


COMMENTARY Gender

Transgender Ideology Is Riddled With Contradictions. Here Are the Big Ones.

Feb 9th, 2018 12 min read

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People say that we live in a postmodern age that has rejected metaphysics. That's not quite true.

We live in a postmodern age that promotes an alternative metaphysics. As I explain in "When Harry Became Sally," at the heart of the transgender moment are radical ideas about the human person—in particular, that people are what they claim to be, regardless of contrary evidence. A transgender boy is a boy, not merely a girl who identifies as a boy.

It's understandable why activists make these claims. An argument about transgender identities will be much more persuasive if it concerns who someone is, not merely how someone identifies. And so the rhetoric of the transgender moment drips with ontological assertions: People are the gender they prefer to be. That's the claim.

Transgender activists don't admit that this is a metaphysical claim. They don't want to have the debate on the level of philosophy, so they dress it up as a scientific and medical claim. And they've co-opted many professional associations for their cause.

Thus the American Psychological Association, in a pamphlet titled "Answers to Your Questions about Transgender People, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression," tells us, "Transgender is an umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression, or

behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth.”

Notice the politicized language: A person’s sex is “assigned at birth.” Back in 2005, even the Human Rights Campaign referred instead to “birth sex” and “physical sex.”

The phrase “sex assigned at birth” is now favored because it makes room for “gender identity” as the real basis of a person’s sex.

In an expert declaration to a federal district court in North Carolina concerning H.B. 2, Dr. Deanna Adkins stated, “From a medical perspective, the appropriate determinant of sex is gender identity.” Adkins is a professor at Duke University School of Medicine and the director of the Duke Center for Child and Adolescent Gender Care (which opened in 2015).

Adkins argues that gender identity is not only the preferred basis for determining sex, but “the only medically supported determinant of sex.” Every other method is bad science, she claims: “It is counter to medical science to use chromosomes, hormones, internal reproductive organs, external genitalia, or secondary sex characteristics to override gender identity for purposes of classifying someone as male or female.”

This is a remarkable claim, not least because the argument recently was that gender is only a social construct, while sex is a biological reality. Now, activists claim that gender identity is destiny, while biological sex is the social construct.

Adkins doesn’t say if she would apply this rule to all mammalian species. But why should sex be determined differently in humans than in other mammals? And if medical science holds that gender identity determines sex in humans, what does this mean for the use of medicinal agents that have different effects on males and females? Does the proper dosage of medicine depend on the patient’s sex or gender identity?

But what exactly is this “gender identity” that is supposed to be the true medical determinant of sex? Adkins defines it as “a person’s inner sense of belonging to a particular gender, such as male or female.”

Note that little phrase “such as,” implying that the options are not necessarily limited to male or female. Other activists are more forthcoming in admitting that gender identity need not be restricted to the binary choice of male or female, but can include both or neither. The

American Psychological Association, for example, defines “gender identity” as “a person’s internal sense of being male, female, or something else.”

Adkins asserts that being transgender is not a mental disorder, but simply “a normal developmental variation.” And she claims, further, that medical and mental health professionals who specialize in the treatment of gender dysphoria are in agreement with this view.

Transgender Catechism

These notions about sex and gender are now being taught to young children. Activists have created child-friendly graphics for this purpose, such as the “Genderbread Person.” The Genderbread Person teaches that when it comes to sexuality and gender, people have five different characteristics, each of them falling along a spectrum.

There’s “gender identity,” which is “how you, in your head, define your gender, based on how much you align (or don’t align) with what you understand to be the options for gender.” The graphic lists “4 (of infinite)” possibilities for gender identity: “woman-ness,” “man-ness,” “two-spirit,” or “genderqueer.”

The second characteristic is “gender expression,” which is “the way you present gender, through your actions, dress, and demeanor.” In addition to “feminine” or “masculine,” the options are “butch,” “femme,” “androgynous,” or “gender neutral.”

Third is “biological sex,” defined as “the physical sex characteristics you’re born with and develop, including genitalia, body shape, voice pitch, body hair, hormones, chromosomes, etc.”

The final two characteristics concern sexual orientation: “sexually attracted to” and “romantically attracted to.” The options include “Women/Females/Femininity” and “Men/Males/Masculinity.” Which seems rather binary.

The Genderbread Person tries to localize these five characteristics on the body: gender identity in the brain, sexual and romantic attraction in the heart, biological sex in the pelvis, and gender expression everywhere.

The Genderbread Person espouses the latest iteration of transgender ideology. (Photo: Sam Killerman/It’s Pronounced Metrosexual)

The Genderbread Person presented here is version 3.3, incorporating adjustments made in response to criticism of earlier versions. But even this one violates current dogma. Some activists have complained that the Genderbread Person looks overly male.

A more serious fault in the eyes of many activists is the use of the term “biological sex.” Time magazine drew criticism for the same transgression in 2014 after publishing a profile of Laverne Cox, the “first out trans person” to be featured on the cover.

At least the folks at Time got credit for trying to be “good allies, explaining what many see as a complicated issue,” wrote Mey Rude in an article titled “It’s Time for People to Stop Using the Social Construct of ‘Biological Sex’ to Defend Their Transmisogyny.” (It’s hard to keep up with the transgender moment.)

But Time was judged guilty of using “a simplistic and outdated understanding of biology to perpetuate some very dangerous ideas about trans women,” and failing to acknowledge that biological sex “isn’t something we’re actually born with, it’s something that doctors or our parents assign us at birth.”

Today, transgender “allies” in good standing don’t use the Genderbread Person in their classrooms, but opt for the “Gender Unicorn,” which was created by Trans Student Educational Resources. It has a body shape that doesn’t appear either male or female, and instead of a “biological sex” it has a “sex assigned at birth.”

Those are the significant changes to the Genderbread Person, and they were made so that the new graphic would “more accurately portray the distinction between gender, sex assigned at birth, and sexuality.”

According to Trans Student Education Resources, “Biological sex is an ambiguous word that has no scale and no meaning besides that it is related to some sex characteristics. It is also harmful to trans people. Instead, we prefer ‘sex assigned at birth’ which provides a more accurate description of what biological sex may be trying to communicate.”

The Gender Unicorn is the graphic that children are likely to encounter in school. These are the dogmas they are likely to be catechized to profess.

The Gender Unicorn is used to avoid using a male or female body as default. (Photo: Landyn Pan and Anna Moore/Trans Student Educational Resources)

While activists claim that the possibilities for gender identity are rather expansive—man, woman, both, neither—they also insist that gender identity is innate, or established at a very young age, and thereafter immutable.

Dr. George Brown, a professor of psychiatry and a three-time board member of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health, stated in his declaration to the federal court in North Carolina that gender identity “is usually established early in life, by the age of 2 to 3 years old.”

Addressing the same court, Adkins asserted that “evidence strongly suggests that gender identity is innate or fixed at a young age and that gender identity has a strong biological basis.” (At no point in her expert declaration did she cite any sources for any of her claims.)

Transgender Contradictions

If the claims presented in this essay strike you as confusing, you’re not alone. The thinking of transgender activists is inherently confused and filled with internal contradictions. Activists never acknowledge those contradictions. Instead, they opportunistically rely on whichever claim is useful at any given moment.

Here I’m talking about transgender activists. Most people who suffer from gender dysphoria are not activists, and many of them reject the activists’ claims. Many of them may be regarded as victims of the activists, as I show in my book.

Many of those who feel distress over their bodily sex know that they aren’t really the opposite sex, and do not wish to “transition.” They wish to receive help in coming to identify with and accept their bodily self. They don’t think their feelings of gender dysphoria define reality.

But transgender activists do. Regardless of whether they identify as “cisgender” or “transgender,” the activists promote a highly subjective and incoherent worldview.

On the one hand, they claim that the real self is something other than the physical body, in a new form of Gnostic dualism, yet at the same time they embrace a materialist philosophy in which only the material world exists. They say that gender is purely a social construct, while asserting that a person can be “trapped” in the wrong gender.

They say there are no meaningful differences between man and woman, yet they rely on rigid sex stereotypes to argue that “gender identity” is real, while human embodiment is not. They

claim that truth is whatever a person says it is, yet they believe there's a real self to be discovered inside that person.

They promote a radical expressive individualism in which people are free to do whatever they want and define the truth however they wish, yet they try ruthlessly to enforce acceptance of transgender ideology.

It's hard to see how these contradictory positions can be combined. If you pull too hard on any one thread of transgender ideology, the whole tapestry comes unraveled. But here are some questions we can pose:

If gender is a social construct, how can gender identity be innate and immutable? How can one's identity with respect to a social construct be determined by biology in the womb? How can one's identity be unchangeable (immutable) with respect to an ever-changing social construct? And if gender identity is innate, how can it be "fluid"?

The challenge for activists is to offer a plausible definition of gender and gender identity that is independent of bodily sex.

Is there a gender binary or not? Somehow, it both does and does not exist, according to transgender activists. If the categories of "man" and "woman" are objective enough that people can identify as, and be, men and women, how can gender also be a spectrum, where people can identify as, and be, both, or neither, or somewhere in between?

What does it even mean to have an internal sense of gender? What does gender feel like? What meaning can we give to the concept of sex or gender—and thus what internal "sense" can we have of gender—apart from having a body of a particular sex?

Apart from having a male body, what does it "feel like" to be a man? Apart from having a female body, what does it "feel like" to be a woman? What does it feel like to be both a man and a woman, or to be neither?

The challenge for the transgender activist is to explain what these feelings are like, and how someone could know if he or she "feels like" the opposite sex, or neither, or both.

Even if trans activists could answer these questions about feelings, that still wouldn't address the matter of reality. Why should feeling like a man—whatever that means—make someone a man? Why do our feelings determine reality on the question of sex, but on little else? Our

feelings don't determine our age or our height. And few people buy into Rachel Dolezal's claim to identify as a black woman, since she is clearly not.

If those who identify as transgender are the sex with which they identify, why doesn't that apply to other attributes or categories of being? What about people who identify as animals, or able-bodied people who identify as disabled? Do all of these self-professed identities determine reality? If not, why not?

And should these people receive medical treatment to transform their bodies to accord with their minds? Why accept transgender "reality," but not trans-racial, trans-species, and trans-abled reality?

The challenge for activists is to explain why a person's "real" sex is determined by an inner "gender identity," but age and height and race and species are not determined by an inner sense of identity.

Of course, a transgender activist could reply that an "identity" is, by definition, just an inner sense of self. But if that's the case, gender identity is merely a disclosure of how one feels. Saying that someone is transgender, then, says only that the person has feelings that he or she is the opposite sex.

Gender identity, so understood, has no bearing at all on the meaning of "sex" or anything else. But transgender activists claim that a person's self-professed "gender identity" is that person's "sex."

The challenge for activists is to explain why the mere feeling of being male or female (or both or neither) makes someone male or female (or both or neither).

Gender identity can sound a lot like religious identity, which is determined by beliefs. But those beliefs don't determine reality. Someone who identifies as a Christian believes that Jesus is the Christ. Someone who identifies as a Muslim believes that Muhammad is the final prophet. But Jesus either is or is not the Christ, and Muhammad either is or is not the final prophet, regardless of what anyone happens to believe.

So, too, a person either is or is not a man, regardless of what anyone—including that person—happens to believe. The challenge for transgender activists is to present an argument for why transgender beliefs determine reality.

Determining reality is the heart of the matter, and here too we find contradictions.

On the one hand, transgender activists want the authority of science as they make metaphysical claims, saying that science reveals gender identity to be innate and unchanging. On the other hand, they deny that biology is destiny, insisting that people are free to be who they want to be.

Which is it? Is our gender identity biologically determined and immutable, or self-created and changeable? If the former, how do we account for people whose gender identity changes over time? Do these people have the wrong sense of gender at some time or other?

And if gender identity is self-created, why must other people accept it as reality? If we should be free to choose our own gender reality, why can some people impose their idea of reality on others just because they identify as transgender?

The challenge for the transgender activist is to articulate some conception of truth as the basis for how we understand the common good and how society should be ordered.

As I document in depth in “When Harry Became Sally,” the claims of transgender activists are confusing because they are philosophically incoherent. Activists rely on contradictory claims as needed to advance their position, but their ideology keeps evolving, so that even allies and LGBT organizations can get left behind as “progress” marches on.

At the core of the ideology is the radical claim that feelings determine reality. From this idea come extreme demands for society to play along with subjective reality claims. Trans ideologues ignore contrary evidence and competing interests, they disparage alternative practices, and they aim to muffle skeptical voices and shut down any disagreement.

The movement has to keep patching and shoring up its beliefs, policing the faithful, coercing the heretics, and punishing apostates, because as soon as its furious efforts flag for a moment or someone successfully stands up to it, the whole charade is exposed. That’s what happens when your dogmas are so contrary to obvious, basic, everyday truths.

A transgender future is not the “right side of history,” yet activists have convinced the most powerful sectors of our society to acquiesce to their demands. While the claims they make are manifestly false, it will take real work to prevent the spread of these harmful ideas.

This piece originally appeared in The Daily Signal

