what the relationships between gender identity, gender and sex are, how they should perhaps be thought of, and how they should *not* be thought of. This inquiry is relevant not only because these relationships are theoretically unclear and so far underexplored, but also because these philosophical views (especially the ones I will be arguing against in §3.3) can and do influence policymaking, and these policies have substantial real-world effects on the lives of many people, not only trans. I will argue that we should hold a so-called conferralist view with regards to gender and sex, meaning that the properties of being some gender G and some sex S are *conferred* to us by others, possibly including ourselves (Ásta, 2018). I will further explain how, under this view, there is a sense in which we can meaningfully say that transitioning changes both one's sex and gender. At the same time, I hope to show that gender-critical stances on sex and gender are theoretically and practically unfounded, and that the only purpose that they can be shown to effectively serve is trans exclusion and marginalization.

3.1 Gender identity and the sex/gender distinction

My starting point is, again, what we may perhaps call folk intuitions about gender identity, trans people and their bodies, gender, and sex, which is what I have worked with so far. On a first intuitive understanding, which tends to be how these topics are publicly discussed (which, as I will show, is not at all unproblematic), sex has to do with one's biology, whereas gender is its "cultural interpretation" (Butler, 2006, p. 10). In this sense, a trans person who was assigned G at birth is often in public discourse referred to (again, not unproblematically!) as "biologically G".

Perhaps, then, we can provisionally view gender identity as the particular interpretation of a certain sex. In this sense, an individual of sex S (under this naïve understanding of sex) may have genders $G_1, G_2, \ldots$ (under this naïve understanding of gender) depending on their gender identity (whatever its nature). This seems to correspond to public perception of trans individuals, and to the legal definitions of man and woman in the UK: for instance, a trans woman (i.e. whose gender

identity is female) is "biologically male" (i.e. has male sex). One could perhaps even side-step my commitment to (FPA) by making an appeal to something like a "biological reality" which trumps one's self-identification claims[1]. Somewhat more precisely, under this very naïve understanding of the sex/gender distinction, (FPA) says that we cannot deny a statement "I am *G*" *where G is a gender term* (and the statement does not rely upon a broad conception of a gender class), but in theory (if we have good reasons to!) we may deny an "I am *G*" statement *where G is a sex term*.

However, this conclusion is exceedingly quick. There are two main issues with referring to (say) a trans woman as a "biological male" (and *mutatis mutandis* for other combinations of gender identities and assigned genders at birth). The first is that, because gender and sex terms are often conflated in everyday talk and folk intuitions, one actually does run the risk of (inadvertently or not) violating (FPA) by referring to a trans woman as a "biological male". Although in the literature *male* is often exclusively used as a sex term and *man* as a gender term, and I too am committed to using them as a sex and gender term respectively, they are often used interchangeably in everyday discourse. Therefore, we can say that FPA is often effectively violated when one speaks of a trans woman as a "biological male". Obviously, whether FPA is violated depends on the shared understandings of sex and gender within a specific context. For instance, FPA is *prima facie* not violated if one refers to a trans woman as "biologically male" to indicate that she has (or is supposed to have: most people do not actually know their karyotype) XY sex chromosomes, if it is understood that sex *within that context* (say, a doctor's office) is defined solely in terms of karyotype[2]. But this is arguably a highly specific case in which there is a shared, narrow understanding of sex as defined in terms of karyotype: again, in most everyday scenarios, *female/male* and *woman/man* are used interchangeably. What I wish to emphasize is simply that these "truths about bodies" (Bettcher, 2009, p. 115) can be expressed without (risk of) reference to gender and/or sex terms – to put it more crudely, we can say that a trans woman has a penis (if that is relevant in a given context, which it is almost always not) without saying that she is a "biological male"[3].

The second issue, which arises independently of my commitment to (FPA), is that this view completely ignores the ways in which gender-affirming hormonal therapy changes trans people's bodies (and this is, to a large extent, even without any surgical interventions). I find that this issue is particularly evident in certain accounts of sex and sexual orientation. For instance, the gender-critical author Kathleen Stock (2021) considers a female self-identified lesbian (we may say a cis woman who feels she is only attracted to other women) in a relationship with a "gorgeous, feminine, post-surgery trans woman", and argues that "there are reasons both for and against saying that this is a lesbian", because "there's female sexual attraction to a female-like body, at least on the outside, but the female-like body is artificially produced and not an endogenous phenotype. The body is actually male, no matter what it looks like" (p. 82). Two of Stock's claims especially puzzle me in this context: that the trans woman's body is actually male (what if this trans woman never even went through male puberty?) and, supposing this is somehow granted, that it is a reason against saying that the cis woman

[1]Appeals to "biological sex" as some sort of "biological reality" are a key part of the gender-critical philosophers' argumentative strategy: as I argue in §§3.2-3.3, I think that their understanding of sex is not based on biological realities, but rather on biological fictions that only serve the purpose of trans exclusion and marginalization.

[2]As I argue in §3.3, I do not think that this is a sensible understanding of sex, although for reasons different than my commitment to (FPA).

[3]If we accept Bettcher's view that gender presentation is genital representation (Bettcher, 2007, 2009), it becomes fairly obvious that genitals is what one is getting at with talk of trans women as "biological males".

in a relationship with this trans woman is still a lesbian. Is the trans woman's body "actually male" because it was not feminized through endogenous hormone production? If that is the case, as Stock suggests, why is it relevant for her purposes to categorize the trans woman's body as male *for this reason only*? I contend that the burden of argumentation is on Stock here, because *all* relevant facts here point to the cis woman who is in a relationship with the trans woman effectively being a lesbian – even without appealing to (FPA), which Stock admittedly does not seem keen to endorse, at least in my formulation.

Raja Halwani (2023), in his account of sexual orientation, uses the term "gynandromorph" to refer to trans women "who gender present as feminine . . . but who retain their penises" (p. 9), because he takes breasts to be a marker of the female sex, and penises to be markers of the male sex. Halwani's stance seems, at least at first glance, more reasonable than Stock's. However, I contend, Halwani is ignoring how much feminizing hormonal therapy changes one's physiology and anatomy, even without any surgical intervention. Put it more crudely: a body running on testosterone and the same body running on estrogen function so differently that it is questionable whether taking a penis in isolation to *necessarily* be a marker of the male sex is a sensible choice here (and conversely, the same reasoning may apply to breasts in trans men). My point is that we should look at more than just the anatomical part in a vacuum, and adopt a more holistic view of sex. Otherwise, it also becomes unclear how gender incongruence, dysphoria, and euphoria fit into the picture. Hormonal replacement therapy, as I briefly discussed in §1.2, affects both one's primary and secondary sex characteristics, and simply referring to certain traits as female or male dismisses its impacts.

So far, I have assumed an intuitive understanding of the concept of sex, that has to do with our biology, so to speak. But one could also posit that gender identity has biological underpinnings. This echoes the theory of brain sex, first proposed by Money and Ehrhardt (1971), drawing on studies done on rats. Under this view, exposure to different prenatal hormones (androgens or estrogens) affects human brain development in a way that possibly results in a mismatch between one's gender identity, which is rooted in their brain (in ways to be specified), and their assigned gender at birth (which is based on various observed anatomical features).

However, research on the influence of different exposure to prenatal hormones on the development of gender identity in human infants poses two significant challenges. The first challenge has to do with how to conduct such experiments. Anne Fausto-Sterling (2012) points out that "we have high ethical standards for the conduct of research on human subjects", meaning that we obviously cannot simply experiment with human subjects by giving them different hormones at different dosages and studying how this influences their development, but we have to resort to "quasi-experiments", in which researchers "stitch together information from developmental accidents — hormonal exposures due to medicines ingested during pregnancy and the like" (pp. 36-37). Moreover, studies often simply observe hormone levels at times t_1 and t_2, and compare observed behaviours at t_1 and t_2, ignoring the events between t_1 and t_2, thus not telling a "developmental story" (Fausto-Sterling, 2021, p. 2). However, there are surely more factors that ought to be taken into account to determine how our hormone levels influence our development.

The moral of the story is that a folk understanding of sex and gender as having to do with biology and culture respectively (so to speak) cannot easily accommodate a satisfying account of gender identity, gender incongruence, dysphoria, and euphoria, and the actual experience of medically

transitioning. On the one hand, if we view sex as some immutable biological reality, then we effectively deny the *actual* biological realities of *many*[4] trans individuals. Moreover, because speakers often use *female/woman* and *male/man* to interchangeably refer to both sex and gender in everyday discourse, referring to (say) a trans woman as a "biological male" runs the risk of effectively violating (FPA), whether she has medically transitioned or not. On the other hand, the hypothesis that gender identity has biological underpinnings is theoretically and practically very hard to either prove or disprove, and research on it is still inconclusive.

Feminist neuroendocrinologist Sari van Anders, in her account of sexual orientation, uses the term "gender/sex" to refer to "whole people/identities and/or aspects of women, men, and people that relate to identity and/or cannot really be sourced specifically to sex or gender" (van Anders, 2015, p. 1181), and recent research in neuroscience and anthropology is also picking up the term "gender/sex identity" (Fausto-Sterling, 2021; Lancaster et al., 2023). Talk of gender/sex, as opposed to a sex/gender distinction, can make sense of my suggestion that we cannot take certain anatomical features to *invariably* be markers of a certain sex. This is especially so in the case of trans people who are medically transitioning, because there are both biological and social factors at play, i.e. the very body part or feature, how hormonal replacement therapy affects its external appearance and physiology, and the sex of which the body part or feature is usually taken to be a marker of. In other words, "bodies are 'real' but are never simply given" (Lancaster et al., 2023, p. 2): we are the ones who in the end have to interpret them. The concepts of sex and gender are, after all, not so easily separable (Mikkola, 2024) and, in the following, what I draw between them is simply an *analytical* distinction for heuristic purposes.

3.2 Categories with purposes

This so far rather informal discussion was meant to help illustrate two important points. First, I have argued we cannot realistically hope for scientific research to provide us with an answer to the possible biological reasons for gender incongruence and the development of gender identity, because any hypothesis testing strategy inevitably and quickly runs into practical and ethical concerns that seem impossibly hard to overcome, at least to this day. Importantly, scientific research on the development of gender identity is clearly a multidisciplinary endeavour, which could arguably itself benefit from inputs from philosophical work on gender identity aiming to provide a conception of gender identity that can be effectively operationalized (Fausto-Sterling, 2021, pp. 12-15).

My second related point is that, even when we do have "truths about bodies" such as chromosomes, gonads, hormones, genitals, what we do with them, as theorists, is up for debate, and clearly depends at least on our goals and commitments. We can (and should!) question the purposes of any categorization that is meant to track any combination of these properties, whether these purposes are themselves legitimate (with respect to, say, other commitments that we hold), whether the kinds that a categorization produces are (broadly speaking) appropriate for our theorizing and with respect to our other commitments, whether we have sensible conditions for membership to one kind or another, and whether the labels we use for membership to one kind or another are apt (Haslanger, 2015, p. 133). To give an example, consider the property of height, and suppose we want to categorize a group of

[4]Meaning those who medically transition, to varying extents.

people on its basis. What are the purposes of this categorization? Are they legitimate, and consistent with the other commitments that we hold? Is it a sensible strategy, given the purposes that we have set out, to have (say) the kinds "tall" and "short"? Would (say) "being taller than 180cm" be a sensible condition for the membership to the kind "tall"? Are the labels "tall" and "short" or "not tall" apt?

Let us then go back to the case of sex. Why would we want to categorize individuals into sexes? What are our purposes, and are they legitimate? What other commitments do we hold? What categories should we use, what conditions should we take for membership to these categories, what labels should we use? Answering these questions is not at all straightforward, which goes to show that the category of sex, analytically distinguished from that of gender, ought to be thought of as *social*, in the sense explicated by Ásta (2018): the property of being a certain sex is *conferred* to us by others (usually legal authorities, advised by doctors). Our property of being a certain sex is therefore not an intrinsic fact about us, but is rather conferred on the basis of other facts about our anatomy. Confusion may arise because these facts, meaning the properties that sex as a category is meant to track, usually are, so to speak, "natural": again, sex usually tracks chromosomes, gonads, hormones, genitals, or some combination of these. How can we then give an account of how sex *is* conceptualized? To begin with, we can offer a breakdown of the property of "being a certain sex" as follows, under Ásta's proposed conferralist framework (cf. Ásta, 2018, pp. 70-72).

- The *property* that is being tracked, i.e. being female/male/other.
- *Who* confers that property, i.e. legal authorities, usually advised by doctors, except in the case of self-identification laws.
- *What* the conferral of the property consists of, i.e. the recording of one's sex on their birth certificate and other identification documents.
- *When* the property is assessed in an individual, i.e. at birth or when specifically requested later in life (for instance, because one is medically transitioning).
- The *base properties* that the property is meant to track, i.e. sex-stereotypical traits (such as gonads, hormones, genitals).

The second point is that this categorization is clearly not uncontentious: there are many kinds of sex that we can define (some better than others relative to our goals) and many of them do not form neat binaries (Lancaster et al., 2023). Following Haslanger (2015), we can ask the following questions, having to do with the purposes and adequacy of the categories that we distinguish.

- What are the purposes of tracking this property? Do we even need to track it? Are these purposes legitimate? Does it make sense to distinguish the categories that this property gives rise to?
- Whom should this property be conferred by, and why?
- Are the labels used apt, and why?
- Should we allow for re-categorizations, and if so how and in which cases?
- Are our conditions for membership to one category over another sensible?

Let us leave these consideration aside for a moment, and suppose we are to retain a concept of gender as having to do with the social significance of a sexed body or, perhaps, of how that body is *perceived* to be sexed (cf. Haslanger, 2000), again analytically distinguished from the concept of sex. Ásta's (2018) insight is that the property of being a certain gender *G* is radically context-dependent, meaning that its conferral is meant to track different base properties in different contexts. To give a trans-related example, someone who identifies as non-binary may "be non-binary" (or more precisely: be conferred the property of being non-binary) in a trans-friendly context where gender conferral is meant to track self-identification, whereas they may "be their legal gender" (i.e. be conferred the property of being their legal gender) in a context where gender conferral is meant to track one's legal sex (for whatever reason: for instance, men and women, legally defined, had to form separate lines to vote in Italy until very recently, because eligible voters were sorted into lists divided by legal sex). Therefore, we may break down the property of "being *G*" as follows (cf. Ásta, 2018, pp. 74-75).

- The *property* of being *G*.
- *Who*: the subjects in a particular context.
- *What:* the subject's perception that one has certain base properties that the property of being *G* is meant to track.
- *When:* in a particular context.
- *Base properties:* they are context-dependent, meaning that in some context it could be one's (perceived) role in reproduction, or their bodily presentation, or their stated self-identification, and so on.

The interdependence of the concepts of sex and gender is evident under these definitions. On the one hand, the choice of base properties that the concept of sex is meant to track may be influenced by certain interpretations of bodies – for instance, the possible claim that certain body parts are necessarily marks of a certain sex. On the other hand, the base property that the concept of gender is meant to track corresponds in certain contexts to particular understandings of sex – as having to do, for instance, with one's perceived role in reproduction.

These definitions also help us make sense of the significance of transitioning. Again, I will draw an analytic distinction between *medically* and *socially* transitioning. The former usually involves hormonal replacement therapies and gender-affirming surgeries, while the latter typically consists of changing one's name and/or pronouns and/or gendered presentation; the two arguably do not neatly come apart because, for instance, one's gendered presentation is itself altered by the workings of hormonal replacement therapy alone.

Under this distinction, we can therefore meaningfully say that, in some sense, medically transitioning changes one's sex. Whether and to which extent this statement holds depends on one's definition of sex, which again is not *a priori* uncontentious and may be challenged as outlined above. For instance, if we take hormonal makeup to be a base property that ought to be tracked by a certain understanding of the category of sex, then a medically transitioning trans person is indeed altering their sex. If our categorization of sex is meant to track certain anatomical features, then gender-affirming surgeries also alter one's sex. If we are only aiming to track the production of small and large gametes and thus

sort people into males and females, then many fail to be categorized as either sex, including many infertile cis people, and trans people who have had their gonads surgically removed. If we track sex chromosomes, then trans people obviously cannot change and are not changing their sex (and we may questionably categorize many intersex individuals as well, not all of whom would consider themselves trans).

Similarly, we can meaningfully state that socially transitioning changes one's gender, again depending on our context-dependent definition of gender and, in particular, on the base properties that the property of being *G* is meant to track in a given context. If the property of being *G* tracks the property of presenting in a stereotypically *G*-like manner and/or the property of identifying as *G*, then a socially transitioning trans person is effectively changing their gender.

This conferralist view about sex and gender may seem to run into three problems. The first is that a trans person who is not medically transitioning, under these understandings of sex and gender, can still be said to fall within the sex class of their assigned gender at birth (the odd word choice here being a result of my choice to speak of *assigned gender at birth* in §3.1), and this may seem to be at odds with (FPA). I do not think this is an issue, since I formulated (FPA) in terms of gender classes rather than sex classes. It is still worth emphasizing that it is certainly possible to make references to bodies and their features *without* making reference to gender terms (i.e. woman/man), or to sex terms (i.e. female/male) that are very often conflated with gender terms. Doing so, as I further argue in §3.4, is also simply more accurate, since the bodies of many trans and intersex people may have sex-stereotypical features that are typically understood as both female and male (for instance, breasts and a prostate in trans women).

The other two challenges to a conferralist view of sex and gender, summarized by Rach Cosker-Rowland (2023, p. 811), look more serious. Let us begin with the first. In Cosker-Rowland's view, the fact that the property of being a certain gender may vary across contexts "seems to be in tension with the idea that many of our disagreements about gender are genuine disagreements" (p. 811), and the same holds with regards to disagreements about sex. To give an example, suppose ❀[5] holds that the property of being a woman is defined by the property of producing large gametes, and that we hold that the property of being a woman should not be underpinned by the property of producing large gametes, but rather by genuine self-identification. According to Cosker-Rowland, if it is true that the property of being a woman varies across contexts and we all accept it, "it is hard for us to genuinely disagree" with ❀ when they say that only women produce large gametes, because what ❀ means by "women" is *only those who count as women* relative to the mechanisms that determine the extension of the gender term "woman" *within the context* ❀ *is operating in* (ibid.). In other words, how can we defend our account of the property of being a woman against ❀'s account without talking past each other? I believe that we can address Cosker-Rowland's worry about contextualism via a reflective-equilibrium approach (Brun, 2022). In short, we can meaningfully disagree with ❀'s account of "woman" by starting from our shared commitments about the subject matter – for instance, our extensional intuitions about the gender term "woman", and in particular the fact that we both take individuals who produce large gametes and self-identify as women (i.e. cis women, we may say) as women, as well as the work that we would want an account of "woman" to do for us. This way, we can (in theory) avoid talking past each other. Whether this endeavour might be successful or even practical

[5]Again, I use ❀ to refer to a fictional speaker.

is of course doubtful, but my point is that it is certainly possible, under a conferralist view of gender and gender identity, to have genuine disagreements about different categorizations of gender and sex.

The last challenge to conferralism is posed by Jennifer Saul (2012). Now, trans woman Alice counts as a woman in a particular context if she fulfils whatever the base properties for being classified as a woman are in that context. So, for instance, Alice counts as a woman in a context in which "self-identification is what mattes to womanhood", but she may not count as a woman in a context where (say) sex chromosomes matter (p. 209). However, Saul contends, this is "deeply unsatisfying to the trans woman who wants to be recognized as a woman simply because *she is a woman* rather than because 'woman' is such a flexible term" (p. 210). Because we hold (Self-identification), i.e. that self-identification is sufficient to gender categorization, Saul argues that we need to show that the claim that Alice is not a woman is false (p. 210). Conferralism seemingly implies that both the claims "Alice is a woman" and "Alice is not a woman" are true within their respective contexts, and therefore appears to clash with the view that self-identification is what should ultimately matter to one's gender.

In my view, Saul's worries might be misplaced. It is indeed true that, according to conferralism, the claim "Alice is not a woman" holds true in certain contexts, because of the mechanism that locally govern the extension of the term "woman". For instance, in a context where the dominant understanding of gender is a gender-critical one (as I explain in the next section), the claim "Alice is not a woman" is true, because the property of "being a woman", within that context, is defined in terms of (say) the property of producing of large gametes. However, that "Alice is not a woman" holds true in this context is merely a descriptive claim. We can indeed still hold that the property of being a woman *should not* be defined in terms of production of large gametes based on other considerations[6]. We can, in particular, argue against the local extension-determining mechanisms that result in Alice not being a woman within a context where the dominant understanding of gender is a gender-critical one, by questioning the purposes, commitments, and legitimacy of an understanding of the term "woman" that relies on some properties that effectively exclude trans women. Concretely, this can be done within the conferralist framework by arguing, for instance, that a base property that results in trans women not counting as women (such as production of large gametes) is not a sensible condition for membership to the kind of women in any given context. Conferralism is, after all, a framework that can help us understand what the relationships between sex, gender, and gender identity *are*, and what they *should* be is a distinct, although related question.

3.3 The conceptual flaws of gender-critical feminism

Now, as we have just seen, a conferralist view of sex and gender clearly implies that one's sex and gender are not consistent across all imaginable contexts. But we are committed, in particular, to (Self-identification), meaning the view that gender self-identification *should* be sufficient for gender categorization. I have also argued that sex classifications of (medically transitioning) trans people (as well as those of many intersex individuals) are not as straightforward as folk intuitions would suggest, and sex terms themselves are often unnecessary in contexts where what we wish to refer to is some specific aspect of one's anatomy (which may itself be one of the base properties that sex

[6] As I discussed in §2.3, conceptual change alone surely will not be enough, although it is arguably a necessary starting point.

classifications are meant to track, such as genitals or gonads). My conferralist view on sex and gender is not an anything-goes: if one's classification into a certain sex and gender depends on particular conceptions of sex and gender, and these result in categorizations that are questionable with respect to other commitments that we hold, then we can argue against these categorizations by questioning the legitimacy of their purposes. What I wish to do here is then to criticize so-called gender-critical stances on sex and gender from this perspective[7], focusing on the works of Kathleen Stock (2019; 2021) and Holly Lawford-Smith (2022).

Broadly speaking, according to these views, sex is an immutable binary natural kind. Stock (2021) writes that "humans are divided into females and males, and . . . this binary division is a natural state of affairs rooted in stable biological fact" (p. 40). In her view, sex is defined "in terms of a cluster of endogenously produced morphological, genetic and hormonal features" (Stock, 2019, p. 300). Lawford-Smith (2022) speaks of "the two biological sexes . . . ['male'] is the sex that all going well produces small mobile gametes (sperm), ['female'] is the sex that all going well produces large immobile gametes (eggs)" (p. 1). Moreover, sex is viewed as coextensive with gender, which they view as the norms and stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. This directly implies that gender stereotypes turn out to be actually based on sex, according to their own definitions of sex. Stock (2021) speaks of "sex-based" stereotypes to refer to "social stereotypes of 'masculinity' and 'femininity', originally directed towards biological males and females respectively" (p. 35), and Lawford-Smith (2022) similarly characterizes gender as a "system of norms imposed on the basis of sex" (p. 55). These views completely dismiss the role that gender identity plays in determining one's gender – Lawford-Smith in particular even goes as far as speaking of "ideology of gender identity" (p. 13).

I have already argued extensively in §§3.1-3.2 that the properties of being a certain sex and a certain gender ought to be thought of as social and, in particular, as conferred to us by others on the basis of certain base properties, which in particular means that gender is extremely context-dependent. If this holds, it only makes sense to speak of sex and gender as coextensive in a particular context. In this sense, it is clear that they are not coextensive: it suffices to think of the example of a trans person who has socially transitioned, but has not changed their legal sex yet.

Here, I wish to further defend a conferralist view on sex and gender by defending the following two claims, *contra* the gender-critical authors.

(1) Sex is not an immutable binary natural kind, nor should it be thought of as such: doing so would only serve the purposes of trans and intersex marginalization and exclusion.

(2) Sex is not, generally speaking, coextensive with gender; in particular, gender norms are not applied on the basis of sex.

Let us begin with claim (1). For Stock and Lawford-Smith's definitions of sex to unquestionably generate an immutable binary natural kind, the following conditions are certainly necessary. First, we must have the capacity to reliably measure or determine both Stock's cluster of endogenously produced properties, and Lawford-Smith's all-going-well developmental pathways. Second, the kinds of males and females under these definitions must have some legitimate theoretical purpose in a

[7] Gender-critical arguments have also been argued to potentially have extremely objectionable political implications, by effectively endorsing a form of biological essentialism that is closely aligned with neo-Nazi world-views (Killmister, 2025). I will however not discuss these implications here.

feminist philosophy project, and they must also reflect the state of the world, so to speak (Bird and Tobin, 2025).

However, neither definition satisfies any of these two conditions. The main issue with both definitions is that they do not track the biological realities of medically transitioning trans people, and instead effectively focus on the hypothetical scenario of *what might have happened* had they not medically transitioned. Consider a trans woman who was assigned male at birth and who transitions before the onset of her natal puberty[8], meaning that the only puberty she goes through is (externally-induced) female puberty. Under both Stock's and Lawford-Smith's definitions, she counts as male, because she would have *presumably* gone through male puberty, developed male secondary sex characteristics and produced small gametes, had she not medically transitioned so young. Yet she did not go through any stage of male puberty, but she still counts as male in the same sense as someone who fully undergoes endogenous male puberty (a cis man, we may say). This clearly does not reflect the state of the world in any way, and the only theoretical purpose that such an understanding of sex can be argued to serve is trans marginalization and exclusion, which I obviously do not think is a legitimate purpose. Moreover, we cannot reliably measure a cluster of endogenously produced sex-stereotypical features[9] in someone *who never develops them* (would she therefore count as having no sex?), nor can we reliably determine her all-going-well trajectory towards production of a certain kind of gamete at any point in her life (Killmister, 2025, p. 4).

These arguments show that Stock and Lawford-Smith's conceptualizations of sex do not and should not be taken to constitute an immutable binary natural kind, but one might still object that one such conception might still (in theory) exist. To see what shape it would take, let us look again at the conferralist framework. When we speak of the category of sex, there are two levels of properties at play: the conferred property of being a certain sex, and the sex-stereotypical base properties that being a certain sex is meant to track (Ásta, 2023, p. 39), such as Stock's cluster of endogenously produced sex-stereotypical features, or Lawford-Smith's all-going-well developmental pathways. In its most general form, we can therefore interpret the gender-critical philosopher's claim that sex is an immutable binary natural kind as follows: that there is a sensible combination of sex-stereotypical base properties that generates a neat, legitimate and immutable binary classification of individuals into males and females that reflects the state of the world, and that serves some legitimate theoretical purpose.

But for this to hold, the number of outliers must clearly be *very* limited. The number of intersex individuals, broadly defined as individuals with mismatching endogenous sex-stereotypical features that do not conform to a Platonic ideal of male or female, has been estimated to be around 1.7% of the general population (Blackless et al., 2000), corresponding to about 140 million individuals. If this were true, it would severely undermine any project of a binary sex classification. Gender-critical authors argue that this estimate is overly inflated and includes many who would be rather straightforwardly classified as male or female under their accounts, and refer to estimates of the intersex population as low as 0.015% of the general population (Lawford-Smith, 2022, pp. 241-242; Stock, 2021, pp. 49-53), which instead corresponds to about 1.25 million individuals.

[8]The same point can be made, perhaps a little less strongly, about someone who medically transitions at some point during or after their natal puberty – as I have argued in §3.2, we can meaningfully say that medically transitioning changes one's sex (in particular, a number of their sex-stereotypical features) to a certain extent.

[9]Mason (2024) further argues that, no matter what set of sex-stereotypical features we take as sufficient for being male or female, there will be some non-trans men classified as female and/or some non-trans women classified as male, which is another questionable consequence of Stock's definition of sex.

Tomás Bogardus (2026), for instance, proposes an understanding of sex in terms of activated higher-order functions, meaning the "genetic plans, master programs specifying the structure and organization of component systems" (p. 67) that specify "the development, organization, and maintenance of components programmed to produce (and transport, etc.) some type of anisogamous gamete", i.e. small or large gametes (p. 68). Under this account, individuals with XY chromosomes, undescended testes, and Complete Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome who are assigned female at birth, grow up as women, and develop female secondary sex traits, without possibly ever knowing they have XY chromosomes and testes if they do not get specifically tested[10], actually count as males. In Bogardus' view, this is because their "bodies [are] directed toward the production of spermatozoa, yet . . . due to insensitivity to androgens (especially testosterone), [they] do not realize this capacity" (p. 147). But even if we grant that their bodies are indeed "directed toward the production of spermatozoa", what is the purpose of categorizing these people as males, the same way as cis men? Does it make sense to distinguish the categories of males and females that Bogardus' proposed property of sex gives rise to? Are the conditions for membership to the thus defined kinds of males and females sensible?

I do not think so, and I believe this points to the one fundamental flaw in the project of providing a characterization of sex as an immutable binary natural kind. As I have argued, I believe that it is not only pointless, but that it might also have dangerous implications, for sex to track *would-be* sex-stereotypical traits as Stock and Lawford-Smith (as well as Bogardus) effectively suggest. In this sense, I suggest that their understandings of sex, despite their constant appeals to "biological realities", actually constitute *biological fictions* that effectively result in the marginalization and exclusion of many trans and intersex people.

It is thus clear, again, that the purpose of the category of sex should be to track *manifest* sex-stereotypical traits, instead of *would-be* sex-stereotypical traits, which include in particular the traits that one has the *unrealized capacity* to develop (because they are intersex and/or because they medically transition). But it is then equally clear, as already mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, that the one sex-stereotypical trait that may be (*prima facie*) reasonably used to define a sex class, possibly together with other biological traits, and that cannot be changed by any medical intervention, is one's sex chromosomes. Genitals, gonads, gamete production, hormones and phenotype can and are often changed by medically transitioning (Chappell, 2025), and if it is all these features that we should be keeping track of via the category of sex, then again, no combination of them forms a neat binary. These individual biological facts about our bodies are surely out there in the world, but what to do with them, via the category of sex, is up to us. Conceptualizing sex as an immutable binary natural kind denies the biological realities of medically transitioning trans people and many intersex people to instead focus on some biological fiction that can only serve the purposes of marginalizing and excluding trans and intersex individuals.

If sex is again shown to be a conferred property and not an immutable binary natural kind, as I have already argued, it then follows that sex is not coextensive with gender across all contexts. To complete my defence of claim (2), I wish to consider Lawford-Smith's (2022) argument that sex (under her definition) is coextensive with gender, and that gender norms are actually applied on the basis of sex. Importantly, Lawford-Smith emphasizes that gender norms are applied on the basis of *sex* and not *perceived sex*: she indeed speaks of "gender as a system of norms imposed on the basis of sex" (p. 55).

[10]See for instance the (already cited earlier) famous case of Olympic athlete Maria Patiño (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, pp. 1-3).

Now, Lawford-Smith constructs the following thought experiment: a passing trans woman is in a car-share with a few cis men, who joke that they will be the ones to give directions because she, being a woman, is probably not good with maps (ibid.). This is what we would ordinarily call a gendered stereotype[11]: because she is perceived to be a woman in this context, and because the men believe that women are often not good with maps, they believe that she in particular might not be good with maps. Lawford-Smith believes that if the woman comes out as trans, then this assumption will fall, because she will be seen to actually be a "male person" (ibid.), which I believe is ludicrous. First, this proposition completely ignores "the existence and perniciousness of transmisogyny" (Killmister, 2025, p. 6). If a woman comes out as trans she is not only not escaping misogyny, but she is also exposing herself to transphobia, and the complex and pernicious interactions of the two (Serano, 2007, pp. 14-15). This is to say that there is very good reason for the trans woman not to disclose that she is trans, and that if she were to disclose it, she would most likely actually face further discrimination on the basis of being a *trans* woman.

This reason alone suffices to entirely dismiss this thought experiment, but there is yet another reason why Lawford-Smith fails to show that gender norms are applied on the basis of sex. Even if we somehow granted that coming out as trans would suffice to dismiss the gendered stereotype (which, again, is an absurd thing to believe!), Lawford-Smith's argument *still* would not show that this stereotype was actually based on sex. This is because the men would inevitably take their stereotype to apply only to those whom they *read* as women, because they obviously do not have the capacity to determine their all-going-well developmental pathway. Therefore, the class of females, defined in Lawford-Smith's terms as all-going-well production of large gametes, and that of women, defined by the application of gender norms, do not and cannot coincide. To insist that they do "involves a metaphysical sleight of hand" (Killmister, 2025, p. 5): it therefore turns out that gender norms are, after all, applied on the basis of gender, completing my defence of claim (2).

Lastly, I want to tentatively suggest that insofar as our philosophical theorizing is to some extent shaped by our worldly experiences, gender-critical stances might be based on factually wrong world-views about trans people. In particular, I wish to suggest that these wrong world-views may distort philosophical theorizing in two ways: first, via questionable thought experiments, or second, via a misunderstanding of empirical data that may be taken to support or refute, to some extent, one's theorizing. As for the first example, Lawford-Smith's thought experiment cited above already goes to show that some of her intuitions about the realities of being a trans person may simply be factually wrong: it is extremely doubtful, to put it mildly, that a passing trans woman would ever want to disclose her trans status for the sole purpose of escaping misogyny, and that she would ever succeed in thus escaping misogyny. So Lawford-Smith's entire thought experiment is arguably based on a factually wrong world-view, and I believe that this reason alone would be enough to entirely reject it (although, as I argued above, the thought experiment would fail anyway).

As a second and last example, Kathleen Stock (2019) defends her view that sexual orientation is based on her definition of sex (as a cluster of endogenously produced sex-stereotypical features) by referring to a survey in which self-identified cis lesbians were found more likely to be willing to date trans men rather than trans women, when simply asked whether they had or would be open to

[11]This is also sometimes called a sexist stereotype, which only goes to show how much sex and gender are conflated in everyday talk and folk intuitions.

dating a trans person (Blair and Hoskin, 2019). She takes this (admittedly limited) empirical evidence to support her claim that "female homosexuals have a tendency to be attracted to females" (Stock, 2019, p. 305). However, I find her conclusion all too quick and convenient, and I think that Stock is fundamentally misunderstanding these empirical findings. As I have argued, folk intuitions about trans people tend to ultimately reduce them to their assigned gender at birth and, in particular, to their genitals (Bettcher, 2007; Serano, 2007). In Blair and Hoskin's (2019) survey, notably, participants were simply asked to indicate which genders they had dated and which they would consider dating in the future, selecting them from a list (p. 2079), but we admittedly "know very little about what the average cisgender person knows or thinks of trans bodies" (p. 2086). It follows that Stock's conclusion is completely unwarranted: if anything, the survey results seem to confirm prevalent attitudes and beliefs towards trans people in society. One might wonder, for instance, what the results of the survey would have been if participants had been asked to describe what they think a trans woman or man looks like, and had then been presented with actual examples of some. Without knowing this, the burden of proof is here on Stock's interpretation.

3.4 From metaphysics to amelioration

In short, I have argued in favour of a conferralist view of sex and gender. According to this view, sex and gender are properties conferred to us by others (possibly including ourselves), and they are meant to track (broadly speaking) our sex-stereotypical features and whatever features are salient within a given context for counting as member of a certain gender respectively. Gender identity, in particular, is in some trans-friendly contexts taken to be the base property that gender ought to track, but it is more often than not disregarded, whereas we hold that it is what should ideally matter across all contexts. Moreover, I have argued that transitioning involves changing both one's sex and gender under many reasonable conceptualizations of sex and gender within the conferralist framework, that are produced by elucidating the possible base properties that the two concepts are meant to track. Again, I wish to emphasize that this is a purely metaphysical picture of sex, gender, and gender identity, that is simply meant to illustrate the mechanisms that govern the extension of sex and gender terms, and their relations to gender identity and the realities of transitioning. At the same time, conferralism is not an anything-goes: I have showed that some categorizations of sex and gender, such as those of the gender-critical authors, are questionable and do not serve legitimate purposes, and we may therefore reject them on these bases, without even appealing to the other primitive commitments that we hold.

This account naturally raises the question of what we *want* sex and gender to be. We hold, in particular, that (i) we should simply make reference to one's specific anatomy over their conferred sex where relevant, and (ii) gender identity is a sufficient condition for gender categorization. The conferralist framework plays an important role here in revealing these injustices in our sexed and gendered practices. As Ásta (2023) argues, perhaps the very categories of sex and gender are indeed "too coarse" (p. 42), in the sense that the conferred property tracks too many different base properties across different contexts.

Let us consider sex first. In medical contexts, when someone uses the term female, they usually have a specific stereotypically female feature in mind that they wish to refer to. For instance, as soon as my legal sex was changed to female, I received a letter inviting me to a cervical smear test, although I

do not have a cervix. What was relevant in that scenario was the base property of having a cervix, which I do not have, not my conferral of female as my legal sex status specifically, which in that context was taken to track the property of having a cervix. Similarly, if we are concerned with prostate cancer, it is important to simply know whether one has a prostate or not, regardless of their conferred sex. In these scenarios, it is doubtful whether referring to one's sex over their specific anatomy (i.e. the base property that we mean to track) serves any purpose. Referring to this specific base property is more precise and may also reduce harm, especially towards trans and intersex people (Karkazis, 2019). Trans and intersex[12] people face significant obstacles and barriers in healthcare systems that are designed with cis people with certain sex-stereotypical features in mind. These obstacles and barriers include misgendering, which often causes severe discomfort, and missed routine checks, which may lead to missed crucial diagnoses, such as cervical cancer in trans men and prostate cancer in trans women (Horsted, 2025), and deflating sex can therefore be part of a strategy to fight these barriers.

To be sure, whether it is more appropriate to retain the traditionally understood sex terms within some practice certainly depends on many more considerations than I can hope to account for within the scope of my thesis: I merely wish to emphasize that in certain contexts, such as medical contexts, there are several reasons that point us towards deflating sex, i.e. view it as a collection of sex-stereotypical traits. To anticipate a point that I make in §4.3, another area where talk of sex as a collection of sex-stereotypical trait may be useful is trans people's transition goals, in terms of what bodily features they may desire to achieve via a medical transition. At any rate, as I discussed in §2.3, these gaps between sex as a collection of sex-stereotypical anatomical features and sex as a conferred property can arguably only be entirely filled by political action, surely not philosophy alone.

As for gender, I do not think that the case for deflating gender is as straightforward as the case for deflating sex (at least in medical settings, and when speaking of transition goals)[13]. As Matthew Cull (2019) argues, the concept of gender is extremely meaningful for trans lives in various pragmatic ways, and "seeking abolition [of gender] in our current political landscape is a recipe for trans deaths" (p. 14). I am sympathetic to Cull's argument, and I will indeed be retaining a conception of gender as a conferred property in the remainder of my thesis. I cannot see how we can, after all, speak of gender identity without speaking of gender, at least in the present day. I am happy to simply emphasize how our gender assignment practices are highly contextual, which can help us see where injustices lie in our gendered practices more clearly, and to leave the question of whether we should deflate gender, i.e. whether we should focus on the contextual base properties instead of the conferred gender status, open-ended.

[12]It is worth mentioning that medically unnecessary (as in, non-life-saving) surgeries on intersex infants with mismatching sex-stereotypical traits are currently only banned in 12 countries in the entire world (see Equaldex's report – link accessed on March 9, 2026). A full defence of this claim is outside the scope of my thesis, but I suspect that deflating sex to focus on the individual sex-stereotypical traits rather than the conferred property of being a certain sex might help normalizing, so to speak, intersex bodies (as well as perhaps trans bodies) that do not conform to a neat female/male binary.

[13]Following a question by Dr Gulzaar Barn during my defense, I wish to briefly clarify that my aim here is to separate an ideal of a concept of gender as self-identification from a more instrumental concept of gender as having to do with one's social positioning (see also Jenkins, 2016 on the idea of *twin* concepts of woman).

Chapter 4

Towards an account of gender identity

Let us quickly summarize where we currently stand in my inquiry into gender identity. In chapter 2, I have argued that our folk intuitions about sex, gender and gender identity are defective in various ways: in particular, folk intuitions about sex and gender effectively overlook the significance of medically and socially transitioning. In chapter 3, I have defended a social constructivist account of sex and gender that views them as properties that are conferred to us on the basis of certain other base properties. Sex is thus meant to track our sex-stereotypical features, with gender as its highly contextual interpretation. As a limit case, gender is in trans-friendly contexts taken as self-identification, and therefore completely unlinked with sex as defined here; this corresponds to my commitment (Self-identification). Within this theoretical framework, it makes sense to say that medically transitioning alters one's sex, and that socially transitioning changes one's gender across various contexts.

Now, going back to gender identity, I have argued in §2.1 that the folk conception of gender identity has two major practical shortcomings. First, it is not a helpful tool to guide people through their gender questioning, which may or may not result in them realizing that their gender identity ultimately differs from their assigned gender at birth, and may or may not result in them wishing to transition, in a variety of ways. Second, the folk conception of gender identity does not convey the idea that gender identities are worthy of respect and often come with urgent concrete needs, such as access to gender-affirming care. I have thus identified in §2.3 two desiderata (D1)-(D2) for a target concept of gender identity: it should constitute a useful tool for gender questioning, and it should show that gender identities merit respect and often come with urgent concrete needs. Moreover, a suitable conception of gender identity should be consistent with (FPA). In this final chapter, I hope to provide such an account, within the conferralist framework that I outlined in chapter 3.

Four accounts of gender identity have recently been proposed in analytic philosophy: Jennifer McKitrick's (2015) dispositional account, Katharine Jenkins' (2018) norm-relevancy account, Talia Mae Bettcher's (2017) self-identification account, which has recently been further substantiated and defended by Florence Ashley (2023), and Rach Cosker-Rowland's (2025) subjective fit account.

Here, I wish to defend a novel account of gender identity as self-identification, combining Florence Ashley's (2023) account with the conferralist understanding of sex and gender that I defended in chapter 3. This account is not to be understood as deflationary in the sense discussed in §2.2 of declining to explain our self-identifications: I will argue that we can coherently hold that gender identity is defined in terms of self-identification, while at the same time providing an account of how our sense of ourselves as some *G* comes to be constituted, within the conferralist framework. This, I will argue, is

an account of gender identity that is consistent with (FPA) and that satisfies the desiderata (D1)-(D2).

4.1 Gender identity, gender norms, and gendered social positioning

To motivate my position, I wish to begin by considering the weaknesses of the dispositional, norm-relevancy and subjective fit accounts of gender identity with respect to my commitments and desiderata. My contention is that these accounts overall rely, to varying extents, on notions of gender classes in order to characterize gender identities. However, because our gender identities and our gendered social positioning (in terms of which gender class we are contextually taken to be members of) often come apart, these accounts sometimes produce gender identities that differ from one's self-identified gender. As (FPA) demands that we take the avowal "I am *G*" (in terms of gender identity) as decisive, this is an obviously problematic implication which should push us to reject these accounts. It is important to note that these accounts were put forward by their respective authors with their own commitments and purposes in mind – I am only evaluating them here with respect to my own. Let us begin with the dispositional account.

> **Dispositional account.** *P* has gender identity[1] *G* if they have (sufficiently many, sufficiently strong) dispositions to behave in ways that the relevant socio-cultural group interprets as characteristic of *G*s as a gender class within their respective contexts. (cf. McKitrick, 2015, p. 2581)

We can understand having a disposition as being prone to act in certain ways under certain circumstances; if gender is a disposition, it is therefore a "massively multi-track disposition" (McKitrick, 2015, pp. 2579-2580) that manifests itself in a variety of context-dependent ways. For instance, a disposition to behave in a masculine way may manifest itself in certain presentation choices, or certain mannerisms. Importantly, one may have a disposition to behave in a certain way without manifesting it, and dispositions need not be thought of as intrinsic properties.

In my view, the issue with the dispositional account of gender identity lies in the fact that it effectively conflates, to a certain degree, one's social positioning as *G* with their sense of themselves as *G*'. In many cases, and in particular when a trans person has not come out, they may still be socially positioned as their assigned gender at birth, and being socially positioned as one's assigned gender at birth *G* may be associated with dispositions to behave in a stereotypically *G*-like manner. For instance, a pre-transition trans woman who only comes to self-identify as a woman later in life may have internalized certain dispositions to behave in a stereotypically masculine way (which she may very well desire to reject) because of her upbringing as a boy, and the dispositional account may seem to imply that she has a masculine gender identity, contrary to her self-identification.

Yet this issue is not limited to pre-transition trans people only. Consider the following concrete scenario: take Alice, who sincerely self-identifies as a woman, yet does not have sufficiently many, sufficiently strong dispositions – which again need not even be manifest – to behave in ways that are considered feminine by her relevant socio-cultural group (cf. Cosker-Rowland, 2025, §3.2.2).

[1] While McKitrick uses the term *gender* rather *gender identity*, she is clear that what she means is what we would now call gender identity (McKitrick, 2015, p. 2577).

For instance, Alice may be a trans gender non-conforming[2] woman, such as a very masculine or androgynous woman. McKitrick (2015) actually does consider this possible objection, but argues that "gender is a matter of degree on this account" (p. 2586). Yet I do not think this is a satisfactory defence of the dispositional account: it is unclear how, under the dispositional account, we can meaningfully say that Alice is a woman (or that similarly, a very feminine or androgynous man is nonetheless a man). What this shows is that it is an overly demanding requirement for someone to be sufficiently strongly disposed to behave in ways that are considered feminine by her relevant socio-cultural group, in order for her to count as having a feminine gender identity[3]. The point of my critique of the dispositional account is that Alice, who sincerely self-identifies as a woman, may not be sufficiently strongly disposed to behave in ways that are considered feminine by her relevant socio-cultural group. Obviously, Alice may come to have a feminine gender identity under the dispositional account within a different socio-cultural group (for instance, one in which the manifest disposition to self-identify as a woman is taken to be sufficient to one's womanhood, or where the same behaviours she is disposed to are taken to be stereotypically feminine). However, as I have argued, (FPA) requires an account of gender identity to be such that Alice can meaningfully state "I am a woman" across any context[4].

This failure to produce the correct gender identity in this paradigmatic case has negative implications with respect to my desiderata as well. The dispositional account does not seem to be useful in gender questioning, and may perhaps even turn obfuscating: it may keep someone in a state of perpetually asking herself whether their wanting to be a woman (perhaps in the sense of wanting to have been born with traditionally female anatomy) means that they are indeed a woman (cf. Silva, 2025), because they do not find themselves to be disposed to behave in stereotypically feminine ways. Moreover, as Jenkins (2018, p. 726) argues, if we are critical towards how certain norms are viewed as traditionally masculine or feminine by some socio-cultural group, it becomes unclear how dispositions to comply with these norms can be said to be worthy of respect as demanded by (D2). For instance, one can argue that the norm that women should remove their leg hair is harmful and unjustified, which is at odds with the idea that we should nonetheless respect someone's disposition to comply with this norm as constitutive of her feminine gender identity.

My case against the norm-relevancy account proceeds in a similar fashion, although I do not think that its implications are as problematic as the dispositional account (again, with respect to my own commitments and purposes). The norm-relevancy account of gender identity may be stated as follows.

> **Norm-relevancy account.** *P* has gender identity *G* if their internal map is formed to guide someone who is classed as a *G* through the social and material realities that are characteristic of *G*s as a class within that context. (Jenkins, 2018, p. 730)

[2]For trans people, I mean gender non-conforming with respect to their self-identified genders: for instance, a trans woman with a masculine gender presentation, or perhaps who desires to present and live as a woman with a masculine gender presentation, or a trans man with a feminine gender presentation, or perhaps who desires to present and live as a man with a feminine gender presentation.

[3]Here, one would often say *female gender identity* – because I have chosen in §1.1 to reserve female as a sex term, I instead use *feminine gender identity*.

[4]It is worth noting that context-dependency is an explicit feature of the dispositional account: in McKitrick's (2015, p. 2582) words, "on this view [the dispositional account], one can have multiple genders [i.e. gender identities], and one can have different genders [i.e. gender identities] in different contexts". The possibility of having multiple gender identities does not look immediately problematic, as our gender identities may be in theory constituted by some complex combination of other gender identities (for instance, some people identify as genderfluid or bigender). The problem here, I contend, lies in providing an account of gender identity that is *explicitly* context-dependent.

Broadly speaking, one's internal gender map may be thought of as an "internalised sense of the norms operating in social spaces that they regularly navigate, and the implications of those norms for the status of their own behaviour as norm-compliant or norm-violating" (Jenkins, 2018, pp. 728-729). Someone with an internal gender map characteristic of *G*s as a gender class will, in particular, experience the norms characteristic of *G*s as a gender class as *relevant* to them. For instance, one may experience the norm that women should remove their leg hair as relevant to her by virtue of her feminine gender identity.

Jenkins' account of gender identity fundamentally differs from McKitrick's in that it only requires that one experiences the norms characteristic of *G*s as a gender class (within a given context) as relevant to them, rather than have a disposition to comply with these norms. Crucially, experiencing a norm as relevant is a much weaker requirement than being disposed to comply with it. For instance, under the norm-relevancy account, a woman may experience the norm that women are expected not to have leg hair as relevant to her by virtue of her gender identity, yet not be disposed to comply with it (Jenkins, 2016, pp. 411-412). Under the dispositional account, on the other hand, having a feminine gender identity is a matter of degree of disposition to comply with the norms and stereotypes associated with women (in terms of social positioning) within a given context. So all other things being equal, while it does not explicitly *require* the woman to remove her leg hair in order for her to have a feminine gender identity, the dispositional account surely places some importance on a woman's disposition (manifest or not) to comply with the norm of leg hair removal, whereas the norm-relevancy account only requires awareness of this norm.

Because the norm-relevancy account conceptualizes gender identities in terms of internal gender maps, Alice from the example above can meaningfully say that she is a woman, if her internal gender map is that which is characteristic of women in her socio-cultural context, without the need for her to be disposed to comply with all of the norms of femininity within her community. However, the main issue with the norm-relevancy account is that one's gender map need not, in general, align with their self-identified gender. Matthew Andler (2017) considers the case of some non-women who are socially positioned as women, and who will therefore "perceive themselves to be socially subject to the norms associated with the social position of women" (p. 891). Andler considers the specific experience of writer and queer activist Patrick Caliña, who identifies as a trans man, yet "describes the deep somatic internalization of many gender norms associated with the social position of women" (p. 892). So Patrick Caliña's internal gender map is not characteristic of men, and the norm-relevancy account of gender identity thus fails to categorize him as a man, contrary to his self-identification as a man.

Again, the problem here is that the norm-relevancy account, similarly to the dispositional account, relies on some notion of gender norms in order to conceptualize gender identity. Yet many trans people are not (or at least not fully, not across all contexts) socially positioned as their self-identified genders, and the gender norms that are associated with their self-identified genders are therefore not generally applied to them. Moreover, especially if someone transitions later in life, they may have deeply internalized some norms associated with their assigned gender at birth. This can make it so that even if someone self-identifies as *G*, they may not come to experience the norms of *G*s as relevant to them (let alone be disposed to comply with them), or they may also still experience some of the norms associated with their assigned gender at birth as relevant to them, such in Patrick Caliña's example. But this produces, under the dispositional and norm-relevancy accounts, a gender identity

that is different from one's self-identified gender, which is at odds with (FPA).

It is worth noting that in this respect, the norm-relevancy account is surely moving towards what I think is the right direction, by substituting the strong requirement to have a disposition to behave as *G* with a weaker requirement to experience the norms of *G*s as relevant without necessarily having a disposition to comply with them. This conception of gender identity is surely less obfuscating in the gender questioning experiences of gender non-conforming trans people, although as the case of Patrick Caliña illustrates, it still presents serious issues. Moreover, Jenkins (2018) argues that the norm-relevancy account of gender identity shows that gender identities are worthy of respect because a continuous experience of one's internalized gender map being disrespected (for instance, by being constantly misgendered, or being denied access to gendered spaces that align with one's self-identified gender) amounts to a serious form of social disempowerment, i.e. a "deprivation of the authority to prompt social recognition of one's intentions" (p. 732).

However, the issue remains that the extent to which we experience certain gender norms as relevant inevitably depends, to a certain degree, on our (present *and* past) gendered social positioning, which can and often does come apart from our self-identified genders. Rach Cosker-Rowland's subjective fit account seems to move even more decisively towards explicating how our gendered social positioning can come apart from our self-identified genders. We may state this account as follows.

> **Subjective fit account.** *P* has *G* as part[5] of their gender identity if they are minimally familiar with the gender *G*, and if they take it not to be unfitting for them (or to be positively fitting for them) to be treated as *G*. (Cosker-Rowland, 2025, p. 27)

There are three components of this account that we need to further clarify in order to fully explicate the subjective fit account: minimal familiarity with a gender *G*, fittingness, and being treated as *G*. Following Cosker-Rowland (2025), we can define these components thus. First, minimal familiarity with *G* may be understood as having heard about *G*s as a gender category, and/or having thought about being *G*, so that *P* can make an informed judgement as to whether being treated as *G* is fitting or not unfitting for them (p. 28). Second, fittingness is the intuition of what gender we judge to be most appropriate to us, and what gender category we judge most appropriate to be treated as (p. 20). Lastly, being treated as *G* involves being treated in some adherence with two layers of norms. First, we have categorization norms, having to do with the grouping of individuals into the class of *G*s: to give a few examples, the use of certain pronouns over others, and allowing (or not allowing) the use of some single-gender spaces. Second, there are other norms, corresponding to what I have so far intuitively referred to as gender norms, having to do with the expectations and stereotypes that are contextually imposed on the basis of one's gender. For instance, these norms include norms about bodies and sex traits, as well as norms about social roles (pp. 24-25). In short, being treated as *G* involves being treated in compliance with all the categorization norms associated with *G*s and with some, though not necessarily all, of the gender norms associated with *G*s (p. 24). We can therefore state the subjective fit account of gender identity in full.

> **Subjective fit account (full version).** *P* has *G* as part of their gender identity if the following two conditions are met:

[5]Taking *G* as *part* of *P*'s gender identity is done to allow for the possibility of more complex gender identities that are defined in terms of others, such as bigender.

(i) P is at least aware of Gs as a gender category and/or has had thoughts about whether they might be G, and

(ii) P judges it appropriate to be categorized as G and to be treated as G, meaning that they judge it appropriate to be categorized as G (by e.g. the use of certain pronouns) and treated in accordance with some (though not necessarily all) of the gender norms associated with Gs, or they judge it not to be inappropriate for them to be treated as G.

The subjective fit account clearly allows for our gender identities and gendered social positioning to come apart. A closeted trans woman may find it fitting to be treated as a woman and unfitting to be treated as a man, yet still be socially positioned as a man (because, for instance, she is reasonably scared of the implications of coming out[6]). Under the subjective fit account, unlike the dispositional account and the norm-relevancy account, we can say that she has a feminine gender identity, which corresponds to her self-identified gender (Cosker-Rowland, 2025, p. 56), as required by (FPA).

Still, I think that the subjective fit account suffers some problems as well, mostly having to do with its handling of non-binary identities. According to Cosker-Rowland (2025, p. 48), on the subjective fit account "to have a non-binary identity is for it to seem to you that it is not fitting for others to treat you – and think of you – as a member of a binary gender in certain ways". Consider, however, the case of Bobbie, who identifies as a woman and desires to medically and socially transition, but has not been able to yet. It is plausible that Bobbie may find it unfitting to be thought of and treated as a man, but at the same time not find it fitting, or find it unfitting, i.e. not judge it appropriate, to be thought of and treated as a woman, because (for instance) she believes that since she is not socially positioned as a woman, it is not fitting for her to be thought of or treated as a woman. But Nano, who genuinely identifies as non-binary, may find it equally unfitting for them to be thought of and treated as either binary gender, and yet not *desire* to be treated as either binary gender, unlike Bobbie. I believe that the subjective fit account does not adequately distinguish between these two fundamentally different paradigmatic cases. The reason for this may be that in many contexts, there are no widespread intuitions about a gender class of non-binary individuals, so a non-binary identity may only be defined (within that context) in terms of unfittingness to be thought of and treated as either binary gender, yet this may coincide with the judgements of fittingness of some pre-transition binary trans people. If gender identity is conceptualized in terms of judgments of fittingness, then I do not think it can convincingly account for the fact that Nano indeed has a non-binary gender identity by virtue of identifying as non-binary, while Bobbie has a feminine gender identity by virtue of identifying as a woman.

As a further example, consider the somewhat opposite case of someone who identifies as non-binary but does not find it unfitting to be categorized as a woman, and to be treated in compliance with some of the norms of femininity – this may be, for instance, because in their socio-cultural context, there is no non-binary gender category[7]. Under the subjective fit account, *woman* is part of their gender identity. There surely is a sense in which judging it to be fit to be treated as a woman is part of their *experience of gender*, but our experience of gender, as I discussed in §2.1, should be thought of as distinguished from our self-identification. In other words, we want our conception of gender identity to be such that we

[6]This is, of course, simply to give a concrete example of a possible reason why a trans person might not be out. Again, (FPA) requires that one can meaningfully say "I am a woman" without any sort of transition.

[7]This corresponds to my own personal experience living in my home country of Italy.

can coherently say that one identifies as non-binary and therefore has a non-binary gender identity, while being socially positioned as a woman within their socio-cultural contexts. As I argue in the next section, I think that the only theoretical move here is to wholly defer to self-identification.

4.2 Self-identification without deflationism

At its heart, although all these accounts exhibit important differences, I think that the issue with the dispositional, norm-relevancy, and subjective fit accounts of gender identity lies in attempting to provide an account of gender identity that relies on some notion of gender classes, with its associated gender norms. To be sure, the fact that the same terms are used as both gender terms and gender identity terms inevitably points towards the fact that our intuitions about gender concepts[8] (for instance, our intuitions about *being a woman*), which are socially constructed, play some role in articulating our gender identities (Rea, 2022, p. 15).

Still, where should our intuitions about gender concepts enter our accounts of gender identity? My arguments in the previous section, I contend, suggest that there may be no unproblematic place for gender concepts within an account of gender identity that is consistent with (FPA). The problem is that if we make reference to gender concepts in an account of gender identity, we are inevitably bound to run into conflict with (FPA) in some cases. The reason for this is that, in my view, we need to consider two layers of understandings of a given gender concept: one's own understanding of a certain gender concept, together with their perceived standing with respect to it, and the dominant understanding of the same gender concept within their socio-cultural context, similarly together with the dominant perceived standing with respect to it. In order for an account of gender identity to be consistent with (FPA), I suggest that we must only consider one's own understanding of the gender concept that corresponds to their self-identified gender. This will inevitably lead to, so to speak, a relatively thin account of gender identity. In Ashley's (2023, p. 1069) words, "precisely because gender identities are so nuanced and diverse, . . . few non-minimalistic claims may be made about gender identity", and this is "an inescapable by-product of the irreducible complexity of gender identities".

I believe that the dispositional, norm-relevancy and subjective fit accounts of gender identity run into problems because they do not neatly separate the two layers of understandings of gender concepts. Obviously, this is a somewhat analytical distinction because our own intuitions about gender concepts often are shaped, to varying extents, by the dominant understandings of the same concepts (and the converse is true as well, although it is a more complicated relationship, as I briefly hinted at in §2.3). But the extent to which our understanding of a gender concept and the dominant understanding of the same concept come apart is extremely variable, and I think this is ultimately why accounts of gender identity that rely to *any* extent on the dominant understandings of gender concepts cannot be fully compatible with (FPA). I have provided three examples in the previous section that show how far our self-identifications as some gender can come apart from the dominant understandings of the same gender concept: (i) the case of a highly gender non-conforming woman who is not sufficiently strongly disposed to behave in ways that are understood to be feminine by her relevant socio-cultural group, (ii) the case of a trans person whose self-identification is at odds with the dominant understanding of

[8]To clarify: by gender concept, gender class, and gender norms, I mean (for instance) the concept of *woman*, the class of *women*, and the norms of femininity respectively.

their gendered social positioning, and (iii) the case of a non-binary self-identity that does not even constitute a gender class in its own respect in a particular socio-cultural context.

As a final example to further strengthen my position, consider the case of a trans woman who does not desire genital surgery[9]. Under the dispositional account, for her to count as having a feminine gender identity, she needs to be disposed to have female genitalia (or at least, all other things being equal, the dispositional account places some importance on her disposition to have female genitalia). Under the norm-relevancy account, she needs to be aware of the norm that women should have female genitalia[10], and that she is breaking it. Under the subjective fit account, by virtue of her feminine gender identity, she finds it fitting to be treated in compliance with some of the norms of femininity, so she must not find it fitting to be treated in compliance with the norm that women should have female genitalia. I find that all these accounts of her gender identity are ultimately somewhat unsatisfying: we want to simply be able to say that she is a woman *because* she self-identifies as a woman. That she is indeed not complying with the norm that women should have female genitalia is a fact that is only relevant towards her own experience of gender, not her gender identity.

Where does this leave us, then? As Bettcher (2017, p. 396) suggested, "the cleanest move may well involve avoiding the issues altogether through an appeal to sincere self-identification". I want to take up this suggestion seriously here. This amounts to the following provisional account: P has gender identity G if they sincerely self-identify as G. But is this not Hernandez and Bell's (2025) deflationary view from §2.2 again? Although appealing to self-identification immediately resolves the issue of consistency with (FPA), an account that declines to explain what it is to have a sense of oneself as G, as I argued in §§2.2-2.3, does not satisfy the desiderata (D1)-(D2): it cannot help in gender questioning, nor can it help showing that gender identities are worthy of respect. A possible strategy here is to hold that while we do take self-identification as decisive to one's gender identity in our account, we can at the same time attempt to provide a thick account of what it means to sincerely self-identify as G, in order to retain compatibility with (FPA) as well as satisfy (D1)-(D2). This is the strategy that I follow here: in particular, I wish to defend a non-deflationary account of gender identity as self-identification, as substantiated by Florence Ashley (2023), that also incorporates the conferralist understanding of sex and gender that I defended in chapter 3. In this section, I focus on the non-deflationary aspect of the account, reserving the discussion on how it relates to conferralism to the next section. Let us then begin by considering Ashley's account.

> **(Non-deflationary) self-identification account.** P has gender identity G if they sincerely self-identify as G. P's gender identity G is dynamically constituted, yet underdetermined, by the sum of their gendered experiences, via a process of phenomenological synthesis. (cf. Ashley, 2023, pp. 1053-1054, 1066–1069)

Let us now spell out its terms in more detail. Ashley (2023) introduces the notion of *gender subjectivity* to refer to the totality of our *gendered experiences* (p. 1059). This expression "captures how our affects, attitudes, character, cognition, behaviours, mannerisms, relationships, appearances, and bodies

[9]Her reasons for not desiring genital surgery are obviously irrelevant to my argument, but just to give a few concrete examples, she may feel entirely positive about her natal genitals, or find genital surgery excessively risky and/or costly, or be unsatisfied even with the current state of the art genital surgeries.

[10]That this is indeed a norm, unlike the more obvious case of behavioural norms, becomes clear from the example of certain spaces (such as locker rooms or prisons) restricting access on the basis of genital status. We may indeed see it as a normative expectation as to how women's bodies should look like.

are experienced as relating to our gender" (p. 1057). In short, we may say that a gendered experience is an experience (broadly understood) onto which some understanding of gender is imposed. In particular, a gendered experience of oneself is an experience onto which the person themselves casts their understanding of gender (which need not coincide with the dominant understanding of the same gender within their socio-cultural context). In Ashley's words, through gendered experiences of ourselves "we can come to recognize aspects of ourselves as gendered from the outside, that is, we recognize that others view aspects of us as gendered, and/or from the inside, as we internalize schemes of gendering and ascribe a gendered nature to aspects of ourselves[11]. The experiences are thus often simultaneously gendered and gendering" (ibid.). In other words, we come to see our conferred gender status through these experiences, which may influence our own perception of our gender, which we impose on the same experiences.

Gendered experiences are moreover not static, in the sense that we one can (in principle) come to revisit how their past experiences relate to their understanding of gender. For instance, one may so to speak "re-gender" certain past experiences upon reflection, and the same experience may thus acquire a different gendered significance. Anecdotally, this often happens in gender questioning. Ashley (2023, pp. 1056-1057), for instance, reminisces the experience from their youth playing with their younger sister and having her do their makeup, and apprehends "the memory not only as treasured but equally as deeply gendered". I can also personally attest to coming to see the gendered significance of certain experiences only later in life. I can recall various instances of experiencing that I did not fit in with the boys, or even my own father and older brother (by virtue of our shared properties of being a boy or man, or having been assigned male at birth, that is), which at the time I only ascribed to having different interests (such as disliking football, or some other traditionally more "masculine" hobbies). I only later came to realize, upon further reflection, that the gendered significance of these experiences had to do with the fact that perhaps I (subconsciously?[12]) did not *want* to be a boy, or as Ashley puts it, that the gender category that I was assigned at birth did not "make the most sense out of my feels" (p. 1061).

Gender identity is thus constituted, according to Ashley (2023), via a process of phenomenological synthesis of our gender subjectivity, meaning a process that is "largely spontaneous and pre-reflective, . . . over which we have as little (or as much) control as we do over whether we find an argument convincing or a book entertaining" (p. 1061), and that is "noticeably resistant to deliberate influence" (p. 1064), such as attempts at conversion practices. Crucially, the same gender subjectivity, which is the totality of our gendered experiences, is compatible with multiple gender identities. It is in this sense that we may say that gender identity is *constituted yet underdetermined* by our gender subjectivity. Ashley considers the example of experiencing gender euphoria[13] towards a body that is socially coded as female. This is compatible with multiple gender identities, including man, woman, or non-binary. The main idea behind Ashley's account is that it is the stance that we ourselves individually take

[11] Under this definition, one may also simply not ascribe a gendered nature to their experiences, as is the case with many who identify as agender.

[12] On this note: Julia Serano (2007, p. 78) refers to the gender that we subconsciously feel to be as *subconscious sex*. In my personal experience, I would perhaps rather speak of the gender that I subconsciously felt *not* to be, which can still be said to fall within a suitably broader understanding of Serano's notion of subconscious sex.

[13] As this example shows, these gendered features causing gender euphoria should perhaps be understood in terms of the person's own sense of gender, to allow for the possibility of P identifying as G yet feeling euphoric about gendered features typically characteristic of a gender other than G, which is required by (FPA).

towards our gender subjectivity that ultimately defines our gender identities.

This feature of this account of gender identity is, in my view, what ultimately sets it apart from the other accounts discussed in §4.1. As Ashley (2023) puts it, the dispositional and norm-relevancy accounts of gender identity "identify important gendered phenomena related to gender identity, [but] they mislocate the significance of those experiences", by effectively conflating gender self-identification and gender subjectivity. I have argued in §4.1 that the subjective fit account suffers a similar problem: while our experiences of gender are surely relevant *to our gender subjectivities*, what matters *to our gender identities* is the significance that we ourselves assign to these experiences.

As I discussed earlier, I think that an account of gender identity that is consistent with (FPA) must only consider one's own understanding of the gender concept corresponding to their own self-identified gender (which obviously does not exclude the possibility that their own understanding of that gender concept contains elements of the dominant understanding of the same gender concept). This is what makes it perfectly coherent for $\bigstar_1$ to identify as a man and feel euphoric towards his body being socially coded as female[14], for $\bigstar_2$ to identify as non-binary and feel euphoric towards their body being socially coded as female, and for $\bigstar_3$ to identify as a woman and feel euphoric towards her body being socially coded as female, in accordance with (FPA). What is relevant is only the significance that they assign to their gendered experience of their own body in relation to their self-identified gender. Because gender identity is constituted by the stance that we individually take towards our gender subjectivity, and no constraints are imposed on the significance that one may assign to their gender subjectivity in general, the non-deflationary self-identification account of gender identity is shown to be consistent with (FPA).

We may now sum up these considerations as follows. We say that P has gender identity G if they sincerely self-identify as G, and P's gender identity is constituted by the stance that P themselves takes towards the gendered significance of their own experiences. This means that gender identity is conceived as dynamic, and its consistency through time should be better understood as a dynamic equilibrium, rather than an intrinsic property (which also reflects the recent developments on gender identity in neuroscience that I briefly discussed in §3.1). In particular, this view implies that someone who eventually comes to self-identify as a (trans) woman cannot be said to be a woman prior to sincerely self-identifying as a woman. But I do not think this is a problem: once she does self-identify as a woman, she may (though she need not) come to re-assess her gendered experiences of herself, and meaningfully say that she has always been a woman (Bettcher, 2017, p. 396). If we understand the concept of gender identity as having to do with our gendered sense of ourselves, wholly distinguished from our gendered social positioning, which I have argued we should, I do not find it an issue that someone who eventually re-assesses their self-identification cannot be said to have had their current gender identity *prior to self-identifying as their current gender identity*. As the non-deflationary self-identification account shows, and as (FPA) demands, it is perfectly coherent for someone to say that they have been their self-identified gender all along once they come to self-identify as that.

Applying this to my own experience for the sake of example: before I came to self-identify as non-binary, I was not yet non-binary. To be precise: at a time prior to my self-identification as non-binary, the claim "I am non-binary" was false. However, I can meaningfully say that I have been non-binary

[14]But it does not explain how this may come to be, and therefore may not constitute a strong justification for $\bigstar_1$'s possible desire for gender-affirming medical care. In the next section, I propose an account that does instead justify this.

all along now that I do self-identify as non-binary (which, in my own case, mostly has to do with a later re-interpretation of the gendered experiences of myself). I have argued that it is desirable for an account of gender identity to provide conceptual tools to bridge this gap between our assigned gender at birth and that the gender that we may (though not necessarily) come to self-identify as: that is, tools to guide someone through their gender questioning, and potentially come to self-identify as a gender other than their assigned gender at birth. How does the non-deflationary self-identification account of gender identity fare here?

4.3 Self-identification and social construction

This leads me to discussing, in order to complete my argument, whether the non-deflationary self-identification account of gender identity satisfies (D1)-(D2), i.e. whether it constitutes a useful tool in gender questioning, and it shows that gender identities merit respect and often come with urgent concrete needs. In my view, in order to satisfy these desiderata, the non-deflationary self-identification account of gender identity should incorporate the conferralist understanding of sex and gender that I argued for in chapter 3. To see why, I begin by considering again the concept of gender questioning.

In §2.2, I defined gender questioning as questioning one's relationship with their own assigned gender at birth, the physical traits that come or that are expected to come with it, and the social norms and expectations that are contextually imposed on its basis. It is already evident that gender questioning should perhaps be more aptly termed *sex/gender* questioning, much like *sex/gender* incongruence, dysphoria, euphoria, and identity. While I have chosen to stick to the most widely used terminology of *gender* questioning, incongruence, dysphoria, euphoria, and identity, it should be clear by now that all these concepts also contain aspects that pertain more to sex rather than gender proper, as characterized in chapter 3 as conferred properties. For instance, gender dysphoria may consist in discomfort with respect to one's assigned gender at birth (which, as I hinted at in §1.1, is analogously perhaps better understood as assigned *sex/gender* at birth) that is manifest in terms of discomfort with one's sexed body *and/or* discomfort with one's gendered social positioning. Transitioning, as I argued in chapter 3, may consist of altering one's sex and/or gender. In the same sense, we may therefore more precisely redefine gender questioning as questioning one's relationship with their assigned gender at birth, in terms of their sexed body and their gendered social positioning.

My main reasons for retaining an understanding of sex as a conferred property included not only being able to reject gender-critical views on their own grounds as I did in §3.3, but also being able to speak of the sexed embodiment goals of trans people without having to make reference to how those are perceived to be sexed under the dominant understanding of sex. We may understand sexed embodiment goals as a collection of desired sex-stereotypical traits, together with an understanding of each trait as characteristic of some sex class[15]. The analytical distinction between sex and gender as conferred properties allows us to coherently and more precisely speak of the transition goals of trans people in terms of embodiment (i.e. having to do with sex) and social positioning (i.e. having to do with gender) which we may spell, following Cosker-Rowland (2025, pp. 24-25) as already discussed in §4.1, in terms of full compliance with categorization norms and partial compliance with gender norms.

[15]Although I do not think this specific point matters for the purposes of my discussion, we may perhaps also add the condition that these are attainable via currently available treatments, or treatments that will reasonably become available in the foreseeable future.

Compare this with Ashley's original non-deflationary account in §4.2: under that account, *P* may coherently self-identify as a man while feeling euphoric about his body being socially coded as female. By incorporating a conferralist understanding of sex, we are able to attain a more finely grained characterization of *P*'s embodiment goals, in terms of which sex-stereotypical traits *P* may feel euphoric or dysphoric (or perhaps simply neutral) about, and whether these are traditionally coded as male, female, or other. Notably, under a self-identification account of gender identity, *P*'s embodiment goals are in general distinct, although often indeed related, to *P*'s target gendered social positioning. In other words, *P* may coherently have embodiment goals that would not traditionally be coded as fully male (for instance, *P* may feel entirely positive about their genitalia and not desire surgeries such as metoidioplasty or phalloplasty) while desiring to be socially positioned as a man, i.e. be categorized as a man, and be treated in accordance with some of the norms of masculinity.

My suggestion is therefore to explicitly include sexed embodiment and gendered social positioning goals into Ashley's non-deflationary self-identification account of gender identity. It is important to note that the account as stated here is fully compatible both with the fact that one's goals may change with time (although it remains neutral on how these goals themselves come to be), and with the fact that one may persist in having the same gender identity once they have already attained their embodiment and social positioning goals.

> **(Non-deflationary, conferralist) self-identification account.** *P* has gender identity *G* if they sincerely self-identify as *G*, and *P*'s gender identity is constituted by the stance that *P* themselves takes towards the gendered significance of their own experiences, including in particular their goals with respect to sexed embodiment and gendered social positioning.

That this (final) account satisfies (D1) is now rather trivial, as the account explicitly includes sexed embodiment and gendered social positioning goals as constitutive of one's gender identity, together with the stance that one takes with respect to these and the totality of their gendered experiences. Because gender questioning was defined in the same terms of embodiment and social positioning, this account is clearly a useful tool in gender questioning[16]. One may come to feel discomfort with the sex and gender that they currently inhabit (i.e. gender dysphoria), and may come to realize that their embodiment and/or social positioning goals differ from their current embodiment and social positioning, and in light of this possibly come to re-interpret the significance of their gendered experiences, thus synthesizing a new gender identity, and possibly coming to see themselves as having been their new gender identity all along.

Lastly, as for (D2), we need to show that this account of gender identity shows that gender identities merit respect, and often come with urgent concrete needs. In Ashley's (2023) view, gender identities matter and merit respect because they are grounded in "meaningful and pervasive experiences of the self as gendered" (p. 1068), which constitute "a substrate that matters to us" (pp. 1068-1069). In other

[16]While I am unfortunately not prepared to defend this claim here, it seems to me that my account does not run into the problem of being overly inclusive either, by fully and coherently allowing someone to identify (say) as a woman while maintaining a critical attitude towards the norms and expectations of femininity in her own socio-cultural context. By including target sexed embodiment and gendered social positioning into a definition of gender subjectivity, I believe that my account can potentially serve as a basis to explain what makes the experiences of (say) a trans woman and those of a cis gender non-conforming woman ultimately different, in terms of how they come to synthesize the same (at least at a surface level, in terms of what labels they might choose for themselves) feminine gender identity. Thanks to Dr Gulzaar Barn for bringing up this point during my defense.

words, Ashley's non-deflationary account of gender identity as constituted by a phenomenological synthesis of our gender subjectivity shows that gender identities merit respect by showing how they are grounded in more, so to speak, basic mundane experiences of ourselves as gendered. But such experiences matter to *everyone*, cis and trans people alike. Because gender identities are constituted by our gendered experiences, and gendered experiences matter to everyone, so do gender identities.

As for the urgency concern, I think that it helps thinking of gender identity also in terms of embodiment and social positioning goals. Consider someone who was assigned male at birth, who comes to self-identify as a woman via the realization that (say) she desires to have a female body, be socially positioned as a woman, and via a re-interpretation of her gendered experiences. If we accept as I have just argued that her gender identity, constituted by her gender subjectivity and embodiment and social positioning goals, merits respect, urgency in accessing gender-affirming medical care follows from the simple fact that in absence of any treatments, her body will (most likely) continue to masculinize, bringing her further from her embodiment and social positioning goals, as well as causing further and entirely avoidable discomfort.

Conclusion

So much to say that we should simply regard gender identity as the gender that we sincerely self-identify as – but if we are committed to first-person authority over gender self-identification as a moral obligation, then I believe that there is no choice but to defer to sincere self-identification. And yet self-identification alone is not enough for the purposes that I set out: it is not useful for someone who is questioning their gender to know that being a woman is simply self-identifying as a woman (although we can, and I think should, hold that self-identifying as a woman is *sufficient* for being a woman!), and it is not useful for someone advocating her right to gender-affirming medical care in the face of a world that seems ever more hostile to us. Because of these reasons, I have attempted to explain what it is to self-identify as a woman, or any other gender: ultimately, it is the significance that we ourselves assign to the experiences of ourselves onto which some understanding of gender is imposed (by us *and* others), and to our embodiment and social positioning goals.

Just like some trans philosophers such as Matthew Cull (2019; 2024) have argued against doing away with gender, I have argued that we should not do away with sex either, at least for now. I believe that talk of sex is important for two main reasons. First, it is crucial to retain a concept of sex in order to argue against gender-critical understandings of sex *on their own grounds*, and show that they are ultimately grounded in biological fictions, contrary to their constant appeals to biological realities, that only serve to marginalize and exclude trans and intersex people. Second, talk of sex as a collection of sex-stereotypical traits is also important for us to be able to speak of the embodiment goals of trans people, and the ways in which these come apart from our goals in terms of which gender category we desire to inhabit. I have argued that sex should be best viewed as a collection of sex-stereotypical traits, and I have hoped to show, with various examples throughout my thesis, how medically transitioning can be said to meaningfully alter our sex. This is not to suggest that the gender identities of medically transitioning trans people are more legitimate, or have a different standing, than the gender identities of trans people who choose, for whatever legitimate reason, not to medically transition. I think that the great variety in trans experiences is manifest *both* in the personal significance of our gendered experiences *and* in the ways in which we desire to be socially positioned in terms of gender *and* our goals in terms of the collection of our desired sex-stereotypical traits.

Because this thesis ultimately originates from my own reflections and experiences, this account of gender identity is surely in various ways skewed to artificially fit my own experiences and my own relationship to my sex and gender status, as it changes through time and transitioning. Still, I do think that the account of gender identity that I put forward has the advantage of being easily operationalized for further research in both the natural and social sciences, because it is clearly spelled out in terms of three main components: our gender subjectivity, our embodiment goals, and our gendered social positioning goals. I have argued that this account is philosophically consistent with my purposes and

commitments, and whether and to what extent it makes sense for individuals to speak of their gender identity in the terms that I have put forward is a different question that would certainly be worth pursuing.

Lastly, I want to emphasize that there are clearly many considerations that do and should come into play when we discuss how to adequately conceptualize gender identity, incongruence, dysphoria, and euphoria. Here, I have focused on two specific desiderata, as well as a primitive commitment to first-person authority over gender self-identification. If our purposes and commitments changed, so could our concepts. I have argued that my own purposes and commitments are motivated by the current state of affairs of the world, but this may well change, as it has in the past. For instance, the "born this way" and the "trapped in the wrong body" narratives for the gay and trans rights movement respectively have been the basis of sensible and successful political strategies and campaigns at times when blame was associated with *choice*, but not with *being born a certain way* (Srinivasan, 2021). On the other hand, insisting on the innateness of sexual orientations and trans gender identities does not challenge the possible belief that there still is something inherently blameworthy about them to begin with, and that we ought to accept them only because people have no control over them in the end and just cannot help themselves, so to speak. Now, the account of gender identity that I defended in my thesis is consistent with the idea that our gender identities may change with time, i.e. with the fact that one may genuinely self-identify as some gender at one time, and genuinely self-identify as a different gender as a later time, as is the case in the experiences of many trans people (including my own), and it leaves open the possibility that there might be some biological underpinnings that are still to be understood. My final point is simply that the account of gender identity that I have argued for is very much situated in its own time, both in terms of political and cultural contexts, and of the current scientific understanding of gender identity and its development. If these change, then so could the purposes and commitments of an ameliorative inquiry into gender identity, as well as the resulting target concept.

Bibliography

Anderson, A. D., Irwin, J. A., Brown, A. M., & Grala, C. L. (2020). "Your Picture Looks the Same as My Picture": An Examination of Passing in Transgender Communities. *Gender Issues*, *37*(1), 44–60 (cited on pages 9, 10).

Andler, M. S. (2017). Gender Identity and Exclusion: A Reply to Jenkins. *Ethics*, *127*(4), 883–895 (cited on page 42).

Appiah, K. A. (2018). *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity*. Liveright Publishing Corporation. (Cited on page 16).

Ashley, F. (2023). What Is It like to Have a Gender Identity? *Mind*, *132*(528), 1053–1073 (cited on pages 3, 4, 39, 45–48, 50).

Ashley, F., & Ells, C. (2018). In Favor of Covering Ethically Important Cosmetic Surgeries: Facial Feminization Surgery for Transgender People. *The American Journal of Bioethics*, *18*(12), 23–25 (cited on page 8).

Ásta. (2018). *Categories We Live By: The Construction of Sex, Gender, Race, and Other Social Categories*. Oxford University Press. (Cited on pages 3, 25, 29, 30).

Ásta. (2023). What are Sex and Gender and what Do We Want them to Be? *Metaphysics*, *6*(1), 37–44 (cited on pages 3, 34, 37).

Barnes, E. (2022). Gender Without Gender Identity: The Case of Cognitive Disability. *Mind*, *131*(523), 836–862 (cited on pages 5, 12).

Bettcher, T. M. (2007). Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion. *Hypatia*, *22*(3), 43–65 (cited on pages 6, 7, 25, 26, 37).

Bettcher, T. M. (2009). Trans Identities and First-Person Authority. In L. J. Shrage (Editor), *You've changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity* (Pages 98–120). Oxford University Press. (Cited on pages 13, 20, 26).

Bettcher, T. M. (2013). Trans Women and the Meaning of "Woman". In A. Soble, N. Power, & R. Halwani (Editors), *Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings, Sixth Edition* (Pages 233–250). Rowan & Littlefield. (Cited on page 23).

Bettcher, T. M. (2014). Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *39*(2), 383–406 (cited on page 9).

Bettcher, T. M. (2017). Through the Looking Glass: Trans Theory Meets Feminist Philosophy. In S. J. K. Ann Garry & A. Stone (Editors), *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy* (Pages 393–404). Routledge. (Cited on pages 3, 39, 46, 48).

Bettcher, T. M. (2025). *Beyond Personhood: An Essay in Trans Philosophy*. University of Minnesota Press. (Cited on page 2).

Biaggi, D. (2025). Disforia di genere nei minori e accesso ai farmaci, cosa si nasconde dietro al ddl presentato dal governo italiano. *Wired Italia*. Retrieved December 20, 2025, from https://www.wired.it/article/disforia-di-genere-nei-minori-cosa-prevede-ddl-governo-italiano/ (cited on page 2).

Bird, A., & Tobin, E. (2025). Natural Kinds. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Editors), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2025). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. (Cited on page 34).

Blackless, M., Charuvastra, A., Derryck, A., Fausto-Sterling, A., Lauzanne, K., & Lee, E. (2000). How Sexually Dimorphic Are We? Review and Synthesis. *American Journal of Human Biology*, *12*(2), 151–166 (cited on pages 24, 34).

Blair, K. L., & Hoskin, R. A. (2019). Transgender exclusion from the world of dating: Patterns of acceptance and rejection of hypothetical trans dating partners as a function of sexual and gender identity. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *36*(7), 2074–2095 (cited on page 37).

Bogardus, T. (2026). *The Nature of the Sexes: Why Biology Matters*. Routledge. (Cited on page 35).

Bonali, E. (2021). DDL Zan, la vittoria di non cedere a compromessi. *Valigia Blu*. Retrieved December 20, 2025, from https://www.valigiablu.it/ddl-zan-stop-senato/ (cited on page 2).

Brun, G. (2022). Re-engineering contested concepts. A reflective-equilibrium approach. *Synthese*, *200*(2), Article 168, 1–29 (cited on page 31).

Butler, J. (2006). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge Classics. (Cited on pages 5, 25).

Butler, J. (2011). *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. Routledge Classics. (Cited on page 24).

Cappelen, H. (2018). *Fixing Language: An Essay on Conceptual Engineering*. Oxford University Press. (Cited on pages 3, 19, 21, 22).

Carrell, S. (2025). Legal definition of woman is based on biological sex, UK supreme court rules. *The Guardian*. Retrieved January 16, 2026, from https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/apr/16/critics-of-trans-rights-win-uk-supreme-court-case-over-definition-of-woman (cited on page 25).

Chappell, S. G. (2025). Just Like a Woman. *Think*, *24*(71), 11–15 (cited on pages 24, 35).

Chappell, S. G., & Lawford-Smith, H. (2018). Transgender: A dialogue. *Aeon*. Retrieved March 6, 2026, from https://aeon.co/essays/transgender-identities-a-conversation-between-two-philosophers (cited on page 11).

Chu, A. L. (2018). On Liking Women. *n+1*, *30* (cited on pages 9, 18).

Coleman, E., Radix, A. E., Bouman, W. P., Brown, G. R., de Vries, A. L. C., Deutsch, M. B., Ettner, R., Fraser, L., Goodman, M., Green, J., Hancock, A. B., Johnson, T. W., Karasic, D. H., Knudson, G. A., Leibowitz, S. F., Meyer-Bahlburg, H. F. L., Monstrey, S. J., Motmans, J., Nahata, L., … Arcelus, J. (2022). Standards of Care for the Health of Transgender and Gender Diverse People, Version 8. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, *23*(sup1), S1–S259 (cited on pages 6–8).

Cosker-Rowland, R. (2023). Recent Work on Gender Identity and Gender. *Analysis*, *83*(4), 801–820 (cited on pages 3, 11, 31).

Cosker-Rowland, R. (2025). *Gender Identity: What It Is and Why It Matters*. Oxford University Press. (Cited on pages 3, 6, 12, 18, 20, 39, 40, 43, 44, 49).

Cull, M. J. (2019). Against Abolition. *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*, *5*(3), Article 4, 1–16 (cited on pages 38, 52).

Cull, M. J. (2024). *What Gender Should Be*. Bloomsbury Academic. (Cited on pages 23, 52).

Dembroff, R. (2024). Reimagining Transgender. In T. M. Bettcher, P. Zurn, A. Pitts, & P. J. DiPietro (Editors), *Trans Philosophy: Meaning and Mattering* (Pages 25–40). University of Minnesota Press. (Cited on page 16).

Fausto-Sterling, A. (2000). *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. Basic Books. (Cited on pages 6, 24, 35).

Fausto-Sterling, A. (2012). *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World*. Routledge. (Cited on page 27).

Fausto-Sterling, A. (2021). A Dynamic Systems Framework for Gender/Sex Development: From Sensory Input in Infancy to Subjective Certainty in Toddlerhood. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, *15*, Article 613789, 1–19 (cited on pages 27, 28).

Fraser, N. (1995). From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age. *New Left Review*, *212*, 68–93 (cited on page 21).

Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford University Press. (Cited on page 17).

Halwani, R. (2023). Sex and Sexual Orientation, Gender and Sexual Preference. *Journal of Controversial Ideas*, *3*(2), Article 3, 1–23 (cited on page 27).

Haslanger, S. (1995). Ontology and Social Construction. *Philosophical Topics*, *23*(2), 95–125 (cited on pages 3, 5, 22).

Haslanger, S. (2000). Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be? *Noûs*, *200*(1), 31–55 (cited on pages 3, 18, 22, 30).

Haslanger, S. (2005). What Are We Talking About? The Semantics and Politics of Social Kinds. *Hypatia*, *20*(4), 10–26 (cited on pages 3, 23).

Haslanger, S. (2015). Theorizing with a Purpose: The Many Kinds of Sex. In C. Kendig (Editor), *Natural Kinds and Classification in Scientific Practice* (Pages 129–144). Routledge. (Cited on pages 3, 28, 29).

Heil, J. (1988). Privileged Access. *Mind*, *97*(386), 238–251 (cited on page 12).

Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). The weirdest people in the world? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *33*(2-3), 61–83 (cited on page 7).

Hernandez, E. M., & Bell, R. (2025). Much Ado About Nothing: Unmotivating "Gender Identity". *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy*, *12*(50), 1313–1340 (cited on pages 3, 19, 21, 46).

Horsted, S. (2025). From misgendering to missed diagnoses: The barriers that can keep trans people from safe healthcare. *The Conversation*. Retrieved February 3, 2026, from https://theconversation.com/from-misgendering-to-missed-diagnoses-the-barriers-that-can-keep-trans-people-from-safe-healthcare-269427 (cited on page 38).

Human Rights Watch. (2022). *Human Rights Watch Country Profiles: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity*. Retrieved December 20, 2025, from https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/interactive/2022/05/19/2022-country-profiles-sexual-orientation-and-gender. (Cited on page 1).

Human Rights Watch. (2025a). *"They're Ruining People's Lives" - Bans on Gender-Affirming Care for Transgender Youth in the US*. Retrieved December 20, 2025, from https://www.hrw.org/report/

2025/06/03/theyre-ruining-peoples-lives/bans-on-gender-affirming-care-for-transgender-youth. (Cited on page 1).

Human Rights Watch. (2025b). *US Supreme Court Allows Discriminatory Passport Rule*. Retrieved December 20, 2025, from https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/11/10/us-supreme-court-allows-discriminatory-passport-rule. (Cited on page 2).

Jenkins, K. (2016). Amelioration and Inclusion: Gender Identity and the Concept of Woman. *Ethics*, *126*(2), 394–421 (cited on pages 3, 13, 19, 38, 42).

Jenkins, K. (2018). Toward an Account of Gender Identity. *Ergo*, *5*(27), 713–744 (cited on pages 3, 5, 6, 15, 22, 39, 41–43).

Karkazis, K. (2019). The misuses of "biological sex". *The Lancet*, *394*(10212), 1898–1899 (cited on page 38).

Killmister, S. (2025). What's Wrong with Gender-Critical Feminism? *Hypatia*, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.79 (cited on pages 33, 34, 36).

Lancaster, R., Marks, J., Fausto-Sterling, A., & Fuentes, A. (2023). Complexities of Gender and Sex. *Anthropology Today*, *39*(6), 1–2 (cited on pages 28, 29).

Lawford-Smith, H. (2022). *Gender-Critical Feminism*. Oxford University Press. (Cited on pages 25, 33–35).

Mason, R. (2021). Hermeneutical Injustice. In *The Routledge Handbook of Social and Political Philosophy of Language* (Pages 247–258). Routledge. (Cited on page 17).

Mason, R. (2024). Women Are Not Adult Human Females. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, *102*(1), 180–191 (cited on page 34).

McKitrick, J. (2015). A Dispositional Account of Gender. *Philosophical Studies*, *172*(10), 2575–2589 (cited on pages 3, 39–41).

Mikkola, M. (2016). *The Wrong of Injustice: Dehumanization and its Role in Feminist Philosophy*. Oxford University Press. (Cited on pages 5, 23).

Mikkola, M. (2024). Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Editors), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2024). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. (Cited on pages 5, 28).

Money, J., & Ehrhardt, A. A. (1971). Fetal Hormones and the Brain: Effect on Sexual Dimorphism of Behavior — A Review. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *1*(3), 241–262 (cited on page 27).

Movement Advancement Project. (2025). *Bans on Transgender People using Public Bathrooms and Facilities according to their Gender Identity*. Retrieved December 20, 2025, from https://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/nondiscrimination/bathroom_bans. (Cited on page 2).

Moynihan, S. (2013). *Passing into the Present: Contemporary American Fiction of Racial and Gender Passing*. Manchester University Press. (Cited on page 9).

Pengelly, M. (2025). Trump rolls back trans and gender-identity rights and takes aim at DEI. *The Guardian*. Retrieved February 10, 2026, from https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jan/20/trump-executive-order-gender-sex (cited on pages 23, 25).

Putnam, H. (1973). Meaning and Reference. *The Journal of Philosophy*, *70*(19), 699–711 (cited on pages 5, 22).

Rawls, J. (1971). *A Theory of Justice*. Harvard University Press. (Cited on page 11).

Rawls, J. (2005). *Political Liberalism – Expanded Edition*. Columbia University Press. (Cited on page 11).

Rea, M. (2022). Gender as a Self-Conferred Identity. *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*, *8*(2), Article 3, 1–22 (cited on page 45).

Reed, E. (2026). Kansas Sends Letters To Trans People Demanding The Immediate Surrender Of Drivers Licenses. *Erin In The Morning*. Retrieved March 4, 2026, from https://www.erininthemorning.com/p/kansas-sends-letters-to-trans-people (cited on page 2).

Saul, J. (2012). Politically Significant Terms and Philosophy of Language. In A. M. Superson & S. L. Crasnow (Editors), *Out from the Shadows: Analytical Feminist Contributions to Traditional Philosophy*. Oxford University Press. (Cited on page 32).

Serano, J. (2007). *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Seal Press. (Cited on pages 6, 10, 11, 13, 18, 36, 37, 47).

Silva, F. (2025). Being a Woman and Wanting to Be a Woman: An Application of Subject Matters, Questions and FDE. *Australasian Journal of Logic*, *22*(4), Article 3, 410–437 (cited on pages 17, 18, 41).

Srinivasan, A. (2021). *The Right to Sex*. Bloomsbury Publishing. (Cited on page 53).

Stock, K. (2019). XIV—Sexual Orientation: What Is It? *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, *119*(3), 295–319 (cited on pages 25, 33, 36, 37).

Stock, K. (2021). *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism*. Hachette UK. (Cited on pages 25, 26, 33, 34).

Stonewall UK. (2025). *List of LGBTQ+ Terms and Inclusive Definitions*. Retrieved November 7, 2025, from https://www.stonewall.org.uk/resources/list-lgbtq-terms. (Cited on pages 1, 5).

Tordoff, D. M., Wanta, J. W., Collin, A., Stepney, C., Inwards-Breland, D. J., & Ahrens, K. (2022). Mental Health Outcomes in Transgender and Nonbinary Youths Receiving Gender-Affirming Care. *JAMA Network Open*, *5*(2), Article e220978, 1–13 (cited on page 2).

United Nations Free & Equal. (2025). *Transgender People Factsheet*. Retrieved December 21, 2025, from https://www.unfe.org/en/know-the-facts/challenges-solutions/transgender. (Cited on page 1).

van Anders, S. M. (2015). Beyond Sexual Orientation: Integrating Gender/Sex and Diverse Sexualities via Sexual Configurations Theory. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *44*(5), 1177–1213 (cited on page 28).

Weinberg, J. (2025). Philosopher Wraps Cooperation with Trump in Flag of Academic Freedom. *Daily Nous*. Retrieved March 9, 2026, from https://dailynous.com/2025/06/26/philosopher-wraps-cooperation-with-trump-in-flag-of-academic-freedom/ (cited on page 25).