

HE/SHE/THEY/ZE

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In this paper, we defend two main claims. The first is a moderate claim: we have a negative duty not to use binary gender-specific pronouns (*he* or *she*) to refer to genderqueer individuals. We defend this with an argument by analogy. It was gravely wrong for Mark Latham to refer to Catherine McGregor, a transgender woman, using the pronoun *he*; we argue that such cases of misgendering are morally analogous to referring to Angel Haze, who identifies as genderqueer, as *he* or *she*. The second is a radical claim: we have a negative duty not to use any gender-specific pronouns to refer to anyone, regardless of their gender identity. We offer three arguments in favor of this, which appeal to concerns about inegalitarianism and risk, invasions of privacy, and reinforcing essentialist ideologies (respectively). We also defend the compatibility of the moderate and radical claim, in the face of the seemingly damning objections to the contrary. Before concluding, we examine common concerns about incorporating either *they* or a neologism such as *ze* as a third-person singular gender-neutral pronoun. These concerns, we argue, do not provide sufficient reason to reject either the moderate or radical claim.

1. Introduction

Group Captain Catherine McGregor is the most senior transgender military officer in the world. In 2015, Mark Latham—the former leader of the Australian Labor Party—referred to her publicly using the pronoun *he*. In doing so, he wronged her by misgendering her. This was not because Latham violated a positive moral duty to refer to McGregor using *she*. Exceptional circumstances notwithstanding, we do

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not have a positive moral duty to refer to McGregor, or anyone, with the pronoun *she*; it is perfectly appropriate to refer to her by *Catherine* or *Group Captain*. But we do have a negative moral duty not to misgender McGregor as Latham did when he referred to McGregor with the pronoun *he*.

This is not a very controversial stance in relation to transgender persons who identify as men or as women. But now consider the rapper Angel Haze, who does not identify as a man or a woman. Haze identifies as genderqueer. Should we use gender-neutral pronouns like *they*, rather than binary gender-specific pronouns (i.e., *he* or *she*) in relation to genderqueer individuals? Or, more radically, should we just use a gender-neutral pronoun like *they* for everyone?

We will defend two central claims, the first of which is more moderate, and the second of which is radical. We have imaginatively labelled them as such:

Moderate Claim We have a duty not to use binary gender-specific pronouns (*he* or *she*) to refer to genderqueer individuals like Angel Haze.¹

Radical Claim We have a duty not to use gender-specific pronouns to refer to anyone, regardless of their gender identity.

We defend MODERATE CLAIM by way of an argument by analogy: it is wrong to misgender McGregor by referring to her by *he*, and if this is the case it is also wrong to misgender Haze by referring to them by *he* or *she* (Section 2). This is because enough of the morally relevant facts that explain why it is wrong to misgender transgender women like McGregor are equally applicable to genderqueer individuals like Haze. Many readers may be familiar and even agree with the idea that misgendering others is wrong; as such, they may be inclined to view our defense of MODERATE CLAIM as belabored. However, we think our defense of MODERATE CLAIM is important for two reasons.

First, many people continue to deny this claim, including both people who accept and people who deny that it is wrong to misgender transgender women. If you doubt that people deny this, consider the trepidation with which major media outlets have embraced alternatives to *he* or *she*—the influential Associated Press Stylebook finally changed in May 2017 to allow that “[t]hey/them/their is acceptable in limited cases as a singular and-or gender-neutral pronoun”, where these limited cases include “stories about people who identify as neither male nor female or ask not to be referred to as he/she/him/her”—as well as the scathing denunciations that these changes have prompted.²

1. The phrase “like Angel Haze” is doing some work here. Some genderqueer individuals, such as bi-gender people (see below, and see the discussion of Paige Abendroth’s case in Section 4.1) would not always be misgendered if one referred to them with binary gender-specific pronouns.

2. For references to the announcement of the change in March and an illustrative denun-

Second, our defense of MODERATE CLAIM helpfully sets up an intermediary goal: to establish that MODERATE CLAIM and RADICAL CLAIM are compatible (Section 3). Many doubt this: for several reasons, they think that using *they* for someone like Catherine McGregor would be a pernicious form of misgendering, so the basis for MODERATE CLAIM rules out RADICAL CLAIM. Explaining why this is not true will reveal some important and subtle points of agreement and disagreement with prominent LGBTQ+ groups and other philosophers. It will also highlight an important feature of our view: while we contend that we have certain general moral duties not to use gender-specific pronouns, we do not claim that these duties are indefeasible. As we will see, there may be special circumstances in which one has a moral duty to use *she* in relation to a transgender woman like McGregor. But this is no threat to our central claims. There are exceptions to many general moral duties, where the moral reasons that ground them are undercut or outweighed; these duties are no different.³

Of course, showing that the two claims are compatible does not show that the more controversial RADICAL CLAIM is true. We offer three arguments for it in Section 4. First, using gender-specific pronouns is either inequalitarian or costly and risky: either we lump all genderqueer identities under one pronoun and thereby treat them differently from binary gender identities (men and women), or we proliferate pronouns, which is infeasible and makes misgendering inevitable. Second, using gender-specific pronouns often inappropriately places individuals in a position where they must either deceive others or disclose their gender identity or sexual orientation. And finally, using binary gender-specific pronouns (*he* or *she*) transmits harmful essentialist beliefs about gender identity.

Even if you are persuaded to accept both MODERATE CLAIM and RADICAL CLAIM, an important question remains. What pronouns should we use instead of using *he*, *she*, and other gender-specific pronouns? In Section 5, we consider two alternatives: introducing a neologism (like *ze*) and appropriating *they* as a gender-neutral singular pronoun. We are neutral between these (though we use *they* for genderqueer people throughout the paper). We will argue that the most common objections to each alternative—that *ze* exoticizes the individuals it refers to; and that it is ungrammatical to use *they* as a singular pronoun—fall far shy of establishing that we should avoid using *ze* or *they*.

Before proceeding further, three clarifications are in order. First, some may be unfamiliar with the terms ‘transgender’ and ‘genderqueer’. For our purposes,

ciation of it, see Kuntzman (2017). It is worth noting that the Associated Press still advises journalists to engage in circumlocution to avoid pronouns in such cases altogether, and thereby ‘unpronoun’ genderqueer people (as was pointed out by Tiffany Stevens, a non-binary journalist for the *Roanoke Times*: see Hare 2017).

3. For instance, the reasons why we have these duties might be *outweighed* when a paramedic needs to use gender-specific pronouns to coordinate on which patient to save in an emergency, and might be *undercut* when a genderqueer acting troupe use *he* to refer to Hamlet.

these are umbrella terms related to *gender identities*.⁴ McGregor, for instance, is a transgender woman because she identifies as a woman, but she was assigned the sex *male* at birth. Being a transgender woman is just one way of being transgender, some of which are also ways of being genderqueer.⁵ For one to be *transgender* (as opposed to *cisgender*) is for one's gender identity to (sometimes) differ from the sex they were assigned at birth. For one to be *genderqueer* is for one not to exclusively identify as a man nor as a woman, and so fall outside of the traditional gender binary. Given this broad understanding, we recognize that many distinct gender identities fall under this umbrella term. Some genderqueer people have alternating gender identities: they might identify as men at some times and as women at others. Some identify as having a gender that is distinct from that of both men and women. And some (including Angel Haze) identify as being agender, or as not having a gender. Much of this paper emphasizes the general position of persons who do not identify exclusively as men or as women, because we think that each way of being genderqueer involves a gender identity that is metaphysically analogous to identifying as a man or as a woman.⁶

Second, with respect to both our MODERATE CLAIM and RADICAL CLAIM, we are primarily focused on English. Some languages—such as Hungarian, Finnish, Malay, Armenian, Bengali, Yoruba—have no gender-specific pronouns or grammatical gender. One way to think about our RADICAL CLAIM is that we should shift English this direction. In the interests of brevity, we leave open whether our case for this generalizes to other natural languages with gender-specific pronouns

4. As we discuss later (Section 2.5), the notion of *gender identity* that plays a crucial role in our view is not necessarily co-extensive with the more commonly discussed notion of *gender*. Along with Talia Bettcher and others, we think that gender identities are helpfully understood as existential self-identities, relating to an individual's "attitudes, values, and commitments" in relation to gender practices and norms. See Bettcher (2009). But our view is compatible with alternative understandings of gender identity. See, e.g., American Psychological Association (2015), or Jenkins (2015).

5. We emphasize this because, as Talia Bettcher and others have pointed out, many gender paradigms have problematically failed to "leave space for trans people who don't self-identity as beyond the binary", but rather "see themselves as men and women" (Bettcher 2014: 385); see also references therein.

6. Some might argue that these are not metaphysically analogous to because the latter are *positive* gender identities and the former is a *negative* gender identity. We only describe being genderqueer in negative terms in order to be succinct and inclusive with our use of that umbrella term, which covered many specific gender identities. Additionally, even if some gender identities are in some sense "negative" (like being agender), it is unclear why this would be morally relevant. Plausibly, there are similarly negative sexual and religious identities—namely, *being asexual* or *being non-religious*—and it would clearly be morally inappropriate to routinely communicate that asexual people are heterosexual, or that non-religious people are Christians, for the same reasons that it would clearly be morally inappropriate to routinely communicate that homosexual people are heterosexual, or that Muslims are Christians. The same holds for communicating that genderqueer individuals are men (or women).

or more extensive systems of grammatical gender; the elimination of *he* and *she* in English is much less drastic than the elimination of grammatical gender in, say, Portuguese. All subsequent discussion of other languages is for the purpose of illuminating our analysis of English. Relatedly, while our examples primarily focus on what individual speakers of English should do, the considerations we raise also have implications for institutional duties.

Finally, we are decidedly not declaring that using *they* or *ze* for everyone would be a panacea. The oppression, discrimination, and persecution faced by transgender persons and other gender minorities is alarming and multifaceted. So is the essentialist misogyny to which gender oppression is often tethered. It would be foolhardy to think there is a silver bullet to defeat these threats, let alone one as simple as a change in pronouns. But that is no reason to ignore our proposal that we should stop using gender-specific pronouns. If there is no silver bullet, we may well need to use every weapon in our arsenal, including linguistic reforms that on their own can only ameliorate gender oppression.

2. In Defense of Moderation

Our defense of MODERATE CLAIM is a straightforward argument by analogy:

- 1 We have a duty not to use *he* to refer to transgender women like McGregor.
- 2 If (1) is true, we have a duty not to use binary gender-specific pronouns (i.e., *he* or *she*) to refer to genderqueer individuals like Haze.

Moderate Claim So, we have a duty not to use binary gender-specific pronouns (*he* or *she*) to refer to genderqueer individuals like Haze.

Here's how we will defend this argument. We will identify the four most salient relevant considerations that explain why it is wrong to refer to McGregor as *he*, and show that each counts equally against referring to Haze as *he* or *she*. We do not need all of these considerations to apply equally to both cases, or to apply in the exact same way: we just need to show that enough of the reasons that ground a duty not to misgender McGregor also ground a duty not to misgender Haze. In Section 2.5 we switch to playing defense: we consider and reject what we take to be the most common objection to the MODERATE CLAIM, and the reasoning that we have used to support it (namely, premises 1 and 2).

2.1. Disrespect

The first and most obvious reason not to misgender transgender individuals like McGregor is that it expresses disrespect towards her in virtue of her social identity, and thereby also expresses disrespect to those who share her social identity (i.e.,

other transgender women).⁷ For example, Latham expressed disrespect towards McGregor by referring to her as *he*, thereby communicating that she is a man. Similarly, we claim, referring to Haze as *he* or *she* expresses disrespect towards Haze in virtue of their social identity, and thereby also expresses disrespect to those who share their social identity (i.e., other genderqueer people). It does so by communicating that Haze (*they*) either identifies as a man (*he*), or identifies as a woman (*she*). By using binary gender-specific pronouns one thereby *denies* Haze's gender identity. (We say more about denying identities in Section 3.1.) This wrongs the referent, and the class of persons to which they belong.⁸

We are sympathetic with the thought that in cases like Latham's, where individuals are *intentionally* misgendered, the harm inflicted is exacerbated. Nevertheless, even unintentional instances of misgendering can express disrespect to persons' identities. One way of understanding this unintentional disrespect, discussed by Stephanie Kapusta, is as a form of microaggression—"everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership" (Kapusta 2016: 504, citing Sue 2010). When a transgender or genderqueer person is misgendered, regardless of whether it was intentional, this communicates disrespect of their already marginalized gender identity. The impact of persistent microaggressions like misgendering are wide-ranging, and include serious physical and psychological health problems.

2.2. Resources

The second reason why misgendering someone is wrong is that it implies that we may withhold from them certain resources (understood broadly), to which they are genuinely entitled.⁹ Categorizing McGregor as a woman carries a vast

7. For general discussion of the notion of *expressing disrespect*, see Anderson and Pildes (2000). To be maximally ecumenical, we offer no analysis of it.

8. An analogy might help elucidate this harm further. Consider national identities. Many recent immigrants encounter individuals who refer to them using the wrong demonym. (A demonym is a word that identifies people from a particular place, derived from the name of that place.) Ukrainians might be called "Russians". Venezuelans might be called "Mexicans". Zimbabweans might be called "Rhodesians". Such mistakes can be innocent, or at least merely ignorant. But they are sometimes deliberate, voicing xenophobic disdain and disrespect towards immigrants' identities by denying their distinct national identities.

9. For similar discussion, see Kapusta (2016: 505). While we are open to the possibility that misgendering can, in some cases, *cause* resources to be wrongly withheld, that is not our claim here. Rather, we are making the weaker claim that misgendering communicates (wrongly) that it is *permissible* to withhold certain resources. A similar point is made in Langton and West (1999), in which they argue that pornography implies the permissibility of harmful and misogynistic sex acts, as distinct from causing those acts. Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing this point to our attention.

number of practical implications and entitlements: it implies that McGregor has appropriate access to women's spaces, such as bathrooms and locker rooms; that she can appropriately take part in women's social groups; that she can apply for scholarships, jobs, or housing intended for women applicants; and so on. Misgendering McGregor—referring to her as *him*—implies that we may withhold each and all of these resources from her.¹⁰ And this contributes to a situation in which transgender women like McGregor are not acknowledged as women, and so are subject to criticism, ostracism, or physical or emotional violence for performing innocuous acts like attempting to access women's spaces, applying for women-oriented opportunities, or adopting a feminine gender expression.

We believe a similar—though not identical—point holds in the case of Haze. While there are clear resources exclusively associated with binary gender identities like being a woman, in most communities there are not clear resources associated with being genderqueer. In fact, far from finding resources exclusively for genderqueer persons, it can be hard simply to find traditionally gendered resources that have been made *accessible* to genderqueer persons. One need not try very hard to locate schools, clubs, locker rooms, and government identification markers that are exclusively for women or for men; it is much more rare to encounter such resources that have explicitly been adapted so as to include genderqueer persons. It is yet rarer to encounter resources that are exclusively for genderqueer persons.

While this absence is itself a harm, it also means that using *she* to refer to Haze does not implicitly deny that we may withhold access to existing resources from them in the way that using *he* implicitly denies this about McGregor's access to existing women's resources. Nevertheless, calling Haze *he* or *she* still has problematic implications with respect to resources. Although it may not imply that we may withhold *existing* resources, it suggests that we may refrain from *establishing* resources that are accessible to genderqueer persons. That is, to use *she* or *he* for individuals like Haze implies that they can and should fit into a binary and gender-specific organization of restrooms, legal identification, educational institutions, social clubs, dating apps and so on, and that we may expect them to do so, rather than restructuring resources to accommodate them.

2.3. *Intelligibility*

The third reason concerns the intelligibility of our actions and choices. Gender identities—like other social categories such as race, nationality, or profession—

10. We take this to be analogous to certain harmful features of slurs: that they implicate the acceptability of and apply harmful, subordinating ideologies. On acceptability, see Swanson (2018). On subordinating language, see Maitra (2012). For general discussion of how language can be used to pragmatically advocate for different concepts, see Burgess and Plunkett (2013a) and (2013b).

provide others with a guide or a blueprint for interpreting and evaluating one's behavior and speech.¹¹ In general, there are a range of blueprints that could apply to our actions and choices, and most of us care both about our *autonomy* over which blueprints can apply to us, and about how *satisfactory* we find those blueprints.¹² For instance, a woman with a thick Texan accent might care that others make assumptions about her political beliefs even if those assumptions are accurate, because those assumptions undermine her autonomy over which blueprints apply to her; and she might also care that others interpret her political beliefs in a way that is distorted and hostile, because that makes the blueprints available to her all unsatisfactory, or at least less satisfactory. We think both types of concerns arise with gender-specific blueprints for interpreting others.

Consider gender-specific norms like *women shave their legs*. Misgendering McGregor would undermine the intelligibility of her actions and choices *vis-à-vis* this norm regardless of whether McGregor shaves her legs: she can only be recognized to conform to *or* violate the norm if the norm is recognized as applying to her. So if McGregor is misgendered as a *he*, the intelligibility of her actions and choices is undermined. She is stripped of certain forms of speech and self-expression. By this, we mean both that misgendering McGregor denies her *autonomy* over which blueprints apply to her, and leaves her with a range of blueprints that she can justifiably consider to be unsatisfactory. Setting aside the practical implications and dangers of lacking this ability to communicate, there can be little doubt that this expressive stifling also does serious harm to an individual, especially given the social salience of gender norms (see also Kapusta 2016).

The same point applies to misgendering someone like Haze. Being genderqueer involves rejecting certain blueprints that guide interpretation and evaluation of behavior as that of *a woman* or that of *a man*. This means that we should

11. As nicely summarized in Mallon (2016: 1), we use social categories such as gender and race for purposes including “explaining and predicting the behaviors of other individuals and groups; signaling to and coordinating with others; representing the world to ourselves; and stigmatizing, valorizing, and regulating the behavior of ourselves and others.”

12. As an anonymous referee noted, how we should think about autonomy in this context raises interesting questions. Does having autonomy over which blueprints apply to us require that we have *control* over the interpretation of our actions and choices? If so, is this appeal to autonomy incompatible with ‘relational’ (as opposed to ‘atomistic’) conceptions of agency? Very briefly, we think that when our claims are framed in terms of autonomy, they are compatible with relational conceptions of agency. Jennifer Nedelsky, for instance, offers a framework for thinking about autonomy on a relational conception of agency in part by rejecting the common identification of autonomy with control (see Nedelsky 2012, especially Chapters 3 and 7; and cf. the essays collected in Mackenzie & Stoljar 2000). That said, we also grant that there may be cases where others’ actions alter how we’re interpreted without wrongfully undermining our autonomy—for interesting and relevant discussion of this matter, see Shotwell and Sangrey (2009).

not *deny* Haze's gender identity and thereby undermine the intelligibility of their conduct by subjecting their conduct to the very interpretative guides that they clearly and publicly reject. Calling Haze *he* or *she* subjects them to binary gender norms, imposing a set of masculine or feminine blueprints that they can justifiably consider to be unsatisfactory. In this, it wrongfully undermines Haze's ability to reject the norms associated with being a woman or being a man. For this reason, we think the two cases are clearly analogous.

2.4. *Ideology*

The fourth and final reason for why we have a gender duty not to misgender is more indirect. Misgendering individuals like McGregor or Haze reinforces the ideologies—roughly, systems of concepts, language, and social norms—that undergird the three problems we just discussed. That is, misgendering reinforces ideologies that disrespect transgender and genderqueer individuals, deprive them of resources, and undermine their social intelligibility.¹³ The degree to which these ideologies generate these three problems is in direct proportion to the degree to which these ideologies are socially operative. So even if a harmful ideology is already present, reinforcing that ideology in everyday discourse—making it stronger, more pervasive—makes its problematic implications worse.

This fourth reason is important to recognize as it helps explain why private acts that misgender individuals like McGregor or Haze are also problematic. To be clear, it would have been much *better* if Mark Latham had misgendered McGregor while muttering to himself under his breath, rather than in print and on Twitter. But this would still be *bad*, because which words and concepts we use in private still affect which words and concepts are socially operative. Our private speech is not insulated from our linguistic dispositions, which manifest publicly in a variety of ways that can reinforce problematic ideologies. Similarly, even if someone were to only refer to Haze by *she* in the company of men and women, they would indirectly affect genderqueer people like Haze by reinforcing a problematic concept of gender that excludes non-binary gender identities.

2.5. *The Objection From Accuracy*

That concludes our argument for why enough of the moral reasons that explain why it is wrong to misgender transgender individuals like McGregor also apply to misgendering genderqueer individuals like Haze. So you should accept that we have a general moral duty not to misgender McGregor, and hence a similar

13. This operationalization of ideology is a simplified version of Swanson's more thorough characterization of an ideology as "a temporally persistent and socially extended cluster of mutually supporting beliefs, interests, norms, practices, values, affective dispositions, and ways of interpreting and interacting with the world" (2018: 5).

moral duty not to misgender Haze by referring to them by *he* or *she*.

Why might someone reject the MODERATE CLAIM, and the argument we offered above? We take the most salient objection to be one that appeals to the conjunction of an *accuracy norm* and a claim about the non-existence of non-binary genders (or gender identities). We think that this objection motivates much of the opposition to gender-neutral language,¹⁴ though it is rarely explicitly defended. We take it that the objection rests on two key ideas:

Accuracy We may use pronouns that accurately reflect the referent's gender.

Exclusivity Each person is either (exclusively) a man or (exclusively) a woman.

If these two key ideas are true, the MODERATE CLAIM (as well as the second premise in our argument above) is false: even if we have duty not to use *he* to refer to transgender women like McGregor, we are still permitted to use binary gender-specific pronouns to refer to individuals like Haze: Haze is either a man or a woman, and so we are permitted to use either *he* or *she*.

To show that the objection fails, we must show that at least one of these ideas is false. In fact, we think both of them are false, for instructive reasons.

Consider EXCLUSIVITY. One might believe this on the basis of a range of positions about the metaphysics of gender. For instance, one might be a biological essentialist who holds that due to their biological features (e.g., chromosomes, genitalia), each person is either (exclusively) a man or (exclusively) a woman.¹⁵ In fact, due to the existence of intersex conditions, EXCLUSIVITY is not supported by biological essentialism (see, e.g., Ainsworth 2015). But even setting this aside, we should not accept this essentialist explanation of EXCLUSIVITY *and* accept ACCURACY. If we did, we would be stuck with the verdict that unless we know that McGregor's physical characteristics have changed, we can refer to her by *he*. Of course, some might accept this verdict. But we think we can explain why it is wrong.

Misgendering individuals (including McGregor) is wrong because of the psychological and social features of the world: it is wrong to misgender McGregor because it is offensive given her sensed group identity, implicitly deprives her

14. For instance, (Senden, Bäck, & Lindqvist 2015: 1, 4) points out that "new words challenging the binary gender system evoke hostile and negative reactions", and that the prevalence of these "negative attitudes toward gender-neutral language use" is predicted by essentialism about gender.

15. Theoretically, one could try to defend EXCLUSIVITY without embracing biological essentialism. For instance, one might understand gender in terms of social roles and argue that all persons are either exclusively subjected to masculine gender roles or exclusively subjected to feminine gender roles. This is highly implausible—the Fa'afafine and Khanith have long been recognized to occupy distinct gender roles—so we set it aside. As we will soon argue, we should reject EXCLUSIVITY on grounds that are independent of the metaphysics of gender.

of access to certain rights and privileges, and undermines the intelligibility of her conduct. It is not wrong because of the biological features of the world.¹⁶ McGregor's chromosomes are irrelevant to whether these outcomes are morally acceptable. More generally, we think that even if gender and gender identity come apart, the question of what *gender* someone has is irrelevant to whether such outcomes are morally acceptable. What matters is one's *gender identity*.

Even those who dispute this should, at the very least, accept that it is *prima facie* wrong to gender someone in opposition to their gender identity.¹⁷ By identifying with a gender group, one situates oneself as being norm-receptive to the norms applying to that group, regardless of whether or not one approves of these norms.¹⁸ If ascribing gendered roles is permissible at all, this norm-receptivity seems to be the bare minimum for its permissibility. Since using gendered pronouns ascribes these roles (at least by implication), we claim that gendered pronouns, if they may be used at all, may be used only when they are not in opposition to the referent's gender identity.

One upshot of this point is that our view here is entirely ecumenical about complicated and contentious issues in the metaphysics of gender.¹⁹ We are only relying on the analogous status of McGregor's and Haze's *gender identities*, which we take to be an intuitive notion from social psychology that picks out an individual's self-identification with one or more gender group(s).²⁰

Another upshot of this explanation of why misgendering is wrong is, interestingly, that we should reject ACCURACY: if gender and gender-identity can come apart, we are not permitted (let alone morally required) to use certain pronouns just because they accurately reflect the referent's gender. At most, one might think, we should use pronouns that accurately reflect the referent's gender identity. One could try to resurrect the objection with modified premises that appeal to gender identity rather than gender. But then the corresponding version of EXCLUSIVITY

16. This point is echoed in Bettcher (2014). For example, with respect to transgender persons, she argues that "[their] claims to belong to a sex [other than the one assigned at birth] do not appear to be metaphysically justified: they are claims that self-identities ought to be definitive in terms of the question of sex membership and gendered treatment. They are therefore political in nature" (Bettcher 2014: 387).

17. We are inclined to accept the stronger position that it is *prima facie* wrong to gender someone if they do not identify with the relevant gender group. But we do not endorse that stronger claim as, unlike the weaker claim above, it commits us to the controversial view that is impermissible to gender babies who lack (corresponding or opposing) gender identities.

18. For further discussion of norm-receptivity and gender identity, see Jenkins (2015).

19. For relevant discussion, cf. (*inter alia*) Haslanger (2000) and Jenkins (2015).

20. See also the above discussion of gender identity relative to Bettcher (2014). We take it that one of the reasons why metaphysical analyses of gender is so contested is that so many closely related phenomena surround gender, such as gender performativity, gender roles, and—crucially—gender identity. See Butler (1990) for more on these and other important distinctions surrounding gender. For more on the distinction between gender and gender identity, and its relevance to using gender-specific language, cf. Barnes (2018) and Dembroff (2018).

will be even more implausible. To deny that Haze identifies as agender despite what they say—indeed, to deny that anyone identifies as genderqueer despite their claimed identities—would be a gross instance of testimonial injustice, akin to denying that anyone identifies as homosexual (rather than heterosexual) or Muslim (rather than Christian) or Zimbabwean (rather than Rhodesian), despite others' protests to the contrary.²¹

3. In Defense of Compatibility

So far, we've offered an argument for MODERATE CLAIM and defended this claim against an objection that appeals to an accuracy norm. Before turning to our arguments for RADICAL CLAIM (the claim that we have a duty not to use gender-specific pronouns to refer to anyone, regardless of their gender identity), we first must address a seemingly damning objection: that the duty not to misgender and the duty not to use gender-specific pronouns conflict. We will address three versions of this objection. The first contends that we have a positive duty to *affirm* gender identities via pronouns, the second contends that pronouns like the singular *they* have gender-specific meanings, and the third that withholding gender-specific pronouns from transgender women like McGregor constitutes a problematic form of 'third-gendering'. We are most sympathetic to the third version of the objection, though we contend that it only points to an important exception to the general duty in the RADICAL CLAIM.

3.1. Affirmation and Denial

The first version of the objection contends that we have a general positive duty to *affirm* others' gender identities via gender-specific pronouns:

Affirmation We have a duty to affirm others' gender identities by using third person pronouns that represent the referent's gender identity.

That we have such a duty with respect to pronouns is often taken for granted, especially by LGBTQ+ organizations such as GLAAD and the Human Rights Campaign, which typically state that one ought to use the pronoun that matches a person's gender identity.²² Indeed, we suspect that many would appeal to

21. For the classic discussion of testimonial injustice, see Fricker (2007), especially Chapter 1.

22. See, e.g., GLAAD (2016). That we have a duty to affirm others' gender identities is also implicitly assumed by Susan Stryker in writing that "Some transgender people—often those who have worked very hard to attain a gender status other than the one assigned to them at birth—take offense when gender-neutral pronouns, rather than the appropriate gendered ones, are applied to them because they perceive this usage as a way that others fail to acknowledge their attained gender" (2008: 22). The closeness of AFFIRMATION to ACCURACY is worth noting.

AFFIRMATION to explain why the MODERATE CLAIM is true (we have a duty to affirm Haze’s gender identity by using *they* instead of *he* or *she*), as well as to undermine the RADICAL CLAIM (we also have a duty to affirm McGregor’s gender identity by using *she* instead of the gender-neutral *they*).

While we recognize that AFFIRMATION is initially attractive, we think it is false. We will argue that once we recognize that we should accept a nearby moral norm—one that is perfectly compatible with the RADICAL CLAIM—we see that we should reject AFFIRMATION. That nearby norm is:

Denial We have a duty to *not deny* others’ gender identities by using third person pronouns that *misrepresent* the referent’s gender identity.

AFFIRMATION and DENIAL are very similar. For this reason, we think, advocates of AFFIRMATION rarely (if ever) distinguish between the two. This is also true of the more general philosophical discussion of the ethics of recognition: Mattias Iser notes that “experiences of misrecognition violate the identity of subjects”, and quickly moves from this to an impetus for such subjects to “struggle for an affirmation of their particular identity” (Iser 2013). That is, misrecognition is a wrong, so it is assumed that *recognition* is needed to right it (Iser 2013). But there are two ways to avoid misrecognition or misrepresentation with respect to some method of categorization like gender pronouns: one can categorize everyone accurately (affirm) or not categorize anyone at all (and thereby not deny, without affirming).

We engaged in a lengthy defense of MODERATE CLAIM in part to show that we need not accept AFFIRMATION to ground this duty. DENIAL will do just fine. Here we agree with trans theorists such as Talia Bettcher that the harm of misgendering consists in gender identity *invalidation*, rather than the lack of gender identity validation, where invalidation is understood as “the erasure of a person’s gender identity *through an opposing categorization*” (Bettcher 2014: 392, our emphasis). And notice that if MODERATE CLAIM is explained by DENIAL, it is not incompatible with RADICAL CLAIM: we have no general positive duty to use *she* and *he* to validate or affirm women’s and men’s gender identities, as using a gender-neutral pronoun like *they* will suffice to avoid invalidating or denying their gender identities.

Moreover, we think that once we recognize how the two norms come apart, DENIAL is clearly more plausible, for two reasons. First, AFFIRMATION is far too demanding. Exceptional circumstances notwithstanding, it is perfectly appropriate to refer to a woman in the third person by her proper name or professional title, even though neither affirms the referent’s gender identity. Moreover, it is perfectly appropriate that speakers of languages like Hungarian, Finnish, Malay, Armenian, Bengali and Yoruba only use gender-neutral pronouns which do not deny others’ gender identities, even though this means that they do not affirm others’ gender identities by using distinct gender-specific pronouns.

Second, AFFIRMATION suggests, implausibly, that we should treat gender identities differently from the multitude of other identities that are socially and politically salient. We do not think that we have general moral duties to affirm others' religious, national, racial, and professional identities (and so on), so long as these identities are not denied or misrepresented. Or at least, we do not have a duty to affirm each of those identities by using distinct pronouns. No English pronouns succeed in *affirming* anyone's religious identity, but that's fine because no such pronouns *deny* anyone's religious identity either: *he*, *she* and *they* simply fail to ascribe religious identities to their referents. This does not give us a good reason to introduce new pronouns that we can use to represent (rather than *not misrepresent*) others' religious identities. And we think the same holds for race, ethnicity, class, age, weight, nationality, and other socially significant identities. Why should things be any different with respect to gender identities? Why should gender identities be *represented* (rather than *not misrepresented*) with distinct gender-specific English pronouns, rather than just acknowledged in all and only the same ways that we acknowledge other identities where appropriate?

Some might try to answer this by appealing to preferences for pronouns. Unlike with religion, race and class, many individuals actually have and express preferences *for* gender-specific or -neutral pronouns: McGregor prefers *she*, and Haze at least at one point preferred *they*. For this reason, wouldn't using *they* for both individuals show disrespect for McGregor's gender identity?²³

We have two responses to this. First, we do not think that the duty not to misgender McGregor or Haze is explained in terms of what preferences people happen to have; that's why our defense of this duty in Section 2 did not appeal to pronoun preferences, but instead appeals to something closer to reasons for preferences. Second, and separately, we do not think we should look to what pronoun preferences people happen to have *given current linguistic practices* to evaluate whether we should change those linguistic practices.²⁴ Plausibly, McGregor prefers to be called *she* given the current linguistic practice of referring to all women as *she*.²⁵ There are excellent reasons for trans and cis women alike to have this conditional preference. And changing linguistic practices so that *they* is used for everyone is consistent with those conditional preferences.

23. See, e.g., Hess (2016).

24. This point also holds for the preferences of genderqueer people. Haze no longer has a strong preference for *they* because given current linguistic practices it is frequently (mis)understood as a plural pronoun: see Smyth (2016). That preference does not show that we should not use *they* for every person so that it was understood as a singular pronoun.

25. Whether this is true is an empirical issue that cannot be settled *a priori*, but since we do not think whatever preferences people happen to have settle what linguistic practices ought to change or continue, we do not bear the burden of settling it. We take many of the considerations discussed below in Section 3.3 and Section 4 to provide good reasons for people like McGregor to have the conditional preference, and these reasons are what's probative on our picture.

3.2. Is 'They' Gender-Neutral?

The second version of the objection is that using the singular *they* in accordance with our RADICAL CLAIM would often amount to misgendering because pronouns like the singular *they* are not in fact gender-neutral. In other words, that the singular *they* refers to a gender-queer person is part of its meaning, just as that *she* refers to a woman is part of its meaning. So to use *they* to refer to someone who identifies as a man or woman would misgender the referent.

What motivates this objection is the observation that *they* is often used to communicate the information that the referent is genderqueer. That's true. But we nevertheless think this objection rests on the mistaken inference that this (misgendering) information is part of the semantic meaning of the singular *they*.

To see why this is a mistake, compare generic uses of *he* and the singular *they*. When one constructs a question using the generic *he*, Mercier (1995: 229) points out that this "invites a masculine answer", and thereby excludes women, which is likely to be noticed by women but not men. A similar complaint does not hold for *they*: "One student did very well. Who do you think they were?" does not similarly invite a genderqueer answer, or exclude men and women—if this were the case, that pervasive exclusion would have been noticed by women and men. This suggests that *being genderqueer* is not built into the meaning of the singular *they* in the way that *being a man* is built into the meaning of *he*.

This point can also be supported with linguistic data involving personal uses of the singular *they*. Imagine a passenger saying one of the following while conversing with strangers at the airport (and pointing while saying *he*):

1. My friend is picking me up but they're running late. Oh wait, there he is!
2. My friend is picking me up but she's running late. Oh wait, there he is!

We think that (2) is problematic in a way that (1) is not. This accords with the widely accepted view that gender-specific pronouns *presuppose* information about gender:²⁶ in other words, (2) first presupposes that the friend is a woman, then presupposes that the friend is a man, and it is difficult (though not impossible) to find a context in which both presuppositions are satisfied.²⁷ By contrast, there is clear linguistic evidence that at least in some English-speaking countries speakers will make claims like (1) where *they* does not presuppose any information about the specific referent's gender identity: even though the speaker knows that the referent is a man, *they* is used because this is irrelevant (see Strahan 2008).²⁸

26. See especially the "presuppositional account of gender features" in Heim and Kratzer (1998: Chapters 5 and 9).

27. Why not impossible? See the discussion of cases like Paige's in Section 4.1.

28. This point helps us address an interesting concern raised by an anonymous referee:

Finally, it is worth noting that even if *they* has a gender-specific meaning, the same objection cannot be leveled at a neologism: we can introduce a gender-neutral pronoun like *ze* in English, just as Sweden formally incorporated the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* in 2015. So even if using *they* for everyone would misgender women and men, the MODERATE CLAIM and RADICAL CLAIM are still compatible.

3.3. Third-gendering

If the second version of the objection rests on a mistake—if the meaning of the singular *they* is gender-neutral—how can *they* sometimes be used to communicate that the referent is genderqueer? Because *they* sometimes pragmatically implicates that the referent is not a man or a woman.²⁹ Against a general background assumption that speakers use *he* or *she* for individuals within the gender binary, a use of *they* might implicate (via the Gricean maxim of relation) that the referent is genderqueer.³⁰ In such circumstances, if this implicature is not cancelled, one's use of *they* could misgender individuals like McGregor.

We are framing this point in terms of pragmatic implicatures, but we think this is simply a more precise way to capture an underlying concern in Julia Serano's objections to 'attempts to *third-sex* or *third-gender* trans people' (2016: 29–30), including via the use of gender-neutral pronouns like *ze* and *hir*:

I have nothing against the use of *ze* and *hir* *per se*, but I object to their use non-consensually to describe me (I prefer *she/her*). Indeed, people only seem to use *ze/hir* when discussing trans people, but never cis people, a tendency I find to be cissexist. (Serano 2013: Chapter 11, Footnote 14)

By not using *she* or *her* for a transgender woman like Serano, speakers pragmatically does the RADICAL CLAIM imply that genderqueer persons should not use *they* to mark their genderqueerness, and if so, does this conflict with the MODERATE CLAIM? If, as we've argued, *they* is a gender-neutral pronoun that at most pragmatically implicates that someone is genderqueer given background linguistic practices, there is no deep conflict between using *they* for a genderqueer person in a context with these implicatures and having the long-term goal of eliminating those implicatures—one can, after all, cancel the implicature that the referent of any use of the single *they* is genderqueer. Further, and more generally, we think individuals often opt into institutions while also taking steps to change or dismantle that institution. A genderqueer individual might use *they* for the purpose of signaling their genderqueer identity in our current linguistic context while also adopting the goal of eliminating gender-specific pronouns, just as someone might opt into the institution of marriage with the goal of making it more inclusive and less patriarchal.

29. In this respect, using the singular *they* is a bit like using *partner*: against a background assumption that people use gender-specific terms for heterosexual couples (*boyfriend*, *girlfriend*), using a gender-neutral term (*partner*) implicates that the couple is not heterosexual.

30. Some may have reservations about this appeal to Gricean maxims. See below in Footnote 48 for discussion.

cally communicate the false, pernicious information that Serano is not really a woman. In that sense, she is ‘third-gendered’. And the significant risk that using *they* to refer to someone like Serano may third-gender the referent is especially pronounced in contexts with salient negative stereotypes of transgender persons as being deceptive or confused about their gender identities (see also McKinnon 2014).

This is the version of the objection that we are most sympathetic to. But we still think it fails to show that the MODERATE CLAIM and RADICAL CLAIM are incompatible. Recall that our RADICAL CLAIM aims to change how we treat *all* persons with respect to pronouns. As a result, in a context where our RADICAL CLAIM is implemented, there is no longer a background assumption that speakers use *he* or *she* for individuals within the gender binary, so referring to Serano as *they* no longer fails to treat her as a woman or implicates that she has some third non-binary gender. If English-speaking communities adopted our RADICAL CLAIM and reformed their linguistic practices, no misgendering or third-gendering would result from referring to someone like Serano as *they*. The linguistic reform we recommend would be entirely egalitarian, not cissexist.

However, we recognize that until linguistic practices are so reformed, in many contexts casually using *they* to refer to someone like Serano would be seriously problematic. Our current situation is not ideal. For this reason, there will be contexts in which the negative duty not to use *he* or *she* will be outweighed and thereby defeated. This is because, given how things stand now, there are many circumstances in which failing to use gender-specific pronouns for a transgender man or woman implicitly denies, rather than merely fails to affirm, the referent’s gender identity. This generates exceptions to the defeasible moral duty not to use gender-specific pronouns for anyone. But it does not show that we have no such duty. Nor does it show that speakers should not adopt the *long term* goal of removing gender-specific pronouns from natural languages. Rather, we take it to show that, until the background assumption that speakers use *he* or *she* for individuals within the gender binary dissipates, we must be careful about the practical, strategic steps that we take towards achieving this long term goal.

We do not have sufficient space to provide an exhaustive discussion of what practical, strategic steps should be. We will, however, make two big picture remarks about this matter. First, we think that there are steps that individuals can take, but we recommend that individuals proceed with a great deal of caution when using pronouns to refer to individuals who may be vulnerable to misgendering or third-gendering. Speakers can, and must, exercise such caution to ensure that they do not implement the RADICAL CLAIM in a ways that are cissexist and harmful to transgender men and women. In making a transition to using gender-neutral pronouns, we do not think these pronouns should initially be used for vulnerable gender minorities, such as transgender men and women, whose

recognition is vital to their being and rests in part on gender-specific pronouns. Instead, a better place to begin would be to use a gender-neutral pronoun (e.g., *they*) as well as *he* or *she* for non-vulnerable persons that are known to identify within the gender binary (especially oneself, if applicable).

Second, along with the steps that individuals can take, we think that there are steps that institutions can take in fostering a transition in pronoun practices. While individuals' speech is important, institutional changes are more likely to have a sustained impact. They also are less likely to have problematic implications for trans persons: if a gender-neutral pronoun such as *they* becomes the standard singular pronoun in, say, an academic journal, then it will not have insidious implications if a trans woman or man is referred to as *they* within that journal. For this reason, it would be especially beneficial if institutions that function as the 'gate-keepers' of English, such as publishers, government agencies, schools, and media outlets adopted a singular gender-neutral pronoun into their style-guides and practices. In this regard, we laud the decision of the *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* in December of 2017 to permit the use of the singular *they*. But we also urge this journal, and similar institutions, to consider going even further: for instance, to encourage the use of *they* instead of *he* or *she* in instances where gender is not relevant.

These remarks are, as should be clear, somewhat schematic. They leave open a range of interesting questions about how we should try to reform our non-ideal language. We pick up some of these questions later, such as whether we should appropriate the singular *they* rather than adopt a neologism such as *ze* (see Section 5); we remain neutral on that matter in part because we aim to be as ecumenical as we can while pushing for a fairly radical conclusion.³¹ We hope we have said enough to show that there are feasible, practical steps that we can and should take now if we should adopt the long-term goal of eliminating gender-specific pronouns, even though we grant that there is a great deal of room for reasonable disagreement about what specific steps should be taken.

4. In Defense of Radicalization

That the MODERATE CLAIM and RADICAL CLAIM are compatible, so long as one proceeds with sufficient caution, is an interesting result in its own right. And it removes what to many may be the most significant obstacle to accepting the latter. But we have not yet shown that we should accept RADICAL CLAIM, so let's now turn to three independent arguments in favor of this view.

31. We thank an anonymous referee for pushing us to say more about this, and the general issue of how to transition from a non-ideal world to a more ideal system of gender pronouns.

4.1. *There's No Better Alternative*

We think that the MODERATE CLAIM and RADICAL CLAIM are more than just compatible: we think that there is a clear path from the former to the latter. If we should *not* use binary gender-specific pronouns for persons who identify outside the gender binary, what pronouns *should* we use for these persons? We contend that if we maintain *he* and *she* for referring to persons with binary gender identities, the obvious options are deeply problematic, so there's no better alternative than ceasing to use gender-specific pronouns (*he* and *she*) regardless of whether the referent identifies within the gender binary.

Why is that? If we continue to use *he* and *she*, the two obvious options for referring to people who identify outside the gender binary are as follows:

Use A Third Catchall We use a single pronoun (such as *they* or *ze*) to refer to *all* non-binary persons, while maintaining *he* and *she* for binary persons.

Proliferate Pronouns We introduce a new pronoun for each specific non-binary gender identity while maintaining *he* and *she* for binary persons.

We argue that both options raise deep problems, and that the best way to avoid these problems involves ceasing to use gender-specific pronouns altogether.

Why not USE A THIRD CATCHALL? The basic problem with this option is that it is inegalitarian.³² There are a plurality of ways of being genderqueer – genderqueer individuals differ far more in gender identity than men and women. If we are going to maintain binary gender-specific pronouns (*he* and *she*) while lumping together all non-binary persons under a catch-all non-binary pronoun, this creates a situation in which only persons who identify exclusively within the gender binary are granted specific pronouns that convey their gender identity. The many gender identities of persons outside this binary, in contrast, would have to be specifically named, as they could not otherwise be easily incorporated in conversation. In this way, to use a third catchall is to tacitly dismiss non-binary individuals' many identities and reinforce the common prejudice that binary gender identities are in some way more natural, more esteemed, or otherwise privileged. The same concern arises with greater force with gender-specific honorifics (Mr., Mrs. and Ms.) and suffixes (-ess).

32. A version of this objection was made by Amanda Hess:

It's precisely the ambiguity of 'they' that makes it a not-so-ideal pronoun replacement. It can obscure a clear gender identification with a blurred one. Think of genderqueer people who are confident in their knowledge of their own gender identify as one that simple doesn't fit the boxes of 'he' or 'she': Calling them all 'they' can make it sound as if someone's gender is unknowable; it's the grammatical equivalent of a shrug. (Hess 2016)

To make this concern more vivid, consider the gay marriage debate. Some argued for gay marriage because they wanted homosexual couples to have the same legal rights and privileges as heterosexual couples. But even when these rights and privileges could be attained by entering marriage-like relationships that were open to gay couples (namely, civil unions), there was still a powerful case for gay marriage. Making marriage available to heterosexual but not homosexual couples bestows an honorific status on the former social group. It reinforces the common prejudice that one sexuality is in some way more natural, more esteemed, or otherwise privileged. This is our concern about having gender-specific pronouns only be available to men and women.

So much for USE A THIRD CATCHALL. But why not PROLIFERATE PRONOUNS? This option is not inequality: it allows us to keep *she* and *he* while introducing a new gender-specific pronoun for each non-binary gender identity. The problem with this option, however, is that it is far too costly and risky.

Why is this option too costly? In part, it is because of the plethora of new pronouns it would require. New York City now recognizes 31 gender identities;³³ this list includes some culturally specific gender identities (like Hijras) but not others (like Fa'afafine and Khanith), so like other similar lists it is expected to expand. This alone makes proliferating gender pronouns difficult for any given individual, let alone for a whole linguistic community. And even if everyone accepted that we should introduce a new pronoun for each gender identity, it is extremely unlikely that we would succeed in doing so. An abundance of linguistic and psychological evidence suggests that in English pronouns function as 'closed classed' words (i.e., words that can function as shorthand for any things, persons or concepts). Closed classed words are cognitively primitive.³⁴ Like learning a new preposition, then, learning even one new pronoun is incredibly difficult. Learning dozens is infeasible. And a policy must be feasible to have a hope of being adopted by the relevant community, and thereby changing the relevant grammatical norms.³⁵

Even if these costs did not make the policy infeasible, it would still be objectionable because it is too risky. Imagine that one individual, or indeed one community, can learn a sufficiently comprehensive list of new pronouns. To avoid misgendering, they would have to accurately associate each pronoun with the appropriate referents. Even the best intentioned among us would frequently make mistakes—and thereby misgender individuals. We use third person pronouns to refer to everyone from our closest friends to complete strangers. We often lack sufficient information to know the referent's gender identity. We never have direct epistemic access to others' gender identities, and we frequently have very

33. See NYC Commission on Human Rights (n.d.).

34. On the distinction between open and closed class words, see Gleitman (1984: esp. 559).

35. This is by no means the only concern with infeasible policies. See Southwood (2016).

unreliable indirect access to this information from gender presentation and have no appropriate means of getting better indirect access. To make this vivid, imagine that you are giving a lecture in which an androgynously-presenting student at the back of the hall asks a question. You do not know whether the student has a binary or non-binary gender identity (let alone *which* non-binary gender identity the student might have). And as a complete stranger in a public setting, it would be grossly inappropriate for you to ask that student to divulge their gender identity (see the discussion of privacy in Section 4.2).

Bigender individuals generate a particularly difficult case for those who would prefer to proliferate pronouns. To be bigender is for one's gender identity to alternate: one might strongly identify as a man one minute and as a woman the next. This is not a well-known or widely studied phenomenon.³⁶ But it is a real phenomenon. Consider, for instance, Paige Abendroth.³⁷ Paige consistently identified as a man for thirty years, until a point when Paige started to flip, "multiple times per day" between "guy mode" and "female mode". Paige reports that these flips came with various physical, cognitive, and emotional changes. Paige is not indecisive or mercurial about gender: rather, Paige reports an "instinctual way of knowing what I am" that is "the same" as how others know that they are men or women or what have you. The only difference is that, for Paige, this knowledge is dynamic rather than static: Paige is subject to involuntary alternations in experienced gender. What's crucial here is that even Paige's closest friends will not always be able to track these changes. So what pronouns could they use to refer to Paige? If they always use *she* or *he*, Paige is misgendered part of the time.³⁸ And alternating between *he* and *she* is risky: we typically lack epistemic access to Paige's experienced gender, so even while paying close attention to external manifestations of alternations in Paige's experienced gender (such as Paige's posture), we would still make mistakes.

What about always using *they* to refer to Paige? This avoids the risk of misgendering. But, given current linguistic practices, it contributes to the stigmatization that Paige faces as a bigender individual. It tacitly communicates that *at no point in time* is Paige like Hillary Clinton or Catherine McGregor or any other woman (for whom *she* would be used); and likewise, that *at no point in time* is Paige like Stephen Curry or John Oliver (for whom *he* would be used). In short, if we use *he* or *she* for anyone, we either risk misgendering Paige with *he* or *she*, or we go back to the egalitarian option of using a third catchall.

This last point illustrates how by embracing a hybrid of the two obvious options discussed above—USE A THIRD CATCHALL and PROLIFERATE PRONOUNS—one would only inherit the problems with each. To proliferate pronouns for

36. Though see Case and Ramachandran (2012).

37. The following quotes are from Spiegel and Miller (2015).

38. Paige prefers *she*, as Paige spends approximately 80% of the time in "female mode".

some individuals (like Angel Haze) while using a third catchall for others (like Paige) would be somewhat less costly and risky, but also more inegalitarian. So we conclude that if we should not use gender-specific pronouns in relation to genderqueer individuals (as the MODERATE CLAIM holds), there is no better alternative to ceasing to use gender-specific pronouns for anyone.

4.2. Privacy

Our second argument for the RADICAL CLAIM is that using gender-specific pronouns often puts individuals in the following morally problematic position:

DISCLOSE OR DECEIVE: One must either disclose private information about one's gender identity or sexual orientation, or deceive others (explicitly or tacitly) about these matters.

To see why the use of gender-specific pronouns (particularly *he* and *she*), puts individuals in this position, consider the following two scenarios.

Asher: Asher has just moved to start a graduate program. Asher identifies as a man, but was assigned the sex 'female' at birth. Moreover, because most people 'read' Asher as female, those outside of Asher's close group of friends assume that Asher identifies as a woman. Asher's new advisor, Maria, refers to Asher as *she* to other faculty and students. Asher now faces a choice: to either correct Maria, and thereby out themselves as transgender, or to tacitly endorse Maria's false claim that Asher identifies as a woman.

John: While socializing with colleagues, John mentions that they are leaving soon for a vacation to Hawaii with their partner. A colleague, Devon, then asks, "Oh, is she looking forward to the sun?" John now faces a choice: to correct Devon and disclose that they are gay, or to tacitly deceive their colleague by answering "Yes".

Scenarios like these are not uncommon.³⁹ Right now, people are regularly forced into a decision where they must either disclose information about their sexual orientation or gender identity,⁴⁰ or else deceive others (whether tacitly or explicitly) with respect to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Someone might object that this is not a problem for use of *he* and *she*, but simply points to the need to adopt a third, gender-neutral pronoun such as *they* or

39. See, for instance, Reis (2016); Reis concludes that "[d]ivulging one's gender through an announcement of pronouns at best contradicts the reality that our gender may be ambiguous, and at worst forces students to reveal a potentially vulnerable part of themselves."

40. To be clear, we do not claim that information about gender identity is the only gender-related information that is communicated by gender-specific pronouns. To refer to Asher using the pronoun *she* might also communicate information about, say, their gender performance.

ze. In reality, though, this is not the case: so long as *he* and *she* are predominantly used to refer to persons who identify as men and women (respectively), using *they* and *ze* for someone will pragmatically implicate either that someone is non-binary or non-heterosexual or that they have a reason to hide their gender identity or sexual orientation (see Section 3.3). For example, if Asher were to request that they be referred to as *they* rather than *she*, this would pragmatically implicate that Asher is non-binary or, at the very least, that Asher does not identify as a woman. Similarly, if John were to refer to their partner as *they*, it would pragmatically implicate that John is not heterosexual.

We think that persons should not be placed in situations where grammar forces them to either disclose this sort of information or tacitly deceive others. There are plenty of reasons why individuals like Asher or John should not be forced to tacitly or explicitly deceive others. For one thing, individuals who do not wish to disclose their social identities presumably still have a legitimate interest in being honest. For another, stigmatized social groups are already often viewed with suspicion. If they are later ‘outed’, Asher and John may be treated as dishonest and untrustworthy, providing further fodder for such bigotry.

If they wish to be honest (and be perceived as such), why shouldn’t individuals like Asher and John simply disclose their gender identities or sexual orientations? In many contexts, perhaps they should. But they should not be *forced* to do so by the requirements of English grammar. We think that this is true partly because of the discrimination that LGBTQ+ individuals face, which can manifest in ostracism, hostility, or even threats of physical violence on the basis of their gender identity or sexual orientation. Individuals should be able to choose when to come out of the closet, and who they come out of the closet to, so that they can strategically minimize these threats to their safety and wellbeing. The norms of English grammar should not rob them of that choice.

At this point, some may wonder whether we are focusing on a mere symptom of the underlying problem of discrimination on the basis of gender identities and sexual orientation. In a world with such discrimination, don’t individuals face morally problematic situations like DISCLOSE OR DECEIVE even without the use of gender-specific pronouns?⁴¹ And in a world without such discrimination, wouldn’t situations like DISCLOSE OR DECEIVE become morally innocuous?

Our response will be threefold. First, gender-specific pronouns create a particularly harmful symptom, and harmful symptoms should be treated even if we cannot cure the underlying disease. Since singular third person pronouns are used pervasively, and *he* and *she* are the default options, gender-specific pronouns generate DISCLOSE OR DECEIVE dilemmas pervasively. Gender-specific pronouns also make such dilemmas unavoidable: since the background assumption is that

41. For example, even if Asher’s department used only gender neutral pronouns, it would also be problematic for Asher if the department only has gender-specific bathrooms.

gender-specific pronouns will be used for binary gender identities, deliberately avoiding their use for certain individuals (by always using proper names or gender-neutral pronouns) will remain problematic. Worse yet, gender-specific pronouns make such dilemmas far more difficult to resolve. This is because uses of gender-specific pronouns *presuppose* information about referents' gender identities: Maria takes for granted that Asher is a woman in using *she*; Devon takes for granted that John's partner is a woman in using *she*. Because their utterances *presuppose* this information, it is likely to pass without comment, even in contexts in which communicating about such matters is known to be improper (such as in job interviews). So it is more likely to fall to vulnerable individuals like Asher and John to challenge the presupposition, which it is very difficult for them to do for all of the familiar reasons that presuppositions are more difficult to challenge than explicit assertions,⁴² as well as the further reason that in challenging the presupposition Asher and John would have to make explicit the very matter that they had wished to keep private.

Second, even in the absence of discrimination, we do not think that situations like DISCLOSE OR DECEIVE would be morally innocuous. In the absence of discrimination, it would still often be doubly presumptuous to ask a perfect stranger "As a gay man, what do you think about *x*?". This is presumptuous in part because it presupposes that the addressee is a gay man, and in part because it presupposes that the addressee permits that information to form part of the conversational score. Individuals retain a legitimate autonomy-based interest in determining whether and when to disclose intimate information about their private lives. Information about one's sexual orientation (which can be communicated by gender-specific pronouns, as in John's case) uncontroversially falls within the scope of this interest. We think information about gender identity (in cases like Asher's) falls within the scope of this interest too; our gender identities are a crucial part of how we define ourselves and our relations to others.⁴³

42. See, for instance, Langton and Haslanger (2012), and Wodak and Leslie (2017). Consider, for example, a case of being asked "Have you quit smoking?" Because this presupposes that one has smoked, both 'yes' and 'no' are inappropriate responses if one never has smoked.

43. Here we are relying on a fairly common view about the nature and importance of the right to privacy: that, as DeCrew (2015) writes, "privacy protection gains for us the freedom to define ourselves and our relations to others." As DeCrew notes in that same article,

it has been difficult for philosophers to provide clear guidelines on the positive side of understanding just what privacy protects and why it is important. There has been consensus that the significance of privacy is almost always justified for the individual interests it protects: personal information, personal spaces, and personal choices, protection of freedom and autonomy in a liberal democratic society.

Importantly, the autonomy that Asher exercises is not merely over information, but over (*inter alia*) social relationships (see Rachels 1975). Finally, we think that it is important to recognize that appeals to a right to privacy are often conflated, especially in contexts involving gender,

Finally, we doubt that the symptoms and causes of discrimination fall into mutually exclusive categories: some symptoms of discrimination help to reinforce discrimination. As we will now argue, there is a plausible case that the use of gender-specific pronouns helps to engender and transmit discriminatory beliefs about gender, so targeting the symptom will help address the cause.

4.3. *Anti-Essentialism*

Our third and final argument for the RADICAL CLAIM concerns the common effects of having and using gender-specific pronouns in natural languages. These effects are not specific to pronouns—they also arise for gender-specific suffixes like the (patronizing) diminutive *-ess* (think *hostess* and *seamstress*), as well as other aspects of grammatical gender that are found in non-English languages. The argument, put simply, is that there is a plausible case for the view that linguistic markers of gender play a role in communicating harmful beliefs about the nature and social significance of gender identities, and that reducing the linguistic markers of gender would reduce the prevalence of such beliefs.⁴⁴

Why think that linguistic markers of gender play a role in communicating harmful beliefs about the nature and social significance of gender identities? Much of the evidence for this correlations between the degree to which gender is encoded grammatically in a natural language and essentialist beliefs about gender. By essentialist beliefs about gender, we mean something more general than the form of biological essentialism considered above: we mean to encompass beliefs that someone's gender is an intrinsic part of who they are, which explains their other features, including their psychological traits and social roles.

Numerous studies attest to this correlation between grammatical gender and the prevalence of essentialist beliefs. There is a "direct relationship between gender-loading in the native language and gender identity attainment" (Guiora 1983). ("Gender loading" is the extent to which a language forces speakers to take their addressee's gender into account in choosing the correct word form.) "Sex-determined grammatical 'gender loading' of languages varies from almost zero in languages like Finnish through very low in English, to very high in Hebrew," and children who are native speakers of Hebrew "learn" their gender earlier than native speakers of English or Finnish (Guiora 1983). That is, the more gender-loaded a language is, the earlier children feel the need to sort themselves into a gender category. Moreover, the high use of gender labels in communicating to children is linked to the development of strong gender stereotypes in children, as well as the transmission of essentialized beliefs about how gender explains

with prescriptions of silence and modesty (see especially Allen & Mack 1990), which we emphatically reject.

44. The following extends the central idea that we discussed in Section 2.4: like misgendering, gender-specific pronouns reinforce harmful ideologies.

stereotypical group traits—e.g., that ‘being a woman’ explains why someone is engaged in domestic labor (see Bigler & Liben 2007 and Taylor, Rhodes, & Gelman 2009). It is also correlated with children’s high use of gender categories in making inferences about other people and in forming preferences based on endorsements by other people—another marker of essentialized beliefs about gender (see Shutts, Pemberton, & Spelke 2013, and references therein). Such essentialist beliefs are harmful in multiple ways, including but not limited to those we alluded to in relation to transgender individuals in Section 2.⁴⁵

We acknowledge that this evidence is not conclusive. In some cases, societies with high levels of gender-encoding in their natural language seem to embrace gender ideologies that are far less essentialist in flavor than societies with low levels of gender-encoding in their natural language (cf., for example, Turkey). But we think we can bolster this empirical evidence in two ways.

First, we can situate the empirical evidence above in a broader literature about the effects of language on social cognition. We are, in effect, endorsing a weak “Whorfian” view that linguistic categories and usage affect social cognition to some degree. And we think that at least *apropos* grammatical gender, the empirical evidence is on our side here. The evidence we have cited so far concerns the influence of gender-specific language on cognition about the gender of people. But there is further evidence for the weak Whorfian view regarding the influence of gender-specific language on cognition about the gender of non-persons. This evidence comes from languages that have grammatical gender systems whereby every noun is assigned a gender. While such grammatical gender systems are arbitrary—Mark Twain noted that in German “a young lady has no sex, while a turnip has”, and “a tree is male, its buds are female, its leaves are neuter”—they seem to influence the representations of objects nonetheless, including among reflective adults.⁴⁶ The best evidence for this comes from a series of studies that demonstrate that grammatical gender systems have the power to “bias people’s memory, their descriptions of words and pictures, their assessments of picture similarities, and their ability to generate similarities between pictures” (Boroditsky, Schmidt, & Phillips 2003: 75). This evidence is all the more impressive given that these effects are found in a wide variety of conditions; even teaching native English speakers the grammatical gender system of a fictional language, Gumbuzi,

45. These harmful effects are discussed further in Wodak, Leslie, and Rhodes (2015).

46. As Boroditsky, Schmidt, and Phillips (2003: 64) notes “many adult philosophers throughout history have thought that grammatical gender systems reflected the essential properties of objects, and even took a considerable amount of pride in the thought that the natural genders of objects were captured in the grammatical subtlety of their language”. For specific examples, see Fodor (1959).

had a significant effect on subsequent tasks that they performed in English.⁴⁷

Second, we can bolster this empirical evidence by offering a plausible mechanism by which gender-specific pronouns would engender and transmit harmful beliefs. That mechanism is the Gricean maxim of “relation”.⁴⁸ If we communicate gender information whenever we use singular third person pronouns, we pragmatically implicate that this information is *relevant* in all of those contexts. In presupposing gender information by saying “She won the Booker Prize twice” we pragmatically implicate that Hillary Mantel’s gender identity is somehow relevant to why she won the Booker Prize twice. And we communicate that this is the case regardless of the predicate we apply. So when we use gender-specific pronouns we communicate that *her* gender identity helps explain all and sundry features of *her* life. By contrast, when we use the singular *they* in sentences like “My friend is picking me up but they’re running late”, we thereby communicate that the referent’s gender is not relevant to discussion.⁴⁹

To make this second point vivid, it may be helpful to imagine a nearby world

47. As Boroditsky, Schmidt, and Phillips (2003) explains, these experiments were designed

to test whether grammatical gender in a language can indeed exert a causal power over thought without intermediary cultural factors. Native English speakers were taught about the soupative/oosative distinction in the fictional Gumbuzi language. Participants were shown pictures of males and females along with many inanimate objects and were taught which would be considered soupative and which oosative in Gumbuzi. The soupative/oosative distinction always corresponded to biological gender (all females were in one category and all males in the other) but also extended to inanimate objects. A given participant might have learned that pans, forks, pencils, ballerinas, and girls are soupative, while pots, spoons, pens, giants, and boys are oosative. (2003: 71)

The results of the experiments “show that the effects of grammatical gender on object representations can be produced in the absence of culture, even under verbal interference”, and suggest that “people’s ideas about the genders of objects can indeed be influenced by the grammatical genders assigned to those objects in a language” (Phillips & Boroditsky 2003: 932). They add: “The fact that grammatical distinctions learned in one language seem to have an effect even when a task is performed in another language may favor the view that grammatical knowledge actually plays a role in shaping the underlying non-linguistic representation” (Phillips & Boroditsky 2003: 932). For further information about and discussion of these experiments, see their Phillips and Boroditsky (2003).

48. Some may have reservations about our appeal to Gricean maxims here (insofar as many think Gricean maxims operate via the recognition of speakers’ intentions, which is arguably not part of the mechanism we sketch below). Briefly, if one has this concern, we think that there are alternative ways of explaining the mechanism below which involve aspects of social meaning that do not always operate via the recognition of speakers’ intentions: for particularly relevant options, see Burnett (2017) and Khoo (2017).

49. Strahan (2008: 17, 27) provides evidence for this common use of *they* as “a third person ‘gender not relevant to discussion’ pronoun”.

in which we marked other social identities with distinct pronouns.⁵⁰ Imagine that we used different pronouns for thin (*fee*) and fat (*fum*) individuals. We suspect that many people who do not deplore gender-specific pronouns would deplore that practice. People already have an unfortunate tendency to make awful assumptions about others based on their weight. Larissa McFarquhar (2012) noted that after Hillary Mantel suddenly gained weight (as a side-effect of certain medicines), “[p]eople started treating her differently: when she was thin, they thought she was fierce and nervous; now that she was fat, they perceived her as placid and maternal”. Imagine if we had to say “*Fum* won the Booker Prize twice”, and likewise for any other predicate. We think it is plausible that this would exacerbate harmful beliefs about weight, and that it would do so by pragmatically implicating that whether one is fat or thin is relevant to all and sundry features of one’s life. In fact, we think that it is a challenge for anyone who wishes to defend gender-specific pronouns to explain why we should communicate that others’ gender identities are always relevant when we recognize that we should not communicate that other facts about others’ social identities (race, weight, religion, class, and so on) are always relevant.

Our contention, then, is that by both linguistically encoding a gender binary and increasing the dose of gender-specific terms in English, *he* and *she* have harmful effects on social cognition about gender. If they have these effects, it stands to reason that eliminating gender-specific terms like *he* and *she* would help improve social cognition about gender. We do not want to overstate our case here. That Finnish and Turkish lack grammatical gender systems does not mean that they lack sexism. Eliminating gender-specific pronouns would not eliminate harmful beliefs about the nature and importance of gender.⁵¹ So our contention is not that eradicating grammatical gender would be a panacea. Our claim is simply that it would be better than the status quo.

It is also important that our contention is that we should eschew gender-

50. If the scenario below (involving distinct pronouns depending on the referent’s weight) does not seem sufficiently vivid, analogous to current gender-specific language, and jarring, consider Hofstadter (1985). Hofstadter imagines a world where English has race- rather than gender-specific language, including distinct third-person pronouns (*whie* and *ble*), suffixes (authoroon, actoroon), and honorifics (*Master* for whites, and *Niss* or *Nrs.* for blacks depending on their employment status). As he said, “the entire point” of the piece “is to use something that we find shocking as leverage to illustrate the fact that something we usually close our eyes to is also very shocking” (Hofstadter 1985).

51. As Fine argues at length, the pervasive use of gendered language partly explains the transmission of gender stereotypes to children (2010: 211), along with a wide range of other environmental stimuli (2010: 189–225). Sullivan makes a similar point about harmful beliefs about race, which are transmitted (among other things) by body language: “Tense facial expressions, a subtle stiffness in one’s posture, slightly stammered or unusually paced vocalizations” when using racial terms (2014: 96), along with physical distancing oneself from black bodies (2014: 106), suffice to engender discomfort and fear towards black people.

specific pronouns, not that we should eschew gender-related language entirely. Advocating that we embrace only gender-neutral pronouns is not equivalent to advocating that we embrace only gender-blind discourse more generally. We leave open whether our arguments extend to other gender-specific and -neutral terms in English, such as gender-specific versus -neutral proper names, *mother* and *father* versus *parent*, or *wife* and *husband* versus *partner*.⁵² We also leave open whether our arguments extend to institutional gender markers, such as the legal practice of assigning and registering individuals' gender, or the NCAA's practice of placing student athletes on men's or women's teams based (in part) on testosterone levels.⁵³ This is because the considerations bearing on these terms and practices are not identical to those bearing on gender-specific pronouns.⁵⁴

That said, we take our arguments to suggest that we should be *cautious* with gender-related language, avoiding such language where it is irrelevant; that is a departure from the status quo, wherein we label gender "even when we don't have to", including, for instance, by using "gender labels (like *woman*) twice as often as ... nongendered alternatives (like *teacher* or *person*)" when telling stories to children (Fine 2010: 211). But unlike grammatical gender—including gender-specific pronouns like *he* or *she*—terms like *woman* can be easily avoided, and that means we can use them where gender is relevant (such as in telling Latham that McGregor is a woman), but we are not forced to use them when gender information is irrelevant ("*She* won the Booker Prize twice") or otherwise inappropriate ("My partner and I are going to Hawaii"; "Oh, is *she* looking forward

52. These examples raise further concerns that we haven't addressed in this paper: for instance, see Haslanger's (2006) discussion of the term *parent*.

53. NCAA Office of Inclusion (2011).

54. Some have suggested that our arguments easily extend from gender-specific pronouns to gender-specific proper names—interestingly, this is sometimes treated as a feature of the view, and sometimes as a bug, insofar as some think such as extension of our view would be a *reductio*. We think that there are important differences between pronouns and proper names, such that it is far from obvious that our arguments extend from the former to the latter. Proper names are not 'closed class words', so it is much less problematic to proliferate proper names (including gender-neutral proper names) than to proliferate pronouns. There is no general expectation (in English, at least) that women and men will all have specifically feminine or masculine names, so it is easy for an individual to avoid deceiving or disclosing information about their gender identity by simply adopting a gender-neutral name (via legally changing their name, or via using a nickname). And it is relatively easy for individuals to avoid only problematic uses of gender-specific names, but much harder to change your linguistic dispositions with respect to pronouns in a similarly context-specific manner. These points can be illustrated in Arden (2017), a novel titled *The Girl in the Tower*. Vasya Petrovna has a gender-specific first name. But she can adopt the gender-neutral nickname 'Vasilii', and she and her siblings can use this name without that practice being marked or deceptive; the same does not hold if her siblings were to use gender-neutral or masculine pronouns for Vasya. Moreover, Vasya can expect that her siblings will use 'Vasya' in private and 'Vasilii' in public, but it would be significantly harder, and riskier, for them to vary their use of pronouns in the same way. We thank an anonymous referee for pressing us on this interesting issue.

to the sun?”). As a tool for recognizing and remedying the social significance of gender, gender-specific pronouns give us a sledgehammer when we need (and already have) a scalpel.

5. *They* vs. *Ze*

So far, we have argued for two negative theses: MODERATE CLAIM and RADICAL CLAIM. If you were only convinced by our arguments for moderation, you are now left with the question, *what pronoun should we use for any genderqueer person?* And if you were also convinced by our arguments for radicalization, you are left with a similar question, *what pronoun should we use for any person?*

Either way, there are two salient alternatives to consider:

Appropriation We could appropriate *they* as a singular and plural pronoun.

Neologism We could introduce a new gender-neutral singular pronoun, like *ze*.

Both options create difficulties. Our purpose here is to show that these difficulties are to a significant degree surmountable, so they do not provide a reasonable argument against either moderation or radicalization.

5.1. *They*

While there have been a plethora of proposed gender-neutral singular pronouns, the only one that has seemed to gain anything close to widespread traction is *they*. This provides some motivation for the APPROPRIATION option, or adopting the *personal* singular *they*, as in *Haze completed their tour*.

There are two central reasons why one might object to the appropriation of *they* as a singular, gender-neutral pronoun: first, that such uses of *they* are ungrammatical; and second, that *they* is not in fact gender-neutral. As we discussed the second in Section 3.2, we here will focus on the grammatical worry.

As a matter of sociological observation, concerns about grammaticality seem to drive much of the opposition to using *they* as a personal singular pronoun, and much of the acceptance of using *he* or *she*, in relation to genderqueer individuals like Angel Haze. For instance, consider Levy (2015), a profile of Jill Soloway. At one point, Soloway—who created the television show *Transparent* about a transgender parent—claims that morally we should use *they* as a singular third person pronoun. In response, Levy “pointed out that strict grammar forbids using a plural pronoun for a single person; it would sound crazy, for instance, to describe Soloway by saying, ‘They are my favorite director.’” Levy seemed to take the fact that “strict grammar forbids” such uses of *they* to be a sufficient response to settle the issue. Let’s set out this objection formally and evaluate its merits.

- I It is ungrammatical to use *they* as a singular, personal pronoun.
- II If (I) is true, we should not use *they* to refer to a genderqueer individual.
- C We should not use *they* to refer to a genderqueer individual.

Does the objection succeed in showing that we should not use *they* in relation to an individual like Haze? The discussion of this objection in the blogosphere tends to focus on the first premise. We think that the better place to push is against the second premise. If it is ungrammatical to say “Haze completed *their* tour”, does it follow that we *should* not speak this way?

If the claim is that *morally* we should not write speak this way, more needs to be said about the moral implications of violating norms of prescriptive grammar. Perhaps the thought is that we have good moral reasons to write and speak grammatically, because we have good moral reasons to use language in ways that help us coordinate, communicate, and collect information. Using a plural pronoun to refer to a single person might be misleading or confusing (as to whether Angel Haze is a group or an individual). Perhaps this is what Levy had in mind when objecting to uses of singular *they*. But if so, Levy does not have a terribly persuasive objection to those like Soloway who advocate for the wider acceptance of the singular *they*. This is for two reasons.

First, any costs to the clarity of communication would be temporary. Grammatical norms are not fixed and immutable. They change in accordance with changes in how we use language, which changes in accordance with our communicative needs. For instance, after the plural second person pronoun *you* started doing double duty as a singular pronoun (replacing *thou*), English dialects adapted by marking instances where the referents were plural (*y’all, you guys, youse*) to minimize ambiguities of reference. We see no reason to doubt that, if any ambiguity of reference surrounding *they* proved to be communicatively problematic, the need for clarity would prompt a similar linguistic shift to differentiate between third-person singular and plural pronouns.

Second, the costs to the clarity of communication are plausibly outweighed by our other moral concerns about the use of gendered pronouns to refer to genderqueer individuals. Using *she* for Haze is disrespectful, implicitly withholds rights and privileges, and undermines the intelligibility of their actions and lifestyles. We would rather slightly complicate how we communicate rather than further malign and marginalize minority gender groups. This is all the more plausible given the systematic problems with entrenching a gender binary in the only grammatically acceptable singular personal pronouns.

Of course, we need not take Levy to be making a moral argument. She may simply be pointing out that *grammatically* we should not use *they* in such a way. In one respect, this makes the premise more plausible: it is straightforwardly true

that grammar requires that we do not speak ungrammatically. The question is why we should care about what grammar requires, rather than what morality requires, in determining how we use language. When moral requirements conflict with grammar requirements, of course we should resolve such conflicts in favor of morality. As Foot (1972: 311) wrote, the commonsensical view is that “morality is supposed to be inescapable in some special way” that requirements of etiquette—and, we think, of prescriptive grammar—are not.⁵⁵

5.2. Ze

Some may not be persuaded by our responses to these objections to the singular *they*. But if so, one need not deny our MODERATE CLAIM or RADICAL CLAIM. If one is opposed to APPROPRIATION, NEOLOGISM remains a reasonable option. Introducing *ze* (or some other neologism) as a third-person singular personal pronoun allows us to retain *they* as a plural pronoun without raising concerns about ungrammaticality or clarity of communication.

We grant that introducing a new pronoun would be incredibly difficult. But we still think it is a prescription worth taking seriously. The gender-neutral pronoun *hen* (drawn from the Finnish *hän*, and used as an alternative to the feminine *hon* and masculine *han*) was introduced into the Swedish Academy Glossary, which contains the “unofficial norms” of the Swedish language in 2015 (Senden, Bäck, & Lindqvist 2015). *Hen* has entered into common usage and gained widespread acceptance (see Senden, Bäck, & Lindqvist 2015 for discussion and data). We take this evidence to suggest that English can adopt gender-neutral neologistic pronouns like *ze*. Introducing a proliferation of new pronouns might be infeasible, risky, and costly (see Section 4.1), but coordinating around just one new gender-neutral pronoun is a policy worth taking seriously.

Aside from questions about their feasibility, another common concern with neologistic pronouns is that *ze* would ‘other’ or ‘exoticize’ any genderqueer persons that *ze* is used to refer to. By using a new, unfamiliar term for non-binary persons, one might worry, we would grammatically work against the goal of socially incorporating these persons by suggesting that they not ‘normal’, in the sense that they fall outside the bounds of normalized social categories.

This is similar to concerns raised in Section 4 about using *they* as a catchall alternative to *he* and *she*. Our response is similar too. It would be concerning if we used *ze* for all and only non-binary persons, but retained *he* and *she* for binary persons. But no concerns about ‘othering’ remain if we use *ze* for all persons; no one is exoticized if we accept RADICAL CLAIM and use *ze* for everyone.

55. Foot’s own view about this commonsensical position was complex.

6. Conclusion

We want to close by recognizing that we have only provided a presumptive case, and not a decisive case, for thinking that English-speakers should adopt the long-term goal of eradicating gender-specific pronouns. Some of our arguments for the RADICAL CLAIM turn on *a posteriori* questions about our social context; we've provided empirical evidence to support our answers to these questions, but we do not think this evidence settles the issues conclusively. Moreover, we recognize that our context abounds in countervailing considerations given that gender-specific pronouns are a beneficial resource for transgender persons. We have treated these considerations as generating possible exceptions to the general duty not to use gender-specific pronouns. But some might argue that these considerations are so weighty that they extinguish this duty entirely. We think these issues warrant further discussion, from philosophers and non-philosophers alike.

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