Invariantist, Contextualist, and Relativist Accounts of Gender Terms[*]

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore a range of existent and possible ameliorative semantic theories of gender terms: *invariantism*, according to which gender terms are not context-sensitive, *contextualism*, according to which the meaning of gender terms is established in the context of use, and *relativism*, according to which the meaning of gender terms is established in the context of assessment. I show that none of these views is adequate with respect to

the plight of trans people to use their term of choice to self-identify and be referred to accordingly. I then consider an invariantist view based on *self-identification* and explore some of its challenges.

I. Introduction

Gender terms play a crucial function in our lives. We use them to self-identify and to categorize beings around us. We include and exclude people from various groups based on gender terms, draw policies, and elect presidents. But what exactly is the meaning of such terms? What do "man," "woman," "gender-neutral," for example, mean? Equally important, what *should* they mean?

In the philosophy of language, discussion of the meaning of gender terms has been mostly conducted within what is known as "ameliorative projects." Famously, Sally Haslanger (2000, 2006) has distinguished between conceptual, descriptive, and ameliorative projects. In contrast to the first two, in pursuing an ameliorative project in the philosophy of language we strive to come up with accounts of the meaning of "loaded" terms (gender terms included) that are sensitive to social, moral and political ideals. Put differently, by pursuing an ameliorative project we end up not with what the target terms mean or what concepts are operational in a community (as the conceptual and descriptive projects have it), but with what they should mean in light of the types of ideals mentioned. While such ideals can be incorporated in descriptive projects as well (see, for example, Díaz-León, 2016), it is within an ameliorative mindset that I will proceed in this paper.

While gender terms are widely used, here I will focus on how they are used (or, rather, should be used) mostly by, and in connection to, trans people (in fact, a subgroup thereof—see below). There are at least two reasons for this. First, in most societies trans people face serious discrimination. At a minimum, an ameliorative project involving gender terms should aim at finding an account of such expressions that allows trans people to be treated justly. Second, the way in which gender terms are used by, and in connection to, trans people has been taken to provide a crucial test case for various theories of the meaning of gender terms (both descriptive and ameliorative). Thus, the great majority of the recent

papers tackling gender terms—including the ones I will discuss below—address the issues raised by such use. I will follow suit.

I think the considerations offered apply to all gender terms, a comprehensive analysis of which is obviously a major desideratum for an ameliorative approach. However, to make the paper manageable, I restrict the discussion to the term "man." More specifically, throughout the paper I focus on such sentences as

(G) John is a man,

where John is a trans man who has not undergone gender-affirming medical procedures. The reason for this restriction will become clear in due course.

Before starting, let me specify more accurately what I take the ameliorative enterprise I am engaged in to be. Above, I said that the main goal of an ameliorative account of gender terms should allow trans people to be treated justly (or at least to increase the chances of that happening). Quite plausibly, just treatment entails, in part, allowing trans people to self-identify by using the gender terms *of their choice*.[1] But it is also plausible that a part of just treatment is to demand that the choices trans people make in this connection be respected by others. Translated in semantic terms, the ameliorative project should thus provide an account in which sentences like (G) come out as true *in the right contexts*—those in which trans people themselves utter sentences like (G) (in fact, corresponding sentences containing first person pronouns, such as "I am a man"), but also in contexts in which non-trans people utter them. What exactly *the right contexts* are is a contentious matter; in what follows I will make clear what the authors I discuss take them to be, as well as give my own opinion. Providing an answer to this question is important both for setting the desiderata of an ameliorative semantic theory and for evaluating its success.

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[1] See Barnes (2020), Bettcher (2009), Jenkins (2016)—among many others.

One might, of course, object to this way of pursuing the ameliorative project in relation to gender terms. For example, one might think that focusing on the *semantics* of sentences like (G) (whose job is, among other things, to provide truth-conditions that account for the intuitive truth-values of such sentences on various contexts) is not necessary, since we have other mechanisms (e.g., pragmatic mechanisms like presupposition or implicature, ambiguity resolution, assertability conditions etc.[2]) that might better serve amelioration. Another observation, mostly coming from those interested in the metaphysics of gender, is that tracking "real gender" might not help, or even be detrimental, to amelioration, and that, once we give up that chase, a *pluralist* or even an *eliminativist* view of gender that better serves amelioration opens up.[3] I acknowledge that these other ways of achieving ameliorative goals are legitimate, and that an exploration of the non-semantic mechanisms involved is a worthwhile endeavor. But I also think that the purely semantic route is worth pursuing and that, at the end of the day, it might yield some satisfactory results. Regarding the focus on "real gender", as far as I can tell the views discussed below can be severed from their ontological underpinnings—mostly because they are taken to be ameliorative accounts and thus disconnected from "what there is" (which is not to say that they ignore relevant aspects of reality, especially those about injustice),[4] but I also acknowledge that it is quite possible that a pluralist or even an

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[2] See, e.g., Barnes (2020), Bettcher (2009), Laskowski (2020).

[3] See, e.g., Barnes (2020), Dembroff (2018).

[4] Thus, I am not convinced that the views discussed in what follows (at least not all of them) must be understood as subscribing to what Dembroff (2018) calls "the Real Gender assumption" that, according to them, leads to ontological oppression. In fact, I believe that semanticists are (somewhat) free to adopt all kinds of metaphysical views, and in the case of gender the offer is very rich—including a deflationary account such as that recently proposed by Anthony (2020). There are also voices that deny that ameliorative projects related to trans people are sufficient to improve their lives (e.g., Kapusta, 2016). I agree, of course, that merely *devising* such projects is not enough, but I assume that they do play a role in improving trans people's lives.

eliminativist stance is better for ameliorative purposes. Thus, in this paper I refrain from getting into debates about what is the best way of conceiving an ameliorative project regarding gender terms and focus solely on the "(monistic) semantic way to amelioration"; I do so in the hope that it will make for an interesting and ultimately useful project—one that does not take on unwanted metaphysical commitments.

Bearing that in mind, the goal of the paper is to investigate several well-known positions in the semantics of various natural language terms in order to ascertain which could provide the best ameliorative account of gender terms (particularly "man"). I will thus explore invariantist (Section II), contextualist (Section III) and relativist (Section IV) views, present their main versions and the most important objections that have been raised against them. While some of these views have been discussed at length in the literature (invariantism, contextualism), others have not yet been proposed (relativism). So, part of my aim here is to offer a map of possible positions vis-à-vis the issue in question.[5] Importantly, some of the authors to be discussed have put forward specific semantic views about gender terms but taken amelioration to consist of something other than coming up with a semantic account with the features sketched above. That is fine with me, and confusion should be kept at bay if it is understood that my interest is purely in the *semantic* aspect of those proposals, and not on those authors' different views on amelioration. In addition to this descriptive/critical aim, after concluding that the views scrutinized are problematic with respect to the issue at hand, I venture a positive view. Thus, in Section V, I sketch an invariantist view based on self-identification and discuss various issues, including the need for an account of self-identification. While I acknowledge from the outset that the view I propose needs to be further developed, I am confident that it leads

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[5] Thus, there will be some overlap with previous overviews of such views—e.g., Bettcher (2017); Mikkola (2016); Saul & Díaz-León (2018). I have tried to keep the discussion of such views short and focus on discussing views previously not included.

to an interesting position in the (ameliorative) semantics of gender terms.

II. Invariantist Views

Invariantism about a certain type of expression is the general view that the truth-values of sentences containing the target expression—but no other obviously (or arguably) context-sensitive terms—do not vary across contexts. Take the word "gold," for example. Whether something is gold or not is true in any context, depending solely on whether the thing in question has certain essential properties—say, atomic number 79. Thus, a sentence like "The Statue of Liberty's torch is covered in gold" has an absolute truth-value, and no relativization to contexts or any other parameters is postulated.[6]

When it comes to gender terms, two views on gender have been popular: according to the first, gender is, or is reducible to, biological traits; according to the second, gender is, or is reducible to, societal roles. On the former view, for a subject to be a man is for that subject to possess certain biological markers (usually, penis, testicles, XY chromosomes etc.; similarly for other gender terms); on the latter, for a subject to be a man is for that subject to fulfill a certain role or roles in a society (traditionally, breadwinner, protector, etc.; similarly for other gender terms). As expected, these views infuse the semantics of gender terms. The best way to characterize the semantic views such broad approaches to gender lead to is as invariantist views. Thus, the truth-conditions of (G) according to the former view (call it "biological invariantism") and according to the latter (call it "social invariantism") are given by the first and the second clauses below, respectively:

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[6] In possible world semantics, the framework I operate here with, all sentences have their truth-values relative to possible worlds. I ignore this parameter for simplicity's sake.

> (G) is true iff John possesses biological traits like penis, testicles, XY chromosomes etc.
> (G) is true iff John plays the societal role of breadwinner, protector etc.

As with sentences like "The Statue of Liberty's torch is covered in gold," no relativization to contexts or other parameters is needed; John is man, regardless of the context in which (G) is uttered, if he fulfills the conditions given in the clauses above.

As has been extensively argued (Bettcher, 2017; Díaz-León, 2016; Jenkins, 2016; Mikkola, 2016; Saul, 2012), both these broad views on gender are problematic. One of the main problems faced by the biological view is its commitment to a binary notion of sex. There is ample evidence that the biological traits connected to sex do not divide naturally into two mutually exclusive groups. The existence of intersex people is a case in point. Furthermore, Ayala & Vasilyeva (2015) have recently argued that the binary distribution of biological traits is endangered by the possibility of conceiving sex as "extended." The biological view thus seems to rely on an easily discreditable binary view of sex, without which biological invariantism is untenable.

On the other hand, the main problem for the social view has to do with finding the unique societal role for men required by the definition. As remarked repeatedly, both men and women occupy a multitude of very different societal roles. Perhaps finding a *unique* such role is not something to which the social view on gender is committed, but without delineating at least a relatively well-circumscribed set of such roles, the view is in danger of losing its substantive character. However, even that proves to be notoriously difficult.[7]

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[7] An important view to mention here is Haslanger's (2000). According to her, someone counts as a man/woman in virtue of occupying a superior/subordinate role in society. This definition has been criticized by, e.g., Jenkins (2016); Mikkola (2011); Saul (2012). For a recent defense of the main points of Haslanger's view, see Barnes (2020). Barnes' view, however, is not invariantist.

More important for my purpose here, neither of the two views yields the right result in connection to the truth-value of sentences like (G). According to biological invariantism, (G) comes out as false in any context, given that what it takes for John to be a man is the possession of the relevant biological traits. Since John has not undergone gender-affirming medical procedures, he does not possess the biological traits required by the view, and thus does not count as a man.[8] This is so even if (G) (or, rather, "I am a man") is uttered by John himself. This is a very unsatisfactory result, one that is obviously incompatible with the ameliorative project on the table. On the other hand, according to social invariantism, (G) is true if and only if John fulfills the societal role required by the view (breadwinner, protector etc.). While John fulfilling that role is this is certainly possible, it is equally possible that John does not; if so, (G) comes out as false. Again, this is so even if (G) (or, rather, "I am a man") is uttered by John himself. Tying gender to a certain social role seems quite unintuitive and surely not satisfactory from an ameliorative standpoint, since trans people (John included) want to use gender terms of their choice, regardless of the societal role they happen to play. Both biological and social invariantism are thus unsuitable for the type of ameliorative project pursued here.

III. Contextualist Views

Contextualism about a type of expression is the general view that the truth-values of sentences containing the target expression, but no other obviously (or arguably) context-sensitive terms, vary across contexts, *because* the contents of those sentences are different in different contexts. Many types of expressions in natural language

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[8] Here one can see why the restriction to a sub-group of trans people (that is, to those who did not undergo gender-affirming medical procedures) is important. The biological view could, in principle, yield the right result in relation to the truth-value of sentences like (G) if John is a trans man who did have medical procedures that would confer him the required biological traits.

have been taken to be context-sensitive in this sense, and the perceived variation in truth-value to support contextualism about those expressions.[9] A similar variation is perceived with sentences like (G). For example, in a context in which the issue is whether John should be able to use the men's bathroom (for brevity, BATHROOM), (G) is intuitively true, while in a context in which the issue is whether John should have medical procedures related to female biology or participate in men's sports competitions (for brevity, MEDICAL/SPORTS), (G) is intuitively false.[10] Here, we have an example of what the *right contexts* in which sentences like (G) should come out as true are taken by a theory to be: namely, contexts like BATHROOM, but not contexts like MEDICAL/ SPORTS. Taking such variation into account, several types of contextualist views about gender terms have been proposed in the literature.

A. Attributor Contextualism

Attributor-contextualism about gender terms is the general view that the truth-value of gender-attributing sentences is determined by various factors in the context of utterance (C_U)—that is, the context of the speaker, or of the attributor. There are many contextual factors that have been taken to determine truth-value of sentences in context and many ways in which they do so. For purposes of generalization, I will dub the factor that determines the truth-value of (G) in a context "the count-as parameter." According

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[9] The term mostly used for comparison in the literature is "know," in case of which the truth-value of sentences like "Moore knows that he has hands" is taken to vary between, say, ordinary and skeptical contexts. The debate has opposed *invariantism* and *contextualism*—much like in the case of gender terms. A classical reference for contextualism about "know" is DeRose (1992). For a classical invariantist defense, see Rysiew (2001).

[10] I do not subscribe to the latter intuition. I am assuming it is correct only to present a *prima facie* case for contextualism. I am also not assuming that all contextualists subscribe to these intuitions—although many of them explicitly subscribe to the intuition that, in contexts like MEDICAL, (G) should come out as false.

to attributor-contextualism, then, the truth-conditions for (G) are given by something along the following lines:

(G) is true in context C_U iff John counts as a man in C_U.

A difference between contextualism and invariantism that can be immediately seen is that in the clause above, the truth of (G) is relative to a context of utterance, while in the invariantist clause no such relativization is present.

As expected, the view is well-suited to account for the variation in (G)'s truth-value across contexts. Thus, in BATHROOM, the count-as parameter is simply self-identifying as a man. Since John does self-identify as such, (G) comes out as true in this context. However, in MEDICAL/SPORTS, the count-as parameter is the possession of male biological traits. Since John does not possess such traits, (G) comes out as false in this context.

Although it seems clear that attributor-contextualism fares better than invariantism on this score, it is not problem-free. The problem most relevant for my purposes here is the one that Jennifer Saul (2012) points out in connection to variant of contextualism she herself discusses.[11] Saul notes that (attributor-)contextualism fails short of being sensitive to the ameliorative goals we are after. To see this, one has only to consider that sentences like (G) (or, rather, their negations) are uttered not only by trans people and their allies, but by transphobes as well. Since according to the view the count-as parameter is determined in the context of utterance (that is, by the speaker/attributor), and since the speaker is a transphobe, it is the transphobe that determines the count-as parameter. Presumably, for

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[11] According to Saul's view, the truth-conditions for (G) are as follows:
(G) is true in a context C_U iff John is human and relevantly similar (according to the standards at work in C_U) to most of those possessing all of the biological markers of male sex.
The definition incorporates biological traits, but allows for context-sensitivity by pinning it down to the standards of similarity that can differ across contexts of utterance. Thus, they are what I called "the count-as parameter."

the transphobe, counting as a man amounts to actually possessing male biological traits, and so (G) comes out as false and its negation as true in the mouth of the transphobe.[12] Even if the view yields the right result when (G) is uttered by trans people or their allies, for which the count-as parameter amounts to self-identification, this is a highly unsatisfactory result. While it is important for trans people to be able use the gender terms of their choice to self-identify, it is equally important that such self-identification be respected by others. Here we see a shift in what *the right contexts* in which sentences like (G) should come out as true are taken to be: not only those in which trans people utter sentences like (G), but also those in which such sentences (or their negations) are uttered by transphobes. Attributor-contextualists pursuing an ameliorative project may well be on board with this, yet their view cannot yield the desired result.

Does the problem noted by Saul extend to any version of attributor-contextualism, regardless of the way of conceiving the count-as parameter? One interesting variant[13] that might avoid it is one that takes the count-as parameter to be self-identification, which gives the following truth-conditions for (G):

> (G) is true in context C_U iff John self-identifies as a man in C_U.

Given that John can self-identify as a man in some (types of) contexts (e.g., BATHROOM) but not in others (e.g., MEDICAL/ SPORTS), the view can easily account for the perceived variation in (G)'s truth-value across contexts, since it simply tracks John's self-identification in those contexts. As for the crucial issue, that of the truth-value of (G) in the mouth of the transphobe, the view yields the right result:

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[12] I am assuming that the context of the transphobe is not one in which medical or sports issues are at stake.

[13] Suggested by a reviewer, whom I warmly thank. A subject-contextualist version of the view is briefly discussed in the next section. The case of John self-identifying in some contexts, but not in others, will also be picked up in Section V.B.

the sentence comes out as true and its negation as false—as long as John self-identifies as a man in that context. However, while the focus on self-identification is welcome, I think the reliance on a subject self-identifying in *specific contexts* leads to further problems. Things might work well for simple sentences like (G); however, the view seems to have troubles with more general sentences like "All trans men are men" or "Trans men are men." The procedure of determining the truth-value of such sentences in a (type of) context involves verifying whether each trans man self-identifies as such in that (type of) context. First, such sentences should be true (under an ameliorative approach) across the board and not only relative to a context, without needing to perform the mentioned verification in *any* particular context. Second, some trans men might self-identify as such in the (type of) context at stake, while others might not—yet the sentences in question seem true regardless of that fact, which shows that the mentioned verification in specific contexts is irrelevant for the truth-value of those sentences. Not yielding the right results when it comes to general sentences such as "All trans men are men" is a problematic consequence of any (ameliorative) view.

It might be thought that attributor-contextualism can be saved by making it more flexible. More precisely, what is required in order to solve the problem highlighted by Saul is to conceive the count-as parameter in such a way as to allow it to be determined by the subject of the gender-attributing sentence while still counting as a parameter that is settled in C_U.[14] I am skeptical that such a strategy works, however. First, leaving the decision to defer to the subject in determining the count-as parameter at the latitude of the speaker/attributor will not work for the case in which the negation of (G) is uttered by a transphobe, for obvious reasons. Second, imposing more constraints on when to defer to the subject comes down to providing a principled way of distinguishing between the

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[14] DeRose (2004) has taken such an approach for "know."

cases in which a speaker is to defer to the subject (non-transphobic, non-medical/sports contexts) and cases in which the speaker should not (non-transphobic, medical/sports contexts), while at the same time assuring that (G) comes out true in the mouth of the transphobe. No such principled, non-ad-hoc way seems to be on the horizon.

B. Subject-Contextualism

Subject-contextualism about gender terms is the general view that the truth-value of gender-attributing sentences is determined by various factors in the context of, or having to do with, the subject of the gender-attributing sentence.[15] In other words, using the jargon introduced here, what determines the count-as parameter is not the speaker, but the (situation of the) subject. According to subject-contextualism about gender terms, then, the truth-conditions for (G) are given by something along the following lines:

(G) is true in context C_U iff John counts as a man in C_{John}.

The difference between subject-contextualism and invariantism is that in the clause above, the truth of (G) is relative to a context of utterance, while in the invariantist clause no such relativisation is present. The difference between subject-contextualism and attributor-contextualism is that, while both views relativize the truth of (G) to C_U, the contexts which determine the count-as parameter differ in the way already specified.

It is important to get clear what C_{John} means (or could mean) in the schema above.[16] On one understanding, it amounts to what John takes himself to be in his context—that is, to whether John self-identifies as a man or not (which also amounts to a particular way

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[15] The corresponding view in the literature about 'know' would be *subject-sensitive invariantism* (which is in fact a form of contextualism in my sense), defended for example in Stanley (2005).

[16] Thanks to a reviewer for pressing me on this point.

of understanding the count-as parameter). Given that John can self-identify as a man in some (types of) contexts (e.g., BATHROOM) but not in others (e.g., MEDICAL/SPORTS), the view can easily account for the perceived variation in (G)'s truth-value across contexts, as long as it tracks John's self-identification in those contexts. As for the crucial issue, that of the truth-value of (G) in the mouth of the transphobe, the view yields the right result: the sentence comes out as true and its negation as false—as long as John self-identifies as a man in his own context, regardless of what the speaker (i.e., the transphobe) thinks. However, like the corresponding attributor-contextualist view briefly mentioned towards the end of the previous section, this variant of subject-contextualism also runs into problems with general sentences such as "All trans men are men" or "Trans men are men," and for exactly the same reasons. As before, I take this to be a problematic consequence of the view.

A different subject-contextualist view has been recently proposed by Esa Díaz-León (2016), based on a different understanding of what C_{John} comes down to. The most distinctive claims she makes are that what determines the count-as parameter are not the speaker's beliefs and intentions (what the speaker "has in mind"), but "objective" considerations related to John's situation that are practically relevant, and that such considerations are "the best theoretical and normative" ones we have (the latter including prudential, moral, political, aesthetic etc. considerations). [17] Like

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[17] Díaz-León uses the same similarity-based framework as Saul. The truth-conditions of (G) under her view are as follows:

(G) is true in C_U iff John is similar to most males with respect to the standards that are relevant in John's context, given the practical purposes that are relevant in this context, where this should be determined by our best theoretical and normative considerations. (Adapted from Díaz-León, 2016: 249; the explicit relativization to C_U is mine.)

So, while strictly speaking the count-as parameter is determined by similarity standards, it is the theoretical and normative considerations that do the crucial work. I omit mentioning standards of simplicity in what follows for simplicity's

the two views scrutinized above, this version of contextualism also accounts easily for the variation in (G)'s truth-value across contexts. Thus, in BATHROOM, the count-as parameter, as determined by our best theoretical and normative considerations that are practically relevant, simply consists in self-identifying as a man. Since John does self-identify as such, (G) comes out as true in this context. However, in MEDICAL/SPORTS, the count-as parameter, as determined by our best theoretical and normative considerations that are practically relevant, consists in actually possessing male biological traits. Since John does not possess such traits, (G) comes out as false in this context. Crucially, the view also does well when confronted with the problem that has marred attributor-contextualism: (G)'s truth-value in the mouth of the transphobe. This is not a problem for Díaz-León's view because the speaker/attributor is *not* who determines the count-as parameter, but the normative and theoretical considerations that pertain to the practical purpose of giving trans people the right to use the gender terms of their choice to self-identify. (G) thus comes out as true and its negation as false *in the mouth of the transphobe*—a highly satisfactory result for the ameliorative purposes at hand.

There is thus no doubt that Díaz-León's view is an improvement over attributor-contextualism on this score. Yet, I think it is unsatisfactory on different counts. First, as a couple of authors have remarked (Bettcher, 2013; Laskowski, 2020), the view is in danger of collapsing into a version of invariantism—not necessarily a bad result in itself, but an embarrassment for a view that is promoted as contextualist.[18] A second worry for Díaz-León's view concerns its major selling point: yielding the right result when (G) is uttered by

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sake. I should also mention that Díaz-León does not talk about sports contexts, but I will, in order to preserve continuity with the discussion so far.

[18] To be sure, the version of invariantism Díaz-León's view collapses into is of a different type than the two versions considered in Section II, one that gives radically different truth conditions to sentences like (G)—based on theoretical and normative considerations instead of biological traits or societal roles. It is also different from the version of invariantism I end up proposing.

transphobes. As we have seen, this is accomplished by taking the count-as parameter to be determined by "our best theoretical and normative considerations." But whose considerations are they, exactly? No doubt, the relevant considerations vary across groups; and while there is no problem when the group is formed by trans people and their allies, there *is* a problem when the group is comprised of transphobes. In the latter case, it is their theoretical and normative considerations that determine the count-as parameter and thus the truth-value of (G), which leads to a foreseeable (bad) result. The answer here might be to adopt an objectivist view about normativity, and thus to claim that either the transphobes are right or they are wrong. While this reply in not objectionable *per se* (objectivist accounts of various normative areas are plenty—see, for example, Enoch [2011] for morality), being committed to objectivism in the course of giving a semantic account of gender terms (or of any terms, for that matter) is to bear quite a heavy burden.

A final worry for the view concerns the relationship between the subject and the community whose theoretical and normative considerations are relevant for determining the count-as parameter. While things go smoothly when the subject and community are on a par in this regard, it is not clear what happens on Díaz-León's view when they are not—for example, when the subject has not considered any issues related to gender, or when the subject explicitly holds a different moral, social or political outlook than the community, while self-identifying as a man. Subtle differences in how such cases are conceived might lead to different verdicts for the view, but the lingering worry is that problematic cases might be generated quite quickly. Further, even if the issue of the relation between the subject and the community is circumvented, as Barnes (2020: 728, footnote 47) notes, there might be tensions between moral and political considerations that drive the application of a certain gender term to a subject. Díaz-León is silent about such issues. Thus, while not necessarily decisive points against the

account, they do show the need for Díaz-León to fine-tune her view.[19]

C. Ambiguity/Polysemy Views[20]

A large number of natural language expressions have been deemed to be ambiguous or polysemous. While both presuppose a multitude of meanings an expression can have, the main difference between ambiguity and polysemy has been taken to rest in the relation between those meanings: while there is no relation between the meanings of an ambiguous term (for example, the word "bank" means both a financial institution and the slopes bordering a river, with no relation between them), the meanings of a polysemous term are related in some way (for example, while there are many ways to cut something, all the sense of 'cut' have in common some operation that results in separate parts).

Several authors have proposed construing gender terms as ambiguous or polysemous as well. For example, Talia Mae Bettcher (2009) holds that there are (at least) two meanings of gender terms: a dominant one, embraced by the mainstream culture, and a resistant one, used in subcultures like those formed by trans people and their allies. Bettcher claims that this "multiple-meaning" view is better equipped to deal with the problems faced by trans people that "single-meaning" positions, which comprise both invariantist and contextualist views as I have understood them here. According to the dominant meaning, someone counts as a man if they have certain biological traits; according to the resistant meaning, someone counts as a man if they self-identify as such. A similar view that postulates more than one meaning for gender terms has recently been proposed

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[19] For a more detailed case against Díaz-León's view along similar lines, see Zeman (2020). For other objections, see Bettcher (2017).

[20] While the two authors discussed below reject the label "contextualism," I have grouped their views under such a heading because, according to both, there is variation in truth-value of sentences like (G) across contexts that is due to the meaning(s) of the terms themselves.

by N. G. Laskowski (2020). He claims that gender terms are not ambiguous, but polysemous (that is, they have several, inter-related meanings). Laskowski takes this view to fare better than Díaz-León's with respect to the main issue focused on in this paper, and to invalidate her claim that subject-contextualism has an advantage over Bettcher's ambiguity view.

Presumably, none of these views has issues with accounting for the perceived variation in truth-value of sentences like (G) across contexts (i.e., by selecting different meanings of "man" in different contexts). However, ambiguity/polysemy views, while significantly different from each other, are hopeless when taken to be part of an ameliorative project of the type I am pursuing here. The reasons are essentially those given by Díaz-León (2016) in her criticism of Bettcher's view.[21] In a nutshell, and applied to our example, the problem is that even if some people embrace the resistant meaning of "man," the transphobes are within their *semantic* rights to use the dominant one, since both meanings are part of the overall meaning of the term. This is not like a situation in which someone thinks that "elm" means beech, where we feel no inclination to say that they are right and that there are two meanings of the word; instead, we simply think that that person is wrong with respect to the word "elm." Ambiguity/polysemy views, however, cannot hold this about "man"; their proponents are thus forced to accept that there are contexts in which sentences like (G) are false—not "harmless" contexts like MEDICAL/SPORTS, but ones in which such sentences are uttered by transphobes. Thus, while it is reasonable to say that Bettcher or Laskowski's proposals might work *from a descriptive point of view* (Díaz-León's disagreement notwithstanding), they

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[21] Of course, Díaz-León takes her criticism to apply Bettcher's view taken as a descriptive project, which she takes to incorporate moral, social and political considerations, whereas I take them to apply to the view taken as an ameliorative one.

should not be adopted by someone pursuing an ameliorative project like the one assumed here.[22, 23]

D. An Assertability-Based View[24]

Elizabeth Barnes (2020) has recently put forward a comprehensive view about gender, gender terms and their relation. She aims to provide a middle ground between the view that the metaphysics of gender dictates the truth-values of sentences like (G) and the claim that the meaning of gender terms is given by their use. Thus, Barnes argues that our conceptions of gender influence the truth-conditions of sentences like (G), but they do not strictly

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[22] Bettcher takes amelioration to come down to accepting one of the two meanings of gender terms (the resistant one) and rejecting the other (the dominant one), as the latter is based on and encapsulates a worldview that propagates injustice for trans people. By doing so, one rejects not only the meaning of a word, but the whole worldview on which it is based, thus actively fighting against discrimination of trans people. Laskowski is neutral about what amelioration is.

[23] A different view that might be considered to appeal to ambiguity/polysemy is Jenkins' (2016). Jenkins claims that not one, but two concepts of gender (she focuses on the concept of woman, but quite possibly similar considerations apply to the concept of man, especially in connection to trans men) should be part of an ameliorative project: namely, *gender as class* and *gender as identity*. However, when it comes to using gender *terms*, she claims that "woman" (and, presumably, 'man') should be employed so that to express the latter concept and advises using a different expression to track the former. Thus, Jenkins' view does not face the problems the ambiguity/polysemy views discussed above face. Although she is not explicit about the semantic treatment of gender terms she prefers, I take her view to come quite close (at least in broad outlines) to the view I end up proposing.

[24] As with the views in the previous section, I take Barnes' to be (broadly) contextualist for the same reasons. Regarding amelioration, she takes it to concern assertability-conditions and not truth-values, and is thus in this sense based on pragmatics rather than semantics. While I made it clear that my concern in this paper is strictly with amelioration as a purely semantic enterprise, I consider Barnes' view because i) it seems to be farther away from the usual pragmatic views dealing with presuppositions, implicatures, ambiguity resolution etc.; ii) assertability-conditions are attached to the same entities that bear truth-values (that is, sentences and their contents) and not to other entities (presuppositions, implicatures etc.).

speaking provide them. She defends a contextualist version of the "social position account" of gender—essentially, Haslanger's. The main implications of her view for issues pursued in this paper are expressed in the following quote:

> [The worry that (G) comes out as false in the mouth of the transphobe] can be avoided on the picture I'm defending here. It's a mistake, I think, to focus too much on the mere truth of sentences like [(G)]. Truth is relatively easy to come by for natural language sentences . . . . Communication, on the other hand, is hard. There are probably contexts in which sentences like 'Trans women aren't women' or 'There's no such thing as being nonbinary' are literally true. But it doesn't follow that such sentences are ever assertable, appropriate things to say. There are many things, over and above the basic content, which are communicated by a typical utterance of a sentence like 'Trans women aren't women'. This often includes things like 'Gender is determined by biology', 'There is a correct way to express and experience gender', 'There's something wrong or defective about people whose gender identity is different from the gender they were assigned at birth', and so on.
>
> On the view I'm defending, these are false *in any context*, simply because they misdescribe the basic social reality of gender. . . . Thus even if one can, strictly speaking, truly say in a context 'Trans women aren't really women' or 'There's no such thing as being genderqueer', much of what one typically communicates by such an assertion will be false, making it an incorrect and inappropriate thing to say. (Barnes, 2020: 721-722)

I think there are a couple of unclear points in this account, which might lead to problems. One worry I have is this: According to Barnes, there are contexts in which sentences like "Trans women are not women" are true, yet they are not assertable in any context because they communicate a host of claims that are false (the list in the quote), since they misrepresent (social) reality. While one might agree with what she says about such general sentences, one wonders

how exactly this strategy applies to negations of sentences like (G). Barnes does not discuss such sentences in this connection, but it is not unreasonable to say that she would treat them in the same manner as the more general ones above: that is, she would claim that they are not assertable in any contexts because they communicate (some) false claims. Yet, it is not clear what asserting that John is not a man by uttering the negation of (G) communicates. Is it the same things as in the case of the corresponding general sentence "Trans men are not men" (presumably, the claims on the list)? That seems quite a stretch: how exactly does one get from uttering (G) to communicating that, say, gender is determined by biology? Is it then something else? If so, what is it? Obviously, context should play a great role in determining what is being communicated in a specific situation, but Barnes does not give much detail. However, I contend, such detail is needed in order to ascertain whether then view can successfully apply to sentences like (G) and their negations.

Further, and perhaps more importantly, even if it is clear what a sentence usually communicates (in general, or in a certain type of context), I do not think the strategy works for all situations. Consider, again, medical contexts. Assume that in such a context a doctor asserts the negation of (G) in response to a specific medical problem. Assume also that Barnes' view takes an utterance of such a sentence to communicate *all* the things she claims sentences like "Trans women are not women" communicate. It seems to me easy to imagine, with such assumptions in place, a situation in which the doctor did not intend, nor was taken in that context to communicate *any* of those things. In fact, we can imagine the doctor to take themselves to be a great supporter of trans people's fight against discrimination. If so, then I think we should say that the doctor *did not* communicate any of the horrible things on the list (or any other objectionable ones). If the case is coherent and the diagnosis acceptable, it shows that there are cases in which the negation of (G) is true *and* perfectly assertable, since none of the things on the list

was communicated.[25] This shows that the strategy does not apply to all situations. It is true that Barnes says that the claims on the said list are "typically communicated" (by assertions of the negations of sentences like (G), we assumed), but I do not think the escape route of taking the devised situation to be untypical is plausible here: medical contexts and trans-friendly doctors are (one may hope) quite typical. Barnes' view, then, leads to unwanted results.[26]

IV. Relativist Views

Relativism about a type of expression is the general view that the truth-value of sentences containing the target expression, but no other obviously (or arguably) context-sensitive terms, vary across contexts, not because the contents of those sentences are different in different contexts, but because of differences in the "circumstances of evaluation" (Kaplan's [1989] term) with respect to which they are evaluated. Relativism is one of the main contenders in the semantic debate about a wide array of natural language expressions, such as predicates of taste, aesthetic adjectives,

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[25] The trouble might be with what Barnes takes communication to be. I confess that I am at a loss in this respect: in her description, there seems to be no audience or communicative intentions etc. Maybe she takes the audience to be us, the readers. This strikes me as rather ad-hoc. I am happy to concede that this objection might be based on a lack of understanding of her view on communication.

[26] Some views that have been put forward in the debate about the metaphysics of gender might be thought to have contextualist implications. For example, Mikkola (2011) proposes the "trait/norm covariation model" as a replacement of the sex/gender distinction; Haslanger (2016) adopts a pluralist stance on explanation concerning social kinds like gender; Ásta (2018) takes gender to be socially constructed and spells the latter out in a conferralist framework; etc. Since such views are developed with focus on metaphysical rather than on semantic issues, there is an amount of speculation as to what exactly their contextualist implications are (for example, whether their proponents would adopt attributor-contextualism, subject-contextualism or other forms). As far as I can see, they run into the same problems as the views discussed above, and thus are not suitable for an ameliorative project of the kind I am pursuing—which, of course, does not mean that they are not suitable for other types of ameliorative projects.

moral terms, epistemic modals, knowledge ascriptions etc. In fact, there are several views that go by the name "relativism" in contemporary semantics. Two broad categories can be distinguished: a more conservative and more radical one. Both versions build on Kaplan's distinction between context of utterance and circumstance of evaluation, and both versions situate the relevant parameters in the latter (and not in the content of utterances, as contextualism would have it). Where they differ, however, is the context they claim provides the relevant parameter: the context of utterance (C_U), for moderate versions (e.g., Kölbel [2004]); the context of assessment (C_A)—which is simply any context in which an utterance, possibly uttered in a different context, is evaluated for truth—for radical ones (e.g., MacFarlane [2014]. So, while the first version differs from the orthodox Kaplanian framework in that it introduces more parameters in the circumstance of evaluation, the second postulates an entirely new type of context to which the truth-value of utterances is relativized.

Although (to my knowledge) no one has held a relativist view of gender terms, it might be interesting to explore what it has to offer. While the moderate version of relativism has played a big role in the debate over the semantics of the terms mentioned above, I take the more interesting view for the purposes of this paper to be the radical one. [27] Applied to gender terms, this radical version (henceforth "relativism") holds that the count-as parameter is a part of the circumstances of evaluation and that it is provided by C_A (*not* C_U). In its general formulation, relativism assigns the following truth-conditions to (G):

> (G) is true as uttered in C_U and assessed in C_A iff John counts as a man in C_A.

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[27] One good reason to put the moderate view aside in this context is that the results it yields are similar to those of attributor-contextualism (since the values of the count-as parameter are set by C_u), thus inheriting its shortcomings.

The difference between relativism and both invariantism and contextualism is that in the clause above, the truth of (G) is doubly relative: to a context of utterance (thus distinguishing it from invariantism) and to a context of assessment (thus distinguishing it from contextualism).

Why would anyone adopt relativism about gender terms? On the face of it, the view seems to have some advantages over contextualism. First, like contextualism, it accounts for the variation in (G)'s truth-value across contexts. Two types of situations need to be distinguished here: one in which C_U is the same as C_A—for example, cases in which someone merely utters a sentence, where the person uttering it is also the assessor, and one in which C_U differs from C_A—for example, cases in which a person utters a sentence but a different person, situated in a different context, evaluates it. Since the cases to be accounted for involve a speaker *uttering* (G) in two different contexts, the type of situation relevant in accounting for the aforementioned variation is the former. And relativism accounts for it because, while the count-as parameter is that of C_A, in this case C_A is the same as C_U, and thus the count-as parameter is set in C_U. So, in BATHROOM, (G) comes out as true, since in that context John counts as a man; in contrast, in MEDICAL/SPORTS, (G) comes out as false, since in that context John does not count as a man.

Relativism also yields some right results in situations of the second type—most importantly, in the case that proved problematic for several versions of contextualism, that of sentences like (G) being uttered by transphobes. Thus, when (G) is uttered by a transphobe and assessed by a trans man or an ally, the count-as parameter is that of C_A, not that of C_U, and thus (G) comes out as true because in C_A John counts as a man—even if the sentence was uttered by a transphobe. This neatly solves the problem.[28]

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[28] One possible additional positive point in favor of relativism is that it can account for the fact that after transitioning, some trans people take their previous statements about their own gender as false not only in their current context, but also *when they were made* (that is, they take themselves to have been previously

However, relativism has also obvious disadvantages—most prominently, the fact that it offers only a partial solution to the problem at hand. Thus, while the view yields the right result when (G) is uttered by a transphobe and assessed by a trans man or an ally, it fails to do so when (G) is uttered by a trans man or an ally and assessed by a transphobe. The reason is the same in both situations and pertains to the mechanism for assessing utterances that is built into the view. So, when (G) is uttered by a trans man or an ally and assessed by a transphobe, the count-as parameter is that of C_A, not that of C_U, and thus (G) comes out as false because in C_A John does not count as a man—even if the sentence was uttered by a trans man or an ally. This is a bad result. In addition, the view is also problematic in some of the cases in which C_U and C_A coincide: namely, in contexts in which (G) is uttered by a transphobe, where it predicts that (G) comes as out false, because the count-as parameter is set by C_U—that is, by the transphobe (even if (G) comes out as true in contexts in which it is uttered by trans men or allies).

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wrong about their own gender). This lines up with a phenomenon that has been thought to support relativism: retraction. A retraction is an act of "taking back" an assertion previously made, on the grounds that it is currently false—usually by means of phrases like "I was wrong" (For favorable discussions of retraction in relativist literature, see Egan et al., 2005; MacFarlane, 2014. For critical views, see Marques, 2018, among others). Relativism accounts for such cases because, when trans people assess their claims about their own gender made before transitioning, the count-as parameter is that of C_A and the C_A they occupy now is different from the one occupied before transitioning. Of course, this is good news for relativism only insofar it is a robust phenomenon that trans people take themselves to have been previously wrong about their own gender after transitioning. Despite the existence of a common narrative that might support this idea (expressed, arguably, by statements like "I always knew I was a man," "I knew that something was wrong about my gender" etc.), there surely are alternative narratives concerning transition. What is worse, if such alternative narratives support the idea that some trans people do not, in fact, take themselves to have been previously wrong about their own gender, this might become a problem for relativism instead of a point in its favor. More data on this, as well as extreme caution, is needed here. Many thanks to Em Sun (Mihaela Biolan) and Elin McCready for talking to me about this issue.

Thus, while initially promising, relativism does not lead to significant progress over contextualism, and is thus unsuitable for the ameliorative project pursued here.

As with attributor-contextualism, there might be more flexible versions of relativism.[29] More precisely, what is required in order to solve the problem in the cases in which C_A and C_U differ is to conceive the count-as parameter in such a way as to allow it to be determined by the speaker, while still counting as a parameter that is settled in C_A. Here, too, I have my reservations. First, as before, leaving the decision to defer to the speaker in determining the count-as parameter at the latitude of the assessor will not work for the case in which (G) is assessed by a transphobe, for obvious reasons. Second, imposing more constraints on when to defer to the speaker comes down to providing a principled way to distinguish between the various cases; and while such a principled way has been given in the case of epistemic modals or knowledge attributions, it is hard to see how this could be done in the case of gender terms in a non-ad-hoc manner or without having relativism collapse into a different view. Finally, even if a principled way to construct a flexible view is allowed, it will not help with cases in which C_U and C_A coincide, as this would impose unrealistic demands on asserting.[30]

V. Back Where We Started: A Self-Identification-Based Invariantist View

Simple versions of contextualism and relativism yield wrong results. Their more flexible versions are currently underdeveloped.

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[29] For example, MacFarlane (2011) has proposed a flexible version to account for various cases involving epistemic modals, and the same strategy has been pursued in Zeman (2010) for "know."

[30] That is, it would demand someone in a C_U to consider all the possible C_As and then adopt the count-as parameter from there. See Marques (2014) for making this point as an objection to MacFarlane's account of assertion.

The two invariantist views presented at the outset seem to be non-starters. What are we to do?

I think there is a particular invariantist view that is worth exploring in connection to the type of ameliorative approach assumed in this paper. A lot of the examples discussed in the literature, including those above, involve people self-identifying as being of a certain gender. A natural thought, then, is to investigate an invariantist view in which the only or the key factor for determining the truth-value of utterances like (G) is self-identification. In fact, many authors in the literature have acknowledged the importance of self-identification (Ásta, 2013; Bettcher, 2009; Jenkins, 2016), and as a consequence have included it among the desiderata of an ameliorative project, even if they have different views about what such a project amounts to than mine. In the remainder of this section, I present the general form such a view takes (call it "self-identification invariantism"—"SII," for short) and consider some possible objections.

According to SII in its more general form, the truth-conditions for (G) are given by the following clause:

(G) is true iff John self-identifies as a man.

The first thing to note about it is that no relativization is present: there is no relativization to a context of assessment, as in relativism; but there is also no relativization to a context of utterance, as contextualism would have it. Sentences like (G) have absolute truth-conditions. This is how it should be, as the view is an invariantist one. More importantly, the view easily avoids the problem besetting some versions of contextualism and relativism, that of the truth-value of (G) as uttered or evaluated by transphobes. Simply, the sentence is true if and only if John self-identifies as a man, regardless of what the transphobe thinks. Since he does, (G) is true—end of story.

Put like this, the view is deceptively simple. A lot of issues arise, some of which I discuss in turn below.

A. What Is Self-Identification?

One question that arises immediately concerns self-identification: what is it? The question leads to a worry, namely that, absent a precise answer to the question, the clause for the truth-conditions of (G) given above is useless. After all, if we do not know what does it mean that a person self-identifies as being of a certain gender, then we are not able to establish the truth-value of sentences like (G), and thus we will not be able to say whether a person is a man, a woman—or of any other gender, for that matter.

The question of what self-identification amounts to is a legitimate one, and a very difficult one at that. There are several ways to approach this issue. First, one might simply take a nonchalant attitude towards the question of what self-identification is. Such an attitude could be buttressed by the observation that semantics is not in the business of providing answers to hard questions that, strictly speaking, belong to a different area of inquiry. Compare with the following situation: suppose we want to give the truth-conditions of the sentence "This chemical element is gold." Suppose further that this sentence is true if and only if the element referred to has atomic number 79. Knowing whether the element has atomic number 79 is enough for the semanticist to draw conclusions about the sentence's truth-value. As semanticists, we do not need to know how to determine the atomic number of an element, nor what an atomic number is. Clearly, that is a task for physicists.[31] In a similar vein, in giving the truth-conditions for sentences like (G) above, the semanticist need not come up with an account of what self-identification is—that is, plausibly, a task better suited for sociologists, psychologists or philosophers from different areas of inquiry.

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[31] I take this to be similar to Barnes' (2020) point about the irrelevance of deep metaphysical debates about what a table is for a sentence like "This is a table" having a truth-value.

I am sympathetic to the approach described above, but other, less radical, are available too. A more substantial approach to the issue is not silence, but the adoption of any workable account of self-identification from the literature—provided, of course, it is coherent and does not clash with our ameliorative aims. Luckily, there are several such accounts on the market (e.g., Bettcher, 2009; Jenkins, 2016). The point is not that such accounts are flawless (in fact, they have their critics—see, for example, Barnes [2020] for objections to the two accounts mentioned),[32] but that the semanticist can keep an open mind about which of the competing accounts is ultimately the best without needing to commit to any particular account. To continue the analogy with gold, in determining the truth-value of "This chemical element is gold," under the assumption that the way to identify an element is to know its atomic number, the semanticist need not be worried about debates concerning how exactly to do that or what an atomic number is. A semantic view about gender terms, then, need not stand or fall with any particular account of self-identification. If this optimism is not justified, perhaps there is another way to reconcile competing accounts: to be a *pluralist* about self-identification—that is, to adopt the idea that it amounts to different things in different contexts. Whether extant competing accounts can in fact be reconciled into a pluralist framework is of course something that has to be determined carefully, but the point about the neutrality of semantics, I think, remains.[33]

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[32] One of Barnes' objections is that the views mentioned fail to categorize certain people as gendered. I will address this objection, as it applies to my own account, in Section V.C.

[33] This neutrality allows the proponent of SII to take self-identification to include a social dimension, one that includes gender-related societal norms that might be internalized or opposed. On a view like Jenkins' (2016), for example, "there must be some genuine correspondence between the norms people take to be relevant to themselves and the norms associated with the relevant gender class in at least some context, although this correspondence need not be perfect" (2016: 412). Thus, she takes gender identity to be "a response to the social norms that are associated with the social positions that constitute gender as class. A consequence of this is that the nature of those social positions will have implications for gender as

If the two approaches delineated above are still deemed unsatisfactory, a third attempt at tackling the issue of what is self-identification is to come up with a "minimal" account, one that captures the main characteristics of the phenomenon and which would be hopefully agreed upon by (most of) those involved in the debate. Perhaps the following sufficient condition for self-identification can be taken as a starting point:

> A subject S self-identifies as gender G if S is disposed, under normal conditions, to assent to sentences like '*s* is (a) *g*' and their cognates, where '*s*' is a term that designates S and '*g*' a term that designates G.

Of course, what the "normal conditions" are or should be is a key question. For example, they might require that the subject be sincere. That would rule out spurious self-identifications. Lack of confusion about one's gender should perhaps be included too.[34] To be sure, this is a very sketchy start of a possible minimal notion of self-identification. But, to repeat myself, I ultimately do not think that solving this issue is the semanticist's job.[35]

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identity" (2016: 412). Similarly, SII is compatible with gender identity being complex—that is, a combination of personal and social factors and various ways they mesh.

[34] That is not to say that situations in which people are confused about their gender are infrequent or that people in such situations (perhaps in the middle of a transitioning process) should be ignored by an ameliorative project. But it seems trivial to say that in such cases the question of what one's gender is has (yet) no answer. Also, the case of a subject being confused about their gender is different from the case in which the subject self-identifies as gender-fluid. Nothing in the (putative) definition of self-identification given is meant to exclude such subjects. SII itself is entirely compatible with gender-fluidity. The issue of gender-fluidity's role in fighting gender inequality and oppression by challenging the binary gender system (thought of as presupposing stable gender identities) is interesting. For a discussion of how self-identification with a stable gender identity can be incorporated into a post-identity radical gender theory, see McQueen (2016).

[35] Further modifications to the definition above will be suggested in Section V.C, where I investigate possible problematic cases for SII.

B. Truth-Value Variation Across Contexts

Another kind of worry for SII is related to the perceived variation in truth-value of sentences like (G) across contexts—variation that has played an important role in motivating the contextualist and relativist approaches scrutinized above. Regardless of whether one actually has the intuitions I went along with, it is clear that an invariantist view has problems accounting for such variation by purely semantic means.

Many participants in the debate over the semantics of gender terms (but also in that about the metaphysical status of gender) seem to accept the truth-value variation at stake. While this is unproblematic when it comes to the way gendered terms are currently used (and thus could be the starting point for descriptive projects), the question arises whether such intuitions must be preserved within an ameliorative project. I think "no" is the right answer here. This, then, is another point in which *the right contexts* in which sentences like (G) should come out as true are different from what the other views discussed take them to be. In a nutshell, for the defender of SII, *all* contexts are right contexts—that is, (G) should come out in all contexts: those in which such sentences are uttered by transphobes, but also in scenarios like MEDICAL/SPORTS.[36]

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[36] One might wonder (as a reviewer does) why, if *the right contexts* are taken to be *all* contexts, a more direct argument couldn't have been provided against the views discussed in previous sections. I agree that such a direct argument could have been given. However, I didn't take that route for two reasons. First, as I made clear from the outset, one of my aims in this paper is to provide a map of possible ameliorative semantic accounts of gender terms. Giving the direct argument alluded to above would have directly undermined this aim. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the views scrutinized fail as ameliorative accounts of gender terms not because they don't take this radical view about what *the right contexts* are, but due to their inability to account for the cases they themselves set to account for or due to other aspects that turn out to be problematic. So, not taking the more direct route has allowed me to both consider and criticize a larger array of possible ameliorative accounts, thus giving a more complete picture of the

How can this claim be supported? While making it such that sentences like (G) come out as true even in the mouth of the transphobe has been a desideratum at least for some ameliorativists, not the same can be said about the latter type of scenarios. Yet, I think that a quick look at what is in fact already happening worldwide and an earnest consideration of the true purposes of an ameliorative project are revealing. Regarding medical contexts, many medical facilities have nowadays explicit instructions for medical personnel to use the gender terms their trans patients prefer. Surely such a tendency is worth keeping as part of an ameliorative project. Perhaps more radically, it could be even argued that gender terms should be eliminated entirely from medical practice (it seems plausible to hold that they *can* be, given the many alternatives available—the use of sex terms instead, or of purely biological/medical terms etc.). Regarding sports contexts, in recent years more and more organizations have allowed trans people to participate in competitions for the gender they self-identify with. While many details are yet to be worked out (for example, whether the International Olympic Committee's ruling to base the decision of allowing a person to participate in men's/women's sports competitions on their level of testosterone is the right way to go), it is at least reasonable to hold that such a tendency should be preserved in an ameliorative project.[37] Both these facts seem to me

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theoretical landscape—which I take to have at least some value.

[37] This is very far from doing justice to the multitude of issues that arise in connection to trans people participating in sports competition and which are discussed in the growing literature on the topic. In addition, making the case for trans men participating in men's sports competitions seems to be "easier" than making the case for trans women participating in women's sports competitions. One important issue discussed in this connection is the disparity in physical characteristics between trans and cis women, which presumably gives the former an unfair advantage over the latter; the same disparity, however, is not perceived as problematic when exhibited by trans and cis men. While such issues are highly relevant in discussing trans people's participation in sports, I do not think they are crucial for the point I am making. See the essays in Krane (2019)—particularly Semerjian (2019)—for recent takes on this issue, and Daly (2015) for a discussion

very close to the true commitments of an ameliorative stance. But, if so, the reasons for accepting the perceived variation in truth-value of sentences like (G) across contexts (including MEDICAL/ SPORTS) vanishes, and with it the problem such variation has been thought to pose to SII.

　　A situation that runs counter to taking this stance towards *the right contexts* is the following.[38] Previously, I considered variants of contextualism in which the count-as parameter was taken to be a person's self-identification as of a certain gender, yet which allowed some variation in truth-value across contexts due to the fact that the subject self-identifies as of a certain gender in some (types of) contexts, but not in others. Thus, suppose that John self-identifies as a man in BATHROOM, but not in MEDICAL/ SPORTS (or among friends but not at work etc.). Since this is consistent with the "minimal" view of self-identification put forward above (and, presumably, not ruled out by more substantive views of self-identification), it poses at least a *prima facie* problem for SII by allowing (G) to come out as false in certain contexts.

　　I think that this kind of variation can be accommodated by introducing a context (or type of context) in the right-hand side of the definition above:

　　(G) is true iff John self-identifies as a man in a context C.

What is important to note is that this is not a contextualist (nor a relativist, for that matter) view: there is no relativization of the truth-value of sentences like (G) to any contexts, even though the (types of) contexts in which self-identification takes place matter by playing a role in determining the truth-value of the sentences at stake. Thus, this slight and rather technical modification has at least one important consequence: namely, it accommodates the possibility of variation in truth-value of sentences like (G) while

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related to semantics of sex terms.
[38] Again, I thank a reviewer for bringing this case to my attention.

remaining an invariantist view solely based on self-identification. Additionally, it yields the right result when (G) is uttered or assessed by the transphobe: as long as John self-identifies as a man in a certain context, (G) is true regardless of who is uttering/assessing it. Finally, the view thus modified does not fall prey to the problem contextualist views of this type had with general sentences like "All trans men are men," and "Trans men are men" (as shown in Section III): if someone self- identifies as a man in a (type of) context, then he is a man *tout court*, and since each trans man presumably self-identifies as such in at least one (type of) context, there is no need to check whether all trans men self-identify as such in *any* particular context to deliver the truth-value of the general sentences.

Which exact form the theory will ultimately take depends on what it turns out the right contexts should be, according to our ameliorative desiderata. Here I have shown that, even if one does not take the radical stance towards what those contexts are exposed above and thus allows some variation in the truth-value of sentences like (G) across contexts, SII is well-positioned to handle it.

C. Further Problematic Cases

A third type of worry concerns other types of possible problematic cases for the view. SII takes the key factor for determining the truth-value of (G) to be John's self-identification as a man. But what happens if self-identification is missing? There are several reasons why this might occur.

First, imagine that John is, for all intents and purposes, taken to be a man by all members of his community, leads a life full of "manly" activities, conforms to stereotypes associated with men etc. John, however, does not self-identify as a man, but as being of a different gender. Second, consider a similar scenario in which John does not self-identify as a man, but neither does he as being of a different gender; as a reviewer helpfully put it, "it's not that [John] *refuses* to self-identify as a man; rather, it's not something [John]

ever considers." Third, a more radical case has been brought up by Barnes (2020): namely, that of cognitively impaired people who do not have the means to self-identify, but to which we would hardly refrain from assigning a certain gender. In all these cases, SII predicts that (G) comes out as false.

Further problems might come from cases in which John does self-identify as a man, but in less than optimal, or strained circumstances—for example, when he does so because he has (or feels he has) no choice, he is afraid for his wellbeing etc. Here the view predicts that (G) comes out as true in these contexts, but it is not clear that this is the right verdict.

What can be said in reply? The answer depends on the case. In the first, in which John does not self-identify as a man but as being of a different gender, despite living a "manly" life, being perceived as a man, etc. the element that presumably drives the intuition that (G) is true in this context is John's lifestyle and the perception of others. Yet, it seems to me that the best reply here is to reject that intuition and claim that, in fact, John is right and everyone else is wrong. That is, what has to be accounted for is the intuition that (G) is false in this contest, and the view delivers precisely that, given that the self-identification condition is not met.[39]

The second problematic case mentioned above, that in which John does not actively refuse to self-identify, but simply does not consider the issue of his gender at all, strikes me as very far-fetched. Given the important role gender plays in our lives, and the extant pressure to "adopt" a gender or another, it is hard do believe that someone would simply not consider the issue (I am assuming here that John is an adult). But philosophy is full of far-fetched scenarios, so this answer might not be satisfactory. What I find most promising instead is to resort to a conditional element: if John were to consider

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[39] This seems to fit well with Jenkins' (2016) claim that using gender terms so that to encode concepts of "having a gender identity" is the better option from an ameliorative point of view.

the issue of his own gender, he would self-identify as a man.[40]   This can be made part of the minimal notion of self-identification sketched in Section V.A., or be explicitly introduced in the clause for the truth-conditions of sentences like (G).

The third problematic case on the table is that involving cognitively impaired people that lack the capacity to self-identify but to which we do not hesitate to assign a gender. This is a complicated case, and one in which I think the proponent of SII must (somewhat) bite the bullet. The answer, I believe, has the best chances to alleviate the problem for the view is that in such a case it is *indeterminate* whether (G) is true or not. After all, the key feature in establishing the truth-value of sentences like (G) is missing, and, by the design of the case, this situation cannot be remedied. (Compare this with the situation in which we have lost all means to calculate an element's atomic number: assuming that this is the only way to identify an element, a sentence like "This chemical element is gold" might be true, but we would have no way to find out.) Claiming this, however, is compatible with ascriptions of gender to the cognitively impaired for practical purposes—in situations like MEDICAL, for example. Under the proposed fix, such a practice would be similar to the way we sometimes take imprecise sentences or those we know are false to be true for practical purposes. Granted, postulating this type of indeterminacy is a burden for the proponent of SII, but how detrimental it ultimately is to the view might only become clear after a thorough comparison with rival views is undertaken.

Finally, the case in which John self-identifies as a man because he has (or feels he has) no choice. I agree that something here is amiss. While the sincerity condition might be extended to cover this case too, and thus exclude the case as problematic, this does not seem to get to the heart of the matter. A better alternative is to require that self-identification be done freely, without constraints

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[40]   It is important that here that John is able, in principle, to consider the issue of his own gender. This is not true for the next case.

from external factors. As before, this condition can be made part of the minimal notion of self-identification itself or be explicitly introduced in the clause for the truth-conditions of sentences like (G).[41]

VI. Summary and Conclusion

In this paper I have investigated three well-known views in the semantics of natural language terms (invariantism, contextualism, relativism) in order to ascertain which could be adopted by an ameliorative approach to gender terms (specifically, "man"), understood as a purely semantic business. I have found various versions of these views wanting. I have then reconsidered invariantism and proposed a view that takes the unique or the key element that determines the truth-value of sentences like (G) to be self-identification. I have explored several problems arising for this view and tried to answer them. While I acknowledge that this is only one way of pursuing an ameliorative project among many, I hope that it will prove useful at least for some ameliorativists.

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[41] Thus, factoring in all the possible modifications mentioned in this subsection, the truth-conditions for (G) will be something along the following lines:
    (G) is true iff John, after considering the issue of his own gender, freely self-identifies as a man.

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性別詞的恆定主義、脈絡主義及相對主義

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（陳湘韻譯）

摘　要

　　本文探討的是數個現存與可能的關於性別詞的改良型語義學理論：根據「恆定主義」，性別語詞的意義無關於脈絡；根據「脈絡主義」，性別詞的意義是在使用脈絡中被確立；根據「相對主義」，性別詞的意義則是在評價脈絡中被確立。本文指出這些理論都面臨一個困境，即，它們皆無法妥適處理跨性別者選擇符合其自我認同的性別詞。作者提出一個基於自我認同的恆定主義的分析，並討論這樣的處理所面臨的一些挑戰。

關鍵詞：跨性別、自我認同、恆定主義、脈絡主義、相對主義