

Much Ado About Nothing: Unmotivating “Gender Identity”

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Abstract

Recently, the concept of "gender identity" has enjoyed a great deal of attention in gender metaphysics. This seems to be motivated by the goal of creating trans-inclusive theory, by explaining trans people's genders. In this paper, we aim to unmotivate this project. Notions of "gender identity" serve important pragmatic purposes for trans people, such as satisfying the curiosity of non-trans people, and, relatedly, securing our access to important goods like legal rights and medical care. However, we argue that this does not mean that "gender identity" is a metaphysically substantial thing that deserves extensive theoretical attention. There are reasons to be skeptical of such a concept. We trace the history of "gender identity," primarily to identify its roots in trans-antagonistic medical theory and its connections to the problematic "wrong-body" model--a legacy that has pathologized and flattened trans experience. Moreover, we argue that trans people primarily use "gender identity" to explain ourselves to non-trans people, rather than to discuss ourselves among ourselves. Thus, we urge theorists to resist the urge to substantiate gender identity. Instead, we encourage the development of new and better concepts, ones that attend to the lived realities of trans community and the flourishing gender terms and practices that are constructed there. If these lived realities are taken seriously, there is no need to “explain” trans people’s genders; we can simply see them as they are.

0. Introduction

Substantive concepts of gender identity have recently been front and center in gender metaphysics. This seems to be motivated by the desire to create trans-inclusive theory. Prominent works of gender metaphysics characterize gender as a social class imposed on individuals based on their perceived sexed bodies (Haslanger 2000, Witt 2011, Dembroff 2020). Critics worry that this account excludes trans people, who may experience or classify our genders differently than others do (see Jenkins 2016, Andler 2017, Rea 2022). Respecting trans people’s genders is thus cashed out as a matter of validating internal features of gender, such as one’s thoughts, feelings, or beliefs about one’s own gender. These internal features of gender are increasingly characterized as constituting a metaphysically robust and morally significant thing known as *gender identity*.

The nature of “gender identity” is not immediately clear. Thus, there are typically two kinds of theoretical moves from this starting point. The first is skeptical. Critics question the legitimacy or coherence of the concept of “gender identity.” They argue, for example, that gender is entirely external, that the only relevant features are biological or social in nature, and thus that gender identity is irrelevant or nonexistent. This approach is typically associated with transphobia; if gender identity is what grounds trans rights, then to deny its relevance or existence is to deny those rights.¹ The second kind of move is justificatory. Supporters seek to legitimize gender identity as a substantive thing that can bear the theoretical weight of legitimizing trans people’s claims to the genders we say we have. This approach is understood to be trans-positive: if gender identity is what grounds trans rights, then to affirm its substance and moral importance is to affirm those rights.

As trans philosophers, we find this dialectic frustrating. Trans people have a complicated relationship to “gender identity.” In some ways this concept can be valuable for us; we use it to explain ourselves to friends and family; to advocate for social acceptance, political rights, and medical care; and sometimes as theoretical shorthand for our attempts at self-understanding. On the other hand, however, the history of this concept is morally and politically fraught. “Gender identity” arose from the work of cisgender sexologists in the 1960s, creating the groundwork for the kind of medical gatekeeping that would follow. The origins of this term draw on cisgender people’s understandings of trans identity through the “wrong-body” model, a framework which is rejected by most trans people as both explanatorily and politically insufficient (see, for example, Bettcher 2013, 2014). This legacy persists in many uses of “gender identity” to this day; trans people are often expected to explain ourselves to cis people in terms

¹ Some theorists take themselves to be defending a trans-positive politics while also resisting talk of internal gender identities. Most famously, see Butler (1988, 1990); more recently, see Amin (2022), Saketopoulou & Pelligrini (2023). We have avoided citing other arguments here because we take them to be openly transphobic, and we resist giving them more uptake.

of an essential, medicalized gender identity—even when that language draws on a problematic history and elides, misrepresents, or flattens the way we understand ourselves.

We are, therefore, skeptical of many uses of “gender identity.” We argue that much theoretical preoccupation with “gender identity” primarily caters to the objectifying curiosity of cis people. Our goal in this paper is twofold. First, we aim to critically interrogate the history of “gender identity” as a concept and the ramifications of that history for current use; we will use this to raise questions about its value. Second, we aim to unmotivate gender metaphysicians’ theoretical preoccupation with what we call “substantive gender identity.” We appreciate that this concept may have various theoretical and pragmatic uses, but reject the need for a robust metaphysics to explain these uses. In the process of articulating these goals, we hope to show that philosophers’ engagement on trans issues requires greater attention to our lives, needs, and own ways of theorizing our experience.

We begin in Section 1 by reviewing discussions of gender identity in the philosophical literature. We argue that many of these accounts try to use substantive gender identity to fit trans people into what we call *cisnormative gender metaphysics*, an approach that focuses on the harms of hegemonic, hierarchical gender binaries, and in so doing, takes the primacy of cisgender norms and classifications for granted. We suggest that this is the wrong approach. In Section 2, we trace the history and function of “gender identity” as it is used both by a trans-antagonistic medical establishment and by trans people ourselves. Namely, we argue that trans people often use gender identity as a tool for cis intelligibility, offering a narrative that helps cis people understand us in hopes to gain social acceptance, political rights, and medical care. Given that gender identity has a problematic history but a number of pragmatic uses, we sketch a deflationary view of gender identity, on which one’s gender identity is just the gender one identifies as. In Section 3, we consider two objections to the deflation of gender identity: that substantive gender identity is necessary to explain trans people’s genders, and that it is necessary to ground trans people’s rights. We reject both objections on the grounds that they

assume the primacy of cisnormative theory. Trans people's genders are grounded in our community gender practices, and put succinctly, trans rights are human rights.

1. The (Cisnormative) Metaphysics of Gender Identity

Philosophers working on the metaphysics of gender have recently spent a great deal of time and energy constructing a metaphysically robust notion of gender identity. The question of whether and to what extent gender is itself an identity (as opposed to a social class, a genre/genus, or something else) has a rich history within feminist, queer, and trans theory.² However, the recent trend in gender metaphysics does not appear directly descended from these discussions. Rather, it arises alongside a specific political context where “gender identity” has served important political and social purposes for trans people—such as offering us a way to explain ourselves to non-trans people, or providing the grounds on which to change our legal sex (Ben-Asher 2022). Philosophers of gender have worked to underwrite this discursive move with substantive metaphysics. These attempts are understandable. The underlying assumption seems to be that, if “gender identity” is what we’re going with, then it should mean something.

Gender identity has thus come to occupy a hefty theoretical role, built on the following line of reasoning. Many trans people say that we have genders which do not match the way others see and treat us. Trans people are also understood to deserve significant rights that we are often denied; we ought to be able to use certain bathrooms, be included in certain social and institutional groups, gain access to certain medical treatments, and so forth. Correlatively, these rights produce significant moral obligations on the part of others. These rights and obligations are taken to turn on the truth of trans people's claims about our genders, which in turn is understood to rest on the existence of something that is neither purely individual (e.g. a mere wish or feeling) nor purely social (e.g. the gender that is “read” off one's body in a cisnormative

² See, for example, Butler (1990), Spelman (1990), Bornstein (1994), Wilchins (1997), Serano (2007).

context). Trans-inclusive gender metaphysics therefore aims at two related desiderata: to include trans people in the gender categories to which we say we belong, and to ground specific rights for trans people on the basis of those gender categorizations. Enter *substantive gender identity*—supposedly the bridge that connects the individual to the social, and thus fulfils both desiderata.

This strategy owes much to the work of Katherine Jenkins (2016, 2018). Jenkins argues that Sally Haslanger’s (2000) influential account of gender metaphysics is trans-exclusionary, and thus should be amended. Very roughly, Haslanger argues that we should theorize gender categories as social classes; one’s status as woman/man is assigned by others on the basis of one’s “observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a [female/male]’s biological role in reproduction,” and constituted by social subordination and social dominance, respectively (230). Jenkins agrees that this is an important dimension of gender. However, she correctly points out that it fails to track the self-identified genders of many trans people. For example, some trans men are imagined to have bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female’s biological role in reproduction, not a male’s, and thus Haslanger’s view counts them as women, but not men. Jenkins argues that this is an injustice that feminist theory ought to address. She writes:

Failure to respect the gender identifications of trans people is a serious harm and is conceptually linked to forms of transphobic oppression and even violence. It follows from this that an important desideratum of a feminist analysis of gender concepts is that it respect these identifications by including trans people within the gender categories with which they identify and not including them within any categories with which they do not identify. (396)

According to Jenkins, the solution is a pluralist account that can explain two features of gender categorization: *gender as class*, in which individuals are sorted based on their observed or imagined bodies, and *gender as identity*, in which individuals are sorted based on their relationship to those gender classes. Individuals have a gender identity of, e.g., *woman* just in case they have an “internal map” which guides their behavior relative to gender norms

associated with womanhood; individuals have a gender identity of *man* in case their internal map guides them relative to the norms associated with manhood; and so forth. Jenkins thus deftly weaves together the desiderata of (1) acknowledging subordination and dominance on the basis of observed or imagined bodies and (2) capturing the self-identified genders of trans people within that system of subordination and dominance.

Jenkins' project has been influential, but not uncontroversial. Matthew Andler (2017) argues that Jenkins' view fails to meet its own desideratum of giving a trans-inclusive metaphysics of gender. They argue that Jenkins' account of gender identity fails to include all trans people in the gender category that they intuitively have. Concordantly, they charge Jenkins with understanding trans identities through a cis-centric framework. Throughout this important critique, however, Andler does not challenge an underlying assumption of Jenkins' work: that a substantive account of gender identity is necessary to make sense of trans people's gender identifications, and that this is an important political goal of feminist theory. Rather, they challenge the way in which Jenkins goes about this for failing to be sufficiently trans-inclusive.

Other philosophers have enthusiastically taken up the project of giving a substantive metaphysics of gender identity. This project often takes the form of equating gender or gender categorization with gender identity. For example, Michael Rea (2022) has argued that gender is a *self-conferred identity*. On this view, one belongs to a gender category just in case that gender is included in one's "autobiographical identity," or "the central elements of who one is to oneself" (Rea 2022, 6). According to Rea, among various theories of the metaphysics of gender category assignment, his view is the "most accommodating of trans and nonbinary gender identities" (3) while also respecting the importance of the social and relational features of gender. It does this because it "transparently offers a basis for assigning both epistemic and ethical first-person authority to people's judgments about their own gender" (2). That is, according to Rea, to be "accommodating" of trans identities, we must understand gender itself

as an identity, in effect constructing a substantive metaphysics of gender identity on which individuals have authority. Rea aims to give just such a metaphysics.

Thus, it is treated as important not just to respect the gender identifications of trans people in practice, but also to substantiate those identifications themselves by grounding them in a “feminist analysis of gender concepts” (Jenkins 2016, 396) that can capture the experiences of trans people in a transphobic world. The best way to treat those experiences as central, it is assumed (and in Rea’s case, explicitly argued), is to construct an account of gender identity, and then use that to ground gender classification. However, for gender identity to do this work, it must have some substance. Otherwise, this account gives rise to a vicious circularity:

...someone who asks what it means to say that a certain person ‘has a female gender identity’ will be told that it means that that person has a sense of herself ‘as a woman’—but if the questioner then asks what a ‘woman’ is, they will be told that a woman is ‘a person with a female gender identity’ (Jenkins 2018, 714).

To avoid this circularity, gender identity must mean something more than simply “having a sense of oneself” as a gender. Put differently: giving a trans-inclusive metaphysics of gender is cashed out as creating a substantive account of gender identity, and then using that to ground gender classification.³

Substantive gender identity is thus treated as necessary for trans inclusion. If gender is theorized as a hierarchical, binary social class system, as the dominant Haslangerian tradition in feminist metaphysics has understood it, trans people—understood as people whose genders and sexed bodies do not “line up” in the way this system expects—appear as anomalies that must be explained. Gender identity is offered up to do this explanatory work. Thus, it is assumed, we

³ The project of resting gender categorization on gender identity faces an objection from Elizabeth Barnes (2022). Barnes contends that “to claim that gender identity *uniquely determines* one’s gender” is ableist (1, emphasis in original). Such a view would exclude many cognitively disabled people from gender categorization, as many cognitively disabled people do not have the capacities necessary to have a gender identity on various views. For Barnes, this is both unjust and incorrect; cognitively disabled people suffer significant gender-based violence, for which gender categorization is partly explanatory. Barnes is more than happy to concede, however, that “gender identity is an important aspect of gender and gender categorization” (1). Ultimately, Barnes too sketches a pluralist account of gender categorization, on which gender identity *or* gender-as-class can determine one’s gender category (24-25). Thus, she does not challenge the importance of gender identity to gender classification—only its role as the sole determinant.

must be able to articulate exactly what gender identity is and how it constitutes trans people's genders, and in turn explains our existence and ground our rights. Substantive gender identity becomes a theoretical linchpin, holding the wheel of trans existence and trans rights to the axle of feminist metaphysics.

We think this is an unhelpful approach. We do not think that trans existence can, or should, be "fit in" to theories of dominant gender. Dominant gender rests on a legacy of colonialism, racism, hetero- and cisnormativity that both erases and brutalizes trans people; by design, trans people do not and cannot fit within it. We might say that metaphysicians struggle to account for trans people within this system because, according to this system, trans people do not exist. But trans people do exist; as Naomi Scheman writes, "such lives are lived, hence livable" (1997, 132). Therefore, we conclude that the dominant gender system is *wrong*, not just normatively but descriptively. Following Bettcher (2014), we point out that trans people have our own, subaltern, resistant communities in which we do gender very differently. The metaphysical realities of these communities belie the explanatory failures of dominant gender practices. Trans people's lives and communities are real, tangible counterexamples to a central premise of the system which produces gender-as-class.

This does not point to a fatal flaw in theories of gender-as-class. Rather, it suggests that the uses of these theories are limited for understanding trans existence and experience. Specifically, we hold that such theories are examples of what we call *cisnormative gender metaphysics*. Cisnormative gender metaphysics is a philosophical approach which aims to understand hegemonic, hierarchical, binary gender systems and how they oppress. It is "cisnormative" because it takes a normative cisgender ideal (e.g. the expectation of a white, slim, nondisabled, unambiguously "male" or "female" body; the definition of appropriate presentations of masculinity or femininity on and through that body; and so forth) as the primary target of analysis and critique.

To be sure, this kind of project is valuable for certain ends. Many scholars have done important things with cisnormative metaphysics, including explaining the harms trans people face within those systems. However, cisnormative metaphysics also tends to treat “gender” as defined by hegemonic binary practices. Accordingly, this theoretical lens often takes for granted the sovereignty of the very structures it aims to critique. This elides not only the realities of social practices that exist within subaltern queer and trans communities that grow in opposition to those structures (see Bailey 2011, Bettcher 2013), but also the global diversity of non-Anglophone, non-Eurocentric communities which do not describe themselves in English terms like “queer” and “trans,” but, rather, have their own terms, practices, and histories that are often ignored by cisnormative metaphysics and Anglo/Eurocentric queer and trans theory alike (see, for example, Gopinath 2005, Heyam 2022, Gill-Peterson 2024).

We argue that the genders and rights of gender-diverse people cannot and should not be grounded in cisnormative gender metaphysics. We call for a shift in focus. Rather than understanding gender-diverse people through the lenses of the systems that brutalize and erase us, we want to embrace ways of thinking about our genders, our lives, and our place in the world from our own perspectives, through the ways that we are already understanding ourselves. Such projects must arise from existing communities and epistemic practices, rather than from the armchair. As such, they will take many forms. For trans people specifically, we propose an alternative to cisnormative metaphysics, which we call *T4T metaphysics*. T4T metaphysics, short for “trans-for-trans,” is metaphysics by and for trans people.⁴ As a theoretical perspective, T4T metaphysics begins by heeding Bettcher’s (2013) call to begin with the assumption that trans people are paradigm cases of the genders we occupy, rather than treating us as mere complications to hegemonic binaries. We suggest that the traditional questions raised in

⁴ Importantly, we do not want to claim that T4T metaphysics should be undertaken by everyone, or that it is the only way to resist a cisnormative perspective. As discussed, not all gender diversity or resistance travels under the banner “trans.”

feminist metaphysics (such as “What is a woman, and (why) do trans women qualify?”) need not define T4T metaphysics. That is, T4T metaphysics does not merely “accommodate” trans people, or provide trans answers to (cisnormative) feminist questions. Rather, it should be free to shift the starting point altogether; to ask different questions that matter to and for us; and to reach for concepts we are already using in our communities, or create new ones, rather than remaining beholden to the concepts that populate cisnormative theory. By taking trans lives and communities, questions and curiosities, concepts and self-understandings as the starting point for theory, T4T metaphysics disrupts cisnormative assumptions.

We suggest that the current project of substantiating gender identity is at odds with T4T theory. To be clear, this is not the same as claiming that trans theorists cannot use “gender identity” in interesting and important ways. In just the last year, trans scholars such as Florence Ashley (2023), Jas Heaton (2023), and Rach Rowland (forthcoming) have used the language of gender identity to theorize elements of trans experience that are ignored or misrepresented by dominant theories.⁵ We are not convinced, however, that *gender identity* itself is necessary to do that work. Part of the problem here is that, as R.A. Briggs and B.R. George (2023) have recently argued, gender identity as a concept is overburdened. It is asked to do entirely too many things, including explaining trans people’s experience, justifying our existence to cis people, grounding our gender classifications, ensuring our access to medical care, and so forth. Perhaps no concept could do all of these things; “gender identity” certainly doesn’t do all of them well. Moreover, we hope that, in raising questions about gender identity, we can open up possibilities for trans philosophers to reach for different concepts, or construct better ones, that do not have a history of pursuing cis intelligibility at the expense of trans self-understanding.

We are not the first philosophers in the recent literature to raise issues with gender identity from a trans perspective. For example, Dembroff (forthcoming) has argued that

⁵ Our thanks to both [redacted1] and [redacted2] for pressing us on this point, and especially to [redacted2] for helping us articulate this important feature of trans philosophy of gender identity.

“identity” is the wrong target for trans politics. They argue that “transgender” is not a term that points us to identity, but to experience; specifically, to “the experience of engaging in forms of self-directed gender nonconformity that are heavily penalized” (forthcoming, 5). For Dembroff, what matters is not what we call ourselves, but how we are understood and treated in the world.⁶ Relatedly, Briggs and George (2023) argue that trans intelligibility and self-understanding is often obscured by popular concepts of gender identity. Trans people sometimes search ourselves for some already-present, essential, deep identity that can explain our gendered feelings and desires. This search can get in the way of simply acting on those feelings and desires in the service of being comfortable in our own bodies, rather than meeting some image of what our gender identity “really” is (29-30). Beyond philosophy, other theorists have been challenging a theoretical reliance on gender identity to explain trans experience. For example, in their book *Gender Without Identity* (2023), psychoanalysts Avgi Saketopoulou and Ann Pelligrini argue that “core gender identity” is problematic, because it posits a stable, internal self on which other meanings depend. They argue that this is unhelpful for both theoretical and therapeutic purposes, because it elides the ways in which the self is constructed from experience.⁷

We agree that gender identity is an insufficient ground for trans politics, and that it often fails to explain trans experience. We want to discuss *why*. Specifically, we are interested in the history of the concept, and the way that history shapes popular and theoretical use. In the next section, we will locate the origins of the concept “gender identity” in a cisnormative sexology

⁶ While we are indebted to Dembroff’s suggestion that trans theory move away from identity as the focus of discussion, we want to trouble their positive account, for two reasons. First, it is “damage-centered” in the sense critiqued by Eve Tuck (2009), focusing on harm as the center of identity. This approach, according to Tuck, attempts to secure reparation by highlighting the damage caused by oppression, but in so doing, pathologizes oppressed peoples and invites them to “only speak [their] pain” (413). Second, and more importantly, Dembroff’s definition risks imposing the Western, Anglophone term “transgender” onto gender-diverse peoples across the world, with their own terms and histories of resistance to cisnormative, colonial binaries. Furthermore, as Jules Gill-Peterson (2024) argues, Western colonialism has regularly engaged in “transfeminizing” Indigenous genders, erasing the self-understanding of these people to reclassify them into a Western conception of gender change. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing us to clarify.

⁷ For more on this point, see Bell (2024).

framework, one that launched a half-century of trans-antagonistic medical gatekeeping that resounds to this day. Due in part to this problematic legacy, we are both critical of the role gender identity plays in cisnormative gender metaphysics, and suspicious whether “gender identity” is the concept that trans philosophers doing T4T metaphysics really want.

2. Unmotivating and Deflating Gender Identity

In this section, we begin with the history of the concept as it is rooted in 1960s sexology that pathologizes trans people. It is this concept which first posited the “internal sense of gender” that philosophers have since built on. We then look at how trans people use “gender identity” prudentially, to gain access to medical care and quiet cis curiosity. Finally, in place of substantive gender identity, we present a deflationary understanding of gender identity where one’s gender identity just is whatever gender they identify as.

The term “gender identity” was introduced to the medical literature by Ralph Greenson and Robert Stoller, writing in separate, mutually referential papers in the 1964 issue of the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (Greenson 1964, Stoller 1964). Greenson defined “gender identity” as “one’s sense of being a member of a particular sex” and held that it was “expressed clinically in the awareness of being a man or a male in distinction to being a woman or a female” (Greenson 1964, 217). Stoller’s definition is similar: “Gender identity is the sense of knowing to which sex one belongs, that is, the awareness ‘I am a male’ or ‘I am a female’” (Stoller 1964, 220). Stoller is primarily interested in the “natural experiment” of intersex people who have binary gender identities, where gender identity has the potential to re-stabilize the sex that is thrown into question by intersex status. Greenson investigates the etiology of homosexuality as a threat to stable gender identity. Thus, in its inaugural occurrence in the academic literature, gender identity is understood as dependent on one’s assigned sex, while queerness or intersexuality are understood in relation to the “normal” development or

expression of this identity. From the start, then, this concept is heteronormative, cisnormative, and binary.⁸

The explicit association of “gender identity” with trans people is primarily the work of sexologist and psychiatrist John Money, who in 1966 opened a clinic for transsexual medicine at Johns Hopkins University. Money (1994) defines gender identity as the “sameness, unity, and persistence of one’s individuality as male, female, or androgynous, ...especially as it is experienced in self-awareness and behavior” (169). Importantly gender identity is the “private experience of gender role” with gender role defined as the “public manifestation of gender identity” by “[indicating] to others or the self the degree that one is either male or female or androgynous” (169). Early use of gender identity in Money’s research defends sexual dimorphism (the view that there are two sexes), thereby medicalizing the existence of intersex people as anomalies to be corrected. Money holds that such intersex individuals have an internal gender identity, and that it co-occurs with the “sexual pathology of homosexuality” (Money 1970). Money argues that when an intersex child is assigned a sex and treated as that sex by their parents and community, their gender identity tracks that assignment in most cases, justifying medically enforced sex assignment of intersex children (1970, 433). In this way, Money’s medicalized notion of gender was able to “govern sex” and help fit people into binary gender positions while also recognizing the variety of sexual outcomes that, as evidenced by intersex people, can occur at birth (Dahms 2020). Those whose gender identity does not track this assigned gender suffer from, according to Money, gender-identity/role disorder, or what

⁸ Moreover, as Jules Gill-Peterson (2017) has argued, the introduction of “gender” itself to the sexology literature was an attempt to re-stabilize the heteronormative binary that was challenged by a host of increasingly apparent ambiguities, instabilities, and generally messy and unpredictable realities of the sexed body. That is, sexologists could not locate the sex binary in the body, so they added a dimension: *gender*. Thus, rather than constituting a space of possibility and re-signification, “gender” arose as normative and punitive, primarily aimed at turning unruly trans and/or intersex bodies into legible, heterosexual men and women.

was listed in the DSM as gender identity disorder, characterized by “unrelenting and often desperate or monomaniacal fixation on being a member of the nonnatal sex” (1994, 169 & 175).⁹

This use of “gender identity” places it as a central component of the “wrong-body” model of transsexuality, which trans philosophers and theorists reject as a definition of transness (Bettcher 2014). The “wrong-body” model explains trans identity by saying there is a misalignment between one’s gender identity and their sexed body (natal sex). Trans criticisms of the “wrong-body” model are plenty and not worth rehashing here. What is worth discussing is the way the “wrong-body” model functions in trans-antagonistic medical institutions and in trans discourse.¹⁰

In trans-antagonistic medical institutions, the wrong-body model functions to pathologize trans individuals by defining their experiences as psychological disorders (see, gender identity *disorder*). This pathologizing defines the standards that trans people must meet to access medical transition, effectively gatekeeping our access to life-saving medical care. In response to this, trans people have learned how to use the narrative of being “trapped in the wrong body” to access this medical care. Sandy Stone (2006) recounts how in the 1970s, the only text doctors had to adjudicate trans patients was Harry Benjamin’s *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, which transsexuals read and shared with each other as they “were only too happy to provide the behavior that led to acceptance for surgery” (35). Trans people continue to offer a narrative to doctors and psychiatrists that they know will satisfy their diagnostic standards, regardless of our actual experiences. This is not to say that some trans people *don’t* relate to the “trapped in the wrong body” slogan, but that the slogan’s persistence is largely due to its value in accessing medical care and making our experience intelligible to cis people.

⁹ In the DSM-V this was updated to be called Gender Dysphoria. For trans critiques of gender dysphoria, see Thorn (2023) or Heaton (2023).

¹⁰ It is worth clarifying that when we discuss ‘trans-antagonistic medical institutions’ we are not attributing motivations to the aforementioned researchers or even contemporary doctors. By calling medical institutions trans-antagonistic, we are describing the way medical institutions are currently structured in conflict with trans lives, medicalizing our experience as disorderly.

We believe that many uses of “gender identity” piggyback on the pathologizing and prudential (respectively) use of the “wrong-body” model. Claiming a gender identity is often a useful way to access trans medical care, since it is built into the story doctors expect when diagnosing us. The usefulness of this strategy is not due to our own experience but due to the story written by cis doctors *about* us. Furthermore, the absolute dominance of this story contributes to what Sandy Stone (2006) calls the “relentless totalization” of our experiences, reducing us to “homogenized, totalized objects” (232). We are cast as a monolith, nudged to conform, and doubted when we don’t.

This “relentless totalization” is constructed in part through a constant, structural curiosity about trans people. Perry Zurn (2021) unearths and articulates how trans people are constant objects of other people’s curiosity (including medical doctors and academics). This curiosity is so common and entrenched that Zurn finds references to such “curiosity seekers” in the Digital Transgender Archive, dating back to the 1960s and 70s where trans people shared defensive strategies to avoid such people (2021, 183). By being made an object of curiosity, trans people are in effect objectified, treated as something that calls for an explanation before being treated as a human. As Zurn states,

to be steadily questioned here is to be fundamentally put in question, to be made an object of suspicion... the barrage of questions constitutes them as outliers... puzzle pieces picked up, pressed unforgivingly, and then put to one side. (2021, 182)

This constant questioning not only objectifies, it also puts explanatory pressure on us.

Anyone who comes out as trans knows the difficulty with which people—friends, family, partners, complete strangers—take the news. They struggle to grapple with the experience, not knowing why or how anyone could want to be a different gender—to them, and arguably to many of us, gender is not a thing you *desire* but something you are *given*. It’s given by the obstetrician or midwife who checks or modifies our genitals; or else we’re thrown, in the

Heideggerian sense, into a gender by our society.¹¹ But, as we alluded, many trans people feel this same sense of given and necessity. For some it is immediate; for others it requires intellectual and emotional achievement. However, it is difficult to explain this to others, especially when our attempts are met with suspicion and skepticism. Suddenly, regular people turn into biologists and metaphysicians, searching for explanations for this queer turn of events. (Not to mention how many grammarians hide among the general population, ready to challenge a singular ‘they’ or improper ‘she’.) Again, Perry Zurn (2021) sums up this experience well:

As the object of curiosity at every turn, trans people are forced to live defensively, constantly parrying unwanted attention, often in a vain attempt to guard not only their privacy but their legitimacy. (182)

In our, often exhausted, defense, we reach for something to tell such curiosity seekers, trying to find a way to move on with our days.

The story often reached for is that we were born in the wrong body, that we have a deep internal sense of gender—our gender identity!—that doesn’t cohere with our physical form. We appeal to “born this way” narratives, stating that we (in some way) have always known this true, internal gender identity. It is unclear why such an appeal, ringing of Cartesian dualism and a gender essentialism of which we should all be skeptical, is a satisfying story. Perhaps it is just the easiest story to present, one that doesn’t challenge society’s conception of gender or the organizing work gender does to oppress some and privilege others. It is certainly more satisfying than nothing, though not having to provide an explanation would be preferable. But against such intense curious pressure, an approximation will do. Any story that can help us move on with our days will do. Gender identity, and the wrong-body model, often provide this relief from cis curiosity.

This purely prudential use of gender identity is not true for every trans person. We do not all share the same experiences, or the same conceptual preferences for making sense of

¹¹ For more on the idea of being thrown into a category, see Young (1990).

those experiences. We reject such “relentless totalization.” How we explain ourselves and the language we use to talk about our self-understanding should be open and plural. But the aim of theory is not to provide an explanation on which everyone can agree. Theorizing involves questioning and challenging in addition to explaining (Bettcher, 2019). In doing philosophy or theory, we have the freedom to challenge questionable assumptions and to explore alternatives which are often (but not always) free from objectifying curiosity. Instead, we can contextualize our theorizing in our history, in our experiences of oppression, and in our struggle to find new ways to liberate ourselves.

Previously, we said it seems like philosophers have the target phenomenon of “gender identity” wrong. Accounts of gender identity within cisnormative gender metaphysics seem to take it as a stable, explicable phenomenon that is an integral part of trans experience—something that asks for a deep explanation. However, in providing the history of the concept, how it functions in trans-antagonistic medical institutions, and how trans people use it to gain access to medical care and quiet cis curiosity, we hope to un motivate this project. We hope that, with a full knowledge of its use and function in this “diagnostic battlefield” between clinicians and trans people (as Stone (2006) has put it), the question “What is gender identity?” will lose its philosophical *oomph*. We hope to soothe the metaphysical itch to theorize. What may actually require theory are the pragmatics of identifying—as Kukla and Lance (2022) have explored—or the moral importance of such identifying—as Bettcher (2009) and Bell (2023) have explored—or trans experiences of gender that are elided by cisnormative gender theory—as Ashley (2023) or Rowland (forthcoming) explore—or metaphysical theory of gender itself—as exists in the rich literature of feminist theory and trans philosophy. But none of these things need to travel under the overburdened and historically fraught banner of *gender identity*. In light of the considerations presented here, we suggest that philosophers need to either be able to justify their use of the concept and how that use comes apart from and resists the concept’s problematic history, or—our preference—find another concept altogether.

That said, we acknowledge that soothing the metaphysical itch may still require some explanation of the target phenomenon. If what people are talking about when discussing “gender identity” in everyday contexts is this substantive, but problematic, notion of an inner gender identity, then can gender identity be anything at all? What can we intelligibly and unproblematically talk about when talking about gender identity? We hold that absent the substantive notion of gender identity, one’s gender identity just is whatever gender someone *identifies as*. This may be understood as a deflationary account of gender identity. We are not prepared to defend such an account at length here; our primary goal is to undermine the purported motivations for theorizing substantive gender identity. However, in the interest of heading off the itch to provide a rival theory, let us here sketch how a deflationary account might proceed.

Our day-to-day lives are filled with identifying our gender to other people and organizations. In recent memory, these authors have been asked to identify our gender to prospective employers, U.S. passport services, Canada health services, gyms, tattoo artists, and a subscription to ESPN+—to name a few. This is regularly required of all of us, not just trans people. We fill in bubbles, check boxes, and circle Ms and Fs, identifying how we should be perceived, interacted with, and slotted into the algorithms. We contend that all we are doing when talking about gender identity is this activity. That is, we hold that gender identity just is the gender one identifies as.

As with deflationary accounts of truth, we are not so much providing a rival theory of gender identity but saying that gender identity itself has no specific nature that requires philosophical theorizing (Armour-Garb et al 2022). All that can be said about gender identity is exhausted by its function (the act of identifying one’s gender), making it so there is nothing metaphysically substantive or explanatory about gender identity (ibid). We take our cue from Frege (1918):

It is...worthy of notice that the sentence 'I smell the scent of violets' has just the same content as the sentence 'It is true that I smell the scent of violets'. So it seems, then, that nothing is added to the thought by my ascribing to it the property of truth. (6)

While there is debate whether Frege is defending a deflationary account of truth here, the underlying reasoning applies to our case of gender identity. If someone says, "I identify as a woman" nothing important is added to the statement "I am a woman." Consider, by contrast, the following: "I identify as a woman, but I am not a woman." Assuming that the sense of "woman" is the same in both instances in this sentence,¹² this statement is borderline nonsensical. When one identifies as a woman, one is testifying to a fact about themselves. So it seems that nothing is added to the thought "I am a woman" by my ascribing to it the property of my self-identification; to say "I am a woman" is to identify as a woman, and vice versa. Analogously, on the deflationary view that we are sketching here, to identify as a woman is to have a gender identity of "woman." Understanding 'gender identity' as deflationary allows for multiple, ambiguous, and contextual gender identifications, reflecting the ways trans people and others disrupt and selectively engage in self-gendering. It is worth noting that discourses of having one, true Gender Identity fail to capture this reality of trans practice.¹³

In short: Substantive gender identity is often centered in a philosophical literature which aims towards trans inclusion. But this notion of gender identity is also deeply rooted in trans-antagonistic medical institutions, understanding trans experiences as pathologies that must be treated. Trans people's own use of the concept is often pragmatic, a narrative that is easy to reach for when others feel entitled to understand our experiences, and often necessary to parrot when trying gain access to medical care or legal rights. We suggest that this history and use of

¹² There are, of course, important questions about which sense of *woman* is in play. After all, it is perfectly sensible to claim that "I identify as a woman (within trans-positive contexts) but I am not a woman (within transphobic contexts)." Notice two things. First, consider the first clause: "I identify as a woman (within trans-positive contexts)". The same disquotational analysis applies: this is the same as saying "I am a woman (within trans-positive contexts)." Second, these contexts are not created equal. One of them is morally and explanatorily superior. We discuss this further in section 3.

¹³ Thanks to two anonymous reviewers for pressing us to clarify, and one in particular for providing helpful language with which to do so.

gender identity should un motivate the current interest in the metaphysical nature of gender identity, soothing the philosophical itch that popular discussion raises.

However, one may still be concerned, how do we provide a trans inclusive metaphysics without it? How else can we ground those important moral and political responsibilities to trans people? We address these questions in the next section.

3. Objections, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Trans

In this section, we'll discuss objections to the un motivation and deflation of substantive gender identity, and in the process will draw out some commitments of the T4T metaphysics that we endorse.

Recall that, within cisnormative gender metaphysics, substantive gender identity has been used for two related purposes. First, it has been used to include trans people in the gender categories to which we say we belong. The aim here is to use "gender identity" to construct a view on which trans people always count as having the genders we claim, even in transphobic contexts where the local gender categories incorrectly classify us. Second, "gender identity" has been used to ground supposed specific moral rights on the part of, and thus duties owed to, trans people. Intuitively, trans people have a right to access gender-affirming health care, to be referred to using our chosen names and pronouns, to pee in peace, and so forth. Many gender classification practices deny trans people these rights, effectively misgendering us (see Kapusta 2016). Substantive gender identity is taken to bridge this gap. The project of deflating gender identity thus appears to run into two corollary problems. First, it seems to undermine the project of creating trans-inclusive gender metaphysics. Second, it seems to undermine the project of grounding trans-specific rights and duties.

In this section, we will argue that neither of these is really a problem. First, we argue that a sufficiently trans-positive metaphysics cannot be achieved by beginning from cisnormative gender categories. As Bettcher (2013, 2014) has argued, trans-positive gender metaphysics must

take the existence of trans people and our genders for granted, rather than starting on the defensive by working to justify us. We note that much of the recent literature in gender metaphysics fails to give meaningful uptake to Bettcher's arguments here. Second, and relatedly, we reject the claim that there are trans-specific moral rights and duties which need to be defended using special gender metaphysics. Any such rights and duties are grounded in our basic autonomy. If we, again, begin with the assumption that trans people are paradigm cases of the genders we say we have, then gender-based moral rights and duties owed to trans people need no special justification. We will discuss these concerns in order.

First, consider the worry that gender identity is necessary to create a trans-inclusive metaphysics. The thought is this: If feminist theory ought to respect trans identity, then the gender categories that we theorize ought also to respect trans identity. Thus, gender metaphysics ought to establish that trans people are members of the gender categories with which they identify (and are not members of gender categories with which they don't identify).¹⁴ However, many gender classification practices do *not* include trans people as members of the gender categories with which they identify (and do include them as members of gender categories with which they do not identify). The solution, then, must be to understand *gender identity* as constituting or grounding a gender classification that is stable across contexts, even transphobic ones. If this can be done, then our theory can always respect trans people's gender identifications, no matter what the local social practices are like.

We appreciate the fact that respect for trans people's genders has become a basic desideratum for much of the social metaphysics literature. We also acknowledge that many of these projects are ameliorative, aiming to improve our concepts rather than describe social practices (see Haslanger 2012). However, if the goal is respecting trans people's genders, we

¹⁴ For example, here is a common strategy for aspiring social philosophers. First, find an existing view in gender metaphysics; then, critique that view on the grounds that it cannot count trans people in our self-identified gender categories in all cases; finally, either suggest revisions to the existing view, or propose an alternative. Countless conference presentations or journal submissions are generated on this basic model.

don't think these attempts at trans-inclusive metaphysics will solve the problem, for two key reasons. First, dominant gender classification practices are unsalvageable. They do not simply fail to "include" trans people in the correct gender categories, as if this were an oversight that can be rectified with better social theory. They definitionally erase and (paradoxically) thereby justify the brutalization of trans and other gender-diverse people. Our contemporary gender classification processes in the larger U.S./Anglo context are inherited from a legacy of colonialism which normatively centers only certain bodies as properly gendered. In effect, the gender classification practices not only marginalize and erase contemporary trans people, but any differences in gendered, intersexed, racial, ethnographic, religious, classed, disabled, and fat bodies (see Maracle 2000; Lugones 2007; Snorton 2017). Deviation from this colonial cisgender ideal is deemed unnatural and punished.

The problem, then, is not lack of inclusion, but the presence of a definitional, pernicious erasure and hostility. Understanding these hostile categories is key to understanding transphobia and other axes of oppression. However, philosophical approaches which prioritize this understanding—those we've characterized as *cisnormative gender metaphysics*—are not well-suited to capturing trans experience. Not all gender classification practices can, or should, be made trans-inclusive through theoretical means.

Second, we think the notion of "trans inclusion" here is itself problematic. To work towards trans inclusion is to suggest that there is a gender category in play in which trans people are currently *not* included, and thus we must try to change the conditions for category membership such that they will be included. If many dominant gender classification practices are either hostile towards or, at best, baffled by the existence of trans people, "inclusion" in those classifications is neither sufficient for respecting trans gender, nor particularly desirable. Such a strategy will, at best, count (some, binary-identified) trans people as marginal cases of the gender categories they want to occupy (while either erasing nonbinary people altogether or

treating us as an afterthought). It is no great victory to be grudgingly included at the margins of gender categories which are specifically constructed to erase us.¹⁵

Moreover, to try to justify trans inclusion into a category begins from the assumption that trans identities require justification. This is not a fruitful starting point for a project that is trying to respect our genders—particularly since cis identities are not treated as needing justification in the same way. The language of “trans inclusion” therefore presupposes that normatively “ideal” cisgender people are definitionally central to gender categories, and the demands of colonialist gender classification practices must be appeased before trans people’s genders can be respected. We do not accept this presupposition. Rather, we argue that any account of gender which genuinely aims to improve gender cannot begin from within colonialist, racist, cisnormative gender practices. A truly liberatory gender metaphysics must challenge the legitimacy and supremacy of these practices at the root.

This is not a new concern. Bettcher (2009, 2013, 2014) articulates at length the problem with theorizing trans identity from a dominant, cisnormative framework—or, in our terms, why prioritizing cisnormative gender metaphysics is a mistake. She argues that this approach falsely assumes that gender practices in dominant contexts are either the only game in town, or the definitive one. This is both unhelpful and false. Gender practices are cultural and contextual; thus, there are multiple sets of social meanings for any particular gender term, based on multiple sets of social practices. Importantly, however, holding that there are multiple meanings for gender terms does not mean that they are all equal. While dominant cultures may prioritize cisnormativity in their gender classifications, subaltern trans subcultures prioritize the bodies, experiences, and collective self-understandings of trans people.

These subaltern gender practices are not created in abstract theoretical spaces; they arise from real communities of living, breathing trans folks, who are thinking and doing gender in

¹⁵ For more on issues with trans inclusion see Scheman (2022) and Hernandez and Crowley (2024).

ways that may not be obvious to people outside the communities (see Bailey 2011). This is not to say that these categories and classification practices are stable or uncontested. (In truth, *no* gender categories or classification practices are stable or uncontested—trans people often intend to contest cisnormative gender classifications.) Rather, it is to say that alternative gender categories and classifications are grounded in rich histories and involve complex norms and social practices, just like dominant categories. There is no moral or theoretical reason to suppose that these categories are less “real,” or relevant to gender metaphysics, than the dominant, cisnormative categories. Such assumptions are founded in oppressive power relations that we want to challenge. Put differently, cisnormative gender metaphysics is not sufficient for explaining trans existence, but is valuable only alongside the development of a T4T metaphysics that can understand us from within our own resistant communities and practices.

How, then, should we adjudicate when practices vary and conflict? For example: how can we respond to the transphobic person who claims that a trans man is “really” a woman? After all, if there are “multiple meanings,” then isn’t the transphobic person *right* about that, at least within a given context? We think not. Rather, the transphobic person’s classification practices themselves are wrong, in virtue of being both morally bad and explanatorily insufficient.

Bettcher (2014) makes this case by example:

According to an evangelical account of “sinner,” I would count as one. But it does not follow that I am one even though I might meet all the criteria of the evangelical account. In rejecting the claim that I’m a sinner, I’m rejecting the entire picture of the world in which that term has its definition fixed. (243)

On this picture, questions about the legitimacy of various gender classifications are both descriptive and normative. There is no context-independent fact of the matter about who is a man, a woman, or a sinner.¹⁶ These things depend on contingent and localized social realities. As a result, our theoretical approach to gender is always guided by normative commitments—

¹⁶ Ah, yes, the three genders.

whether we are aware of that or not. Questions about which classification practices we ought to accept are not just about how the social world is organized, but about how it ought to be.

Classification practices differ in at least two ways. First, they are not all morally equal. We need not accept transphobic gender classifications as overriding in our gender metaphysics, any more than we need accept that we are really sinners. Second, not all classification practices are explanatorily equal. As Bettcher also argues, trans subaltern communities are perfectly capable of explaining cis people's genders; it's well understood that there are multiple ways of being a woman, some of which are more familiar to cis people (Bettcher 2014, 243-244). But dominant cisnormative frameworks are *not* capable of explaining trans people's genders, at least not in any way that reflects our own understandings. We conclude that trans ways of doing gender are preferable because they are both explanatorily and morally superior.

To sum up: since the gender categories available in dominant contexts are constructed to exclude trans people, we cannot begin a trans-positive metaphysics by attempting "inclusion" in those categories. Rather, we should *attend to* trans identities, by highlighting the gender categories in which we are central and unambiguous members—i.e. the categories that are operative in trans subcultures. Thus, we do not need a substantive account of gender identity to validate trans people's self-identifications, nor should we try to provide one for this purpose. Respecting trans people's genders is not something that can be accomplished procedurally through gender metaphysics. It is a baseline, pre-theoretical commitment, grounded in the reality of trans lives. To begin as if cisnormative practices solely define gender is to assume that the hegemonic power structures which abuse and erase trans people are somehow authoritative over who and what we are. This is a normative and political commitment that we reject.

We now turn to the second worry: how can we ground those special moral and political responsibilities to trans people without gender identity? Our answer to the first worry hints at the answer to this worry. If you care about justice for the marginalized and oppressed, then you have reason to support trans people, use our correct names and pronouns, provide us access to

gendered spaces (creating gender neutral spaces if need be), and give us access to medical care. As the saying goes, “Trans rights are human rights.”

More than mere political slogan, the phrase “trans rights are human rights” captures much of what is going wrong with the inclination to ground special moral and political responsibilities to trans people in a metaphysics of gender identity. Namely, there is nothing special about these responsibilities. As Bettcher (2009) argues, first-person authority is rooted in one’s autonomy. This is not a Kantian self-governing autonomy, but *a right* to autonomy.¹⁷ Thomas E. Hill Jr. (1991) articulates an important sense of autonomy to be understood not as a feature of a person’s moral character, but as something granted to them by a moral community (48). According to Hill (1991),

[autonomy] is a right to make otherwise morally permissible decisions about matters deeply affecting one’s own life without interference by controlling threats and bribes, manipulations and willful distortion of relevant information. (48)

To grant autonomy is to not interfere with others who are making morally permissible decisions that deeply affect their own lives. Hill (1991) notes that such autonomy is defeasible, limited by “principles of justice, noninjury, contract, and responsibility to others” (48). Furthermore, respect for one’s autonomy also dictates that people should not interfere in particular ways, most obviously through physical or lethal coercion, but Hill (1991) notes how emotional manipulation similarly fails to respect people’s autonomy, such as a parent telling their child that, “If you move away, I will commit suicide” (48).¹⁸

Transitioning, both socially and medically, clearly falls within one’s right to autonomy. It is a matter that deeply affects our life, often being integral to our desire to stay alive (see Austin et al. 2022). Importantly, there are no principles of justice or contracts being violated by letting

¹⁷ Thomas E. Hill Jr. (1991) distinguishes between three types of autonomy that he believes philosopher often conflate: Kantian self-governing autonomy, the right to autonomy, and autonomy as a moral ideal. First-person authority is rooted in the right to autonomy, while also related to autonomy as a moral ideal, as we go on to argue.

¹⁸ In this same paper, Hill (1991) makes the helpful insight that “‘Autonomy,’ like many philosophers’ favorite words, is not the name of one single thing; it means quite different things to different people” (44). Perhaps something we should remember when discussing and theorizing about gender.

someone transition; they are injuring no one and they do not fail to show responsibility to others. In fact, Hill (1991) articulates another sense of autonomy where the ideal moral agent “respond[s] to the real facts of the situation they face, not to a perception distorted by morally irrelevant needs and prejudices” (51). “Morally irrelevant needs and prejudices” are exactly the kinds of factors that get in the way of social and medical transition. According to Turban et al (2021), 82.5% of trans people who de-transition (go back to living as their assigned gender at birth) report external factors like familial pressure and societal exclusion as a reason for de-transitioning. Anecdotally, we know of many trans people who have delayed transitioning for similar reasons. Not transitioning when a desire to do so exists may be failing one’s own self, failing to live up to the ideal of autonomy.¹⁹ Those who decide not to transition (or detransition) because of societal pressure and prejudice are having their autonomy neglected. Furthermore, many trans people face familial manipulation like the kind Hill mentions where a family threatens to kick out or excommunicate trans family members if they seek transition. Such pressure and prejudice constitute an immoral interference with a trans person’s autonomy.

Let’s consider one example of how this plays out: misgendering. An important aspect of social transition is being referred to and perceived as your true gender.²⁰ Misgendering often involves a refusal to go along with this part of a person’s transition, limiting the uptake they receive as their true gender. Robin Dembroff and Daniel Wodak (2018) argue that misgendering is morally impermissible because it is disrespectful, it withholds access to important resources (like properly gendered spaces), it makes our behavior unintelligible, and it reinforces sexist

¹⁹ The inference to this conclusion relies on how Hill (1991) understands how the unautonomous (or heterogenous) person is “divided against themselves” when making decisions (50-51). Having a desire to transition but being hesitant due to internalized pressure to remain cis is a clear example of someone being divided against themselves. However, the conclusion that this leads to a moral failure when making decisions follows if you also accept Hill’s view that we can have duties to ourselves—a contentious position to say the least. There is a further worry that given the kind of societal pressures trans people face, this would be unnecessary moralizing since there are very real reasons to avoid transitioning when it can put you at greater risk of violence. We make the suggestion here to show how closely related transitioning and autonomy are in multiple senses.

²⁰ The relationship between outwardly referring to someone’s gender and perceiving them as that gender is messy and morally complicated. For discussion of this relationship see Hernandez (2021).

ideology. They specifically look at how when misgendering makes our behavior unintelligible, we are denied the autonomy to choose what social blueprints apply to us and how satisfactory we find them (176-177).²¹ But additionally, the kind of disrespect and denial of resources can be understood as a coercive act. Misgendering can often serve as a “willful distortion” of how to understand someone, making it more difficult for them to continue their transition. This is especially salient when misgendering occurs in a context where someone is trying to access important resources like restrooms. Misgendering a trans woman when she is trying to use a restroom denies her that resource by calling into question her access, putting her in, often violent, danger. In effect, this serves as a pressure that it is both cumbersome and unsafe to live her gender while navigating the world, limiting her autonomy.

The claim that trans people have an autonomy-based right to transition may ring contentious. Isn't the problem that some people *do* think transitioning violates principles of justice and noninjury to others (often, cis women)? There certainly are such people, though we do not plan on giving them space in this paper. What is important for our present concern is *why* this disagreement occurs. While access to social and medical transition seems clearly protected by one's right to autonomy, many do not see this so clearly. Social and medical transition is politically contested, unlike other autonomous acts (such as freedom of speech). In this way, the autonomy inherent in transitioning is much more like a right to choose abortion than a right to protest. There are political structures in place to marginalize and silence certain people, distorting other people's moral view of the world and what is owed to the marginalized. When we ignore such distortive political interference, it can make marginalized peoples' claims to access appear as special or important.²²

²¹ While we are indebted to Dembroff and Wodak's (2018) discussion of the wrong of misgendering, we disagree with their further arguments that we ought to do away with gendered pronouns of any kind. This further claim runs contrary to a trans history and present that creates and uses alternative gendered pronouns as a means to liberation and understanding. For more, see Hernandez (2021) and Hernandez and Crowley (2024). Thank you to an anonymous referee for encouraging us to specify this.

²² For more discussion on how political structures can marginalize and alter people's point of view with regards to trans people, see Hernandez (forthcoming).

The things trans people deserve are things that everyone deserves. Everyone deserves to have their name respected and to not be misgendered. Everyone deserves access to the gendered spaces in which they feel right (and to not be forced into gendered spaces where they don't). Everyone deserves access to medical care, especially medical care that could save their life. Such statements (except the last one, unfortunately) are not typically contested. People change their names all the time, urinate and dress in the rooms they feel safest, and access medical care without a letter from a psychiatrist. If there is anything special going on here, it is how trans people are treated—i.e., especially badly.

Our current political context makes it difficult to see how average and mundane trans people's expectations of others truly are. We are stuck in a position where the dominant worldview distorts or erases us. As Bettcher (2009) argues, "there is sufficient cultural variability between dominant and resistance contexts that one unacquainted with resistant context is incapable of interpreting" (113). Because of these political and epistemic realities, recognizing trans people's needs as basic rights of autonomy may require extra care and attention to our lives.

In Hill's (1991) articulation of autonomy, he emphasizes how autonomy is not at odds with care and compassion, but how care and compassion are a necessary part of respecting other's autonomy. In fact, autonomy can often require compassion, as Hill "suspects that without compassion one can never really become aware of the morally relevant facts in the situation one faces" (51). It is easy to extend such care and compassion to others like you, allowing you to recognize their right to autonomy. But for those unlike you, significant moral effort may be required.

Hernandez (2021) argues that central to the moral value of gender affirmation is the virtue of a loving attention. Loving attention often requires moral effort to understand a person on their own terms, attending to their "cares, concerns, needs, and desires" (621-2). Hernandez (2021) goes on to argue that this kind of loving attention is central to the moral value of gender

affirmation because it involves truly perceiving us as we are, taking our gender seriously, relating to us in the way we desire, and respecting our autonomy. Such attention takes seriously Bettcher's (2009) notion of first-person authority (FPA): that gender is not about what genitals one has, but how one wishes to be treated. Bettcher considers failures of FPA to involve "inappropriately treating [one's] own interpretive assessment as authoritative" (103), making such failures akin to Frye's (1983) Arrogant Eye.²³ It seems, then, that to ease the worries of how to ground responsibilities to trans people requires not substantive gender identity but a substantive love for us—an attention to our lives and communities that attends to our self-understanding and embraces us for who are. To stop worrying, you must love trans people.

4. Conclusion

Recent work in the metaphysics of gender has focused on giving substantive accounts of gender identity, in a laudable attempt to respect trans people and our gender self-identifications. We seek to un motivate this project. We argue that "gender identity" is not a useful framework for understanding trans experience. The concept of "gender identity" is rooted in an outdated sexology created by cis people, attempting to articulate "wrong-body" narratives of transsexuality. The impact of these origins is clear; trans people primarily call on "gender identity" when we are trying to explain ourselves to the relentless curiosity of our cis family and friends, *not* when we are trying to understand ourselves and talk to one another. Thus, gender identity as a concept serves cis understanding. For trans people, it is prudentially useful; that does not make it metaphysically substantive.

We addressed two objections to this move, both motivated by the concern that deflating gender identity would make it more difficult to do gender theory that is respectful of trans people. First, substantive gender identity is often defended with the goal of creating a "trans-

²³ Frye (1983) contrasts what she calls the Loving Eye with the Arrogant Eye, with the loving eye being akin to the loving attention Hernandez (2021) is articulating.

inclusive metaphysics,” so deflating it seems to harm this project. We argued that the goal of trans-inclusive metaphysics is poorly formed. Dominant colonialist gender categories ought not and cannot be used to explain trans people’s genders. Rather, following Bettcher, we argue that respecting trans people’s genders requires attending to and learning from the gender practices operative in trans subcultures. Second, substantive gender identity is often used to ground trans rights. However, we do not think that substantive gender identity is necessary here. Trans rights are not “special rights,” but human rights. As such, they need no special justification; they follow from a basic right to autonomy. What may be necessary under oppressive, transphobic ideologies is greater loving attention to the lives and communities of trans people.

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