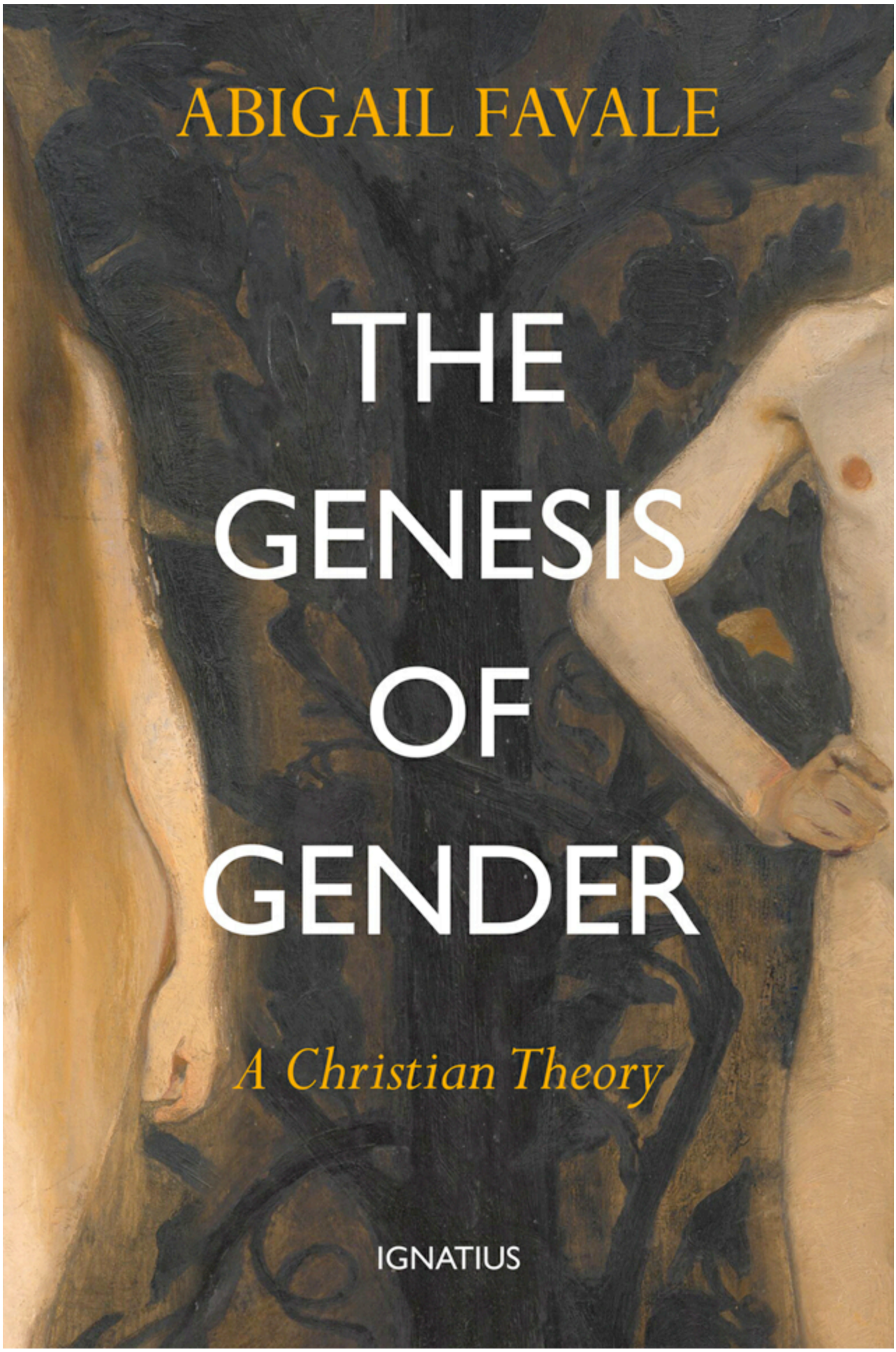
ABIGAIL FAVALE
THE GENESIS OF GENDER
A Christian Theory
IGNATIUS

CONTENTS

Cosmos

Let me tell you a story.

In the beginning, there was water, and this water is where the gods are born. Two kinds of water: the turbulent feminine sea and the docile masculine river, fresh and saltwater intermingling, together forming a teeming pool from which the gods spring forth—all kinds of gods, noisy and raucous gods, gods who beget other gods. One of these gods arises as more powerful than the others, filled with a restless, conquering spirit. The watery orb of his origin becomes too small for him, too confining, and he decides to revolt. He gathers an army of monsters to do battle with the sea, his foremother, who has whipped herself into a terrifying frenzy, a primordial hurricane. He wins. He kills her. As an afterthought, he decides to make use of her corpse. He splits her down the middle, gutting her like a fish, and from her dead flesh forms the dome of the heavens and the sweep of the earth. He kills her consort as well, and from his blood, the warring god makes a multitude of tiny slaves whose sole purpose is to serve the gods, to keep them gratified and well fed.

This is the plot of the Enuma Elish, the Babylonian creation story. The race of slaves are human beings; the violent creator god is Marduk, and the divine feminine principle who births the pantheon is Tiamat. She cannot properly be called a god, because she is never an object of worship. There is never a temple or cult devoted to her, because human existence depends on her conquest. She is dead before the world begins.

Original Harmony

The first chapter of Genesis, which tells the biblical creation story, dates to the era of the Babylonian exile, when the Hebrew people were scattered, deprived of a temple, and living as refugees among their conquerors. The Enuma Elish was the dominant creation narrative of the time and provided the backdrop against which Genesis 1 was written. The Hebrew word *tehom*, typically translated as "the deep" over which the spirit of God hovers, is a cognate of the Akkadian word *tiamat*. However, as Genesis unfolds, it becomes clear that these two cosmologies could not be more different.

In the ancient mind, stories of origin are ultimately stories of identity and purpose. We cannot understand who we are and what we are made for without understanding where we come from. This is still true. There is an innate human tendency to seek out our origins to better understand ourselves. This is why, in order to fully inhabit a Christian sense of reality, we should begin at the beginning, with a careful look at Genesis. To better understand Genesis, we should read Genesis against its Babylonian foil, the Enuma Elish.

Both stories begin with chaos, but chaos of different kinds. The chaos of the Enuma Elish is noisy, violent, driven by conflicts between various gods. The chaos of Genesis is a tranquil emptiness; there are no other deities, no sense of conflict or violence. There is simply a void that God has come to fill, a *nothing* that God will replace with *something*.

Marduk, the Babylonian creator god, has his own origin story. He is the product of two divine beings, the progenitors of the gods, who have both been killed by the time Marduk creates the cosmos. The God of Genesis has no parents; he does not come into being. This absence of an origin testifies to his eternal presence. He is not *a* being, like Mar-

duk, but Being itself, the infinite ground of all finite existence. He has nothing to prove, nothing to conquer, no need to establish his dominance. The oneness and sovereignty of God is strikingly opposed to the throngs of warring gods in the Enuma Elish.

Because there is no need to explain God's existence or his rise to power, Genesis 1 cuts straight to the main event: creation. In the Enuma Elish, the action of creation is secondary to the action of destruction. The creation of the world reads almost like an epilogue, buried in the text's final act. In Genesis, creation is the focal point. Creation is not an afterthought, the sudden impulse of a god who has satisfied his bloodlust. Creation, in Genesis, is intentional and orderly—a light flicking on in the dark. God doesn't create through violence and death, but through language; he speaks the world into being. This divine Word is the engine of creation, and it is this Word that will become incarnate in Christ.

There is no war in Genesis 1, only a productive tension between absence and presence, between something and nothing. Conflict and violence are not endemic to this reality; they do not enter the scene until later. Creation unfolds as an integral, interconnected whole: a cosmos. Each stage of this unfolding, each nested layer, is pronounced by God as *good*. There's a subtle sense of momentum as the narrative builds, each creative interval increasing in beauty and complexity, reaching an apex with the creation of human beings. These beings do not carry the bloodguilt of a fallen god; they bear the image of their Creator. They are not made to be slaves; they are tasked with tending the earth and filling it with life. The Genesis cosmology bestows upon human beings an exclusive kind of dignity, a dignity rooted in their roles as image bearers. Moreover, Genesis recognizes the duality of humankind, male and female; this difference is part of the goodness of creation, and both sexes share fully in the divine image and the commission to tend the

earth. There is no sense here of hierarchy *between* male and female, but rather a shared, benevolent governance over the rest of creation.

The Enuma Elish has nothing to say about women specifically. The text deems the sexual duality of human beings unremarkable. It is worth noting that the central narrative conflict in the Enuma Elish is the war between Marduk and Tiamat: a masculine god and his foremother, a feminine power that must be violently subdued before creation can take place. This gendered conquest is utterly absent from Genesis 1. Between male and female there is no war, only a common dignity and a joint commission.

When we consider the first chapter of Genesis against the backdrop of the Enuma Elish, the distinctive emphases of Genesis are revealed in sharp relief: The reality we inhabit is a divinely created order, a harmonious cosmos. This order is *good*, intentionally and patiently called into being by an uncreated Creator. Human beings, male and female, are endowed with a unique dignity, marked by the image of their Creator, and entrusted with the sacred work of cultivating life. Sexual difference is not an extraneous or faulty feature of the cosmos but an essential part of its goodness.

The following chapters of Genesis further amplify this elevation of sexual difference. There are actually two cosmologies in Genesis. The first chapter describes creation from a transcendent vantage point, a God's-eye view, as if the narrator is suspended above the universe and watching things flash into existence from afar. The second chapter of Genesis zooms in, way in. The narrator brings us down into the dust of Eden, into an earthly paradise situated at the head of four rivers. God is depicted in bodily terms, walking and talking with the first humans in a lush garden. While the first cosmology emphasizes God's transcendence, the second shows us his intimacy. These two accounts, taken together, reveal that the transcendent God of Genesis 1 is also a

deeply personal God, who desires communion with his creatures. The two Genesis cosmologies are clearly distinct, but they are complementary rather than contradictory; they describe the same event from two angles, thus unveiling a bit more of God's ultimate mystery and the primordial traces of our genesis.

Remember, ancient cosmologies must not be read as literal history or science. To do so imposes a modern mindset on premodern texts and obscures the truths the stories seek to disclose. Creation accounts do not provide scientific truths about material origins; they reveal deeper truths: truths about *identity*—who God is and who we are—and *purpose*, the ends for which we are made. Reading the creation narratives in Genesis and expecting to find science, as I was raised to do, will make the two accounts seem contradictory, forcing a reader to do mental gymnastics to reconcile them somehow or to reject them as false. If these texts are instead read as divinely revealed poetry and allegory —as *true myth*—a fuller picture of God, reality, and the human person emerges.

The second creation account cuts almost immediately to the creation of the first human being. God forms the human (the *ādām*) from the humus of the soil and breathes into his body, animating him with the divine breath of life. This imagery reveals an important truth about our nature: we are both earth and breath, matter and spirit. We are physical creatures; our bodies are integral to who we are. Yet we are not *merely* matter, because God's breath enlivens each of us with an immaterial soul. This is one of the foundational principles of a Christian anthropology: every human being is a unity of body and soul.[1]

Then something unexpected happens. God looks at his creation, and instead of echoing the refrain from Genesis 1, he says the opposite words for the first time: it is *not good* that this human being is solitary, one of a kind. The human needs a counterpart, a companion. So begins

one of my favorite passages: the parade of animals. God gets busy shaping and molding all kinds of creatures and presenting each before the human to "see what he would call them".[2] There's something comical about this imagery: here comes God with a monkey, a sheep, a gopher, a parrot; the *ādām* scopes it out, shakes his head, declares a name, and the misfit pageant continues, as if God and the *ādām* are playing a protracted game of Memory, but the cards never match.

Eventually, God goes back to the drawing board. Time for a new approach. He puts the human into a deep sleep, and from one of his ribs, God forms the first woman and presents her to the *ādām*. John Paul II reads this sleep as a sleep of nonbeing—God takes the first human out of existence entirely and brings two new beings into existence: man and woman.[3] He replaces the non-sexed, solitary humanity with a humanity that is differentiated into two modes of being human.

The *ādām*, who can now properly be called a man, issues a cry of wonder upon seeing the woman for the first time: "At last!" Listen to the delight and relief in those two words: "At last!" He immediately recognizes, in the silent declaration of her body, that she is both like him—more like him than any other earthly creature—and not like him. Their difference is complementary, but asymmetrical; this is not a mirror image or polar opposite. She resembles him in their shared humanity —"bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh"—but differs in the feminine form of her humanity. Genesis affirms a balance of sameness and difference between the sexes. This is a delicate balance that is difficult, but necessary, to maintain. Most theories of gender lose this balance, veering into extremes of uniformity (men and women are interchangeable) or polarity (men are from Mars, women are from Venus). Both extremes lose the fruitful tension expressed here in Genesis.

The opening act of this second cosmology could be read as an origin story of sexual difference itself, proclaiming that our identities as

men and women *matter*; they carry sacred significance and occupy a prominent place in this worldview. To provide another contrasting example from the ancient world, Plato's *Timaeus*, a philosophical cosmology, only mentions women at the tail end of an extensive tour of the cosmos. When the *Timaeus* does mention them, it becomes clear that everything said previously in the text about human beings has applied to men only, because there are no women in the first generation of humankind. According to the *Timaeus*, men who live cowardly and unjust lives are reborn as women or other kinds of animals. Sexual difference, then, is not a purposeful feature of Plato's cosmos, but a defect, a bug. For Plato, any difference must be ranked hierarchically; if men and women are different, one sex must be closer to the divine than the other. All of Plato's dialogues, in fact, privilege bonds between men, a common feature of many ancient texts: think of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Achilles and Patroclus, and Aristotle's account of friendship between male peers.

Genesis, in contrast, uniquely foregrounds the importance of the male-female relationship, and this is a relationship not of domination, but of reciprocity. There is no hierarchy of value, no dynamic of superiority and inferiority. Sexual differentiation is not a mishap, but cause for celebration and wonder. This difference is *good*, our bodies are *good*, and both of these are an integral part of the created order, which is *good*. The emergence of man and woman from the sleep of nonbeing is not a footnote in our origin story: it's the ecstatic culmination.

There is more, if we dig deeper still. Genesis 2 emphasizes another vital principle: *the body reveals the person*. Our bodies are the visible reality through which we manifest our hidden, inner life. Each person's existence is entirely unrepeatable, and our unique personhood can only be made known to others through the frame of our embodiment. This sacramentality is displayed in the man's immediate recognition of the

woman. They have not yet spoken; she has not verbally introduced herself. Her *body* speaks the truth of her identity, and this truth is immediately recognized by the man, who is struck with joy and wonder at the revelation of a person with whom he can—*at last!*—have true communion. Our bodies, then, serve a sacramental function, by revealing and communicating a spiritual reality. To use John Paul's words, "the body, in fact, and only the body, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden from eternity in God, and thus to be a sign of it."[4]

It is not good for the human to be alone. This lacuna in the created order is mended not by the formation of more generic human beings or by male bonding, but by sexual differentiation. Sexual difference is a particular kind of difference because it is a difference that is arranged purposefully to correspond to the difference of the other. We are not talking about superficial differences here, like hair or eye color. We are talking about a body that is designed to fit another kind of body, in an entirely unique way. Maleness points toward femaleness, and vice versa. Our sexed body signals our inherent capacity and need for interpersonal communion.

There are all kinds of differences among human beings: differences in size, temperament, gifts, complexion. These differences can help create fruitful and vibrant relationships and communities. Only sexual difference, however, is capable of bringing another human being into existence. The one-flesh union between man and woman is not exclusive, facing inward and closed off to others. Rather, it is expansive and open, because this union alone has the potential to create new life. Communion and procreation: this is the twofold potential that is recognized and celebrated in the Genesis text through the man's cry of wonder.

Our bodies simultaneously proclaim our individual personhood and our capacity for relation. John Paul II, in his interpretation of Genesis, refers to this as "the spousal meaning of the body".[5] This does not indicate a merely biological reality but includes and expands beyond the capacity to procreate. The full spousal meaning of the body, outwardly declared by our visible sex characteristics, is the power to express love, to give oneself fully in love to another. This is the true *telos* or purpose of the human being: to become a *reciprocal gift*, to give love and receive it in turn. In our original condition, this self-gift is entirely free, not hindered or distorted by selfishness or domination. That is why the man and the woman are initially able to be naked before one another without shame. This signals their interior freedom, their reciprocal love that is free from corruption.

Before we move on from this discussion of man and woman in their original condition (spoiler: things quickly go awry), I want to make a final point about language. Both of the Genesis cosmologies depict a particular relationship between language and reality. In the first account, God uses language to create the cosmos *ex nihilo*: he draws order and being out of nothingness. In the second account, the man uses language to name what God creates. Divine speech makes reality; human speech identifies reality.

In the parade of animals, the man's act of naming does not impose meaning but recognizes meaning that objectively exists. God creates the animal and presents it to the man, who discerns its distinct nature and bestows a name that proclaims that nature. This dynamic is most obvious in the naming of woman. The man recognizes that the woman shares his nature, but in a modality that is distinct from his own. She is simultaneously like and unlike him. He chooses a word that corresponds to that twofold reality: *ishshah* ("woman"), a word that includes *ish* ("man") while adding something new. These terms, man and

woman, first appear in the text during this climactic encounter. Prior to this moment, the man is called the *ādām*. This, then, is a moment of *mutual* recognition; the man is both naming woman and renaming himself; it is through encountering her nature that he is able truly to understand his own. Throughout this account, naming is depicted as a linguistic response to that which is being named. Reality, then, exists prior to our naming it, and our language is true and meaningful when it corresponds to what exists.

The understanding of language portrayed in Genesis contrasts starkly with the view that dominates contemporary debates about gender. Most gender theories hold that what we think of as "reality" is a linguistic and social construction. Our use of the words "woman" and "man", so this theory goes, creates the illusion that sex is a binary. We will discuss this perspective in more detail in subsequent chapters. For now, I merely want to point out that the constructionist view of language is a complete inversion of the correspondence view depicted in Genesis. In this divinely revealed origin story, our language does not project meaning onto things. Rather, meaning intrinsically exists in what God creates. Moreover, this meaning is intelligible to us, and language, a mark of God's image in us, enables human beings to proclaim that inherent meaning.

Thus far, the Genesis cosmology has given us a vivid picture of humankind in our original condition. We are part of a created order, a harmonious whole, that is brought into being and held in existence by a loving Creator. We are unities of body and spirit; our bodies are an integral part of our identity that connect us to the created order and serve as a bridge between our inmost being and the outer world, and a sacramental sign of the hidden mystery of God. Both man and woman are made in God's image, and our sexual difference is part of the goodness of the created order, signaling that we are made for reciprocal love.

We have been granted a share in the divine power of language in order to make words that reveal the truth about ourselves and our world.

Harmony, order, communion: these are the key features of our prelapsarian state. But we have reached a turning point in the narrative; the balanced relationship between man and woman is about to undergo a radical transformation. There is a clear rupture between human nature in the original condition and human nature corrupted by sin. Genesis addresses both dimensions of our origin and identity: who we were created to be and who we have unfortunately become.

Original Schism

The best lies are not outright falsehoods but subtle distortions of the truth. The most effective temptations are those that take hold of a genuine desire for something good and twist that desire toward a false or lesser good. So it is with the woman and the serpent. "You will be like God", he promises. These words lead her away from the recognition that she already bears a likeness to God; she is a living, breathing image of God in the visible world. The words of the serpent, as John Paul II writes, cause doubt to well up in the human heart, doubt about "the goodness of the gift": the gift of creation, the gift of our bodies, the gift of divine grace that raises us out of a purely natural state and into a dynamic of communion with God.[6]

Sometimes this moment is described as the moment when "sin entered the world". This wording makes sin sound like a substance, like some kind of metaphysical tar that coats and sullies the soul. But sin is not a *something*; it is a *nothing*, an absence. That is why this moment is known as the Fall. Athanasius, an influential early Church father and bishop, provides an interpretation of the Fall in his treatise *On the Incarnation*. Athanasius writes that human beings are made of

matter, and thus we are finite and prone to disease, decay, and death. That is our natural state. Because God had mercy upon us and desired for us to share in his eternal life, he granted us, in the beginning, "a further gift", a "share in the power of his own Word", that we may be able to "abide in blessedness".[7] The original state of man and woman described in Genesis, then, is a supranatural one; they were lifted out of their mortal state by a gift of divine grace. When the first humans broke faith with God, this grace was lost, and humankind "fell" into mortality, becoming subject to death. The fall is not a plunge from our natural state into a more corrupt, unnatural state: it is a fall from what the Catechism calls "the grace of original holiness", a reversion to our mortal condition.[8]

Some interpreters, perhaps most famously Milton in *Paradise Lost*, have made much of the fact that the serpent tempts the woman, using this as justification to portray women as weak and morally compromised, gateways to sin. But a Catholic interpretation has to take the long view, reading this story in the arc of salvation history. From that perspective, one can see a similitude between the narrative of the Fall and the Annunciation, when Mary is approached by a divine messenger. From the early Church Fathers onward, Catholic interpreters have recognized this parallel between Eve and Mary. Philosopher-saint Edith Stein puts it this way: "As woman was the first to be tempted, so did God's message of grace come first to a woman, and each time woman's assent determined the destiny of humanity as a whole."[9] The woman's temptation indicates not her weakness, but rather her influence: woman's assent has the power to shape and reshape humankind.

The first consequence of eating the forbidden fruit is a sudden awareness of nakedness and an impulse to hide from one another. This harkens back to the concluding verse of the second creation account: "the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed." Now,

something has soured, something has gone wrong. Their naked bodies, once a source of wonder and joy, elicit discomfort and shame. Not only do the man and the woman hide from one another; they also hide themselves from the presence of God. Conflict has disrupted the original harmony; shame has corrupted the original intimacy. Self-gift has become self-erasure.

In his writings on the theology of the body, John Paul II draws out the many layers of meaning that are packed into this moment. The sudden impulse to hide is a sharp contrast from the man's free and full participation in the "visibility of the world" that is depicted earlier in the text.[10] The man and the woman now seek to hide their sexually differentiated bodies, obscuring the sacramental symbolism expressed by that difference. According to John Paul II, this moment is "the collapse of the original acceptance of the body as a sign of the person in the visible world."[11] We have lost sight of the truth that to see a *body* is to see a *person*, a person made in the image of God. Moreover, the man and the woman have lost the sense of the image of God in *themselves*, not just in the other. Shame is a turning away, a "detachment from love".[12] The original union of the man and the woman, their "serene community of love", has ended.[13]

This outer rupture in the relationship between man and woman indicates an inner rupture in the human person's very being. Sin has fractured the call to unity between the sexes and has also created a fracture in the original spiritual-somatic unity of the individual. There is now a war within that threatens the wholeness of the human person. The body becomes a "hotbed of resistance against the spirit", no longer feeling integral to the self, but something that must be tamed and controlled.[14] This state of interior discord is *concupiscence*, and it brings about "difficulty in identifying oneself with one's own body"—and also, I would argue, in recognizing the sacred personhood of other

bodies.[15] Concupiscence depersonalizes the human person, making him an object for the other and an object for himself. The body in particular is objectified, becoming a "terrain of appropriation".[16]

When God confronts the man and woman about what they've done, their reaction is to equivocate, to cast blame elsewhere, to subtly twist the truth—just like the serpent. Language itself has been perverted; words are now being used to obfuscate and manipulate reality, rather than to reveal what is true. In the original Hebrew, man's response to God's question features a curious doubling of the verb: *the woman whom you gave to me gave me the fruit and I ate* it. This doubling emphasizes the notion of *gift* and subtly rejects the gift of the woman, a gift the man wholeheartedly and joyfully celebrated just a few verses earlier. His response to God casts doubt on the goodness of God's gifts —particularly the gift of woman—just as the woman's acquiescence to the serpent reflects a distrust in the original goodness of her own nature.

While misogynist interpreters prefer to perseverate on the woman's role in the Fall, the sacred text resists this reading, again and again stressing man and woman's shared condition. In the beginning, *both* are created in the image of God; *both* are given dominion over the earth and the mission to make it fruitful; *both* are naked and unashamed. In the narrative of the Fall, *both* are present to hear the tempter's words; *both* take and eat the fruit; *both* experience a sudden and shameful awareness of nakedness; *both* hide from each other and from God; *both* twist the truth to cast blame; *both* suffer the consequences of sin. The text never paints one sex as the villain or the victim.

In the midst of all this mirroring, there are meaningful asymmetries. The original goodness and the subsequent evil are fully shared, but the consequences carry different implications for each sex. To the woman, God says: "your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over

you." The man's response to the woman's desire is to dominate her, which "makes an object out of a human being".[17] The dynamic of communion is displaced by a dynamic of possession; mutual love between persons becomes a utilitarian exchange between person and object. Edith Stein's description of this new order is quite pointed: "The relationship of the sexes since the Fall has become a brutal relationship of master and slave. . . . Man uses her as a means to achieve his own ends in the exercise of his work or in pacifying his own lust."[18] John Paul II writes that "the relationship of the gift changes into a relationship of appropriation", and while this appropriation is mutual and not totally one-sided, it happens "more at the woman's expense".[19] For John Paul, the man has a special responsibility as "guardian of the reciprocity of the gift".[20] Maintaining the balance of the gift is entrusted to both sexes, but it depends more on the man whether the balance is kept or violated.

I want to underscore that the dynamic of domination is not God's intention for men and women, but a distortion due to sin. While the serpent and the ground are explicitly cursed, the man and the woman are not. God's words here are a foretelling, a description of consequences that will unfold as a result of losing the grace of original holiness. Human nature is now marked by concupiscence, an inner conflict between body and spirit. The Protestant understanding regards concupiscence itself as sinful, and human nature after the Fall as utterly depraved. The Catholic vision is more optimistic: our nature is *wounded*, not completely corrupt. The human heart is a "battlefield between love and concupiscence", but the battle is not yet lost.[21]

Redemption of the Gift

In the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus is questioned by the Pharisees about whether divorce is permissible, he refers back to Genesis, to the original order of creation: "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one'? So they are no longer two but one."[22] The Pharisees quickly counter that the Mosaic law permitted divorce, allowing men to "put away" their wives for any cause. Christ draws a sharp distinction between this law, which is part of the order corrupted by sin, and God's original intention for men and women. In the fallen order, sin has hardened the hearts of men and women toward one another, but, to use Christ's words, "from the beginning it was not so."

Christ's turn toward Genesis is a significant move. He does not appeal to the law when confronted with questions about how men and women should relate to one another. He appeals to *cosmology*, to the sacred narratives of Genesis that give an account of our identity and purpose as human beings. Genesis still speaks the truth about men and women, about who we are created to be. Christ's Incarnation, his coming into the world, ushers in a new order, the order of grace and redemption, that seeks to restore what has been broken by sin. Christ does not direct us to structure our relationships according to our "hardness of heart".[23] He turns our eyes back toward Genesis and urges us, with divine help, to reclaim the goodness of the created order, the gift of our bodies and the earth, and to cultivate anew a dynamic of reciprocity between the sexes.

Edith Stein, in her writings about men and women, draws on Genesis and the Gospels to argue that "the Lord clearly declared the new kingdom of God would bring a new order of relationship between the sexes, i.e., it would put an end to the relationships caused by the Fall and would restore the original order."[24] Sacred Scripture, taken as

a whole, highlights three states of identity and relation between the sexes. There is the original order, described in the first two chapters of Genesis. In this order, sexual difference is understood and experienced as *gift*, as a source of fruitfulness and love. There is a dynamic balance between sameness and difference, and the man and the woman have a shared commission—a common mission—to generate life and govern the earth. Once the man and the woman break faith with God, a fracture heaves through all of creation: through the center of the human person, through the bond between man and woman, through the connection between humankind and the earth. In this fallen order, the human person is now at war with himself, and this inner conflict erupts outward, pushing the equilibrium between the sexes into a swinging pendulum of conflict and domination. Difference, no longer recognized as gift, is understood as opposition. The final, redemptive order seeks to correct this opposition. This order begins with Mary's assent to become the Mother of God Incarnate. She is the new Eve. Her *yes* to God untwists the knot of Eve's *no*. The redemptive order harkens back to the beginning, to restore the original justice of creation through the engine of grace. Grace has the power to heal our wounded nature, to soften the hardness of our hearts, and to restore the broken covenants between God and humanity and between woman and man.

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We live now as exiles, driven from Eden into the wilderness. In this wilderness, there is a continual "struggle between the sexes, one pitted against the other, as they fight for their rights and, in doing so, no longer appear to hear the voices of nature and of God."[25] We are born into this fallen order, but the realm of redemption remains open to us, beckoning. Feminism rightly recognizes that something is amiss, that the relationship between men and women has been too often charac-

terized by domination. However, blind to the dimension of grace, the solutions offered by its theories are themselves caught in the fallen forces of conflict, in the continual grasping for power over others.

A Christian approach is one that seeks to move from the wilderness of sin and into the realm of grace, all the while remaining attentive to the voice of nature and the voice of God. This means taking Genesis seriously, regarding it as "true myth", as a divinely revealed cosmology that describes our origin so as to give an enduring account of our identity and purpose as human beings, as woman and man. Within this redemptive order, we can recover our wonder. We can recognize anew the abundance of *the gift*—the gift of our bodies, the gift of our shared humanity, and the gift of our sexual difference.

Sex

The classic dystopian novel *Brave New World* features a totalitarian society that has completely separated human reproduction from sexual activity. Human beings are mass-produced and engineered into a caste system; from infancy, their desires are shaped and conditioned to keep them happily enslaved to the social system. Babies, naturally drawn to the beauty of the sun and flowers, are punished with electric shocks until they develop an aversion that will keep them "happy" in the industrial environment of the city. Adults are lulled into an acquiescent state by the euphoric drug soma, which provides a false happiness, a state of superficial pleasure that distracts rather than fulfills.

A social engineering feat like this depends upon the complete conquest of nature—not "nature" as in trees and bees, but nature as in human nature. Aldous Huxley was not a Christian, but the portrait he paints is deeply teleological. The dark mirror of *Brave New World* shows that the human person is not a blank slate, a *tabula rasa* awaiting social construction. The regime has to work against a pre-social nature that is continually threatening to reassert itself. The state in *Brave New World* has its own synthetic *telos* to impose, and because *telos* is connected with nature, the state must work tirelessly against human nature, systematically and violently undoing any enduring bonds of love between people, any natural inclination toward beauty and wholeness. Marriage has been eradicated, and indeed any form of committed monogamy is illicit. There 115 are no natural family units or any family units at all—the term "mother" has become an obscenity.

Huxley's dystopia springs to my mind regularly these days. Take the other week, when I was participating in what has become a standard ritual in the twenty-first-century workplace: mandatory HR compliance training. In my ideal world, compliance training would be replaced by a simple email, sent annually, that reads: "Greetings. This is your yearly reminder from HR. Don't be a jerk." Instead, we cycle through a lengthy and tedious tour of the many possible ways of offending our colleagues, a tour that gets lengthier and more tedious each year, as the list of offenses continues to grow. This year's training, for example, included a directive to stop associating gender with biology. "Say 'pregnant people' " the slide cheerily demanded, "instead of 'pregnant women.' " As I reread this slide in disbelief, I was reminded of *Brave New World*, where technology has conquered biology, where "mother" has become a dirty word. When it comes to sex, gender, and sexuality, our world too closely mirrors Huxley's dystopia. The phrase "pregnant woman" is a microaggression, a slur, because it makes the now-transgressive assumption that only women can get pregnant.

How did we get here? What is being rewritten? What has been unlearned? To answer these questions, we must delve into the concepts of "sex" and "gender", map the shifting meanings of these words, and reanchor them in reality. That will be the focus of the following two chapters, as we take a hard look at biological sex and gender in turn.

Essential Potential

From the second wave onward, feminism has had an ongoing problem with both resisting and depending upon a stable definition of woman. On the one hand, the very term "feminism" indicates a focus on *femmes*, women. Yet feminism has also been marked by a deep suspi-

cion toward the idea of a universal, timeless understanding of what a woman is.

There is some good reason for this. Various cultures and historical moments have featured dehumanizing definitions of woman, denying women basic rights and access to education on the grounds that women are intellectually deficient and only good for producing offspring, ideally sons. Feminists have also pointed out the difficulty of finding a definition that is capacious enough to include all women: What is the foundational denominator to which we can point? We can't point to physical features, because that would exclude women who have had hysterectomies, women who can grow full beards, women who tower over the average man. We can't point to motherhood, because not all women are mothers. We can't point to character traits—compassion, gentleness—because we can all think of women who don't exemplify those traits.

Notice how this line of thought is circular? I am rejecting definitions of "woman" on the grounds that they don't include *all women*. I am taking for granted, in my evaluations, that there is such a being as "woman", and then I'm searching for a way to articulate exactly what distinguishes that being from other beings. What is the whatness, the *quiddity*, of woman?

The idea that all women share some intrinsic property that characterizes "womanness" is called *essentialism*. An essentialist perspective affirms that men and women are fundamentally, or essentially, different. This doesn't have to mean that they are polar opposites, different in every way, but rather that there is some distinguishing feature that all women have and all men do not, and vice versa. In gender theory, essentialism is often contrasted with social constructionism, which is the idea that there are no differences between men and women at the

level of being; any differences we perceive are products of society and culture.

Feminist thought, for reasons described above, is overwhelmingly antiessentialist, and to escape the tension caused by rejecting essentialism on the one hand, while retaining a woman-centered movement on the other, many feminists appeal to *nominalism*. Nominalism—which evokes the notion of *nom* or "name"—is the idea that we can group things together in name only, without appealing to a universal essence that transcends culture. I can say, for example, that women exist, because the idea of woman exists as a mental and social construct. Feminist theorists write of using essentialism nominally and "strategically", appealing to a catch-all category when it suits, rejecting the category when it doesn't, and resisting any attempts to define that category.

I was caught in this nominalist-essentialist loop as a college student. I was first drawn to feminism by an avowedly essentialist impulse: I saw my womanhood as an integral part of my identity, and I felt a longing to understand and embrace my dignity *as a woman* specifically. At first glance, feminism seemed to offer a space where I could do exactly that. I did not expect to have to reject the idea of womanhood in order to find my dignity. Once I became immersed in feminist thought, however, I quickly picked up on the fact that essentialism was an unforgiveable feminist sin.

I remember sitting in a feminist philosophy class as a college senior, bandying around possible definitions of "woman" with my classmates, always coming up short. I kept wanting to appeal to the body, to female biology, but was admittedly stumped by the exceptions. Are women who have had hysterectomies no longer women? I could see that idea was clearly absurd, but I couldn't articulate *why*. Even so, I remained a closet essentialist, playing the nominalism card as needed, secretly

holding on to the idea that womanhood was a core part of my identity, that "woman" named something fundamental and real, something deeper than a social fiction.

I tried to confess this once to a male classmate. We were both taking the feminist philosophy class, both card-carrying, self-avowed feminists. One day after class, he asked me to articulate my perspective. How do I understand my identity as a woman, he asked? I don't remember what I said; I only remember that I spoke honestly, and his response was incredulous: "You can't think that! That's *essentialism*!" The irony of having a male classmate reject my perspective in order to toe the feminist line is not lost on me. His response shows how the rejection of essentialism is a *premise* in most feminist philosophy, rather than a well-reasoned conclusion. I had only been a feminist for a hot minute, and already I was a heretic.

The tool I lacked in my analytical toolbox was this: the crucial distinction between potentiality and actuality. I first encountered these concepts in the work of the philosopher and theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas, who in turn adapted them from Aristotle. *Potentiality* (also called "potency") refers to any inherent potential or possibility a thing has. *Actuality* (also called "act") is the realization or actualization of that inherent possibility. Let's play with some examples.

Before I sat down to write this morning, I was looking at some of my daughter's worksheets from kindergarten. She's just learning how to arrange letters into words, based on sound. On one worksheet, she'd listed characters from the Christmas story: MRE, AJL, CING—a.k.a. Mary, Angel, King. There's something awe-inducing about seeing her oversized, shaky, and often backwards letters being arranged to create intelligible words. There is a potential within her—the potential to read, to write, to reason, to develop language—that is being drawn into actuality, and it is thrilling to see it unfold in real time. She's been in

kindergarten for only two months, and already she's beginning to write and to read.

My cat, Kafka, also has some linguistic abilities. At least, he can communicate pretty well. Like his namesake, Kafka is full of angst; he meows loudly whenever he needs something, usually water, food, or attention, and he has a particularly deep and proud yowl to signal the presentation of a trophy, usually the corpse of a dead rat. Despite his intelligence and ability to communicate, if I sent Kafka to kindergarten, he would never learn to read. I could keep him in school until his nine lives ran out, and it would just never happen, because he does not have the inherent potential to develop literacy. There are plenty of animals more intelligent than Kafka, but none of them could do what my five-year-old daughter is now doing, because they lack the potential to do so, by their very nature.

How does this help us define "woman"? In my prior and failed attempts to settle on a definition, I was working only with the idea of *actuality*, fumbling to find a characteristic that would be *actually* true for all women at all times. I held the common-sense intuition that a woman is an adult human female but was unsure how to respond to the inevitable what-aboutery that springs up in response to any proposed definition: What about infertile women? What about post-menopausal women? What about women who've had mastectomies and hysterectomies? What about women with a Y chromosome?

Potentiality solves this problem. A woman is the kind of human being whose body is organized around the potential to gestate new life. This *potentiality* that belongs to femaleness is always present, even if there is some kind of condition, such as age or disease, that prevents that potential from being actualized. The very category of "infertility" does not undermine this definition, but affirms it. A male human who cannot get pregnant is not deemed "infertile", because he never had

that potential in the first place. A woman who cannot get pregnant does have that potential, and so she is considered infertile. Infertility names the often painful and devastating inability to actualize one's procreative potential.

Maybe I have found a well-armored definition of woman, but doesn't this definition reduce people to reproductive function? Isn't that dehumanizing? The first response I have to this objection is that this definition is not about *function* per se, but about innate *potential*. This is an important distinction, because it affirms the reality that women who do not procreate are still fully women.

My second response is to call to mind again that guiding principle of thinking like a Catholic: when we talk about people, we are always talking about bodies *and* souls, physical-spiritual beings. Our consideration of womanhood must include bodily sex, but must also extend beyond it to consider the whole person. That's the lively tension we need to inhabit: to remain rooted in the body but not reduced to the body.

I recently saw a tweet from the brand Tampax that proclaimed, "not all people with periods are women. Let's celebrate the diversity of people who bleed!"[1] This echoes the worldview behind the HR training I took that mandated the phrase "pregnant people" rather than "pregnant women". I've seen similar permutations elsewhere: people with a cervix, chest-feeders, birthing parents—linguistic somersaults to speak about female bodies without using the term *woman*. *This* strikes me as the dehumanizing, function-based approach. Instead of a term that evokes an integrated, personal entity—"woman"—we have phrases based on function and then loosely attached to personhood, which is necessarily delimiting. "Birthing parent" is narrowly focused on the function of giving birth; "mother" evokes that role, but blooms far beyond it, encompassing so much more than one singular event or function.

It is the gender paradigm that employs function-based categorization rather than person-based categorization. By divorcing femaleness from the concept of "woman", this paradigm creates a schism between body and identity. Instead of body-identity integration, we are left with fragmentation, a picture of the human person like a Potato Head doll: a hollow, neuter shell that comes with an assortment of rearrangeable parts.

The Science of Sex

Now that we have a working definition of woman that is connected to femaleness, let's tackle some of the misguided assumptions about biological sex in our culture. One of my finer teaching moments in gender theory was successfully luring my students into the following thought-trap. During one of our class discussions, I noticed some students parroting the line that biological sex is "assigned" at birth by doctors and parents rather than identified or recognized. "Wait a second", I said. "Is sexual orientation innate, something we are born with?" My students nodded readily. This is well-established dogma. "And you're also saying that biological sex is a social construct, a category arbitrarily 'assigned' at birth?" More vigorous nods. "How is that possible? Aren't those claims contradictory? How is it possible to have an *innate* attraction to something that is merely a social construct?" Aha. In that millisecond, I saw a brief glimmer of light cut through the postmodern haze. Even if they quickly turned away, they had at least recognized the contradiction.

The bizarre idea that biological sex is "assigned" at birth for everyone is one of several myths about sex that have gained widespread acceptance in our time. These myths tend to cluster together, like one trapdoor that opens into another. Once you accept one myth as true,

you quickly freefall down the rabbit hole. The first trapdoor is this idea: sex is not binary but a spectrum. This leads to the notion that the categories "male" and "female" are social constructs, rather than terms that correspond to an objective truth about human nature. If sex is a construct, then the labels "girl" and "boy" are indeed "assigned" by doctors, who thus create the illusion of a binary. Lastly, if birth sex is not identified *from* the body, but projected *onto* the body, then sex can be changed.

The gateway into this spiral of myths is the contention that sex is not binary—in other words, the contention that there are more than two sexes or that sex is a spectrum. The question is: Do we have good evidence to support this contention?

Come! Let's take a magical mystery tour through the science of sex.

Human bodies are teleologically organized according to our distinct role in reproducing the species. The structure of our bodies is arranged to produce either large sex cells or small sex cells. These sex cells are called gametes. Large gametes are ova, and small gametes are sperm. A physiology arranged to produce ova is female, and a physiology arranged to produce sperm is male. This twofold distinction between large and small gametes is stable and universal, not only throughout the human species, but also among *all* plant and animal species that reproduce sexually.

There is no such thing as a third gamete or a spectrum of possible gametes. This invariable feature of our humanity ties us intimately to the rest of creation. When the gametes combine, they can create a new member of the species. The sex binary, then, is the necessary foundation for the continued transmission of human existence. (If it's just a construct, we're in trouble.)

Rather than arbitrarily assigned at birth, a baby's sex is determined at conception, through the SRY gene (or its absence). This gene is the

master switch of sexual differentiation; if triggered, the SRY gene initiates a process of sexual development toward the production of male gametes. Without successful SRY activation, the gonads of a developing baby become ovaries, which are structured to produce female gametes.

If the science is clear, and the sex binary in humans has existed for millions of years—why are we suddenly facing the novel notion of sex as a spectrum? In the following chapter, I will sketch out a possible genealogy for this idea; here, I would like to respond to two central arguments behind the spectrum hypothesis.

This is by far the most common rejoinder I hear: "Sex is not a binary. *Intersex people exist*." Foot soldiers of the gender brigade always make sure to carry the intersex card in a ready holster and are quick on the draw. This reflexive reference to intersex is a great rhetorical move, because most people don't know enough about the topic to make a cogent response. The term is used in such a way to suggest that "intersex" refers to something completely outside the male / female binary, like some third sex or non-sex category of persons who are neither male nor female, or somehow both male *and* female. In this way, the intersex trump card is used to erase the fundamental and stable reality of biological sex, in order to justify the idea that sex is a construct and open the door to limitless self-identification.

The term "intersex" is an umbrella term encompassing a range of conditions that disrupt the development of certain sexual characteristics. Despite its prevalence in the gender theory world, the term is imprecise and often misused. Medical literature tends to use the term "disorders of sexual development" (DSDs). I have also seen "differences of sexual development" and "variations of sexual development" (VSDs). I prefer the term "congenital conditions of sexual development" (CCSDs), which is medically precise and avoids the language of "disorder" that some find stigmatizing. Moreover, including the

word “congenital” helpfully limits the range of conditions; while late-onset disruptions of sexual development can occur, these do not result in sexual ambiguity at birth. If “intersex” is used to invoke a category *in between* the sexes, it is a misnomer. However, the label can be accurately used when referring to a biologically based variation *within* maleness or femaleness.

I first encountered the concept of intersexuality in graduate school, when I was studying gender theory. I came across the book *Sexing the Body* by biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling and found it utterly fascinating. I had never done a deep dive into the complexities of sexual development before, and her radical conclusions blew my hair back. I used this book as a primary source in the culminating project for my master’s coursework, in which I argued that science itself is a gendered discipline with an inherent masculine bias (an entertaining but ultimately flawed line of argumentation).

Fausto-Sterling is the fairy godmother of the intersex gambit, that tokenizing reference to intersex people used to dismantle the idea of a sex binary. Her work is also the origin of common misconceptions about CCSDs, such as the idea that these conditions are as common as having red hair. In a coauthored article “How Sexually Dimorphic Are We?”, Fausto-Sterling *et al.* argue that sex should be understood as a continuum, rather than a binary, and a key part of their argument is the notion that intersex conditions are fairly common, occurring in as many as 1.7 per 100 live births (1.7%).[2] They arrive at this number through an overly expansive definition of intersex, one that includes any “individual who deviates from the Platonic ideal of physical dimorphism at the chromosomal, genital, gonadal, or hormonal levels.”[3] This capacious definition would include conditions such as polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), a hormonal disorder that occurs when a woman produces excess androgen, or Klinefelter syndrome, when a

man has an extra X chromosome. (It might even include me! My body hair situation is decidedly *not* in line with the Platonic ideal.) While these conditions may lead to fertility problems, they do not cause sexual ambiguity. A woman with PCOS is clearly female, and a man with Klinefelter is clearly male, often unaware of his chromosomal variation until he attempts to have children.

In fact, the five most common conditions that Fausto-Sterling categorizes as "intersex" do not actually involve instances of sexual ambiguity. When we restrict the category to include only such cases, the number plummets to 0.018%—a figure one hundred times *lower* than Fausto-Sterling's estimate.[4] Rather than the inflated rate of 1.7 out of 100 births, CCSDs occur in fewer than 2 out of 10,000 births. This is a crucial point to understand: *the vast majority of individuals often categorized as intersex are unambiguously male or female*, even if the presentation of maleness or femaleness is atypical in some way.

Take the condition of vaginal agenesis, which Fausto-Sterling categorizes as intersex. Baby girls born with this condition have a vagina that is not fully developed, along with fully functioning ovaries, which lead to female sex characteristics. In Fausto-Sterling's logic, a girl with vaginal agenesis is not "really" female. Ironically, her attempt to critique the Platonic ideals of maleness and femaleness actually *reinforces* those ideals, by exempting those with variations in sexual development from the sex binary altogether.

Given the fact that sexual development is a process and at each stage of the process, things can go awry, I am actually surprised how *rare* cases of genuine sexual ambiguity are. I'm not surprised such cases exist; rather, I'm surprised there are so few. Statistically speaking, sex is readily recognizable at birth for 99.98% of human beings. That is remarkably consistent. In the remaining outlying cases, the reality of sex is still present but must be more carefully discerned—not for cu-

riosity's sake, but in order to support the person's physical health. This is not because those individuals are neither male nor female, but rather because their developmental pathways of becoming male or female took some unexpected turns.

Discerning sex in these individuals entails looking at multiple factors taken together: karyotype (chromosomes); phenotype (genitalia); gonads (ovaries or testes); internal structures that support gamete production; and hormones. Sexual ambiguity occurs when the phenotype is not readily classifiable as male or female or when the karyotype is not consistent with the phenotype, as in cases of complete androgen insensitivity syndrome (CAIS).[5] Overly broad use of the term "intersex" tends to privilege karyotype and phenotype, while overlooking gamete production and the structure of the body as a whole. In the face of ambiguity in these first two factors, genderists tend to conclude prematurely that the verdict is in: the sex binary is false. Popular memes, such as the Genderbread Person, portray sex on a spectrum and define sex as a mix-and-match assemblage of "genitalia, body shape, voice pitch, body hair, hormones, chromosomes, etc." Gamete production is not mentioned at all, even though this is the foundation of biological sex.

This reflects a common error: reducing biological sex to secondary sex characteristics—seeing sex as merely about genital appearance or breast development. The gender paradigm fundamentally misunderstands what sex is, confusing cause with effect. Secondary sex characteristics develop as a *consequence* of sex; they are the effect, rather than the cause.

This misunderstanding is often perpetuated to reach a desired conclusion: the notion that a person can change his or her sex. If sex is defined by secondary characteristics like genital appearance and voice depth, then changing sex *is* possible, through surgery and synthetic

hormones. If, however, sex is fundamentally about how the body is organized in relation to gamete production—a potentiality that cannot be endowed by a scalpel—then the undeniable truth is this: it is *not* possible to change one's sex, because sex is constitutive of the whole person.

When faced with ambiguity at the level of phenotype and karyotype, the best response is not to shrug and embrace the spectrum, but to continue the discernment of sex by looking at the anatomical structures that support either large gamete production or small gamete production. Although the term "hermaphrodite" used to be applied to cases of sexual ambiguity, this is a dehumanizing misnomer. Hermaphrodites are species that do not have separate sexes, such as snails and slugs; instead, each member of the species has the ability to produce both large and small gametes and can thus take on either the "male" or "female" role in reproduction. For this kind of species, hermaphroditic reproduction is the norm. Human biology, on the other hand, does not support this mode of reproduction. In the rarest CCSD, an individual can develop both ovarian and testicular tissue, but even in this case, he or she will produce one gamete or the other, not both. There have only been about five hundred documented cases of an ovotesticular CCSD in medical history, and there is no direct evidence in the literature of a hermaphroditic human being, someone able to produce both small and large gametes.[6]

When all the dimensions of sex are taken into account, sex can be discerned in each human being. To conclude otherwise is to exclude some individuals from a reality in which we all participate. This kind of thinking has unintended and harmful consequences, ones that lead to bodily violation.

Bodily Integrity

Despite its flaws, one of the most valuable aspects of Fausto-Sterling's work is her critique of infant genital mutilation (IGM), medically unnecessary surgeries on infants born with CCSDs. This used to be standard medical practice. If a baby was born with atypical or ambiguous genitalia, the reaction was to whip out the scalpel and attempt to sculpt more normal-looking genitals. An infant girl born with an enlarged clitoris (clitoromegaly) might be subjected to unnecessary genital surgery to make the clitoris appear more normal. Surgeries like this, which are purely cosmetic, can lead to reduced sexual function and sensation.

Even more disturbing: a healthy infant of one sex might be categorized and raised as the opposite sex, simply because of the external appearance of the genitals. This is the situation in which the phrase "assigned sex" is accurate: a baby boy with a micropenis might have been surgically altered and raised as a girl, simply because his male genitalia didn't match the norm. It is easier to surgically mimic the appearance of a vagina, so infants with ambiguous genitalia were more regularly designated "female", regardless of overall bodily structure. I remember this chilling line from Fausto-Sterling's book, which she attributed to a surgeon: "You can make a hole, but you can't build a pole."

The animating problem behind the practice of IGM is an idealization of how male and female genitalia should *look*. The emphasis is on cosmetic appearance, rather than respect for the integrity of the body and how the body is organized as a whole.

Intersex activism first arose in the 1990s—not as an attempt to dismantle the sex binary, but rather to end harmful medical practices and raise awareness of CCSDs. The Intersex Society of North America (ISNA) successfully advocated for groundbreaking changes in the

healthcare system. Clinical guidelines published in 2006 established new protocols for responding to infants with CCSDs, including a more cautious approach to surgical intervention, with attention to bodily function and medical necessity rather than appearance. After these successes, ISNA disbanded in 2008, which is around the time I first learned about intersex conditions in graduate school. At the time, it seemed like we were entering a new era of respecting the dignity and bodily integrity of people with CCSDs, but the mainstreaming of post-modern gender theory is reversing that progress.

Proponents of the sex spectrum claim to be allies of people with CCSDs, and I am sure most are acting in good faith. But the knee-jerk invocation "Intersex people exist!" is used to cast doubt on the reality of biological sex rather than to cultivate an awareness of the unique circumstances and needs of people with CCSDs. Ironically, postmodern genderists fall into the same error as those surgeons who performed unneeded surgeries: they place undue emphasis on idealized stereotypes of how men and women should *look*. If we refer to the Gender Unicorn—an Internet meme that distills postmodern gender theory into a cartoonish diagram—there are three options listed for "sex assigned at birth": male, female, and other / intersex. This meme classifies "intersex" as something *other* than male or female, a mischaracterization commonly found in activist rhetoric. Unfortunately, this way of framing CCSDs dehumanizes intersex individuals by insisting that any deviations from idealized norms are not "really" male or female, but "other". In this understanding, a girl born with atypical genitalia is expelled from the category "female" altogether and placed in some amorphous third category or marooned along a spectrum between maleness and femaleness.

Increasingly, the term "intersex" is invoked as a "gotcha!" card in debates about transgender identities. The addition of an "I" to the ever

expansive LGBTQIA+ acronym conflates, in a reductive and unhelpful way, the very different situations of individuals with CCSDs and trans-identifying people. One notable point of tension is the question of bodily integrity.

The intersex activist effort has focused on ending mutilating surgeries, valuing health and wholeness over idealized appearance and preserving the integrity of the body in whatever form it comes. These efforts are in tension with transgender activism, which advocates invasive surgeries on healthy bodies, values cosmetic appearance over health and bodily function, and does not respect the integrity of the body as a good that should be preserved. The procedures that intersex activists describe as "mutilations" are the same procedures that trans activists insist are good and necessary, even for minors. IGMs are rightly decried not simply because they are nonconsensual—although this is a crucial factor—but also because they do unnecessary harm to the body. For the trans activist, the integrity of the body matters *only when I want it to matter*. The underlying fantasy of postmodernity is that we have control over our nature, that we are the masters, the gods, the makers. Rather than affirming that fantasy, people with CCSDs expose it as false, because they are reckoning with bodily realities outside of their control.

There have been some attempts to categorize trans-identifying people as intersex, usually by appealing to the idea of a congenital "brain sex" that does not align with bodily sex. Several neuroimaging studies have explored the hypothesis that the brains of trans-identified people bear greater similarity to the brains of their professed gender than their natal sex. There are problems with this theory on three distinct levels. First of all, there is no solid evidence for an association between brain structure and trans-identification. The neuroimaging studies that exist are small and very limited and generate inconclusive

and contradictory results.[7] Secondly, *even if* we had solid evidence for these structural and functional brain differences, due to neuroplasticity, the causal relationship would remain unclear. In other words, it would be impossible to tell if such differences were congenital and led to transidentification or if trans-identification and transition had rewired the brain.[8] Thirdly, *even if* we had solid evidence for this association *and* evidence that it is congenital like an intersex condition, we still arrive at another problem: Why should sex be defined according to neuroanatomy rather than the presence of a healthy reproductive system, when sex is fundamentally a reproductive category? Redefining sex according to brain structure and function would mean that *any* woman or man whose neuroimages deviate from the norm is not "really" a woman or a man at all. I am not denying that some cases of sexual incongruence might have a neurological basis. That is certainly possible. What I am disputing is the idea of "brain sex", which is not supported by evidence and contradicts a basic biological understanding of what sex is.

Let me gather the important threads here.

Sex is not a spectrum but a stable binary—not only in the human species but in all sexually reproductive plant and animal species. There is no third sex. There is no spectrum of possible sexes.

In the process of sexual development, there can be variations that lead to atypical manifestations of maleness and femaleness. In 99.98% of these cases, sex is readily recognizable as unambiguously male or female. Categorizing these individuals as "intersex" or "other" leads to the idea that some women are "more" or "less" female based on how closely their bodies approximate the norm. Am I "less" female because I have more facial and body hair than the ideal? Am I less of a woman because, as I was told in high school, my legs look like a man's legs? This

way of thinking draws a narrow, superficial box around maleness and femaleness and demeans anyone who falls outside its bounds.

The 0.02% of cases where sex is not readily identifiable do not represent a third sex or points on a spectrum. Even here, sex is present and must be discerned with an attention to the whole person and supporting his or her physical health. These extremely rare situations are by definition unique and particular, and the focus must be on the individual's specific needs. Some CCSDs, like other congenital conditions, require medical attention and management, in order to maintain bodily health and integrity.

Co-opting the existence of intersex people to promote a postmodern understanding of sex and gender is unjust. The most humanizing and precise way to view CCSDs is to understand these conditions not as exceptions from the sex binary, but as variations within the binary. We need to make room *within* the boxes of male and female for a diverse range of body types and personalities. We do not need to abolish the boxes altogether.

Body as Sacrament

I've been spending a fair bit of time here on the biological plane. It's important to understand what sex is, and how sexual development unfolds, in order to be able to counter the postmodern myths. That can't be the extent of our discussion, however, if we're thinking from a Christian perspective. Our consideration of sex and gender must be attuned to the holistic and sacred reality of the *person*—the person as an integrated unity of body and soul. We must follow a path of contemplation that sees the various dimensions of personhood in order to receive the miracle of each person. This is a path that moves toward integration, from disorder to wholeness. The postmodern approach to

sex and gender runs in the opposite direction, into fragmentation, a piecemeal self, where body and psyche and desire are split off from one another and rearrangeable—where the body is not the foundation of personal identity, but rather its lifeless tool.

In contrast, the personalist approach allows us to see each human being as a *person*, rather than a collection of ever-proliferating labels, and, more importantly, to attune our awareness to the sacramentality of every human body. Bodies are not "just" bodies. Bodies are persons made manifest. The sacramental principle is always at work: the visible reveals the invisible. The body reveals to us the eternal and divine reality of the person—a reality that can only break into the tangible, sensible world through embodiment.

That is how God enters into our world and reveals himself, through the incarnational reality of Christ, who became a body that we might know and love the invisible God. The Incarnation is both a historical moment, a plot on the timeline of the world story, and an eternal moment. The divine Person who quickened in the womb of Mary is also the Person who, in the Eucharist, clothes himself in the molecules of wine and bread, that he might be placed on our tongues and engulfed by our hearts. This mystery—the sacramental mystery of the Incarnation—should frame our vision of all that is.

Too easily, we lose sight of this mystery; we allow our vision to contract, to become superficial and self-serving. We fall into the perennial error of seeing some human bodies as not-quite-human and thus disposable, cast out of the circle of what's seen and what's valued.

This time-worn tendency is on glaring display in Flannery O'Connor's story "A Temple of the Holy Ghost". Told from the perspective of an imaginative child who fantasizes about heroic martyrdom while skimping on her prayers, this story casts a bright beam on the dignity and sacramentality of the intersex person.

There's a fair in town, one with a Ferris wheel, merry-go-round, and "closed tent" exhibits for adults only. The child protagonist hears two older girls talking in hushed tones about what they saw in one of the tents: a "freak" that was "a man and woman both".[9] This person had "a particular name", but the girls don't remember it, instead using demeaning terms like "you-know-what" and the excising pronoun "It".[10]

The child, being a child, is not allowed into the closed exhibit, but her robust imagination embellishes the scant details provided by the older girls. She imagines the exhibit like a tent revival, the intersex person as preacher: "God made me thisaway. . . God done this to me and I praise him." The people murmur, "Amen. Amen." The preaching goes on: "Raise yourself up. A temple of the Holy Ghost. You! You are God's temple, don't you know? God's Spirit has a dwelling in you, don't you know?. . . A temple of God is a holy thing. Amen. Amen. I am a temple of the Holy Ghost."[11]

This fantasy of a communal worship service led by the intersex person stands in stark opposition to how the town's religious authorities actually respond. By the end of the story, we learn that the fair has been closed prematurely, after the town preachers do an inspection and tell the police to "shut it on down".[12] Rather than whispering "amen" and praising God for his handiwork, the townsfolk say "begone".

In one of her personal letters, O'Connor explains how that intersex character is the only person who approaches holiness in the story. She writes, "as near as I get to saying what purity is in this story is saying that it is an acceptance of what God wills for us, an acceptance of our individual circumstances."[13] Only the intersex person displays that spiritual wisdom, the purity of self-acceptance, a purity made even more remarkable in the face of ostracism.

The closing section of the story centers on another kind of exhibition: Eucharistic Adoration, the Catholic practice of sitting in rever-

ence before a consecrated Host, the small circle of bread that has been changed by the Holy Spirit into the Body of Christ. This form of Christ's Body is unexpected, dazzling our assumptions about what should be.

When the child sees the raised monstrance with the Body of Christ "shining ivory-colored in the center of it", she thinks again about the person from the closed tent, and she hears that person say, "This is the way He wanted me to be."[14]

Through this religious imagery, O'Connor deftly portrays two truths simultaneously. First, the undeniable fact that people with unexpected bodies are often shunned, scapegoated, and dehumanized. This is still happening. Despite its so-called progressivism, the current portrayal of intersex people as neither men nor women is simply the latest version of this othering—the updated, politically permissible way of saying "freak" and "It".

Secondly, O'Connor is drawing a profound parallel between the intersex person and Christ himself. Like Christ, the person's identity baffles and confuses the crowd. Like Christ, the person is shunned, mocked, and rejected. Like Christ in Adoration, the person's body is on display. Just as Christ's divine personhood is made visible by his eucharistic Body, the intersex body is likewise a revelation, a sacramental image of the living God and a temple of his indwelling Spirit. The extended parallel highlights the hypocrisy, the inherent contradiction, of adoring the Body of Christ, his divinity and humanity—while denigrating the intersex body, which carries divine dignity.

This story calls us to take a posture of adoration, to see all of reality, and every human being, through the illuminating mystery of the Incarnation. Each body is an icon of Christ; each body is a sacrament, revealing to us the sacred and unrepeatable mystery of the person.

Let our knees tremble in wonder at this.

Amen, amen.

Gender

A colleague once expressed to me her dismay that a student in my gender theory class was unable to articulate the difference between sex and gender. I found this oddly affirming: this student had rightly picked up on the fact that those two terms do not have fixed meanings in gender theory, and certainly not in the culture at large.

What *is* the difference? Are "sex" and "gender" interchangeable synonyms? Do they reflect a gnostic split between body (sex) and soul (gender)? Do they signify the interplay between biology and society in human identity? Depending upon the context, the words "sex" and "gender" can evoke any and all of those meanings. Why? Because, in a nutshell, we are deeply confused about what it means to be a body. We no longer know who we are as sexed beings, and this is mirrored in our language.

Perhaps more importantly, the meanings we hitch to those words reflect, whether intended or not, specific philosophical assumptions about what it means to be a human person. These meanings are continuing to shift at an astonishing rate. As a Christian, I believe that the proper response to any human person is always love and respect, but this does not exempt our culture's *idea* of human personhood from scrutiny. What is needed at this juncture is a hard look at, to borrow Chesterton's phrase, "the idea of the idea" of gender in our time.

The Eclipse of Sex

In the last century, our understanding of sex and gender has undergone a monumental shift—or, more specifically, *two* shifts. To trace the story of gender's cultural ascendancy, I have to describe a twofold revolution: first, the erosion of the old framework, in which bodily sex referred to the person as a whole and was characterized by generative roles, and secondly, the emergence of an alternate framework, one centered on the inherently unstable concept of gender.

Before the middle of the twentieth century, the word "gender" lived discreetly in the realm of grammar as a basic word denoting a category, kind, or class. One might find references to "the feminine gender" as a synonym for womankind, but it was more customary to speak of *words* having gender, as words do in various languages, such as French and Russian. The word "sex", in contrast, has referred exclusively to male and female differences in living beings, whether plants or animals, since at least the 1300s, only more recently taking on the additional meaning of a shorthand for "sexual intercourse"—a phrase that signals the bodily nature of "sex" and its connection to reproduction.

The predominant use of the word "sex" to indicate manhood or womanhood reveals a particular understanding of these terms. Sex, a reality expressed in the body, is seen as something innate, a given, a fact of nature recognized at birth, and one that provides the foundation of a person's identity. As discussed previously, this represents what gender theorists would call an *essentialist* understanding of sexed identity. In this view, human beings come into existence in two distinct forms, male and female, and this difference of sex occurs on the level of being itself; it is ontological, intrinsic, part of the *essence* of the person.

Perhaps most importantly, this intrinsic sexed identity is not merely about external *appearance* but also intimately connected to procreative *function*, one's generative potential as a male or female. This understanding of sex stretches back to the beginning of Western thought; we

see this in Aristotle's *Generation of Animals*, for example: a male is the animal that generates in another, and a female is the animal that generates within herself. This does not mean, as discussed in the previous chapter, that a man or woman who cannot procreate is not truly a man or woman. In that prior discussion, we explored how human bodies are structured to support either small or large gamete production. Understood in this way, sex reflects a reproductive capacity, one that is not reducible to genitals or chromosomes but characterizes the organism as a whole.

How did we arrive at this cultural moment, where bodily sex is no longer considered to be integral to person-hood, but is ornamental, easily altered, a fiction "assigned" at birth? I'd like to argue that this new understanding of sex can be traced, in large part, to two related innovations in the mid-twentieth century: first, the widespread embrace of contraception, which then enabled a newly expansive concept of "gender" to emerge.

It is difficult to underestimate the impact of widespread contraception on our culture, in terms of both thought and practice. The thread I'd like to take up here is how contraception reshaped our shared cultural understanding of the meaning of the sexed body. In our imagination, reproduction has receded into the background. Our procreative capacities are seen as incidental to manhood and womanhood, rather than an integral aspect—indeed, the defining feature—of those very identities. We live and move and have our trysts in a contraceptive society, where the visible sexual markers of our bodies no longer gesture toward new life, but signal the prospect of sterile pleasure. That has become the meaning of the body in our time, as exemplified by the work of Michel Foucault, the godfather of contemporary gender theory.

Foucault's four-volume work *A History of Sexuality* begins by describing how, in the Victorian era, sexuality was taken hostage by "the

conjugal family", who "absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction."[1] Ostensibly, Foucault is writing in a descriptive mode, tracing a conceptual history of sex, but from the very first page, it is clear that he is working from the assumption that human sexuality is only secondarily or even artificially about reproduction. Foucault writes this opus in the 1970s and '80s, from a cultural context where contraception has been normalized, a context that is primed to embrace a new understanding of sexuality, divorced from procreation altogether. Theologian Angela Franks aptly describes the Foucauldian view of sex, which now holds supremacy in our culture. Sex, for Foucault, is about "bodies and pleasures". If fertility no longer matters, "it does not matter whether the bodies are male or female; they are all just raw material for anonymous couplings." Our "age of contraception" has ushered in a "depersonalized view of the body" and a "world in which female fertility just does not fit."[2]

I want to extend Franks' analysis here to underscore a further ramification, mentioned in the previous two chapters. If "man" and "woman" refer to our generative potentiality, changing one's sex is an impossibility, because a man cannot physically adopt the procreative role of a female, and vice versa. But now that bodily sex has been divorced from procreative potential, reduced to appearance and pleasure-making, having a sex change seems feasible. Elaborate surgical and hormonal interventions can alter the appearance of the body and mimic sex markers, and that is enough for us now, because that is what bodily sex has become. A surgeon can make a "vagina" out of a wound, because the vagina is no longer seen as the door to a womb.

By the mid-twentieth century, "sex" *qua* biological sex was dethroned, both linguistically and conceptually. The word "sex" no longer served merely as shorthand for one's biological sexual identity, but expanded to indicate any kind of erotic genital activity. "Sexuality"

no longer referred to one's maleness or femaleness, but to the flavor and expression of one's erotic desires. This dethroning of "sex" created a conceptual vacuum, one quickly filled by the term "gender".

The Rise of Gender

In the 1950s, the phrase "gender role" first appeared on the scene, thanks to its coinage by psychologist John Money.[3] Money, whose work is now considered controversial, to put it mildly, was one of the first prominent advocates of a *tabula rasa* view of the human person. Biological sex, he argued, does not have an intrinsic connection to men and women's social roles and behaviors. He drew a distinction between sex, a mere biological fact, and "gender"—a social identity that is a product of culture rather than nature.

John Money's most famous patient was David Reimer, who was brought to him as a baby after his penis was disfigured during a botched circumcision. Money, who believed that gender was entirely socially constructed, convinced David's parents to raise him as a girl and entrust him to Money's clinical supervision. David happened to be an identical twin, and Money saw a golden opportunity to run a controlled experiment to test his theories. David's parents unfortunately agreed, subjecting him to more genital surgeries and renaming him Brenda.

As part of his ongoing experiment, Money met with the twins annually throughout their childhood. His sessions with them were disturbing and invasive, involving clear instances of sexual abuse, such as compelling the two children to enact various sexual positions and inspect one another's genitalia.[4] As a teenager, David became suicidal and rejected his female identity, eventually learning the truth about his sex from his parents. He underwent more surgeries in an attempt

to reverse the forced reassignment and took the name David (his birth name was Bruce). As an adult, David got married and adopted three children, and for a time, it seemed like he might be able to reclaim a normal life for himself—until May 4, 2004, when David took his own life at the age of thirty-eight, just two years after his twin brother's own suicide.

Money's attempt to demonstrate the veracity of his theories failed catastrophically; his theories proved to be not only erroneous, but *fatal* for his two research subjects. Unfortunately, this tragedy took decades to play out, and in the meantime, Money's malleable and disembodied concept of gender swept through the academy, becoming thoroughly entrenched in feminist theory and the social sciences.

Thanks to Money's innovations, this newly conceived idea of gender as distinct from sex became a site of resistance to essentialism, which was viewed in resolutely negative terms. Supplanting the earlier paradigm, which relied on the holistic category of sex to classify men and women, a new paradigm emerged that distinguished between sex as a basic, biological reality and gender as a collection of socially constructed norms and ideals that are associated with each sex and mistakenly read as natural. This is the classic, second-wave feminist understanding of sex and gender, the one I inherited when I began my feminist studies. Sex refers to biology, and gender refers to the social meanings attached to sex.

We can understand why this distinction appealed to feminists, because it facilitated an important move beyond reductive and often misogynistic definitions of what it means to be a woman. Historically, arguments appealing to "natural" weaknesses or deficiencies in women have been used to justify denying them certain rights and opportunities, such as the right to vote or attend medical school. At times, differences between the sexes have been understood as differences in

value and translated into rigid, sex-specific roles, creating a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority in favor of men. Without the concept of gender as distinct from sex, such ideas about woman are easily naturalized and seen as innate and inevitable rather than as distortions of culture. Let's look at some of these arguments in very basic terms:

Premise 1: Men and women are essentially or ontologically different.
Premise 2: Every difference represents a difference in value.
Conclusion: Men are essentially superior to women.

Premise 1: Men and women are essentially or ontologically different.
Premise 2: These differences can be easily summarized in a list of contrasting traits that characterize each sex (for example, women are inherently more emotional, while men are inherently more rational).
Conclusion: The differences between men and women are clearly defined and necessitate distinct, sex-specific roles in the home and society.

In an attempt to overturn the conclusions of female inferiority and rigid sex roles, feminists rejected the first premise of each argument, rallying their forces against essentialism. Gender became the primary conceptual tool for dislodging the idea that men and women are two essentially different kinds of human beings.

At first glance, the distinction between sex and gender in this initial feminist usage seems straightforward: sex is a basic fact referring to one's biology (femaleness or maleness), and gender refers to the collection of cultural meanings associated with each sex. Upon further examination, however, it becomes difficult to understand where

the demarcation between the two actually lies. Take the notion that women are more nurturing, for example. Is this idea a product of biology or culture?

The underlying problem, of course, is that humans are both social and biological beings; our neuroplastic brains respond to our environment, and our biological abilities and limits shape cultural norms. We are formed through an ongoing and ultimately mysterious interplay between nature and nurture. Neatly distinguishing between sex and gender, then, oversimplifies the complexity of human personhood.

One can easily see, however, why gender was adopted as a helpful tool in advocating for women's rights. It added some much-needed nuance to the age-old "woman question", enabling feminists to argue that some sex-specific norms spring from culture rather than nature, and therefore cultural changes were necessary to give women greater social equality. (It should be noted, however, that first-wave feminists successfully won legal rights for women *without* the help of "gender".)

Are there costs that accompany these supposed benefits? How does introducing gender as a lens through which we understand ourselves subtly alter our conception of the human person? Once gender entered the theoretical scene, it quickly became the dominant force. The precarious, seesaw balance that feminist theory tried to maintain between sex and gender was eventually lost; in the postmodern turn of the third wave, the distinction between them grew into an outright schism. Sex retracted in its sphere of influence, becoming a discrete set of markers on an objectified body that carries little or no intrinsic meaning.

Ultimately, the concept of gender has driven a wedge between *body* and *identity*. Sex once referred to a bodily given, a fact of nature. In gender-world, the power of the body to constitute identity is diminished. "Woman" no longer refers simply to one's sex, but rather to one's gender, which has become an amorphous cultural construction that has a

tenuous relationship to bodily sex. Once this distance between bodily sex and identity was enabled via gender, it did not take long—merely a few decades—for gender to shift meanings once again, becoming entirely disconnected from sex, which has paved the way for an even more fragmented and unstable understanding of personhood. Because gender is no longer anchored in bodily realities, it has become a post-modern juggernaut, impossible to capture, impossible to name. Unlike sex, "gender" can be continually altered and redeployed, and we are witnessing in real time the wild proliferation of its meaning.

Genderwocky

Pop narratives about gender often speak as if gender is something *real*, even though the concept itself resists the slightest hint of realism—or consistency. *Gender is a spectrum! Gender is fluid! Gender is innate! Gender is in the brain! Gender is a construct!* While the emphatic rhetoric suggests that the truth of gender is at last being unveiled, it is increasingly difficult to settle on a definition of gender at all, because there are multiple and often contradictory definitions on offer. Let's take a brief and nonexhaustive tour.

First, there is the decidedly "un-woke" definition that sees gender as a simple synonym for biological sex. This is the view of the uninitiated man-on-the-street, who checks the M box on a form without dwelling on the question.

Then there is the second-wave feminist definition that defines gender as the social and cultural *accoutrements* of each sex. Once cutting-edge, this definition is becoming outmoded, although still prevalent among feminists of a certain age.

A further iteration is the now-classic one offered by Judith Butler, godmother of gender theory. Butler, remember, argues that gender is

an unconscious and socially compelled performance, a series of acts and behaviors that create the illusion of an essential identity of "man" and "woman". In this view, gender is *entirely* a social construct, a complex fiction that we inherit and then repeatedly reenact.

One can find yet *another* definition in a common transgender narrative: gender as the sex of the soul, the innate manhood or womanhood that may or may not "align" with the sex of the body. In this understanding, gender is decidedly *not* a mere construct, but is rather a pre-social reality, the inner truth against which the body must be measured.

Even more recently we have the cute and overly complicated understanding of gender popularized by the "Gender Unicorn" and "Genderbread Person" memes (the latter of which has already undergone four separate revisions in its brief existence). In this model, personal identity is collated from a menu of attributes, each of which runs along a spectrum. *Gender identity*, à la the trans definition above, is located in the mind: "how you, in your head, experience and define your gender". *Gender expression*, a trickle-down version of Butlerian performativity, refers to one's external appearance and acts: "how you present gender". *Sex*, which is "assigned" rather than recognized at birth, is confined between the legs. Rounding out the list is *attraction*, which is further parsed into two subcategories: physical and emotional.[5]

My students and I once mapped out these definitions on the board, lining them up for a side-by-side comparison. Rather than a row of neat little ducks, we found ourselves with a gaggle of mythical creatures that looked nothing alike. Several of these definitions, employed regularly by genderists, are contradictory, even mutually exclusive. If gender is completely a social construct, how can it also be innate and unchangeable?

Moreover, when used by activists, the term "gender" is defined in a circular and self-referential way. Take, for example, the terms in a "Trans Glossary" featured on the University of Oregon's HR website. "Gender identity" is defined as "a person's sense of their own gender".[6] Yet there is no entry for "gender". The glossary includes definitions of "gender expression" and "gender role" that similarly refer back to the concept of gender without defining it.

My recent HR compliance training—the one that unsuccessfully tried to get me to use the phrase "pregnant person"—performed similar gymnastics. First, the training stated that "the terms 'sex' and 'gender' are often used interchangeably" and we need to go into more detail to understand each term. Fair enough. *However*, the next paragraph literally conflated the two terms with a slash, asserting that one's "assigned sex / gender" might conflict with one's "gender identity". Again, the word "gender" itself was never defined.

There is rhetorical sleight-of-hand at work here. The reader is first put off balance, subtly led to believe that she is not using the terms "sex" and "gender" correctly. After sowing these seeds of doubt, the training proceeds by using those very terms without clearly defining them, keeping them malleable, open to various meanings, which the reader readily accepts, assuming any lack of clarity must be due to her own ignorance.

It's difficult to know whether this is an explicit strategy or simply the product of unclear and faddish thinking. I'm not sure which option is more depressing: the idea that this radical revision of identity is a runaway train, barreling down the track because the gears of basic logic have broken down, or that these contortions of word and thought are strategic moves. My suspicion is that both are true.

One can see more circularity in the increasingly common classification of woman as someone (anyone!) who identifies as a woman. This

looping definition sends me right down a rabbit hole and into a frustratingly nonsensical conversation with a giant smoking caterpillar who sneers down at me from atop a large mushroom.

"What, pray, are *you*?" asks the caterpillar.

"I'm a woman."

"Oh *are* you?"

"Yes, at least. . ." I pause, suddenly unsure. "I think so?"

"Do you *feel* like a woman?"

"I'm not sure", I say. "What does it mean to feel like a woman?"

"To feel like a woman is to be a woman", pronounces the caterpillar, taking a long drag from his hookah.

"But what is a woman?"

"Someone who feels like a woman."

"But. . . what does it mean to feel like a woman, if being a woman is defined as feeling like a woman?"

"Transphobe", puffs the caterpillar.

That's me, a dizzy little Alice, smoke rings spinning round my head. Not phobic at all, but oh so curious and curiouser. What *is* this thing called gender? If the word is an egg, and I crack it open, what will I find inside? The more I study what gender has become, the more it feels like an empty signifier, a word that is only a shell, conveniently waiting to be filled with whatever meaning is most useful.

How many possibilities there are! There is a gender category for every proclivity, every flicker of mood, every possible aesthetic. Not sure if you feel like a man or woman? No problem. There are infinite options. Here is a small sampling from the ever-growing menu:

- *Agender*: a person without gender[7]
- *Bigender*: having two genders; exhibiting cultural characteristics of male and female roles[8]

- *Trigender*: This is a gender identity term that most often means one of two things. First, a trigender person may feel as though they are not man or woman, but are also not in between those two labels. As such, a trigender person defines their gender identity in a third category, which is not situated in between man / woman. Second, trigender can also mean a person who feels that they are a blending of three gender identities.[9]

If this *eins, zwei, drei* approach isn't your style, you can also work with fractions:

- *Demigender*: A person who feels partially, but not completely, connected to a particular gender identity.
- *Demifluid*: A person whose gender identity is partially fluid whilst the other part(s) are static.
- *Demiflux*: A person whose gender identity is partially fluid, with the other part(s) being static. This differs from demifluid as flux indicates that one of the genders is nonbinary.[10]

With so many options, it's easy to get decision fatigue. In this situation, you can go big, and I mean *way* big—as in, beyond the boundaries of space and time.

- *Pangender*: refers to a gender identity whereby a person identifies with a multitude, and perhaps infinite (going beyond the current knowledge of genders) number of genders either simultaneously, to varying degrees, or over the course of time.[11]

These are not terms culled from random blogs and discussion forums. These are all taken, verbatim, from official websites of American and British universities. While it might be tempting to eye-roll and hand-

wave away what those "crazy college kids" are doing, I would make this reply: official websites are run by administrators, not students, and what happens on campus quickly makes its way into the broader culture, corporate sector, public sphere, and education system as a whole. These students will graduate, after all, and enter the workforce. It's clear from the HR training I just completed that this is already happening.

Feeling Like a Woman

All of these definitions of gender are based on a subjective sense of identification, on how one "feels". But what does it mean to "feel" like a man or a woman or neither? Let's approach this question by way of an analogy, heading into a territory where the lines between categories have not yet been blurred. If I say that I "feel" like I'm a cat or that I "identify with" being a cat, I'm expressing that I have an affinity with what I imagine it must be like to be a cat. I cannot have direct, firsthand knowledge of what it is *actually* like to be a cat, because I am human, not feline.

To bring the analogy even closer, within the realm of the same species—let's say that I have a strong affinity with Italians. I am American, by the objective fact of being born and raised in America, but perhaps I nonetheless "feel" more Italian than American. I love to eat pasta, to gesture emphatically with my hands; I'm Catholic. I even have an Italian last name, albeit through marriage. But because I'm not *actually* Italian, what I am identifying with is only my perception, my fantasy, of what it might be like to be Italian.

Let's make the analogy even more pointed and discomfiting. Let's say I tell you that I'm not really a white girl, even though that's what I look like. In truth, I'm a black girl trapped in a white girl's body. My brain is

black, even though my body is white. I know this because I *feel* it. I hate my white skin and straight hair. I feel at home around black people; I love hip-hop and basketball and Toni Morrison. I don't like white culture. I feel like a misfit in a room full of white people. I have a black soul.

I hope that anyone reading the above paragraph has a strong and instinctive reaction that what I am saying is ridiculous. I hope it reads as laughable, even offensive. If I were to make those claims in sincerity, I would be swiftly tied to a stake and set aflame for the sin of cultural appropriation—by the same people who would celebrate me as a courageous hero if I came out as a man. The boundaries between races and cultures are more policed than ever, but the boundary between the sexes has become completely porous.

"To feel" is not "to be". A white girl *cannot* know what it is like to be a black girl. She can only know what a white girl *imagines* it must be like to be black. A man *cannot* know what it is like to be a woman. He can only imagine, from an outside perspective, what it might be like. When he claims to be a woman, he is identifying with a fantasy. And, too often, that fantasy is constructed from the flimsy chaff of stereotypes.

When I was in my first year of graduate school in gender studies, I remember watching a television special on transgender kids. This was 2007 or so, and I was living in the UK. Even in my secular academic circle, feminism had not yet become fully allied with the transgender narrative. The current transgender wave, particularly among adolescents, was still years away. This special was about a little boy who insisted he was a girl, and the parents had begun to raise him that way. He was probably seven or eight and had already adopted a new name and social identity as a girl. What struck me then, and sticks with me now, is the evidence of this boy's ostensible girlness: he loved the color pink, he preferred to play with dolls, and he liked to wear dresses. His room looked like a Pepto Bismol bottle had exploded. Even the way this

little boy spoke about being a girl had everything to do with the accessories of stereotypical femininity. There was an odor of consumerism wafting about the whole thing—as if the products we want define what we are.

My feminist grad student self was dubious. I did not recognize this version of girlness, except perhaps from a commercial for Barbie dolls. Certainly not in my own childhood. I was never into pink. My room was painted blue. I played with dolls and stuffed animals, but I also loved making fake swords out of rulers and tin foil and building Star Trek phasers from Legos. I liked wearing dresses as part of pretend-play, when I could temporarily escape my time and place and become someone new. Mostly, I wanted to wear clothes that allowed me to run, to feel my legs churn underneath me, swift and powerful. In terms of stereotypes, I was a mixed bag. The idea that a boy is actually a girl because he likes pink seemed to me then, and does still, to be a regressive and decidedly unfeminist notion, a throwback to cartoonish understandings of femininity and masculinity.

If girlness and boyness no longer reside in the body, there is no other ground for these concepts *except* stereotypes. Remember the definition for "bigender" above, from Johns Hopkins University? *Exhibiting cultural characteristics of male and female roles*. My first reaction to this is well, shoot, who is *not* bigender in twenty-first-century America? Am I bigender simply because I am a breadwinner (stereotypically male role) and a mom who does lots of laundry (stereotypical female role)? Is my husband bigender because he is a stay-at-home parent (female role) and mows our lawn (male role)? Why is my identity as a woman threatened or lessened simply because I, a complex human being, happen to reflect a variety of stars in the vast constellation of sex-associated tasks and traits? Don't these silly definitions of gender end up keeping those regressive stereotypes entrenched?

There is a profound irony here. Through the vehicle of feminist theory, the concept of gender has displaced manhood and womanhood from bodily sex. Now, unmoored from the body altogether, gender is defined by the very cultural stereotypes that feminism sought to undo. In other words, when a girl recognizes that she does not fit the stereotypes of girlhood, she is now invited to question her sex rather than the stereotype.

The Age of Pygmalion

When gender remains rooted in sex—when womanhood refers to femaleness rather than the embodiment of a feminine stereotype—this allows "woman" to be a much roomier box, to encompass a diverse range of traits, roles, and body types. The box based on stereotypes is much narrower, confining womanhood to an artificial, airbrushed, hyped-up caricature that would exclude most human females, myself included.

When I go to Mass at my local parish, a situation that gathers together a diverse group of people, all ages and sizes, I do not see a single female who looks anything like Caitlyn Jenner on the cover of *Vanity Fair*. I see girls in sweatpants and sneakers, girls in lace veils and heels; I see tall women, short women, fat women, broad-shouldered women, thin women, huge- and small-breasted women, women with long hair, women with cropped hair, women in skirts, women in men's flannel shirts, women with wide hips, women with trim hips, women with rolls of soft flesh, women with wrinkles, sharp angles, concave chests. This assembly of the ordinary—this slice-of-life sample—looks nothing like the artifice displayed on magazine covers and billboards and the filtered reel of Instagram.

We are living in the Age of Pygmalion, that master artist from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* who wants a wife but despises real women. He picks up his hammer and chisel and constructs his ideal out of stone. He lusts after her; his image of woman is more desirable than the reality. In the original myth, Pygmalion wants to marry her, to bring her to his bed; in our time, Pygmalion wants to *be* her. Instead of a sculptor's tools, he works with scalpel and syringe. Instead of stone, he carves his fantasy into his own flesh.

In Ovid's tale, Pygmalion's creation comes alive through divine intervention, an on-high blast from the goddess Aphrodite. In our time, there are no capricious gods who can make fantasy seem real. There is only the power of language.

The University of Edinburgh's policy on trans equality gives the following directives for interacting with transgender people: "Think of the person as being the gender that they want you to think of them as", and "use the name and pronoun that the person asks you to."[12] These guidelines unwittingly make a startling concession: you have to actively *convince yourself* that this person's gender proclamation is true. Accepting that a man is really a woman and vice versa requires effort, a conscious exertion of thought, because this cuts against biology and common sense. Since the gender paradigm is not based on concrete reality, perpetuating this framework requires careful policing of thought and language.

This explains the intense focus on pronouns by today's activists. One *must* use the pronouns of the declared gender. Failure to do so is considered a malicious attack on a person's identity and dignity. Beyond mere offense, "misgendering" someone by using the incorrect pronouns is considered harmful, an act of violence.

I remember in high school being teased for having "man legs" and a moustache. This was deeply hurtful, of course, and it preyed upon my

insecurities about how I looked as a young woman, that I was failing to live up to an ideal. It did not threaten the core of my identity as a woman, because I considered that to be a fact that I couldn't escape, whether I liked it or not. Today's concept of gender identity, however, is not based in material reality. A man who claims to be a woman is a woman in language only. For the postmodernist, that's enough, because *all* of reality, all of what we consider "true", is linguistically constructed.[13] This means that the construct of gender identity must be continually buttressed by language in order to appear true. This requires not only a self-declaration of gender, but a declaration that is echoed by everyone else. If gender identity only exists in language, our language must be manipulated, or else the whole thing falls apart. That is what's at stake in the battle over pronouns: our understanding of reality itself.

The linguistic reshaping of reality is working its way into the law. The Equality Act is a bill under proposal in the United States as of 2021; it passed the House in 2019. This bill would amend the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, replacing the word "sex" with the three-headed Hydra of "sex (including sexual orientation and gender identity)". As always, gender identity is defined in a circular way, as "the gender-related identity, appearance, mannerisms, or other gender-related characteristics of an individual, regardless of the individual's sex at birth."[14] Legally redefining sex as something that includes gender identity, while in the same breath defining gender identity as something not necessarily related to sex, is nonsensical. This linguistic contortion attempts to hold together two things that are in direct contradiction: the view that gender is based in sex and the view that gender is *not* based in sex. Moreover, this definition establishes gender—manhood and womanhood—to be a matter of appearance and stereotypes rather than biology.

Let me state emphatically that I have no objection to legally protecting all American citizens from unjust discrimination. The problem arises when sex-based rights and protections are eroded to accommodate the novel and inherently unstable concept of gender identity. This bill would effectively outlaw sex-segregated spaces, programs, institutions. This bill would end women's sports as we know it, because, no matter how they identify, biological men have an undeniable physical advantage. Spaces such as women's locker rooms, bathrooms, prisons, and domestic shelters would no longer be limited to females only. Spaces like these can only be preserved through maintaining boundaries, boundaries that respect material reality, that acknowledge the fundamental fact that women and men are biologically distinct. Sex-segregated spaces, by and large, do not exist for the benefit of men, except to protect the worst among them from their darkest impulses. These boundaries exist to protect women and girls, a population that is more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and violence.

I do not make this argument solely out of fear, fear that the erasure of clear boundaries will put women and girls at risk. I am also appealing to beauty: the quiet beauty of being a female body in a room alone with other female bodies.

I traveled to Israel in 2019, and when we were staying on the shores of Galilee, my husband and I walked to the beach together, hoping to dip our limbs into the same waters where Jesus fished. As we stood on the shore together, a man wearing a yarmulke came over and told us, in a polite and matter-of-fact way, that this beach was for men only; there was a women-only beach just over the rise. I was surprised, a little embarrassed, but thanked him and walked around to the women's area, disrobing down to my suit and diving into the sea. After a while, a number of my female students joined, as well as some Israeli women and girls, and we all swam and splashed around, in collective female

solitude. Some of my students bristled at the segregation, seeing it as sexist. I found it refreshing. We weren't *doing* anything consciously feminine, as too often happens at women's retreats and conferences, which I tend to dread. This was a space set aside just for existing as women. As I floated in the Sea of Galilee, feeling the fish flicker and dash beneath me, I experienced the hush of freedom—the bliss of being, for the moment, unobserved.

There is something sacred about these female-only spaces, even the swampy women's locker room at the local pool. This is perhaps the only place where girls are able to see the unsung beauty of female nudity that is not at all sexualized, to witness firsthand the diversity of the female form, to have a concrete image that can contradict the harmful fictions displayed everywhere else: to see breasts that droop, flesh that sags, pubic hair that hangs; to see an old lady perfunctorily washing between her rolls in the shower, unselfconsciously caring for the aging body she belongs to, the body she has always been.

Notes

Heretic

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[8] *CCC* 399. Back to text.

[9] Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 19877), 63. Back to text.

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[12] John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 249. Back to text.

[13] Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 61. Back to text.

[14] John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 244. Back to text.

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[20] John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 260-61. Back to text.

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[23] Matthew 19:8. Back to text.

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[3] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 16-17. Back to text.

[4] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 763. Back to text.

[5] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 16 Back to text.

[6] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 17. Back to text.

[7] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 73. Back to text.

[8] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. Back to text.

[9] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 73-74. Back to text.

[10] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 74. Back to text.

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[12] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 440. Back to text.

[13] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 721. Back to text.

[14] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 725. Back to text.

[15] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 735. Back to text.

[16] Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1997), 174. Back to text.

[17] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 761. Back to text.

[18] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 761. Back to text.

[19] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 761. Back to text.

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[28] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 157. Back to text.

[29] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 11. Back to text.

[30] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 29. Back to text.

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Wholeness

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Gift

[1] My telling of Daisy's story is drawn from my personal interview with her, as well as her interview with Benjamin Boyce and a video on her own YouTube channel. Used with permission. See "DeTrans Stories: The Authenticity Quest with Daisy Chadra", interview by Benjamin A. Boyce, December 6, 2020, YouTube video, 1:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4EtS0146uQk. Daisy's video can be found here: "I'm Detransitioning", October 26, 2020, YouTube video, 26:55, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_KD46_Ophg. Back to text.

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[10] Berry, *Art of the Commonplace*, 101. Back to text.

[11] Berry, *Art of the Commonplace*, 101. Back to text.

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