

Against Heteronormativity: The Epistemological Case for a Classical Anthropology of Sex and Gender

by [Christopher Carson](#) (April 2026)



Virgin and Child (Sandro Botticelli, 1465-67)

I was just wandering through the Art Institute of Chicago with the Catholic Bishop of Toledo, Daniel Thomas.

Not the bishop himself, of course, but his recent pastoral letter on gender, "The Body Reveals the Person," open on my phone while I drifted between impressionist seascapes and late medieval altarpieces. The juxtaposition was accidental but apt. On the second floor around me were the "European art before 1900" canvases where form and color were anything but arbitrary. The human body was universally rendered with loving exactitude. Gesture, posture, anatomy: all carried meaning. On the screen in my hand, the bishop was making a parallel case in moral theology.

His argument, in outline, is simple—and the simplicity is the point. Human beings are not ghosts driving meat machines. We are body–soul unities. Our bodies are not neutral hardware beneath a "true self" that floats above them. They are part of the personal "I." To be a man or a woman is not to feel a certain way inside. It is to be a certain sort of organism: ordered toward one or the other role in human generation, marked by a male or female developmental trajectory from conception onward. Feelings matter, but they do not define sex. The classical Thomistic view holds that when a person's self-understanding conflicts with their biological sex, the conflict should be resolved by accepting the body's reality. On this view, the subjective experience is the error, not the body.

This is, in effect, the Thomistic and Wojtylian anthropology that has underwritten Catholic moral teaching for a long time. Bishop Thomas argues that the "gender identity" framework now dominant in medicine, education, law, and corporate policy is not a benign update but a rival anthropology, incompatible with Catholic teaching. Where the Church sees an acting person whose body reveals who he or she is, gender ideology sees an

inner gender essence using the body as raw material, subject to surgical and hormonal revision.

You could treat this as one more intra-Catholic skirmish and move on. Yet as I walked that afternoon, the more interesting question seemed not theological but epistemic. There are, at present, two incompatible pictures of what kind of animal a human being is. One is (at least) two millennia old. The other is a recent improvisation, hardened into dogma in under twenty years. Both claim that science is compatible with their view. When you look carefully at the scientific evidence we actually have, something odd appears.

The oddity is not that “nothing disproves Thomism,” in some trite apologetic sense. It is that if the strong version of the gender-identity model were true—the version that predicts robust, durable improvements in mental health following transition—you would expect the modern empirical record to look very different from the way it actually does. You would expect at least a few decisive, robust victories for the gender-identity model somewhere in the data. Instead, you find an older anthropology that sits quite comfortably inside the facts, and a newer one that never quite manages a clean empirical win, even on its home turf.

That asymmetry, I think, is exactly the kind of higher-order pattern worth attending to. I have been developing what I call Inferential Convergence Theory this year—my own epistemological framework, not an established consensus—and its central concern is not individual studies or single anomalies but the way entire evidential ensembles behave: where signals are thick and overdetermined, where they remain perpetually thin and ambiguous, and how that texture itself becomes a clue to a larger implication.

The gender debate turns out to be one more case where the “signal inside the signal” quietly favors the older view.

The existing critique: what's already been said

Before I try to develop my two arguments, it is worth acknowledging that a serious critique of gender ideology already exists in the conservative and Christian intellectual world. I am not writing into a vacuum. I am, if anything, trying to sharpen and extend lines that others have already sketched.

Broadly speaking, there have been two main strands of response.

The first is empirical and prudential. Writers around *The New Atlantis* and related venues have been cataloguing, for nearly a decade, the mismatch between activist rhetoric and the actual state of the science. The 2016 Mayer–McHugh report in *The New Atlantis* concluded that the evidence for the long-term benefits of hormonal and surgical transition is weak, based on small, non-randomized, often short-term studies, and does not justify the confident claims made in the popular press—a conclusion that major medical professional bodies have contested. More recently, the Cass Review in England and similar reviews in Sweden and Finland have echoed that verdict: the evidentiary basis for “gender-affirming” interventions in minors is strikingly fragile, the long-term effects on mental health and bodily integrity are uncertain, and the harms to bone density, fertility, and sexual function are nontrivial. Some clinicians have acknowledged to families that long-term outcomes are not yet well established. On this axis, the critique says, in effect: the medicine is running far ahead of the evidence.

The second strand is anthropological and metaphysical. At *First Things*, thinkers like Robert George and Michael Hanby have argued that the transgender framework depends on a dualism between inner self and body that is incompatible with

the Catholic hylomorphic tradition. On this view, the trans claim “I am a woman trapped in a man’s body” presupposes that the true subject is a disembodied consciousness or will, one that can stand in judgment over the organism it inhabits. Against this, they set the older hylomorphic account: the human person is a unity of body and soul; the soul is the form of the living body; the sexed body is not a costume but part of the personal subject. There is a similar line of argument in the analytic world: Melissa Moschella, writing in the *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, has treated “wrong body” narratives as covertly dualistic and argued that, on a sound non-dualist view, a real disjunction between “my true self” and “this male body” is metaphysically impossible. In the Thomistic framework, gender dysphoria is classified as a disordered self-perception—a conclusion that follows from prior metaphysical commitments, not from empirical findings alone.

These two strands sometimes intertwine. Sohrab Ahmari, writing in *Commentary*, leaned on the Mayer–McHugh synthesis to argue that “the science isn’t there,” while also describing transgenderism as a “profoundly metaphysical, even spiritual, vision” in which minds or spirits are imagined to be trapped in wrongly sexed flesh. Others have explicitly invoked John Paul II’s “theology of the body” as an antidote to what they see as a reductive, technocratic view of the flesh as raw material. The cumulative effect of this literature is to warn that we are performing radical, irreversible interventions on the basis of contested and low-quality science, and that we are doing so under the spell of a false anthropology.

What I want to do in what follows is not to reinvent those critiques, but to add two further steps that, to my knowledge, have not yet been taken together in a sustained way.

First, I want to read the shape of the empirical record itself as evidentially charged. It is one thing to say, “the data are weak and inconclusive.” It is another to notice that after a

decade of intense clinical adoption and enormous cultural investment, there are still no clear, robust, long-term empirical “wins” for the strong form of gender ideology, in the way one would normally expect if its underlying anthropology were true. That absence, I will suggest, is not neutral. On the epistemological approach I favor, it is a weak but real signal that the world is more hospitable to the older, embodied anthropology than to its rival.

Second, I want to press a question that the metaphysical critique has so far only touched in passing: *what kind of thing is this inner “gender identity” that is supposed to trump the body?* If it is a soul or spirit, then transgenderism is importing a quasi-theological dualism that it has not been willing to defend openly. If it is nothing but brain states, then its authority over the body collapses into the same category as other disordered self-conceptions, and the asymmetry that justifies surgery disappears. If it is neither soul nor mere neurons but something else, then we are owed at least the beginnings of an account: some description of what manner of entity this is and what larger ontology it inhabits. The fact that almost no one on the gender-ideology side even attempts such an account is, I will suggest, a serious defect. It reveals a conceptual vacuum at the very point where the new anthropology claims to be deepest.

Those two moves—an epistemological reading of the evidential landscape informed by my own Inferential Convergence Theory, and a trilemma about the ontological status of “inner gender”—are, I think, complementary. The first says: look at the way the evidence keeps failing to deliver decisive support to the new view. The second says: look at the way the new view never quite manages to say what its central posit really is. Between them, they do not prove that the classical, Thomistic picture of the human person is true. But they do, I think, tilt the epistemic field in its favor more sharply than most people, including many of its defenders, have quite

appreciated.

The two rival anthropologies

Set aside the catechism for a moment and treat the two frameworks as competing high-level hypotheses about human beings.

Call the first one H_{τ} , the Thomistic or Wojtylian anthropology. On this view, a human being is a composite of body and soul, but not in the sense of a driver and a car. The body is part of the person. The soul is the form of the living human body, not a wisp in a jar. Sex is a real, binary differentiation inside that unity. The distinction between male and female is not a costume choice. It is written into the organism's organization around producing one or the other kind of gamete and into the cascade of developmental differences that follow. In this picture, the body reveals the person. If there is a conflict between subjective self-description and bodily reality, something has gone awry in the subjective realm.

Call the second picture H_{\square} , the strong gender-identity metaphysic. Here, the deep truth about you is an inner gender identity, known by introspection and expressed in language. The body is morally and conceptually downstream. It is raw material to be corrected when it fails to mirror that inner truth. Psychological health depends above all on aligning body and social role with the inner gender and on having this inner identity affirmed by others. "Heteronormativity," on this view, is not a natural baseline. It is an oppressive regime of expectation.

These are not modest, test-tube hypotheses. They are skeletal pictures of the kind of creature a human being is. But each one carries a family of empirical expectations.

If H_{τ} is broadly right, a world like ours should have several obvious features.

You should see a robust sexual dimorphism deeply baked into biology. Two gamete types, with bodies and brains that organize around them in distinct patterns. There can be errors and disorders, but they will be intelligible as deviations from an underlying binary, not as third and fourth sexes.

You should expect that attempts to live as if the body did not matter, especially attempts to deny or negate the given sex of the body, would often be psychologically expensive and unstable. There might be partial adaptations. There would not, in general, be clean, effortless flourishing.

You should expect that intense distress over one's sexed body would commonly co-occur with other psychological difficulties—trauma, anxious attachment, depression, self-harm, neurodevelopmental differences—rather than appearing in isolation. If a person's basic sense of self is unstable, they will be more susceptible to cultural scripts that promise to explain their suffering.

You should also expect that treatments which alter the body but leave the underlying misalignment of self-understanding unresolved could deliver provisional relief in the short term. Human beings are plastic and suggestible. If you radically change their bodies to better match an internal story, and surround that change with social celebration, it is not surprising if they feel better for a while. But the deeper fracture between self and nature would remain. Over longer timescales you would still see elevated vulnerability.

If H_{\square} is broadly right, you would expect a different pattern.

The primary driver of suffering in trans-identifying people would be the incongruence between inner gender and external realities. Bring the outer world into harmony with the inner identity, especially in a supportive environment, and the

major driver of distress should diminish. You would expect at least some sizeable cohorts in which medical and social transition, undertaken prudently and followed by genuine social acceptance, bring mental health and suicide risk substantially closer to population baselines.

You might also expect to find some biological or developmental marker of this “deep gender” somewhere in the brain or genome: patterns of structure or connectivity that track subjective gender better than they track chromosomal sex, and that survive large-sample replication. And you might hope to identify a clinically well-defined group for whom dysphoria is not entangled with a dense cloud of other disorders, but functions more like a specific condition: painful and serious, but not a symptom of underlying global fragility.

None of these expectations are unreasonable. They are not straw men. They are the sort of empirical fingerprint one would naturally hope to see if $H \square$ were really telling us what a human being is.

So, with those expectations in place, what kind of world do we actually find?

The world we actually inhabit

The first obvious fact is that biology has been remarkably uncooperative with gender theory. Modern developmental biology and endocrinology have, if anything, reinforced the reality of a persistent sex binary.

Humans are a sexually reproducing species organized around two gamete types. Chromosomal sex affects development from the earliest stages and leaves its mark in every tissue. The slogan “every cell has a sex,” popularized in a National Academies report on sex differences, is not a metaphysical claim, but it points to a real pattern: XX and XY cells do not

behave identically across the organism. Chromosomal complement, hormonal environment, and downstream gene expression shape brains, bones, immune systems, drug responses. There is one sexually dimorphic architecture with many local variations.

Intersex conditions exist, but as clinicians routinely note, they are best understood as disorders of sexual development. They do not constitute a third reproductive class. They are ambiguous precisely because there is a binary structure for them to deviate from. If you had a naturally tri-sexed species, you would know it. The taxonomic argument would not be this tortured.

The second fact is that the adolescents now crowding into gender clinics are, by and large, not a psychologically unburdened cohort whose only problem is that their minds are at odds with their sexed bodies. Large descriptive studies from Europe and North America find markedly elevated rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm, eating disorders, autism spectrum traits, and trauma histories among youth referred for gender distress, compared with their peers. In several studies, autism diagnoses and autistic traits are overrepresented by factors of three to six in these clinics. Histories of bullying, family instability, and disturbed attachment are common. Gender distress shows up not as an isolated condition, but as one thread in a wider fabric of psychological difficulty.

Third, it is now clear that medical transition does something real, at least in the short term, for some patients. Prospective cohort work in adolescents and young adults, such as the study by Tordoff and colleagues in *JAMA Network Open*, has found that over the first year of treatment, those who receive puberty blockers or cross-sex hormones show statistically significant reductions in self-reported depression and suicidal ideation compared with those who remain on a waiting list. These studies are observational and

modest in size, but the direction of change is what one would expect if at least some dysphoric youth experience genuine relief from aligning their bodies and social roles with their self-conception.

If that were the whole story, *H* could claim a straightforward victory. But it is not the whole story.

Because the long-term data look very different.

The landmark Swedish cohort study by Cecilia Dhejne and colleagues, following people who had undergone sex-reassignment surgery, found that in the years after surgery, overall mortality, suicide attempts, and psychiatric hospitalizations were several times higher than in matched controls from the general population. The authors were careful to say that sex reassignment may alleviate dysphoria. Their point, however, was that it does not normalize psychiatric risk.

Dutch data from the Amsterdam gender clinic, covering thousands of patients over several decades, tell a similar story. Trans women and trans men on hormone treatment exhibit suicide rates several times higher than the general Dutch population. In trans women, suicide deaths have declined over time, presumably reflecting better overall care; in trans men, they have not. A large registry study in Denmark that followed almost all surgically reassigned individuals from 1978 to 2010 found that roughly one in ten had died during follow-up and one in three had serious somatic morbidity.

More recently, a multi-state US cohort study published in *JAMA Network Open* reported that transgender and gender diverse adults had an increased risk of overall mortality compared with cisgender peers, with a disproportionate share of deaths due to external causes, including suicide. Transition has not, in aggregate, erased the excess risk.

This is a pattern worth naming. For some patients, there is a

genuine early lift in mood when the body and the narrative are brought into harmony and the surrounding culture applauds. For a period, the weight of dysphoria lightens and the world feels newly navigable. Then, for a significant subset, the deeper vulnerabilities reassert themselves. This review of the data suggests that medical transition does not, on its own, resolve long-term psychiatric risk in many patients.

Fourth, the field's own evidence reviews have begun to admit how thin the empirical grounding really is. The Cass Review in England, a multi-year independent evaluation of gender services for minors commissioned by the National Health Service, examined more than a hundred studies of puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones, and psychosocial interventions. Its conclusion was strongly critical of the evidence base. The evidence supporting these interventions in children and adolescents is of low quality. There are no robust randomized trials. Long-term outcomes are uncertain. Potential harms to bone density and fertility are nontrivial. The review recommended restricting puberty blockers to formal research protocols and shifting youth services away from a narrow, medication-led pathway toward broader mental-health support.

NHS England accepted those recommendations. Routine access to puberty blockers for minors has been halted. Cross-sex hormones are now prescribed more cautiously. Other European countries, including Sweden and Finland, have independently moved in similar directions after their own reviews. Even in the United States, where professional bodies remain publicly committed to "gender-affirming care," a recent federal evidence review quietly acknowledged that the quality of the pediatric data is low and that long-term risks are poorly characterized.

None of this proves that H_0 is false. But it does undermine the strong claim that the gender-identity model has been decisively vindicated by science. After more than a decade of intensive clinical experimentation and enormous cultural

investment, the best one can say is that short-term self-reported mood often improves, long-term risk remains disturbingly high, and the evidentiary foundation beneath the entire enterprise is shaky.

In other words, we live in a world that looks rather like the world H_t would lead us to expect and rather unlike the world H_\square promised.

Neanderthals, Cro-Magnons, and the thinness of a signal

This is where strange but useful analogies to Neanderthals and to cosmology come in.

For decades there has been an argument about whether Neanderthals possessed symbolic cognition comparable to that of *Homo sapiens*. A handful of Spanish cave sites with red markings and hand stencils dated to sixty thousand years ago have been put forward as evidence that Neanderthals painted caves. There are pierced shells and traces of pigment on bones that might indicate personal ornamentation.

Yet even sympathetic archaeologists like Prof. John Hawks admit how thin and ambiguous the record is. The red ladder motif may be symbolic, or it may be a by-product of some other activity. The shell may be decorative, or it may not. Each piece of evidence stands alone and is vulnerable to re-interpretation. The signal is wispy.

Now contrast that with the Cro-Magnon record in the Upper Paleolithic, the period sometimes called the “cognitive Big Bang.” Once fully symbolic modern humans arrive in Europe, the archaeological record blossoms. Cave walls explode with animals and hunting scenes. Tiny figurines appear. Complex bone and antler toolkits proliferate. Personal ornaments become common. The fact of symbolic cognition is

overdetermined. You would have to work very hard to miss it.

The contrast between those two evidential profiles has epistemic significance. It is not just a matter of archaeologists having better luck with Cro-Magnon caves. It tells you that whatever Neanderthals were doing with pigments and bones, it probably was not the same thing Cro-Magnons were doing on anything like the same scale.

The epistemological approach I have been developing under the name Inferential Convergence Theory is precisely about this sort of meta-pattern. It asks not only "what do the data say," but "how thick is the signal, how redundant, how much heroic interpretation is needed to keep a favored hypothesis alive." The thinness and constant contestability of the Neanderthal symbolic record is itself a clue.

So too with cosmology. Well before high precision measurements from the WMAP and Planck observatories, almost every plausible model seemed to push the geometry of the universe toward flatness. Successive observations of the cosmic microwave background, large scale structure, and supernovae produced curvature estimates with error bars hugging zero. When the dust settled, the consensus was a spatially flat universe with an uncertainty band so narrow that deviations from flatness are almost negligible. The way the early estimates clustered was already telling you something, even before the final numbers came in: if the Universe were not "flat," why was every measurement taken to discern its shape coming in so very close to a "flat" model, in the aggregate? There must be a reason why so many cosmic measurements were hovering around a flatness implication, even if they were not individually precise enough to settle the issue.

The gender debate has the same feel.

If the strong gender-identity anthropology were true in a rich, ontological way, one would expect at least some domains

where the evidence looked like Cro-Magnon cave art. You would expect to find one or two large, well designed, long-term cohort studies in relatively supportive societies where transition plus affirmation yielded substantial and durable improvements in mental health, such that suicide and morbidity risk approached that of matched peers. You would expect at least one clear biological marker of inner gender identity robust across large samples and analytic methods. You would expect to identify, within the wide diversity of trans-identified people, a clinically well-bounded subpopulation whose main problem really is misalignment of body and inner gender, not a broader pattern of psychological difficulty.

Instead, what we have is a Neanderthal-like record: hints, suggestions, modest effects in the expected direction, but nothing that cannot be reinterpreted in a less dramatic key. Every apparent "home run" turns out, on inspection, to have a ridiculously small sample size, short follow-up, confounding variables, no control group or randomization, or countervailing data elsewhere.

At the same time, everything that is plainly robust and overdetermined fits comfortably inside the old embodied anthropology. The available biological evidence continues to support a sexually dimorphic model. The co-occurrence of gender distress with trauma, autism, and affective disorders is constant. Long-term risk remains elevated despite transition. The field's best evidence reviews acknowledge that the data are weak.

You do not need to be a Thomist to notice that pattern. You only need to be attentive to the way signals behave when a theory is genuinely latching onto reality.

Epicycles and underdetermination

Advocates of $H \square$ are not blind to these difficulties, of

course. They respond by continually enriching their model with auxiliary hypotheses.

Transition fails to normalize long-term mental health because of stigma, or structural transphobia, or inadequate access, or late transition, or conservative backlash, or capitalist medicine. Heavy comorbidity with trauma and autism is explained by saying that oppressed people are naturally traumatized and that autistic people understand their inner lives differently. The lack of a robust brain marker of gender identity is blamed on limited resolution or subtlety of instruments.

Every patch, taken in isolation, is plausible. Together, they form a small Ptolemaic system. The central claim that “inner gender, affirmed and embodied, is the key to flourishing” is preserved at all costs, while deferents and epicycles proliferate to explain why the planets rigidly refuse to move in perfect circles.

Underdetermination of theory by data is a real phenomenon. Many different high-level frameworks can fit the same mess of facts, at least for a while. But not all forms of underdetermination are created equal. When a picture of the human person keeps needing ad hoc qualifications to survive contact with reality, while its rival absorbs the same data without prophylactic patchwork, that asymmetry itself has evidential weight.

From the perspective of my own epistemological framework, the crucial point is not that H_{τ} has been proved. It is that H_{\square} has repeatedly failed to earn the decisive empirical victories that its own rhetoric led us to expect. The absence of those victories is not mere silence. It is a pattern. It is the dog that did not bark.

Against “heteronormativity”

All of this recasts that fashionable term “heteronormativity” in an interesting light.

The charge, as usually leveled, is that Western society has arbitrarily centered heterosexual, male–female pair bonding as “normal,” thereby marginalizing same-sex attraction, non-binary identities, and other configurations. The underlying assumption is a kind of symmetry. There are many potential ways of configuring sex and gender, and heterosexual complementarity is one parochial choice that has been unjustly elevated.

If H_t is at all correct, that symmetry is illusory. Male–female complementarity is not a cultural preference floating in a neutral space. It is the way this particular species is built to reproduce and to form the pair bonds that shelter its offspring. This is what gonads, pelvises, hormone cascades, secondary sex characteristics, and ordinary sexual desire are for. To say so is not to deny that some people experience same-sex attraction or persistent cross-sex identification. It is to insist that those experiences, however subjectively powerful and morally serious, do not rewrite the teleology of the organism.

I argue that “heteronormativity” reflects biological fact rather than mere social enforcement. There is no alternative anthropological center of gravity in which heterosexual complementarity is demoted to one option among many, all equally consonant with human nature. On the classical view, same-sex attraction and gender non-conformity are understood as departures from the biological telos of the organism—not as neutral variations. This is an evaluative claim, not a neutral anthropological description. I argue that the classical ranking of sexual and gender expressions—with heterosexual, gender-conforming life as most aligned with human telos—is grounded in nature rather than in prejudice.

What makes the present moment interesting is that the attempt to institutionalize *H* □ as a rival ontology is now mature enough that we can see how reality responds. Ten years ago, one could plausibly claim that “gender-affirming care” simply had not been tried in a comprehensive way, and that once it was, the flourishing would speak for itself. Today, we have a decade of widespread clinical adoption, large public datasets, and multiple independent evidence reviews. The flourishing has not appeared as advertised. The signal in favor of the new anthropology is still thin, contested, and heavily dependent on interpretive epicycles.

The old anthropology, by contrast, has required no revision to accommodate the facts. It said, in effect, that we are sexed bodies whose inner lives can go badly out of tune with our own nature. It predicted that attempts to resolve the dissonance by altering the body rather than addressing the self-understanding would be partial at best. It did not predict *how* that partial relief and persistent fragility would show up in hazard ratios and cohort curves. No pre-modern thinker could have anticipated the details. But the general shape of the evidence is precisely what one would expect if that picture were closer to the truth.

The signal inside the signal

Walking out of the museum that day, I kept coming back to the Neanderthal caves.

If Neanderthals had fully modern symbolic cognition in the same sense we do, it would be odd that the archaeological record is so abstemious. You would expect at least one Lascaux, one Chauvet, one dense, undeniable eruption of symbolism. The fact that we have at most a faint, intermittent murmur tells us something, even if it does not resolve the debate.

In the same way, if the gender-identity metaphysic were really the correct description of the human person, it would be odd that the empirical record looks the way it does. You would expect at least a few "Lascaux-level" victories in the data by now. Instead, you get modest short-term gains, persistent long-term vulnerability, high comorbidity, and evidence reviews that call the whole structure methodologically fragile.

Sometimes, the most important piece of information is the dog that fails to bark, the revolution that fails to deliver its promised harvest, the scientific model that never quite manages the decisive prediction it keeps hinting at. The epistemological approach I am proposing is an invitation to pay attention to that kind of silence, to treat the absence of expected signals as a weak but genuine signal in its own right.

On the present state of the evidence, nothing in biology or psychiatry compels anyone to abandon the Thomistic view of the human person. A great deal in both fields sits comfortably within it. The more ambitious gender-identity anthropology has not, so far, earned the right to displace it. That does not settle the metaphysical question, but it does tilt the probabilistic scales.

"Heteronormativity," in that light, turns out not to be an arbitrary imposition that needs to be "queered" into obsolescence. It is what you get when an organism with a particular kind of body and a particular teleology is allowed to tell you what it is for.

Strip away the slogans and what remains is an old insight that our culture is strenuously trying to forget: the body reveals the person. The more carefully we look at the evidence, the more reality seems to answer, quietly but firmly, that this is still true.

Part B: The metaphysical ghost in the machine

Up to this point the argument has been largely empirical. I have contrasted two anthropologies and asked which one the data seem to favor. There is another line of critique that belongs beside it. It has nothing to do with hazard ratios or cohort curves. It has to do with the entity that the new gender anthropology posits at its center but has not given a coherent ontological account of.

Strip away the clinical jargon and the slogans and what the contemporary trans movement is asserting is surprisingly stark. It claims that there exists in each person an inner something, called a gender identity, that is more truly that person than the sexed body is, and that can therefore stand in judgment over the body. When a male human being says, in the strong sense, "I am a woman," the words are not meant as metaphor or as a description of preferences. They are claims of ontological priority. The inner gender is right and the body is wrong.

Once that is recognized, a very simple but very sharp question presents itself. What kind of thing is this inner something supposed to be?

If there is in me a core that can overrule my chromosomal complement, my gonads, my lifelong pattern of development, and everything my organism is ordered toward, then that core is not a trivial construct. It is being treated as the seat of personal identity. It is the "I" in whose name surgery is demanded and language is reshaped. It is, in other words, a substantial self.

At this point the trans ideology faces a trilemma that it has not addressed.

One option is to say that this inner gender core really is a

soul or spirit. On this view, the deepest “me” is an incorporeal subject that, for whatever reason, happens to be housed in a mismatched body. The spirit is female, the body male, and the mismatch, like a badly assigned costume, demands correction. That is the logic implicit in the old phrase “a woman trapped in a man’s body.”

If that is what is being claimed, then we are in very familiar metaphysical territory. There is an immaterial seat of identity, it can be sexed independently of the body, and the body can be a wrong house for it. That is a kind of dualism, indebted at least structurally to religious and quasi religious traditions that distinguish soul from flesh.

Once this is admitted, further questions arise at once. What is the origin of this sexed soul. By what law is it male or female apart from the body. Under what larger order of being does it exist. If it is a creature, to which creator is it answerable. If it is not a creature, then what exactly is it. I argue that there are only three coherent accounts of what “inner gender” might be—a soul, a brain state, or an undefined essence—and that each faces decisive objections. This trilemma depends on the claim that these three options are exhaustive, a claim I believe is warranted.

Gender ideology as it actually exists in public life has no interest in such a project. Its advocates present themselves as secular, allied with materialist science against religious “bigotry.” Yet the structure of their claim is that of an unavowed dualism. There is a sexed inner self that can be at odds with the body and that has authority to overrule it. They want the normative force of a soul without any of the metaphysical responsibilities that come with it.

The second option is to insist that there is no soul, no spirit, nothing but matter in motion, and that the inner gender core is simply whatever pattern of brain states and self representations the nervous system happens to

instantiate. On this view "I am really a woman" reduces to something like "my brain represents me to myself as female, with great affective intensity, despite my male body."

There is nothing incoherent about that as a description of a psychological condition. Neurons do all sorts of strange things. The difficulty is that once the claim is translated into this naturalistic key, its supposed authority evaporates. We now have a familiar pattern. The nervous system generates a powerful and persistent self conception that is not in tune with bodily realities.

That pattern occurs elsewhere. The anorexic adolescent sincerely believes she is grotesquely fat when she is emaciated. The person with body dysmorphic disorder believes that a minor feature is monstrously ugly. The person with apotemnophilia experiences a limb as alien and longs for amputation. In such cases we do not announce that the body is "wrong" and the brain "right." We do not affirm the inner self concept and remodel the body accordingly. We try, however imperfectly, to heal the self conception so that it is reconciled to the body.

If gender identity is nothing but a neurological representation, it looks, at that level of description, a great deal like these other disorders of self perception. It may differ in important ways. It may be less tractable or more deeply rooted. It may coexist with other conditions. But nothing in the bare fact that a brain has generated a tenacious self image entails that the body must be declared mistaken.

In that case, the gender-identity model loses the special normative force it has been claiming. It becomes one more instance in which the mind is out of tune with the organism it inhabits. That is tragic and morally serious. It is not a magical trump card that forces reality to yield. The whole burden of proof then shifts. Why, precisely, should the

medical system treat this dissonant self conception as sacrosanct and remodel the flesh to match, while treating other dissonant self conceptions as targets for therapy.

The third option, to which activists default in practice, is to refuse both of these clarifications and to speak of gender identity as some sui generis inner core that is neither traditional soul nor mere brain, and that must nevertheless be obeyed. One hears talk of authenticity, of "living my truth," of "who I really am." The entity that is being invoked is left in a state of deliberate vagueness. It is not an immaterial spirit, we are told, because that would sound religious. It is not reducible to neurons, because that would allow the analogy to anorexia or body dysmorphia to take hold. It is something else, unnamed, but somehow real enough to demand hormones, surgery, and legal compulsion.

At that point the inner gender core functions as a kind of personal dark energy, a metaphysical placeholder introduced to save the appearances and then insulated from scrutiny. It is real enough to trump the sexed body. It is not definite enough to require an account of its origin, its structure, or its teleology. It is, in practice, treated as a sovereign will to self-define that legislates for the organism it inhabits.

Philosophically, this is untenable. If the inner gender core is a spiritual substance, it belongs in the long, difficult conversation about souls, forms, and final causes that has occupied philosophers and theologians for centuries. It cannot float above that conversation as a free standing dogma. If it is only an especially intense pattern of brain activity, then the analogy to other pathological patterns cannot be evaded, and the case for body modification rather than psychic healing becomes far thinner. If it is something else, neither soul nor brain state, then someone owes us at least a sketch of what kind of entity is being invoked and how it fits into any plausible ontology of persons.

No such sketch is forthcoming. The metaphysics of gender identity stops at the level of slogan and feeling. It demands that we treat the inner declaration as decisive and then forbids us to ask what, precisely, has spoken. Invoking “inner gender” without defining it ontologically is analogous to invoking a foundational concept without specifying what it includes—a move that no serious philosophical system would accept.

From a Thomistic perspective the contrast is instructive. Classical Christian thought rejected Cartesian dualism long before there was a Descartes. The human soul is the substantial form of the living human body. There is no generic, sexless “I” that might later find itself attached to a male or a female organism by mistake. The sexed body is part of the personal subject. When a man experiences himself as a woman, something has gone tragically wrong, but what has gone wrong is in the register of self understanding, not in the register of being. The remedy, if there is one, must involve bringing intellect, imagination, and desire back into friendship with the real organism.

One may reject that picture. One may say that there is no form, no soul, nothing but a sophisticated machine and its software. What one cannot do, without facing a serious philosophical dilemma, is oscillate between an immaterial inner self that overrides the body and a brain whose dictates must be treated as brute fact, depending on the argumentative needs of the moment.

In that sense the metaphysical poverty of gender ideology is not a merely technical complaint. It is a substantive strike against its claim to be a rival anthropology. It wants to dethrone the old account of what a person is without offering a serious alternative. I argue that the clinical and legal case for gender-affirming care rests on a concept—inner gender—that has not been given a coherent ontological account, and that the medical and legal demands made in its name are

therefore poorly grounded.

The epistemological framework I have been developing has a way of handling this sort of problem. A framework that continually insists on an undefined inner essence while refusing to say what category of being it belongs to, and that backs this insistence with neither clear empirical wins nor coherent metaphysics, is not merely incomplete. By my own epistemological criteria, the gender-identity framework fails, because it neither delivers clear empirical victories nor provides a coherent ontological account of its central concept. When such a framework is set against a rival that not only fits the data tolerably well but also offers a worked-out account of body, soul, and sex that hangs together, the asymmetry is not trivial.

The point is not that the Thomist can now declare final victory. It is that the field is not level. On one side there is an old anthropology that anticipated, in broad outline, exactly the kind of world we actually see and that can say what a human person is. On the other side there is a recent construct that asks us to believe in a sexed inner core with absolute authority over the body while carefully refusing to say whether that core is a spirit, a brain state, or something as yet unnamed. Between those two options, even before the empirical evidence is laid out, the mere fact of metaphysical clarity gives the older view a considerable advantage.

That is the part of the argument that is easy to miss in the noise. The trans movement's secular and therapeutic self-presentation conceals an implicit metaphysics—either a dualist soul-body framework or an unexamined neurologism—which it has not made explicit or defended. Once one sees that, the supposed audacity of affirming that the body reveals the person begins to look less like nostalgia and more like a position that is positively correct: not merely traditional, but the view that clears away the most conceptual confusion.

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