

Gender, Gender Expression, and the Dilemma of the Body*

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ABSTRACT: In recent years, avowal has become increasingly central to the trans practice of gender. In this paper, I argue such avowal-based practices represent an attempt to escape the limitations and vulnerabilities of our bodies. But I also argue that this strategy is costly. For in draining the body of any relation to gender, we risk depriving ourselves of what is most valuable about our lives with gender in the first place.

Introduction

In recent years, *avowal* has come to increasingly structure our life with gender. Many of us are by now familiar with the practice of the pronoun circle, where at the beginning of classes, meetings, interviews, etc., each participant briefly states what pronouns they are to be addressed with. In this practice and others like it (e.g., the coming-out post), individuals make their gender known through a speech act of avowal. I will refer to these practices and the implicit self-understanding of those engaged in them as the *ideology of avowal*, or IA for short (to be clear, I'm using ideology in its descriptive, non-pejorative sense).

My objective in this paper is twofold. My first is to explain why trans communities developed IA in the first place, and accordingly why IA should be of theoretical interest. After defining IA in §1, I recount in §2-§6 how IA emerged as an attempt at creating a freer and more

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fulfilling life with gender expression, in the face of an older, oppressive understanding of gender that placed heavy constraints on one's body. I then show that IA combats this older understanding of gender by declaring individual linguistic expressions of gender (like avowal) to be authoritative on the matter of one's gender, while simultaneously deeming the body wholly irrelevant to gender and gender expression. In developing this picture of IA, I also a) defend an account on which gender is *essentially* expressive and b) use this account to formulate a novel argument (THE EXPRESSIVE ARGUMENT) that establishes the reality of trans people's avowed genders, independent of any commitment to IA's broader rejection of bodily gender expression.

My second objective is to ask whether IA can actually fulfill its aim of granting us a more satisfying expressive life with gender. And in §7-8, I argue that we should be concerned about its prospects. For in eliminating the bodily expression of gender and replacing it with individual avowal, IA not only renders gender an inherently private and individualistic affair, but also cuts off trans people from the many embodied practices that have long given meaning and joy to our communities.

We thus face a dilemma when it comes to gender: i) reject the body's expressive capacities, as IA does, and risk losing what we found most meaningful about our lives with gender in the first place or ii) admit the body's expressive capacities, and leave us vulnerable again to the manifold oppressions that can be visited upon us insofar as we are embodied, social creatures. I make no suggestions in this paper about which horn of the dilemma we should take. My goal is only to argue that the dilemma exists.

1. Avowing gender

It is worth saying from the outset that the practices of gender avowal I focus on are far from the only practices that trans communities have developed to resist oppression. Indeed, in

§7-8, I will discuss at length how avowal interacts with the many other liberatory practices developed in trans spaces.

Nevertheless, I think it is especially important to investigate practices of avowal in this moment. In part, this is because of the rapid uptake they have received both inside and *outside* of trans communities in recent years. Indeed, the institutional adoption¹ of pronoun-related practices is among the most visible effects of trans activism, to the point that pronouns have become, at least in popular discourse, metonymic for the whole of trans politics.

But I also think that practices of avowal remain undertheorized in philosophy. For while there has been a recent flowering of philosophical work² on gender and gender identity, including work that discusses the relevance of “self-identification” to gender, I think that the deeper reasons as to why avowal has become so central to how trans communities conceive of gender has not been adequately spelled out. My goal in this paper is thus to argue that the shift towards avowal is rooted in a problem that the body’s capacity for expression poses for trans politics. I then argue that this problematic of the body should be of philosophical interest, even if one thinks that self-identification accounts of gender are otherwise misguided.

Let me first dogmatically state how I understand IA, based on my own experiences as a trans woman and the experiences of other trans people I am in community with.³ It is a way of thinking about gender structured by the following underlying principles:

¹ See, e.g., Caitlin Carlson and Emma Hansen, “Pronoun Policies in Public Schools,” *George Mason University Civil Rights Law Journal* no. 32 (2022): 261-298; also Benjamin Ale-Ebrahim, Tristan Gohring, Elizabeth Fetterolf, and Mary Gray, “Pronouns in the Workplace,” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 7, no. CSCW1 (2023): 1–30.

² For an overview, see Rach Cosker-Rowland, “Recent Work on Gender Identity and Gender,” *Analysis* 83 no. 4 (2023): 801-820.

³ For ethnographic evidence, see Hayley McGlashan and Katie Fitzpatrick, “‘I Use Any Pronouns, and I’m Questioning Everything Else’: Transgender Youth and the Issue of Gender Pronouns,” *Sex Education* 18, no. 3

1. Linguistic avowals of gender (e.g., statements like “I am a woman” and “My pronouns are she/her/hers”) can constitute *expressions* of gender that settle the question⁴ of one’s gender kind membership.
2. Such linguistic avowals of gender are not merely authoritative regarding the question of one’s gender, but are in fact the sole means through which the question of one’s gender kind membership is settled.
3. Accordingly, the body and bodily expression are all irrelevant to one’s gender kind membership.
4. This focus on the linguistic expression of gender will ultimately grant us a freer and more satisfying expressive life with gender.

The ultimate claim of the paper will be that discounting bodily expression in the manner of (2) and (3) conflicts with the goal, articulated in (4), of granting us a more satisfying expressive life with gender.

I acknowledge that it may initially be highly unobvious that our ordinary practices of avowal imply anything like (1)-(4). Indeed, because such practices have proliferated widely into predominantly cis spaces that are far removed from their native trans contexts, the original underlying motives for IA are now rarely reflectively articulated. Nevertheless, by delineating the historical circumstances in which IA was formulated, I hope to convince you that (1)-(4) are in fact the implicit guiding principles that undergird trans practices of gender avowal.

(2018): 239–52; also Marcos Norris and Andrew Welch, “Gender Pronoun Use in the University Classroom: A Post-Humanist Perspective,” *Transformation in Higher Education* 5 (2020): 1-11.

⁴ That is, an expression of a state S necessarily entails that state S obtains. See §2 for clarification.

I imagine many readers will find (2) and (3) to be particularly contentious. After all, why should deferring to people about their gender imply anything about gender's relation to the body? A fuller justification of IA's commitment to (2) and (3) will come in §6, but as a first-pass defense, consider how in pronoun circles, one's gender is common ground only once one has declared it. Assuming someone's gender based solely on their embodied characteristics is in fact a major faux pas, even if one might think that their manner of bodily comportment provides overwhelming evidence of their gender. Only their avowal can settle the question of their gender. In this way, we can already see in IA a certain discounting of the body.

That IA is committed to (1) may also be contentious. Indeed, as I discuss in §4, several philosophers distinguish gender kind membership from gender identity, and argue that avowals of gender aim at settling one's gender identity, but not necessarily one's gender kind membership.

The motivation for such views is usually the following: if we take the standard Haslangerian⁵ picture on which gender kind membership is grounded in one's social position, then a mere speech act could not possibly establish one's membership in a gender kind. After all, my social position is externally determined; what I personally say or believe cannot change it. Therefore, (1) is untenable.

However, this line of thought continues, my avowals *might* be sufficient to establish my gender *identity*, where this can be understood as either the gender I avow of myself, the gendered

⁵ The locus classicus is Sally Haslanger, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?" *Noûs* 34, no. 1 (2000): 31–55. But for a more recent articulation, see Elizabeth Barnes, "Gender and Gender Terms," *Noûs* 54, no. 3 (2019): 704–30.

norms I experience as being relevant to myself, or the gender that I *wish* to be treated as.⁶

Consequently, we should interpret trans people's avowals as avowals of gender identity, while aiming to eventually replace gender kind membership with gender identity in our conceptual toolkit, as a matter of ameliorative justice.

But as I argue in §5, (1) is actually more than tenable, once we recognize that an avowal of gender (and more broadly, one's gender identity) can be an *expression* (i.e., manifestation) of one's gender kind membership, in the same way that a smile can be a manifestation of one's happiness. Hence, an avowal of gender *can* settle the question of one's gender kind membership in the same way that a smile can settle the question of whether one is happy. Consequently, there is no reason to say that avowals of gender establish only one's gender identity, and not one's gender kind membership.

But more importantly, paying proper attention to expression will allow us to better see IA's underlying concerns about the body as a site of gender expression, such that we can better understand the deeper problem that motivates it. Indeed, IA reveals a deep and difficult dilemma in our relationship to our capacity for embodied expression, a dilemma that should be of philosophical interest, even if one otherwise rejects the account of gender implicit in IA. And this dilemma lies in the fact that our bodies are both the means by which we obtain a flourishing existence, and yet simultaneously often obstacles to such flourishing.

2. Some preliminaries on expression

I will begin my discussion of IA by arguing for an intuitive, and yet underappreciated fact about gender: that it is an essentially expressive affair. Indeed, the next few sections will seek not

⁶ For an example of the second, see Katharine Jenkins, "Amelioration and Inclusion: Gender Identity and the Concept of Woman," *Ethics* 126, no. 2 (2016): 394–421. For an example of the third, see Quill Kukla and Mark Lance, "Telling Gender: The Pragmatics and Ethics of Gender Ascriptions," *Ergo* 9, no. 42 (2023): 1130–1159.

only to elucidate the theoretical underpinnings of our commonplace talk about gender expression, but also to argue that expression should have a central role in our theories of gender.

But before discussing gender expression in particular, some clarificatory points about what I mean by “expression” are in order. Now, the word “express” has found a litany of uses in philosophy. However, I will be using the word in roughly its most colloquial sense: that is, when we speak of someone “expressing” their frustration or sorrow through crying, or more relevantly for my purposes, when we speak of someone expressing their gender through their behavior. In this usage, expression is a three-place relation between an agent; a state that the agent is in; and some action, attributable to the agent, which expresses that state.

More precisely, I’ll say that an agent expresses a state S just in case she makes S manifest through some (intentional or unintentional) action attributable to her, such that others who witness the action are, in principle, in a position to know that she is in state S. Importantly, this act of revealing or making manifest one’s states is distinct from an act of describing or reporting on S.⁷ When you inadvertently smile, you express your happiness to me without reporting on your happiness to me. Similarly, enthusiastically exclaiming “I’m so happy!” is not merely a report of my happiness, but also an action that makes my happiness manifest.

Crucially, this notion of expression is applicable only to those revelatory actions that are attributable to agents—in particular, those actions for which an agent can be subject to normative assessment qua member of the revealed state. Thus, while Jupiter’s orbit may reveal that it is a gas giant, we do not think that Jupiter is a defective gas giant if it fails to make that status

⁷ See, e.g., William Alston, “Expressing,” In Max Black (ed.), *Philosophy in America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 15-34 or Sue Campbell, *Interpreting the Personal: Expression and the Formation of Feelings* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998) or David Finkelstein, *Expression and the Inner* (Harvard University Press, 2003) or Dorit Bar-On, *Speaking My Mind: Expression and Self-Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009).

manifest through its orbit, or resent it for revealing its being a gas giant in one way, rather than in another. Similarly, while I may manifest my pollen allergy by sneezing, I will not be the object of criticism or resentment if I fail to sneeze one day in the presence of pollen. We do not express states like brute biological properties or dispositions⁸.

Actual instances of expression are, moreover, *factive*.⁹ Someone's expression of S metaphysically entails¹⁰ that they are actually S. After all, I can only *show you* that I am S if I am S in the first place. For example, I can only show you the money if I've got the money.

Of course, this is not to deny that I can pretend to be happy by *pretending* to manifest happiness through, say, feigning a smile. But feigned expressions of happiness are not actual expressions of happiness. And while feigned expressive acts may, in practice, be hard to distinguish from actual expressive acts, this is an epistemic issue that is orthogonal to the metaphysical claim that actual expressions of a state necessarily coincide with that state's obtaining.¹¹

⁸ Indeed, that we can express gender gives us good reason to distinguish it from sex. Now some may object to the claim that we can't express biology by noting that I can state that I have an allergy. But these statements are reports of my allergy, not expressions of it. Moreover, while telling the truth (or lying about) my allergy may open me to normative assessment qua honest person, it does not open me to normative assessment qua allergic person.

⁹ Compare the discussion of manifestation in Casey Doyle, "'Transparency and self-knowledge,' by Alex Byrne." *European Journal of Philosophy* 27, no. 2 (2019): 515-518. As further evidence that showing/revealing/manifesting is *factive*, consider the infelicity of the following sentences:

It's possible to derive an "ought" from an "is". Nevertheless, Hume showed the impossibility of deriving an "ought" from an "is".

Through her actions, her love for me was revealed. But she didn't actually love me.

¹⁰ That is, a veridical expression of state S necessarily entails that state S obtains.

¹¹ This is also not to deny that I might sincerely believe that I am happy and assert as much, while not actually being happy. For in such a case, while I *would* genuinely express my belief that I am happy, I would *not* express happiness, since by hypothesis there is no state of happiness for me to manifest to you. That one can express a sincere belief about an emotion one thinks one has, while failing to have that emotion, is what makes unconscious mental states possible. See David Finkelstein, "Making the Unconscious Conscious," *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 330-46.

I call the states that we can express in this sense *expressive kinds*. Some examples of expressive kinds include beliefs, desires, the emotions, character traits, and—as I will argue in §3—gender. For it is a hallmark of these states that others will expect me to manifest them through certain socially normal behaviors, and that I can be subject to normative assessment qua possessor of those states depending on whether I manifest them in the appropriate manner. Thus, if I love my partner, others will expect me to manifest that love in the appropriate circumstances by (say) missing her when she is gone, getting her a thoughtful gift on our anniversary, etc. Similarly, if I believe in God, others may expect me to manifest that belief in the appropriate circumstances by publicly professing my faith in God. And if I do not manifest my love in the expected manner or manifest my belief that God exists by publicly professing my faith, my peers may then judge that there is something defective or deviant about my love/belief, and exhort me to act differently.

Importantly, these normative assessments of my status qua loving partner/believer depend on there being assertable generics (call them *expressive generics*) about how loving/believing people normally express their love/belief. And likewise with other expressive kinds. Thus, when someone judges that there is something bewildering or off-putting about someone who is stone-faced and grim even when they claim to be happy, this is because, *normally*, human beings smile to express happiness.

However, expressive generics are not mere statistical facts formulated about people who already have a pre-existing individual capacity for self-expression. Rather, that there are true expressive generics regarding how members of an expressive kind normally act is a *condition of possibility* on our individual capacity for self-expression.

To see this, recall that expression has a communicative function: it puts others in a position to know how it is with us. Accordingly, we can express ourselves only if there are already sufficient regularities around what actions express what states. In the absence of such regularities, you simply could not be in a position to know what state an act of mine manifests. Thus, my individual ability to express my happiness through smiling depends on the fact that *normally*, human beings smile to express happiness.¹² If there were no regularities at all with respect to why humans smiled, such that some smiled out of anger, others out of hunger, and still others out of nausea, then it would be impossible for us to make manifest our happiness to one another through smiling. For my smile would not put you in a position to know that I was happy (as opposed to, say, angry).

Expressive generics also have a kind of *social* normativity¹³ baked into them (that this normativity is merely social is crucial; in many circumstances, we may have good reason to flout these generics.) For as several philosophers¹⁴ have argued, our status as a social species means that we have a vested desire in being mutually intelligible to one another. And this desire is an internal feature of our practice of making folk-psychological ascriptions, and by extension, our practice of expressing those ascribed states to one another. Thus, to assert that normally, happy

¹² This doesn't mean that new modes of expression cannot be invented. Rather, it means that new modes of expression are invented by riffing on/playing off of already-existing regularities in expression. Thus, a sarcastic smile that in fact expresses outrage is possible only because normally, smiles express happiness. Indeed, all expression is citational. See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹³ While I do not take a stand here on exactly how to understand this social normativity, fittingness is a good candidate. Compare the discussion in Rach Rowland, "The Normativity of Gender," *Noûs*, 58 (2023), 244–270.

¹⁴ See e.g., Victoria McGeer, "The regulative dimension of folk psychology," in *Folk psychology re-assessed*, eds. Daniel Hutto & Matthew Ratcliffe, (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 138-156 or Tadeusz Zawidzki, "The function of folk psychology: Mind reading or mind shaping?" *Philosophical Explorations*, 11 no. 3 (2008): 193–210. However, I should note that the argument to follow does not strictly rely on expressive generics being inherently normative. Even if you hold that expressive generics are merely statistical, it is well known that statistical generics often suggest their normative counterparts in hard-to-cancel ways.

people smile, and then judge that someone is happy because they are smiling is not merely to make a statistical guess at what that person is privately experiencing. Rather, it is to enact a framework through which we expect that person to become intelligible and familiar to us. Indeed, we are often deeply invested in how other people express themselves to us, in a manner that outstrips merely wanting to make accurate predictions. For this reason, expressive generics have an inherently normative valence that some other generics lack.

Interestingly, the *normal* in “normal circumstances” is not limited to what is normal for all human beings. It can also include what is normal for my culture. Thus, consider how in the US, I can express grief by dressing in black and donning a mourning veil. My ability to do this depends on the fact that in our culture, wearing black and donning a mourning veil is *taken* to be a way of expressing grief. If we did not have a practice of wearing black at funerals, then wearing black would not put others in a position to know of my grief. Hence, it would not be a successful expression of grief. Moreover, given that we *do* have such a practice, flouting the practice can open me to social criticism that my grief is insufficient, or in some way defective.

3. Gender, gender expression, and the bodily ideologies

That what counts as a state’s normal expression can be culturally malleable is crucial for understanding IA. For talk about our cultural expectations around gender expression is both commonplace and highly consequential for our relationship with our genders. Indeed, IA is best understood as attempting to change our culture’s conventions around the normal expression of gender. For IA is meant to combat two older ideologies about gender that conceived of proper gender expression as deeply tied up with the subject’s body. I refer to them as the *bodily ideologies*.

The first bodily ideology that IA is opposed to, which I call the *anatomical ideology*, holds that certain anatomical facts about a person's body determine what gender a person can genuinely express. These facts paradigmatically include the kind of genitalia present. But they also include factors like the subject's sex chromosomes, the levels of estrogen and testosterone present in the bloodstream, the gametes produced, and more. Someone (say) with a penis, XY chromosomes, etc. will then be marked as needing to engage in actions that express manhood, and as incapable of expressing genuine womanhood.

The second bodily ideology, which I call the *behavioral ideology*¹⁵, builds on this by telling us *how* to properly express the gender that the anatomical ideology says we are, by coding certain behaviors as normally expressing either masculinity or femininity. One is then trained to habitually exhibit the behaviors appropriate to one's gender, with these behaviors then serving as the actions that give expression to one's gender. Those who fail to act as prescribed will be marked as defective and in need of correction. For example, a woman who fails to be deferential to others, wear feminine clothing and makeup, put family over career, or walk and talk in a sufficiently "ladylike" manner will be marked as a bad woman who requires correction.

Crucially, both bodily ideologies deal with gender expression. For the bodily ideologies together state i) what possibilities of gendered self-expression we think are metaphysically available to one and ii) what actions we hold that one must perform to properly express the gender that one has the metaphysical capacity to express. And their oppressive effects are a result of how they regulate our expressive lives.

¹⁵ Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination* (New York: Routledge, 1990). The anatomical ideology could be understood as a biopolitical ideology that works in concert with the disciplinary behavioral ideology, although I do not pursue that thought here.

That the behavioral ideology deals with expression is clear. For it tells us *how* to properly make manifest the gender that the anatomical ideology says we can genuinely express. Thus, in the West, it tells people with vaginas that they must dress in a certain way, that their sadness should be expressed in a particular way, and that they must refrain from expressing more “masculine” emotions like anger or pride. And this expressive repertoire itself is how one properly expresses one’s womanhood.¹⁶

But the anatomical ideology is also caught up with gender expression (for this reason, the anatomical ideology is not merely a theory about biological sex, since we do not express brute biological facts.) For it makes metaphysical claims about what sorts of gender expression are so much as possible for one, given the fact of one’s body. It says, for example, that the exhibition of behaviors associated with womanhood on the body of someone with a penis is, as a matter of metaphysical necessity, not an expression of genuine womanhood. Rather, it says such behaviors are rather the expression of a mere facsimile of actual womanhood, and of a defective manhood.

To see this, notice that nobody denies that trans women are *effeminate*. We were called “sissies” long before any sophisticated theorizing about gender happened. As such, not even the proud, self-identified transphobe denies that in acting effeminately, a trans woman expresses some state of hers that is *akin* to what cis women express through acting in a feminine manner. This is a crucial point.

But the anatomical ideology holds that because this behavior is instantiated on a particular kind of sexed body, the state which it expresses is necessarily not true womanhood. At most, it is a defective masculinity that is a facsimile/perversion of womanhood, and thus

¹⁶ Compare the discussion of “moral genitalia” in Talia Mae Bettcher, “Intersexuality, Transgender, and Transsexuality.” *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015), 407–27.

something that is not worthy of the same recognition. The ordinary-language contrast between “effeminacy”¹⁷ and “femininity” marks this distinction between the true womanhood that those assigned female at birth (AFAB) can express, and the mock womanhood which the anatomical ideology says is the best that those who are assigned male at birth (AMAB) can express.

Something similar happens with manhood and non-binary genders.¹⁸

One might compare the anatomical ideology to a canine-exclusionary theory of pain which stipulated that behaviors that look like our usual expressions of pain—e.g., twitching, crying out, etc.—cannot express real pain, but at best something that is a facsimile of pain *if* the body on which they are manifested has the chromosomal profile of a dog, rather than that of a human being. This theory would not deny that dogs express *something* like pain through their embodied behavior. But it *would* deny that they were expressing genuine pain that was as worthy of concern as human pain.

The anatomical ideology thus comprises metaphysical beliefs about what bodies have the capacity to genuinely express what gender. The behavioral ideology then imposes *normative* constraints on those bodies, so categorized. Of course, both constraints are pieces of ideology that we can come to recognize as distorting and unjust, in the same way that we can recognize the canine-exclusionary theory of pain as distorting and unjust.

Expression is therefore integral to gender, even on traditional, trans-exclusionary ways of conceiving gender; indeed, gender is an expressive kind. Notably, this observation is consistent with the social position accounts of gender often advanced by philosophers of gender. For much

¹⁷ Effeminacy – the quality in a man of having characteristics traditionally associated with women and regarded as inappropriate for a man.

¹⁸ When it comes to non-binary genders, the anatomical ideology’s presumption that gender is binary would lead to the conclusion that *no one* can genuinely express a non-binary gender.

of one's gendered social position arises *through* one's being expected to express a particular gender, in a particular kind of way. Much of the subordination of women is routed through their being expected to express their womanhood through particular embodied behaviors.

However, taking the expressive aspect of gender seriously allows us to build on social position accounts in important ways. For on many social position accounts, it is not immediately obvious why those thrust into masculinized social positions are *also* often severely harmed by patriarchy.¹⁹ After all, how could being marked for privilege result in harm? Similarly, the very existence of transfeminine people takes on a paradoxical character: indeed, why would anyone *want* to take up a social position that is marked for subordination, if they were not already marked for it? Cis women, of course, have no choice, since they are marked for such subordination from birth. But if one is not already so marked, as many transfeminine people are not initially, then what could drive one to *invite* such marking? (To be clear, I'm not saying that social position accounts necessarily get us the wrong result on these questions. Rather, I'm saying that they tend to be silent on these questions.)

But by taking expression seriously, we can fill these lacunae. For *anyone* who is gendered by the bodily ideologies (whether in the masculine or feminine direction) is someone whose expressive capacities have been *severely constrained* and subjected to invasive regulation, even if the masculinized are given some other privileges relative to the feminized. Moreover, because femininity is not just a social position, but also a mode of self-expression that is forbidden to some, we can understand why transfeminine people would long for it, even if doing so marks them for subordination.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Debbi Stanistreet, Clare Bamba, A Scott-Samuel, "Is patriarchy the source of men's higher mortality?" *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* 59 (2005): 873-876.

Taking note of the expressiveness of gender thus yields a unified account not only of women's oppression and trans oppression, but also of the harms that patriarchy inflicts on cis men. For each harm is routed through the constraints that the bodily ideologies place on someone's expressive life. It also helpfully suggests that the natural way to combat gender oppression is to intervene on these expressive constraints and to craft a freer expressive life with gender. And this is precisely what IA tries to do.

4. Transmedicalism

But before proceeding to IA itself, we must first recount one earlier and very different response within trans history to the oppressive effects of the bodily ideologies. Doing so will help us better understand what the communities who later formulated IA were responding to, and thus what the original underlying motives of IA were. This early conception of transness did not reject the bodily ideologies outright. Rather, it tweaked the bodily ideologies (by altering how the anatomical and behavioral ideologies related to one another), while still broadly conforming to the expressive constraints that they articulated. I refer to this conception of transness as *transmedicalism*.²⁰

Transmedicalism was, for many years, the dominant conception of being trans. It is characterized by an emphasis on "passing" as the gender one identifies with by undergoing an extensive process of medical transition. The language of "being a woman trapped in a man's body" derives from this tradition, and its central tenets are that i) being trans is constituted by desiring, on the basis of severe gender dysphoria, to undergo full medical transition in order to

²⁰ Kai Jacobsen, Aaron Dever, and Edwin Hodge, "Who Counts as Trans? A Critical Discourse Analysis of Trans Tumblr Posts," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 46 no. 1 (2021): 60-81.

pass, and that ii) passing, together with medical transition, allows one to become the gender that one says one is, regardless of one's birth anatomy.

Importantly, transmedicalism merely alters the division of labor characteristic of the bodily ideologies, while still making use of their raw material. Thus, notice that the notion of "passing" as a particular gender *does not* challenge the demands of the behavioral ideology. Rather, it reinterprets those demands, such that they are now not *merely* normative, but also possessed with ontological purchase. It says that someone who can "pass" as a gender has a claim to really being a member of that gender, regardless of their birth anatomy.

Transmedicalism tries to carve out a small, fledgling space in the domain of the bodily ideologies for some trans identities. Nevertheless, it by no means washes its hands clean of the oppressive pedigree of the bodily ideologies. (And that is why IA was developed.) Thus, a complaint frequently made about the notion of passing is that it *strengthens* the oppressive power inherent to the behavioral ideology. Indeed, "passing"-talk not only reifies traditional cis norms regarding masculinity and femininity, but actively marginalizes and invalidates *both* trans and cis people who either do not wish to, or cannot approach those behavioral norms.²¹ So for example, transmedicalism tells trans women that to really be women, they must not only express their womanhood by undergoing an extensive medical transition that erases any trace of "maleness" from their bodies, but that their womanhood is contingent on their body then never deviating from the biological and behavioral traits expected from women.

²¹ See Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Sexual Ambiguity*, eds. Kristina Straub and Julia Epstein, (New York: Routledge 1991), 280-304 or Spencer Garrison "On the limits of 'trans enough': Authenticating Trans Identity Narratives," *Gender and Society* 32, no. 5 (2018): 613-37 or Jacobsen et al., "Who Counts as Trans?"

Consequently, transmedicalism encourages trans people to view their bodies as *liabilities* that require constant medical surveillance and intervention, lest they fail to meet the norms of one's gender, and thereby undermine one's ability to express the gender that one wishes to express. For while transmedicalism *does* allow bodies to express genders other than the one assigned to at birth, this ability is conditional on that body *perfectly* recreating the norms of that gender—something that requires constant intervention and vigilance.

The moment the body falls short of those norms, it ceases to express that gender and *instead* expresses the person's status as a mere facsimile of that gender. For example, the moment a trans woman's voice accidentally drops in pitch, her body betrays her by expressing a latent masculinity that thereby compromises her "realness" as a woman.

And given the numerous demands of the bodily ideologies, it is only inevitable that one's body will at some point fall short. For our bodies are ultimately brute biological objects that we never fully master, and which can impose distressing limits on our capacity for successful self-expression.²² (To take a case that doesn't involve gender: imagine wanting to cry to express grief, but finds yourself physically incapable of doing so, and how distressing this inability might be.) Different bodies will, of course, also vary in their ability to live up to the many expressive demands of transmedicalism and the bodily ideologies. Accordingly, in those myriad moments in which they inevitably outrun our control, our bodies naturally appear to us as recalcitrant obstacles that imperil our ability to control what gender we express, and therefore to *be* the gender that we wish to be.

²² This has been called the body's "drag on signification". See Bidy Martin, "Sexualities without genders and other queer utopias." *Diacritics* 24 no. 2/3 (1994): 104-121.

5. THE EXPRESSIVE ARGUMENT

IA is therefore not only a rejection of the original bodily ideologies, but also a corrective against transmedicalism. Its central strategy is to eliminate the possibility that one's body might pose an obstacle to expressing one's gender, by eliminating the bodily expression of gender and replacing it entirely with linguistic expression. In this way, IA aims to create a freer and more fulfilling life with gender expression, while undoing the injustice that body normativity naturally engenders.

Take a practice like the pronoun circle. This practice defies the behavioral and anatomical ideologies by stipulating that we learn the truth of a person's gender not by anything bodily, but purely through what they say. *In addition*, it says that the only expressive disposition I can be expected to have in virtue of my (say) being a woman is that I make the corresponding avowal when prompted. Thus, regardless of how it is with my body—both in terms of its brute anatomy and how I comport myself in it—the rule is that my avowal not only settles the question of my gender kind membership, but also that there is *nothing* bodily that could go on to undermine the normative status of my gender.

We will delve deeper into IA's rejection of the bodily expression momentarily. But let's first return to a worry we discussed in §1: that an avowal of gender simply couldn't settle the question of one's gender kind membership. (Those who are not moved by this worry may wish to skip ahead to §6.)

This is a reasonable worry, and one harbored even by theorists otherwise sympathetic to trans politics. After all, if I tell you that I am kind, such a self-identification may establish that I *believe* I am kind. But it does not settle whether I *am* kind. Merely saying that one is kind is not sufficient for manifesting kindness.

However, avowals of gender are not like this. To reiterate, even a proud, self-identified transphobe would happily admit that an AMAB person, just in saying that she is a woman, is, in doing so, *making manifest* her effeminacy (in a way that someone who merely reports that they are kind need not, in that very act, be manifesting their kindness). That is, *even on the bodily ideologies*, an AMAB person's sincere avowal of womanhood is enough to manifest not just something about what she believes, but also something about the quality of her gender—namely, that her manhood is defective and in need of correction, that she is a sissy, etc. After all, if an AMAB person goes around insisting to everyone that she is a woman, this is *enough* to mark her as less than a real man, and therefore, to mark her for subordination and ridicule. In this way, even cis modes of talking about gender are already committed to the idea that one can express gender through speech.

My intervention is to merely ask that we drop the prejudicial convention that stipulates that a trans woman's avowal of womanhood is a manifestation of mock womanhood/defective masculinity, rather than actual womanhood. And if we accept this, it immediately follows from the factivity of expression that trans women are women. Here's the argument:

THE EXPRESSIVE ARGUMENT

P1. In avowing their genders, trans people express their gender kind membership.

P2: Expression is factive.

C: Trans people's avowals of gender entail their gender kind membership.

Much more succinctly, a trans person's avowal can establish their gender for the same reason that a smile can establish that someone is happy. Crucially, accepting this argument does not require one to accept IA's stronger claim that *only* avowals express gender.

To be clear, THE EXPRESSIVE ARGUMENT does not claim that the merely saying the words “I am a woman” makes one a woman, any more than forcing a smile onto one’s face makes one happy. It also doesn’t say that my gender kind membership is identical to my avowal (after all, my smile is hardly *identical* to my state of happiness). Nor does it say that one cannot have false beliefs about one’s gender (indeed, most trans people once falsely believed that they were their gender assigned at birth!)

Rather, THE EXPRESSIVE ARGUMENT asserts the expressive generic that my genuine avowal of gender expresses my gender kind membership²³. Consequently, genuine avowals of gender entail membership in that gender kind. And this is hardly an idiosyncratic result unique to gender. Genuine exclamations of joy like “I’m so happy!” both assert truth-apt propositions, while also revealing my joy, and thereby entailing that I am joyful. And others can *learn* from my avowal of happiness that I am happy.

Importantly, THE EXPRESSIVE ARGUMENT’s claim that a genuine avowal of gender entails that one *is* that gender is a claim about the metaphysics of gender. It is not the epistemological claim that, in practice, genuine avowals of gender are always easily distinguished from non-genuine ones.²⁴ Rather, it shows that if *given* a genuine avowal of gender, one’s gender kind membership follows.

²³ One might object that we should instead say that acts of gender expression only express one’s gender identity. But this is implausible. Consider the criticism that some cis man is acting effeminately. The criticism here is directed at what his actions (are taken to) express about his manhood—not what his actions express about his beliefs about his manhood. The same holds in the trans case.

²⁴ Notably, I make no claims about whether knowledge of one’s gender is had in any special first-personal way, in contrast to Talia Bettcher, “Trans Identities and First-Person Authority,” in *You’ve Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity*, ed. Laurie Shrage, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009), 98–120. I merely claim that expressions of gender entail gender kind membership.

For this reason, it might seem that there is something trivial about THE EXPRESSIVE ARGUMENT, since all the heavy lifting is done by the premise that trans people genuinely express their genders. But that is by design: most trans-friendly theorists are, I think, already willing to accept that trans people can genuinely express their genders in the sense of expression that I have described. And as I've stressed, even trans-exclusionary discourse recognizes that how trans people act expresses something about their gender, as evinced by the existence of vocabulary like "effeminate".²⁵

Of course, savvy trans-exclusionary theorists will deny P1, and insist that (say) trans women's expressions of womanhood do not express genuine womanhood—just mock womanhood or defective masculinity²⁶. But we can now see this denial for the prejudice that it is. For expressive kinds are often *multiply realizable* (indeed, this is why gender is irreducible to biological sex.) Thus, many philosophers allow that animals with very different biologies from us nonetheless experience and express genuine pain. Insisting that trans women could never express true womanhood, because of their biology, is on a par with insisting that (say) dogs, because of their biology, can never express true pain.

With that, the worry from §1 that avowals of gender cannot settle the question of one's gender kind membership evaporates. Consequently, trans-friendly theorists can avoid a great deal of complication that has recently arisen in the literature, in which discussions of gender identity have become detached from ontological discussions of gender kind membership.

²⁵ Notice that even if you remain unconvinced that avowals of genders are expressions of gender, so long as you accept that trans people *can* express their stated genders through some means, we can argue from that expressive act to gender kind membership.

²⁶ They may also opt to say that gender is not something that can be expressed. But this requires us to attribute enormous error to ordinary speakers, who frequently talk about gender expression and who (for example) acknowledge that trans women express effeminacy.

For while many trans-friendly philosophers have put forth insightful accounts of gender identity and gender classification, these accounts often either remain noncommittal about or deny that there is a relationship between the gender one avows and one's ontological status as a member of a gender kind. For example, Kukla and Lance posit that avowals of gender are attempts to locate oneself in social space, but remain agnostic about whether such avowals have any connection to one's gender kind membership. Similarly, both Bettcher and Jenkins propose a twin concept view of gender, on which the word "gender" is effectively polysemous between gender identity and gender kind membership, but leave the relationship between these two conceptions of gender unclear.²⁷

Now, I do not deny that that a distinction *can* be made between gender identity and gender kind membership (in the same way that a distinction *can* be made between the expression of pain and the pain itself.) Nor do I deny Kukla and Lance's important observation that avowals of gender do not have a *merely* fact-stating purpose. But unless we posit that a trans person's avowal of gender (i.e., their gender identity) entails their gender kind membership, we risk doing violence to trans people's self-understanding of what their avowals articulate. For in my experience, trans people do not take the self-knowledge we express through our avowals to be knowledge merely of what pronouns we prefer, or of what gender-segregated spaces we would like access to. We also take it to be substantive, factual knowledge about who we are.²⁸

²⁷ See Talia Bettcher, "Trans Women and the Meaning of 'Woman'." *Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings, Sixth Edition*, eds. Raja Halwani, Nicholas Power, and Alan Soble. (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 233-250 or Katharine Jenkins, "Towards an Account of Gender Identity," *Ergo* 5, no. 27 (2018): 713-744. More radically, Robin Dembroff, "Real Talk on the Metaphysics of Gender", *Philosophical Topics* 46, no.2 (2018): 21-50 argues for a reject the assumption that our statements about what gender we are track gender kind membership facts, while Barnes, "Gender and Gender Terms" argues that we must separate out practical questions about who we count as women from ontological questions about gender kind membership.

²⁸ That avowals of gender entail gender-kind membership facts is also necessary for the dispute between trans people and the trans-antagonistic to be intelligible. For while trans-exclusionary theorists frequently accuse trans

THE EXPRESSIVE ARGUMENT does justice to this intuitive self-understanding. For gender identity (which on most accounts, consists partly in the gender that one is disposed to avow of oneself) just is a way in which one's gender kind membership is expressed. It therefore settles the question of the avower's gender kind membership. Hence, trans people's avowals of gender *do* entail their underlying ontological status as members or non-members²⁹ of gender kinds. There is no gap between gender identity and gender kind membership.

THE EXPRESSIVE ARGUMENT also clarifies the nature of the harm of transphobia. For while most accounts of the wrong of misgendering³⁰ argue that it constrains one's autonomy (e.g., by restricting one's ability to situate oneself in social space, or author one's own identity), I think the deepest wrong of transphobia is far more basic than that. After all, we do not need to posit anything about canine autonomy in order to make sense of how the canine-exclusionary theory of pain wrongs dogs. For in both the denial of the reality of trans people's genders and the denial of the reality of the pain of animals is a callous denial of our most basic status as feeling and experiencing subjects who have an inner reality—a status that we share with all sentient life.

6. IA's rejection of the bodily expression

THE EXPRESSIVE ARGUMENT vindicates commitment (1) of IA (see §1). Nevertheless, as we have said, IA does not rest content with (1) alone—and indeed one can accept THE EXPRESSIVE ARGUMENT while rejecting the rest of IA.

women of believing in fictions and of being deluded about reality, they clearly do not think that we are mistaken about the fact that we *identify* as women. Rather, they think we are mistaken about the fact that we *are* women.

²⁹ It is true that trans people sometimes make avowals that only locate them within a broad category of gender kinds (e.g., as non-binary), without indicating their membership in any particular gender kind. *But this does not mean that their avowal is not about gender kind membership.* After all, it is part of one's avowal of being non-binary that one is neither a man nor a woman.

³⁰ E.g., Bettcher, "Trans Identities and First-Person Authority" and Stephanie Kapusta, "Misgendering and Its Moral Contestability," *Hypatia* 31, no. 3 (2016): 502–19.

So why have trans people felt pressure to assert the stronger claim that *only* avowals of gender express gender, rather than resting content with the weaker claim that avowals of gender are *one way* of expressing gender? In short, although the latter claim secures the reality of trans people's genders, it is silent about whether being a member of a gender can still carry normative expectations about how one comports one's body. In this way, THE EXPRESSIVE ARGUMENT cannot fully accomplish IA's goal of thoroughly rejecting transmedicalism and its oppressive legacies. For the worry is that if we allow any expressive connection between the body and gender to stand, even in an incredibly weak form, we will inevitably court an exclusionary cisnormativity.

To see how this pressure arises, consider the case of a trans man, Carl, who confidently avows his manhood, but nevertheless occasionally wears dresses because he enjoys the feel of them; suppose that Carl also refrains from getting top surgery, because he feels no dysphoria about his breasts.

Now, IA is committed to asserting that Carl is not only a man (as THE EXPRESSIVE ARGUMENT does), *but also that his manhood in no way falls short of any normative standards.* After all, the whole point of IA is to allow Carl to live his manhood, without that manhood imposing any oppressive constraints on how he must comport his body. Indeed, a central tenet of the rejection of transmedicalism (a rejection which IA is the product of) has long been the claim that one need not experience gender dysphoria to be trans, and that to assume so is itself cisnormative.³¹

³¹ See Jessie Earl, "Do You Need Gender Dysphoria to Be Trans?" *Advocate* <https://www.advocate.com/commentary/2019/1/18/do-you-need-gender-dysphoria-be-trans> and

But if the bodily behavior of wearing a dress, or the characteristic of not being bothered by having breasts is still regarded as normally expressive of womanhood, then it is simply too easy for others to take Carl's wearing dresses or happily having breasts as a sign that his manhood is defective—for them to take *what his body expresses* (womanhood) as compromising the normative integrity of the gender that he expresses *linguistically* (manhood).³² For as was argued in §2, to see action X as expressive of state Y just is to hold that in the socially normal case, action X manifests that one is Y. And if one is Y, but does not do X (and in fact does something that is normally expressive of *not being* Y), it is all too easy to conclude that there is something defective about one's Y-ness.

Thus, if someone insisted that they were happy (i.e. linguistically expressed happiness), while sobbing uncontrollably (i.e., expressed unhappiness through their body), we would find it incredibly easy to conclude that there was something defective about this person's happiness, even if we accepted that they were happy. For sobbing just does, in normal circumstances, express an emotion incompatible with being happy.

In like manner, someone could grant that Carl is a man (as THE EXPRESSIVE ARGUMENT requires), while still classifying his manhood as defective and in need of correction, because he comports his body in a manner normally expressive of womanhood. In this way, Carl's body would again be a liability to his manhood. He would again be exposed to the exclusionary criticism that transmedicalists levied against trans people who could not, or did not wish to pass. This is unacceptable to IA.

³² Compare Cressida Heyes' claim that "the expression of one gender may limit the possible meanings or opportunities to others." See Cressida Heyes, "Feminist Solidarity after Queer Theory: The Case of Transgender," *Signs* 28, no. 4 (2003): 1093–1120.

Cases like Carl's are not mere thought experiments: they routinely occur in trans communities, where the legacy of transmedicalism looms large. The issue is also not restricted to binary trans people; indeed, an especially salient problem in trans spaces is the expectation that non-binary people act in a stereotypically androgynous manner, and the frequent assumption that people who do not exhibit such androgyny must be within the binary.

As such, many trans people embrace not only THE EXPRESSIVE ARGUMENT, but the stronger position that no non-linguistic embodied behaviors express any particular gender. For expression just does carry within it an implicit social normativity that raises anew the specter of transmedicalism.

Consequently, IA must assert that things like how I walk, talk, or dress simply express nothing about my gender. For as we argued in §2, one's individual capacity to express state S by doing action A depends on the availability of the expressive generic claim that normally, doing A expresses S. Hence, by rejecting the expressive generic that wearing dresses expresses femininity, IA subverts the ability of anyone to express femininity in through such behavior.

That IA's rejection of bodily expression is a drastic maneuver is undeniable. After all, in most aspects of our expressive lives, we are happy to allow our bodies to speak for us. Ordinarily, my smile itself puts you in a position to know that I am happy. You need not wait upon my avowal of happiness to know what my smile expresses.

Nevertheless, because IA emerged in the context of transmedicalism's oppressive policing of gender expression, it was extremely tempting for trans communities to opt to simply cut the body entirely out of the picture, and replace its expressive capacities with those of individual speech. For the thought was that our genders should be settled by the story that *we* tell

about ourselves—not the story that others take our bodies to be telling about us, based on our cultural expectations around what embodied behaviors normally express what.

IA’s hope is that individual speech will provide a more satisfying form of gender expression that is also less likely to reinforce gender norms of any kind. For on IA, even if I, as a woman, choose to wear dresses, my wearing dresses does not impugn the manhood of someone like Carl.³³ This is because wearing a dress does not, under IA, express womanhood. Only an avowal of womanhood expresses womanhood.

7. IA and individualism

This concludes our reconstruction of IA’s origins. I hope to have shown that, given its own goals and the circumstances in which it developed, (1)-(4) are indeed implicit guiding principles of IA.

Let us then proceed to the second aim of the paper. For while IA has not even remotely supplanted the bodily ideologies in most places, I think it is important for those of us who inhabit the counterpublics shaped by IA to inquire into the state of gender expression in our communities, and to ask whether IA actually grants our communities a more satisfying expressive life with gender. And I think there are two broad concerns that one might have regarding IA’s ability to do so: firstly, that it renders gender an inherently individualistic and non-communal affair; and secondly, that in detaching gender from the body, it deprives us of what we found most important and meaningful about our lives with gender in the first place.

³³ Compare the account in Graham Bex-Priestley, “Gender as Name,” *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 23, no. 2 (2022): 189-213. On this account, while I may associate my gender with certain behaviors, my associations are not expressive of what it is to be that gender, any more than the idiosyncratic, personal associations I have with my name X are expressive of what it is to be named X.

Let's start with the first worry. Now, as we've said, IA replaces the bodily expression of gender with individual acts of avowal. Moreover, this emphasis on individual speech is designed to prevent the assertion of expressive generics about any gender that impose normative constraints on the bodies of people of that gender.

However, this poses a challenge to the trans communities which have long been repositories of knowledge about gender and transition. For IA implicitly equates any transmission of embodied knowledge about how to express one's newfound gender with the oppressive influence of a pernicious ideology.

To see this, consider how transmitting substantive knowledge about how to express a particular gender requires us to formulate statements like "as non-binary people, we do Y". But this requires us to formulate the kind of generics about embodied expression that IA forbids. After all, if I say that non-binary people express their gender by resisting traditional binary norms of dress, then IA worries that I will inevitably insinuate that the non-binary people of whom the generic is false are defective instances of their gender.

At this point, it may be objected that generics are sometimes used only to express statistical generalizations that have no normative upshots. In this way, perhaps knowledge-sharing could continue in trans spaces without compromising individual autonomy. However, this objection misses the fact that the relevant knowledge-sharing is knowledge-sharing about how one *expresses* one's gender. And as we argued in §2, expressive generics *do* have a normativity baked right into them, since our practice of ascribing and expressing our inner states to one another is an inherently normative affair.

But even if one denies that expressive generics are intrinsically normative, Sarah Leslie³⁴ has argued that statistical generics and normative generics are incredibly difficult to separate in practice. As such, a merely statistical generic may conventionally implicate something normative in a way not easily cancelled. Thus, suppose I say, “Non-binary people usually dress in an androgynous manner. Of course, some don’t, and I’m not saying that there’s anything wrong with that.” In a context where the specter of gender policing is salient, it seems reasonable to worry that such an utterance might still covertly implicate something exclusionary.

Finally, one might worry that even if the assertion of the merely statistical claim implicates nothing normative at all, it still encourages an inference pattern (i.e., from not looking androgynous enough to not being non-binary) that we have political reasons to reject, even if it is empirically sound.³⁵

Accordingly, for all these reasons, the idea that people of the same gender can pass substantive, inherited knowledge to one another about gender expression is often cast as problematic in pro-IA spaces.³⁶ Indeed, in my experience, trans people early on in their transition are often enjoined by their peers not to rely on any received wisdom about what their gender means, but to decide for themselves what they *want* it to mean. For to rely on others’ understanding of their gender would be to capitulate to societal stereotypes about gender.

³⁴ Sarah Jane-Leslie, “Carving up the Social World with Generics,” *Oxford Studies in Experimental Philosophy* (2014), 208–31.

³⁵ Compare the inference “If someone lives in the US, they fluently speak English.” This may be a statistically good inference. But we have political reasons to reject it.

³⁶ On the account in Bex-Priestley, “Gender as Name,” it is rendered unintelligible. After all, the suggestion that two people, just in virtue of sharing a name, will be able to pass substantive, inherited knowledge to one another is clearly false.

Now, one might insist that this prioritization of the individual is all for the better. After all, one of the most pernicious effects of the bodily ideologies was that our attention was monopolized by how others understood the significance of our genders, such that we paid no attention to what *we* wanted from our lives with gender.

However, the problem is that, as Sue Campbell argues, many of our more complicated inner states often begin in a state of inchoateness, and can only become properly clarified and solidified through expressive exploration in the presence of *others* who interpret and reflect back one's initial inchoate thoughts.³⁷ So for example, I might initially be unsure of how I feel about a breakup, or what I want out of my career, until I process and work through my feelings by talking them through with a friend. In a similar vein, Daniela Dover argues that the process of "taking each other seriously," where how *you* understand me can inform and enrich how I understand myself, is crucial to the development and maturation of a full-fledged self.³⁸

These observations are highly relevant for gender. For the bodily ideologies do not merely prevent us from imparting biographical information to others. They also, in isolating us, rob us of the know-how needed to adequately develop our relationship with our own genders.

Indeed, trans communities are important precisely because growing up under the bodily ideologies leaves one with few resources for coming to understand and express one's gender in a healthy and meaningful manner. A crucial function of trans spaces has always been to allow those who are early on in their journeys to learn from trans elders who have walked the same roads, and to develop the skills for gender exploration that we initially lack.

³⁷ Sue Campbell, *Interpreting the Personal* (Cornell University Press, 1997).

³⁸ Daniela Dover, "The Conversational Self," *Mind* 131, no. 521 (2022): 193-230.

But the existence of such knowledge-sharing depends on our ability to formulate generics about who *we* are, what *we* experience, and how *we* express ourselves—statements that sit uncomfortably with IA’s individualism. As such, there is a tension between IA’s focus on individual avowal, and its goal of granting us a more satisfying life with gender.

Importantly, while this worry has some relation to worries that IA’s conception of gender is simply incoherent, because it is either circular, or has no shared meaning, it is distinct from such worries, and withstands the forceful arguments³⁹ made against them. For the concern here is not whether IA’s concept of gender is in logically good standing. Rather the concern is about whether IA’s concept of gender can facilitate a flourishing life with gender.

A personal anecdote may help to illustrate the point: as a trans woman who has been out for some time, I am sometimes approached by younger trans people who are struggling to figure out who they are. Sometimes, I’m asked how I knew that I was a woman, as opposed to being nonbinary, or a man with a “feminine” side. In these moments, I often find myself unable to offer up anything useful to them. For if I say that what convinced me of my womanhood was that I felt more at home in the kinds of friendships that women stereotypically have with one another, or because I wished to have a different relation to my body, I worry that I will inadvertently license exactly the kind of normative expectations that IA is meant to free us from.

But then, all I can say to them is that they must decide their identity for themselves, on their own terms. And this seems a deeply unhelpful and isolating thing to say to someone who is desperately looking for advice. (Indeed, I myself was often frustrated when I got this kind of response early in my transition, even though I knew it was coming from a good place.) For the

³⁹ See e.g., Bex-Priestley, “Gender as Name” and Jenkins, “Towards an Account of Gender Identity.” In brief, the concept *woman* has, under IA, at least as much content as the concept *she/her-pronoun preferer*. It is thus difficult to see why it is not in logically good standing.

injunction to decide for oneself sends the message that gender is a solitary journey which we must walk alone, without the assistance or guidance of a community.

8. Embodied wisdom

I do not know if this worry about individualism is decisive. But IA's aversion to generics connects to a second, and potentially deeper worry about its potential to grant us a fulfilling life with gender expression. For as was argued in §5, IA is compelled to reject any necessary connection between embodiment and gender expression.

And yet, even a cursory glance at how gender is lived in the trans community reveals the central role of bodily expression as a vital and irreplaceable site of meaning and knowledge about gender. Gender euphoria is often related to the new forms of bodily self-relation that become available in trans spaces. Many of our most valued practices of joy center on delving into the relationship between one's gender and one's body.⁴⁰ The ecstatic joy that many trans people have found in, for example, the ballroom scene and other performance settings is no doubt a product of the richness of the bodily expression that such venues allow for. Such performances inherit, but also fundamentally transform⁴¹ the mandates of the bodily ideologies by recreating them in radically different contexts. Similarly, knowledge-sharing around body dysphoria, passing, and navigating hormones/surgeries has also long been a central function of trans communities.⁴²

⁴⁰ Indeed, materiality and embodiment are central to the practice of gender in ballroom communities. See Emily Arnold and Marlon Bailey, "Constructing Hope and Family," *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 21, no. 2–3 (2009): 171–88.

⁴¹ Butler, *Bodies That Matter* calls this the citationality of gender.

⁴² See e.g., Jennie Livingston. *Paris Is Burning* (Off White Productions, 1990) or Reyna Ortiz, *T: Stands for Truth* (Transfusion Corp, 2017).

But if IA is committed to distancing itself from the body, then it inevitably alienates us from these contemporary forms of trans community. For IA inevitably reads these embodied practices as invoking a pernicious transmedicalist ideology that casts gender as inherently bound up with embodied existence. In this way, it stands in an antagonistic relationship with many existing trans practices (an antagonism that I have personally seen play out in community). This is concerning, given how important such communal practices have been to trans flourishing.

A defender of IA might reply by pointing out that for all the goodmaking features of the trans communities I have been discussing, such communities have themselves often been sites in which oppression and exclusion are reproduced—oppression and exclusion often routed through transmedicalism, and the shaming of bodies that do not conform to gender stereotypes. As such, even if IA compels us to leave behind the practices of our trans forebearers, perhaps that is ultimately for the better.

This is certainly a forceful argument. But it does not really address the worries of those who find value in the connection between embodiment and gender that trans communities have celebrated. For it is consistent to admit on the one hand that the body is endlessly vulnerable to harm and coercion, while at the same time maintaining that the body is also an irreplaceable source of meaning and knowledge. We can acknowledge that one's body is often turned into an obstacle that prevents one from having a satisfying expressive life, while also acknowledging that centuries of trans wisdom have also taught us that the body is an incredible *resource* for fulfilling gender expression and self-exploration.

Indeed, though IA is right to try and protect us from transmedicalism's conception of the body as a liability, simply taking the body out of the picture is a cure that imperils the very life of the patient. For the body is an irreplaceable asset in our expressive lives. We cannot hope to

replace the full range of bodily expression with just more words. (Consider, for example, how a knowing smile between friends can communicate more than they could ever verbalize to one another.) And insofar as IA deprives us of this expressive asset, then it is intelligible to lodge a complaint against it, even if we at the same time admit that it also removes one source of potential oppression.

Worse still, removing the body from the picture isolates gender from other aspects of identity that are inherently embodied—for example, race and disability—and thereby cuts gender activism off from the embodied modes of resistance developed in response. And given that many trans communities are also rallying points for activism around race and ability, IA poses an obstacle to a fully intersectional understanding of both gender and transness. In this way, it threatens to prevent us from coming to a deeper understanding of ourselves, and in particular how our genders interact with other aspects of our embodied identity. This is a point that Elizabeth Barnes⁴³ makes forcefully with respect to cognitive disability, and one that is especially worrying, given that most trans activists hold that trans oppression is inextricable from other forms of oppression.

Hence, we should be worried about whether our lives with gender under IA are adequate. For if so much of what we find meaningful in our life with gender is bound up with our bodily self-relation, then it is unclear if IA can deliver on its hope of a flourishing expressive life with gender, if it rejects bodily expression, as it must.

⁴³ Elizabeth Barnes, “Gender without Gender Identity: The Case of Cognitive Disability,” *Mind* 131, no. 523 (2022): 838–64

9. An ambivalent conclusion: the dilemma of the body

I have argued that IA attempts to provide us with a more satisfying life with gender by asserting not only that avowals of gender express (and therefore establish) our gender kind membership, but also by entirely rejecting the body as a site of gender expression. I have also argued that we should worry about whether these practices of avowal will ultimately lead us to a satisfying expressive life with gender. For IA's rejection of bodily expression also puts it in conflict with the many embodied practices that have long defined trans wisdom and joy.

So what should we conclude from this? Well, we should *definitely not* conclude that avowals of gender cannot conclusively settle the question of one's gender. Indeed, recall that THE EXPRESSIVE ARGUMENT by itself does not entail anything about gender's relation to the body, which is the part of IA that leads to trouble. As such, we should absolutely hold onto THE EXPRESSIVE ARGUMENT.

But as we also saw, THE EXPRESSIVE ARGUMENT on its own cannot prevent us from lapsing into recreating the bodily ideologies and all their oppressive power. IA had *very good reasons* for removing the body from the picture. And yet, if we disconnect the body from gender as IA does, we lose out on much of what we found valuable about our lives with gender in the first place. In this way, trans communities face a genuine dilemma. I do not know which horn of the dilemma we ought to embrace. My goal in this paper has been merely to make clear that there is a dilemma, and that whatever we decide, there are costs.