

Gender's Journey from Sex to Psychology: A Brief History

[Tomas Bogardus](#) 13 Mar 2019 · 17 min read

There's no relief from our current cultural conversation on transgender rights. Its implications touch all of us, and the media coverage is relentless. Here at *Quillette* alone, you may read about the long-term consequences of [transitioning](#) for [children](#), the political costs of [deadnaming](#), [Twitter's policies](#) on "hateful conduct" (including tweeting things like "men aren't women"), the controversy surrounding trans women [competing](#) in female sports events, and the [widening chasm](#) between trans-inclusive feminists and trans-exclusive "radical" feminists.

Surrounded by this whirlwind, I thought it would be useful to provide a historical meta-survey on the issue, tracing the debate back to its origins, so that we all might be better positioned to digest the next news cycle. Below, you'll find a brief history of our culture's "gender" talk: its origins, its philosophical evolution, and its current controversies. Gender as we've come to understand it, I will argue, is an idea so shot through with murky confusion. We will soon have to replace it with something more intellectually durable, or abandon it altogether.

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Once upon a time, everyone believed that humans are sexually dimorphic, coming in two sexes: male and female. Of course, we also knew about biologically intersex people—who exhibit rare variations in sex characteristics, and so don't fit neatly into either category. But, just as it's true to say that humans have ten fingers, even though a few are born with more or fewer, and just as we distinguish between day and night despite the shades of dusk and dawn, we accepted the idea that humans come in two sexes, despite the reality of intersex individuals.

In that simpler time, we also believed that males and females can be children or adults. When human males and females are children, they're boys and girls. When they're adults, they're men and women. We used *man* and *woman* to track the distinction between adult males and adult females in our species, just as we do with other species: *doe* and *buck*, *rooster* and *hen*, *sow* and *boar*, *cow* and *bull*, etc. You'll still

find these sex-based definitions of *man* and *woman* in most dictionaries. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary's first three senses of *woman* refer to adult female humans, and similarly for *man*. The OED tells us that the word *woman* comes from the Old English word *wīfmann*, meaning "female human": *wīf* (which meant female, not wife) modifying *mann* (which meant human, generically). Let's call this "the Traditional View" of manhood and womanhood: they're rooted in biological sex.

Things began to change in the middle of the 20th century, when psychologists and philosophers proposed a distinction between sex and what they called "gender." (A classic text here is psychologist John Money's 1955 article, [Hermaphroditism, gender and precocity in hyperadrenocorticism: Psychologic findings.](#)) The term *gender* they borrowed from linguistics, and stipulated that it refers to something other than sex—typically the social features of life as a male or female (i.e., the socially learned rules and roles that a culture associates with biological sex). Boys wear blue, girls wear pink, and so forth.

For psychologists, the benefit of this distinction was that it allowed the emergence of a vocabulary to describe people we now call "gender nonconforming," and people who experience what we now call "gender dysphoria." To be gender nonconforming, back when this language was emerging, was to be of one biological sex, and yet to fail to behave in a manner typical of that sex. To experience gender dysphoria was to be of one biological sex, and yet to have a sincere belief that one was "meant to be" the opposite sex, or to have a deep-seated desire to be of the opposite sex. Trans author Julia Serano, author of the 2007 book *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, puts it this way: Trans people "struggle with a subconscious understanding or intuition that there is something 'wrong' with the sex they were assigned at birth and/or who feel that they should have been born as or wish they could be the other sex." More recently, trans writer Andrea Long Chu (author of [On Liking Women](#)) described it as follows: "I am trying to tell you something that few of us dare to talk about, especially in public, especially when we are trying to feel political: not the fact, boringly obvious to those of us living it, that many trans women wish they were cis women, but the darker, more difficult fact that many trans women *wish they were women, period.*"

The sex/gender distinction also helped philosophers speak about (and combat) unjust social norms and conventions that systematically oppress the female sex, as well as biological essentialism, the view that these social norms are justified by biology. As early as 1949, Simone de Beauvoir argued in her book *The Second Sex* that females are socialized by their former masters (men) to be, as she wrote, “‘truly feminine’—that is, frivolous, infantile, irresponsible: the submissive woman.” And this is unjust. But before one can confront an injustice, one must name the injustice. For that task, we used the word “gender.”

Then, a subtle but important shift happened. Philosophers began to speak as though the ordinary terms we were swapping out for this new category of gender were not merely *masculine* and *feminine*, but in fact our familiar terms *man* and *woman*. This traces back at least as far as de Beauvoir’s famous dictum that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” Note the use of “woman,” rather than “womanly” or “feminine.” This practice spread, and became the industry standard: *Male* and *female* remained sex terms (rooted in biology), but *man* and *woman* became gender terms (and therefore socially constructed). By 2012, feminist philosopher Jennifer Saul [wrote](#) that it had become traditional for feminist academics to use the word *woman* “as a gender term—a term that picks out those who have certain social traits or who occupy a particular social role.”

It was a minor grammatical move, but it had deep implications for our understanding of manhood and womanhood. If “gender” is defined in terms of social rules and roles, and *man* and *woman* are gender terms, then manhood and womanhood are no longer defined even partly in terms of sex, as they were with the Traditional View. They become “social constructions,” as philosophers say, like touchdowns and Texas: determined not by physical reality, but by *us*, our social realities and conventions. On this line of thinking, according to prominent feminist philosopher Sally Haslanger, a woman is [defined](#) as “a member of a social class whose unifying feature is social subordination based on one’s presumed or perceived female biological role in reproduction.” That is, she occupies a certain position in society—oppressed—and she does this because she “presents” or is “read” as female, not necessarily because she *is* biologically female. Likewise, “man” refers to those who are privileged because they’re observed or imagined to be male. Let’s call this “the Social-Role View” of manhood and womanhood,

which is distinct from the Traditional View: women and men are not defined in terms of biological sex, but in terms of social positions of oppression and privilege.

It was in the context of this Social-Role View that much of our language for gender dysphoria was developed. Imagine lining people up by biological sex: a spectrum from clearly male on the left to clearly female on the right. And now imagine the Social-Role theorist lining everyone up along the gender dimension: the most privileged men on the left, through to the most oppressed women on the right. To take myself as an example, I would find myself toward the left side in both of these line-ups: a male, and a man. My wife would find herself toward the right side in both line-ups: a female, and a woman. Others would find themselves on opposite sides of each dimension. Now, borrowing the Latin prefixes *cis* (on the same side of) and *trans* (across), a distinction emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s as between those male/men and female/women who would be on the same side of these two line-ups—“*cis-gender*”—and those female/men and male/women who would be on opposite sides of these two line-ups—“*transgender*.” (The term “*transgender*” originated in a 1968 article by John Oliven, [Sexual Hygiene and Pathology](#). But the term *cis* wasn’t coined until many years later, [by Volkmar Sigusch](#).)

Adopting this view of sex and gender allowed the acceptance of transgender people as individuals who genuinely are the gender they take themselves to be—with, one hopes, a consequent reduction in oppression, bullying and medical pathologizing. This was a quantum leap for trans rights (as we now would call them), as it had been common, even in enlightened circles, to dismiss trans individuals as deluded or fetishists, or “evil deceivers and make-believers,” as trans philosopher [Talia Mae Bettcher put it](#). It also was hoped that trans people would be able to pursue more authentic forms of self-identification, which the rest of us would support through, for instance, use of their preferred pronouns. The underlying motivation was to combat oppression based on sex, as well as the oppression of and violence toward trans individuals.

So far, so good. But now we come to perhaps the most interesting twist in the story. In the last few decades, a rival view has emerged. It began with the observation that, on the Social-Role View of gender, *not all* trans people will

count as the gender they take themselves to be. As feminist philosopher Katharine Jenkins pointed out in her 2016 article [Amelioration and Inclusion](#), some trans people who take themselves to be women, for example, either may not intentionally *present* as female, or they may not be *read* as female by others. In either case, they could not be oppressed on the basis of *being female*. Because the Social-Role View ties womanhood to oppression on the basis of being female, if a transgender woman isn't oppressed for being female, she would not count as a woman on the Social-Role View. The same goes (in reverse) for transgender men. So the concern emerged that the Social-Role View fails to respect the self-identification of many trans people, and therefore is "trans-exclusive."

And so we reached a turning point in the evolution of "gender." Originally, the Social-Role View of gender had an underlying appeal for trans-rights advocates, because the view defined gender *socially*, and not biologically. It decoupled gender from biological sex, and the hope was to locate trans individuals in this conceptual space. However, it began to look like this space did not have the right shape to include all trans people after all. And thus a rift opened between feminists who liked the Social-Role View, and feminists who wanted a fully trans-inclusive view of gender. The latter decided that a satisfactory resolution could be reached only if the sex/gender distinction were collapsed altogether. Which, among progressive intellectuals, at least, is exactly what now is happening.

In this more radical conception—which splits into variants that I call the Self-Identification View and the Norm-Relevancy View—Caitlyn Jenner isn't merely a woman, but actually *female* as well. And she's a female in virtue of something *psychological*, not something social or biological. If you remain attached to the view that women are females playing certain social roles, then since Caitlyn Jenner is actually female on this emerging psychological view, and there's no barrier to her playing the right sort of social role to be a woman. Problem solved.

This reunion of sex and gender arguably began in Judith Butler's 1990 book *Gender Trouble*, when she asked: "Are the ostensibly natural facts of sex discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of other political and social interests?" Her answer: "If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as

gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.”

According to this framework, what unites women—and, thereby, adult human females, in a revisionary sense of “female”—is nothing biological, nor social, but rather something psychological: a female “gender identity,” as it’s called. As trans activist [Miss Spain](#) recently put it in December’s Miss Universe contest, “I always say: having a vagina didn’t transform me into a woman. I am a woman, already before birth, because my identity is here,” she said while gesturing skull-ward.

As noted above, the two main versions of this are the Self-Identification View and the Norm-Relevancy View. You’ll find the first variant all over popular culture, and also set out explicitly in Talia Mae Bettcher’s 2017 article [Through the Looking Glass](#). According to this Self-Identification View, the single necessary and sufficient condition of being a woman/female is to *identify* as a woman/female. As for the second psychologically-based view of sex/gender—the Norm-Relevancy View—it is well-described in [the work of Katharine Jenkins](#), who has argued that to be a woman/female is to have the *sense* that norms about women/females are relevant to one’s own life, even if one does not abide by those norms. And similarly for men/males.

Recall that, originally, the terms *trans* and *cis* were introduced in the context of a sex/gender distinction. If that distinction is collapsed, what becomes of *trans* and *cis*? The answer may ring a bell. Instead of distinguishing between gender and biological sex as we once did, we distinguish now between gender/sex on the one hand, and *sex assigned at birth*, on the other. According to either of these psychological conceptions of sex and gender, one now can claim to be, for example, a transgender woman, without implying that one is now or was ever a member of the male sex. One was merely *assigned* male at birth—but the doctor was [wrong](#). Sex is gender, and gender is in your head, not between your legs. And so doctors are essentially just guessing when they declare babies to be boys or girls, needlessly engaging in psychological forecasting. To be *cis* is to be on the same side of the sex/gender line-up and the sex-assigned-at-birth line up, and to be *trans* is to be on opposite sides of those line-ups.

Before we wrap up the history lesson, let’s quickly point out an important implication of the Self-Identification View and the Norm-Relevancy View, an

implication which is working itself out as we speak. On these views, sex and gender now reside in the kaleidoscopic world of human psychology, as opposed to the dimorphic world of sexual biology. And there is no theoretical limit on the number of ways in which one might self-identify, or the combination of norms one might sense to be relevant to oneself. So, as “nonbinary” philosopher Robin Dembroff recently put it in [The Nonbinary Gender Trap](#), “the scope of gender identities outside of male and female is vast and effectively unlimited.” This is what lies behind recent conversations about the number and types of novel gender identities, which have multiplied with all possible haste. (Google “[tumblr gender master list](#)” to read about colorgender, vapogender, and many others.) This proliferation of gender identities also explains the more recent use of “trans” to mean simply non-cis. One is trans, on the current usage, so long as one’s gender identity (of which there are, according to the Tumblr list, at least 117) does not match the sex one was assigned at birth.

To reiterate: On these psychologically-based views, trans individuals are not merely the *gender* that they take themselves to be, but also the actual *sex* they take themselves to be. And this is the origin of recent controversies over whether it is “transphobic” for, say, a lesbian to refuse to date a trans woman. If an adult human who was spuriously *assigned* a male identity at birth can genuinely *be* female through and through, and lesbians claim to be attracted to females, what reason could that lesbian have for her choosiness except bigotry and transphobia? Since many [lesbians](#) understandably disagree with such logic, and likewise with many [gay men](#), this has become a major fault line separating the “LG” and “T” elements of the LGBT+ community.

This “lesbian erasure” by trans women is what many women have been protesting at the London Pride Parade and other such events. According to the shorthand used to describe this civil war within feminism, “Radical Feminists” or “Gender-Critical Feminists” on one hand are pitted against “Transfeminists” on the other. The former typically advocate a trans-exclusive Social-Role view of gender (and are sometimes denounced as “TERFs” —trans-exclusive radical feminists—which they consider a slur), while the latter advocate the ascendant trans-inclusive psychological accounts of sex/gender.

That brings us to the present day. What does the future hold for sex and gender? I believe the emerging consensus on gender is so deeply flawed that it won't be long before the tread wears thin and it fails, stranding its adherents in a conceptual limbo. Best to plan ahead.

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The Self-Identification View is appealing because it respects individual autonomy. But it also has, at its core, a serious definitional problem. It is circular: *What is a woman? It's someone who identifies as... a woman.* We've used the word to be defined in the definition itself. It would be like if you were wondering what an ultracrepidarian is, and I inform you that it's anyone who identifies as an ultracrepidarian. But that's about as useful as a decaf coffee. If you don't already understand the word, the definition is no help. It would be like if your math teacher asked you to solve for x , and you applied the equation $x = x$. It's a true statement, but it doesn't really tell us *what x is*.

Unfortunately, any attempt to fix this circularity results in definitions of womanhood (or manhood) that leave out some part of the class of people whom Self-Identification proponents seek to include. For example, if you say that to identify as a woman/female is to identify as *biologically* female—i.e. as someone with some or all of a cluster of features such as XX chromosomes, physiological features oriented toward childbearing, certain hormone levels, etc.—then we'll exclude trans women. If you say that to identify as a woman/female is to identify as someone who has a unique sort of internal, ineffable *feeling* of femininity, then, again, women who lack this feeling (whatever it is) will be excluded. (Plus, this option looks like we're simply plugging in antiquated stereotypical assumptions about what it means to be a boy, girl, man or woman—liking trucks instead of dolls, preferring blue to pink, or vice versa. This move understandably causes some Gender-Critical feminists to protest that old-fashioned gender stereotypes are being brought back into public discourse through the back door of trans activism.) Or if you say that to identify as a woman/female is to identify as someone who is oppressed as a result of being observed or imagined to be *biologically* female, then, again, you will exclude or marginalize many trans women, since, as discussed above, many trans women fall outside the Social-Role View definition of women.

The Norm-Relevancy View has a similar problem of circularity. Recall that, on this view, to be a woman/female is to take enough of the right sort of gender rules to be relevant to you, to be about you. But *which* gender rules are “the right sort”? Presumably, the norms *about women/females*. But then, as before, we’ve used the word to be defined in the definition itself, which makes the definition literally unintelligible. And, as with the Self-Identification View, any attempt to patch this problem will result in the exclusion or marginalization of many trans women.

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Finally, I’d like to point out two problems with the broader project of intentionally revising our gender concepts for the sake of social justice: it’s logically incoherent, and it’s impossible to complete (at least, in a trans-inclusive way).

When philosophers abandoned the Traditional View of manhood and womanhood to propose novel definitions of *man* and *woman*, a major part of the justification was that we needed to advance the cause of feminism. The project philosophers have undertaken was to set aside our ordinary, traditional concepts of manhood and womanhood and then reflect upon possible new, revisionary definitions of *woman* and *man* that would best advance this cause.

But, first, by knowingly departing from ordinary linguistic usage—i.e., by consciously abandoning the standard use of the terms *man* and *woman*—these philosophers introduce new concepts rather than modifying shared ones. It has been a *revisionary* project, which has necessarily polluted our discussions about human identity with ambiguity, thus causing people to talk past one another. It’s like when we use old names to dub new cities. “Are you going to London?” means one thing in Ontario, Canada, and something quite different elsewhere: That one word now has multiple meanings. Similarly, if you know full well that “womanhood” is used to refer to the state of being an adult human female, but you decide to use the word “womanhood” to refer to a social role or a certain kind of psychological state, then you have changed the subject. You’re no longer talking about womanhood, but something different, and you cannot reasonably criticize those who say “Caitlyn Jenner is not a woman” on the grounds that what they’ve said is *false*.

Thus the current cultural impasse, whereby the elites who exist within the same circles as philosophy professors—university administrators, human-rights officials,

activists, high-end journalists and publishers—use the English language in a way that strikes others as obfuscatory at best. More importantly, since those engaged in this revisionary project explicitly intend *not* to change the subject, but rather to continue talking about men and women as we have for millennia, this project is logically incoherent. It has a contradiction in its core. One simply cannot *both* stay on topic while *also* intentionally revising the relevant concepts.

A second problem concerns circularity again. To engage in this project of gender revisionism, we're meant to set aside the ordinary understanding of womanhood in order to reflect on advancing the cause of feminism. But, of course, in order to reflect on advancing the cause of feminism, surely we must know a thing or two about *women*. Feminism concerns the cause of women, after all.

So, we're at a sticking point in the process, a gap in the method: How can we reflect on a cause when we've set aside our understanding of the very people who are supposedly the focus of our concern? We are asked to do the impossible, when we're told to bracket off our understanding of womanhood, and then to choose the best definition of "woman" to advance the cause of feminism, i.e. the cause of *women*. The surprising fact of the matter is that feminism has become stalled in this "bracketing" stage, and contemporary feminism simply has no good answer to the question, "What is a woman?" What should be an easy question for a movement organized around the rights of women, has instead become a real brain-buster. This helps explain why, at some women's events, it's now taboo to talk about traditional female sexual-health topics, on the grounds that a male can also have a uterus or breasts. For example, saying "abortion is a women's issue," or wearing a vagina-themed hat to a women's event, are both now considered transphobic, at least to those who have on-boarded this linguistic nihilism about "woman." But if we don't know what it means to be a woman then we don't know what feminism is, and so we cannot complete the project of designing the best definition of "woman" to advance the cause of feminism. And, as discussed above, any attempt to patch this circularity problem will end up excluding some trans women. So, this revisionary gender project cannot be completed (at least, not in a trans-inclusive way).

That's the current state of our ongoing gender conversation. Gender revisionists consider the Traditional View to be regressive, oppressive, and all-around toxic.

The Traditional View does not count transgender women as (real) women, or transgender men as (real) men. So, even many ordinary rank-and-file modern progressives and centrists do not consider the Traditional View to be a live option. But the Social-Role View, which might have once seemed more progressive and enlightened, also seems to exclude many transgender people. That leaves more radically revisionary conceptions of gender—the Self-Identification View and the Norm-Relevancy View—which necessarily change the subject, leading to merely verbal disputes, and also suffer from circularity problems, which threaten to make them either unintelligible or trans-exclusive. In the process, we’ve lost all grip on what it means to be a woman, and so the entire project of feminism has collapsed into philosophical confusion. This is worth publicizing.

It’s hard to see how this situation will resolve itself, and which way the pendulum is swinging. Perhaps we’ll return to the Traditional View of sex and gender, and focus on reducing oppression and violence, but *without* revising our concepts, as we do with discrimination on the basis of race, age, religion, disability status, etc. (Recent efforts toward [transracialism](#) and [transageism](#) aren’t exactly catching fire.) Or perhaps the revisionary process will carry forward like a landslide, and we’ll manage to find a non-circular definition of “woman” that includes the wide variety of people that trans-inclusive feminism wants to include: people all over the biological sex spectrum, the social-oppression spectrum, the feminine-masculine spectrum, and the sexual orientation spectrum.

Neither one of these options seems likely. If we’re taking bets, I’ll say this: Our society will sort this issue out far from the ivory tower. Down where the rubber meets the road, in the nitty gritty space of purely practical concerns about sports, bathrooms, prisons, women’s shelters, transphobic bullying, and assault, public opinion will likely settle on a philosophically muddled rapprochement.

There seems to be broad support for a biologically-based understanding of manhood and womanhood when it comes to sports, prisons, locker rooms, and the like. But, at the same time, there’s growing support and acceptance of transgender individuals—including with regard to the use of revisionary gender pronouns—and a rising opposition to policing gender norms through bullying, assault and medical pathologizing.

Absent some dramatic breakthrough or development, we'll probably strike an unprincipled, incoherent compromise on this issue, as we do with other knotty social issues such as abortion, immigration and economic policy: stumbling like drunks, now to the right and now to the left, down a darkened road that has no end.

It will be messy. But, as we stumble together, let's agree on this: The issue is more complicated than either side lets on. For those seeking truth in good faith, it's exactly the wrong time to be shutting down the debate.