

# The Merciless Ethic of Trans Acceptance: A Biblical Response

JAMES N. BEEVERS

## Abstract

This article examines and ethically assesses “transgenderism-affirming” approaches to the phenomenon of gender dysphoria. It discusses major approaches, identified as “modern” and “postmodern.” These rely respectively on either scientific “evidence” or philosophical criticism. It examines the life experiences of transgender individuals, laying further foundations for an ethical evaluation from a Christian worldview. It shows that neither modern nor postmodern “trans-affirming” approaches fit a Christian framework. Key biblical truths that speak to this issue include the binarity of sex and gender (synonymous in the biblical worldview), the unity of body and soul, the derivative nature of human identity, the need to extend truth and mercy to the suffering, and the objective nature of truth in a revelational framework.

## Keywords

*Transgenderism, gender, gender spectrum, ethics, brain-sex theory, postmodernism, critical theory, critical gender theory, Judith Butler*

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## I. Approaching the Subject

**T**he topic of transgenderism has been catapulted to the forefront of public discourse in a dramatically short period. In the ever-growing LGBTQIA+ acronym, three of the current seven letters are dedicated to phenomena related to transgenderism: trans, queer, and intersex.<sup>1</sup> The sheer political weight behind the movement used to be disproportionate to the actual prevalence of transgenderism.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, however, the number of individuals identifying as something other than their birth sex has exploded. A poll conducted in February of 2021 reported that fully one-sixth of “Gen-Z” adults now identify as LGBT, with nearly 2.2% identifying as “transgender” or “other.”<sup>3</sup> Another recent survey, with a sample size of over three thousand, found that 9.2% of *high school* students had a gender identity that did not align with their “assigned” sex.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, the Christian ethical literature on the topic is limited compared to what is available on issues like homosexuality, extramarital sex, or masturbation.<sup>5</sup> Much of the ethical literature, written as recently as the end of the twentieth century, simply does not include a discussion of gender.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Including intersex people in the acronym is illegitimate from a biblical viewpoint. However, the phenomenon of intersexuality, a genetic disorder, is often evoked by transgender activists to argue that sexuality is not binary.

<sup>2</sup> A recent doctoral dissertation estimated that approximately 150 people annually apply for transgender surgery in Germany, a country of over 80,000,000 inhabitants. See Yves Steinmetz, “Geschlechtsangleichende Operationen bei Frau-zu-Mann-Transsexuellen mit Phalloplastik” (MD Diss., Universitätsklinikum Hamburg-Eppendorf, 2010), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Samantha Schmidt, “1 in 6 Gen Z Adults Are LGBT: And This Number Could Continue to Grow,” *Washington Post*, February 24, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/02/24/gen-z-lgbt/>.

<sup>4</sup> Kacie Kidd, “Nearly 10% of Youth in One Urban School District Identify as Gender-Diverse, New Study Finds,” *Conversation*, June 3, 2021, <https://news.yahoo.com/nearly-10-youth-one-urban-193150921.html>.

<sup>5</sup> One admirable attempt to create clarity on issues of gender, including on intersexuality, is the recent Nashville Statement; see Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, “The Nashville Statement,” August 29, 2017, <https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement/>.

<sup>6</sup> Recent attempts at closing this gap are Peter Jones, “Transgender: Transitioning to Nowhere,” *Unio cum Christo* 4.2 (October 2018): 27–48, and Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020). Trueman focuses especially on the question of the “self,” exploring how “expressive individualism” as Western society’s highest value demands emancipation from all external limitations that may be placed on one’s chosen personal and sexual identity (and demands societal recognition and approval thereof!), including those imposed by biology. This contributes to a more nuanced understanding of what we will explore under the heading of “postmodern approaches.” Jones helpfully explores how a rejection of the “creation” concept, that is, that there is something outside of this world (Twoism), makes each individual his own final reference point for self-definition, since this world is all that exists (Oneism).

## 1. *Methodology*

One difficulty in dealing with transgenderism arises from the conflicting nature of the theories set forth by those who claim to represent the transgender “community.” To achieve a useful balance between simplification and specificity, this article will subdivide trans-affirming approaches into two camps: “modernist” and “postmodern,” the former describing and classifying approaches that operate within an *objective*, “scientific” framework, and the latter classifying approaches that adopt the framework of critical theory, critiquing the concept of the gender binary itself. Individuals may draw from both approaches. Those who use a postmodern approach to transgenderism may cite “brain-sex” studies rather than relying exclusively on philosophical criticism, and those seeking an objective basis may simultaneously hold postmodern views of biology. The distinction remains helpful, however, for the discussion of two *theoretically* distinct systems.

The ethical evaluation will be self-consciously Christian. The epistemological ground for a Christian ethic is the word of God as revealed in Scripture. Far from being a liability, divine revelation is the only philosophically coherent source for an objective ethic. *De facto*, there can be no universally binding postmodern ethic. Furthermore, any rationalistic appeal to the “obvious,” or “reasonable,” is ultimately self-referential, ascribing authority to one’s own conclusions. Authoritative laws require an authoritative lawgiver. God’s will for all humans is found in general and special revelation.<sup>7</sup> Both nature and Scripture are binding. Without Scripture, even the search for the “natural law” is frustrated by the subjectivity, biases, and limitations of human reason, thereby bringing the Christian ethicist into the same bind in which the rationalist finds himself. Arguments about right and wrong can only be founded upon a worldview that views humanity as *ordered* toward an objective good, a good that compels obedience, demands conformity, and is knowable. It has been suggested that this “biblicism” creates epistemological problems since there is no universally recognized authority to adjudicate between competing interpretations.<sup>8</sup> This critique underestimates the extent to which the highlighted problem, real as it may be, is compounded exponentially by removing Scripture altogether. Scripture alone, as the voice of God, is the only adequate basis for any ethical evaluation.

<sup>7</sup> Our approach contrasts with that of Norman Geisler, who argues that special revelation contains God’s will for Christians only; see Norman Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Contemporary Issues and Options*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 16.

<sup>8</sup> David Gushee, “Reconciling Evangelical Christianity with Our Sexual Minorities: Reframing the Biblical Discussion,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 35.2 (Winter 2015): 144.

## 2. Aim and Conclusion

We will outline trans-affirming approaches and offer a biblical critique. Scripture speaks unambiguously to the issues raised by transgenderism. It is necessary to carefully delineate the implicit and explicit beliefs and assumptions in trans-affirming theories. I will use the terms “transsexual” and “transgender” synonymously, as well as “gender-affirming” and “trans-affirming.”

We will argue that a trans-affirming approach cannot survive within a modernist framework and that the postmodern framework is to be rejected. We will show how postmodern ideological approaches increasingly dominate the discussion. This results in a distortion of the truth that comes at the expense, primarily, of the suffering and death of transgender individuals, who do not receive the care they need. Finally, we will argue that both the trans-affirming modernist approach and especially the trans-affirming postmodern approach have no place in a biblical worldview. They should be unequivocally rejected in favor of helping those suffering from gender dysphoria accept their biological sex.

## II. *Between Brain-Sex Theory and the Gender Spectrum*

### 1. *Attempts at a Modernist Approach to Transgenderism*

Because the postmodern approach is dominant in contemporary pro-trans discourse, less time will be given to the modernist approach. In this article, “modernist” describes the idea that the trans person is a “woman trapped in a man’s body,” or vice versa.<sup>9</sup> To the modernist, “men” and “women” are still the norm, notwithstanding the complication that male brains are occasionally found in female bodies or vice-versa.<sup>10</sup> In gender-affirming therapy, hormonal or surgical intervention is not seen as *transforming* but as *affirming* what is *essentially* present.

One term for this is the brain-sex theory.<sup>11</sup> This theory posits that the transgender brain reflects observable characteristics more consistent with the person’s “internal” or “chosen” sex than with their biological sex. Unfortunately, many studies supporting this view are biased.<sup>12</sup> One

<sup>9</sup> J. Michael Bailey and Kiira Tria, “What Many Transgender Activists Don’t Want You to Know: And Why You Should Know It Anyway,” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 50.4 (Autumn 2007): 521.

<sup>10</sup> Bailey and Tria’s term “feminine *essence* narrative” is helpful for understanding this approach; see *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 522.

<sup>12</sup> Mohammed Mohammadi and Ali Khaleggi have provided an overview of the various studies and brain areas targeted for research; see Mohammed Mohammadi and Ali Khaleghi,

brain-sex study examined the size of a collection of cells in the hypothalamus, concluding that male-to-female brains were “female-typical.”<sup>13</sup> The study was widely touted as supporting the brain-sex theory and was used as the basis for the Gender Identity Research and Education Society’s support for transsexual treatment.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, these findings were meaningless. The study failed to differentiate between transgender individuals who had undergone hormone therapy and those who had not. Consequently, they were examining the brains of male-to-female people who had already undergone extensive estrogen therapy. As it happens, the region of the brain they were examining is highly dependent on hormones, with smaller sizes being associated with estrogen.<sup>15</sup> In short, the “female-typical” brains “trapped” in the male bodies were “female-typical” because they had been treated with female hormones. Other studies tried to rectify this oversight but, inexplicably, used imbalanced control groups to distinguish “male-typical” from “female-typical” brains.<sup>16</sup>

It is beyond our scope to provide an exhaustive overview of the medical literature, but this is unnecessary for an ethical evaluation. The Christian ethicist *absolutely must* note that the *implications* drawn from brain-sex studies are neither scientific nor neutral. For example, brain-sex theorists interpret evidence for a “female-typical” brain in a male as justification for transgender surgery, and even if some of them grant that a certain area of the individual’s brain is atypical and the vast majority of biological data still points to an agreement with the male birth sex, they do not take this as evidence that the person should *not* transition. We argue instead that if the person’s physical body is 99% male-typical and 1% female-typical, it is not obvious why the amputation of healthy body parts or other therapy to attempt to generate a physical mirage that conforms more closely to the 1% is justified. To the trans activist, the “ought” can only be derived from the “is” when the “is” supports the preconceived “ought.” Thus, in a purely modernist framework, transgenderism cannot survive: no matter what ancillary data points are collected in support of transgender identity, nearly every physical marker will reflect the birth sex. Even if one were able to determine the brain phenotype of a trans person reliably, would a

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“Transsexualism: A Different Viewpoint to Brain Changes,” *Clinical Psychopharmacology and Neuroscience* 16.2 (2018): 137–38.

<sup>13</sup> Bailey and Triea, “What Many Transgender Activists Don’t Want You to Know,” 525.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 526.

<sup>16</sup> Giuseppina Rametti et al., “White Matter Microstructure in Female to Male Transsexuals before Cross-sex Hormonal Treatment: A Diffusion Tensor Imaging Study,” *Journal of Psychiatric Research* 45.2 (February 2011): 199–204.

modernist pro-trans surgeon have the intellectual consistency to turn away a gender dysphoric patient asking for surgery who does *not* have a “trans” brain? Ultimately, if one is searching in the physical body to justify a pro-trans approach, one will search in vain.

## 2. *The Postmodern Approach*

The etiology of gender dysphoria is still widely debated and not fully understood.<sup>17</sup> As outlined above, the evidence for a “trans brain” remains elusive. The increasingly dominant postmodern approach is untroubled by this since it is rooted in neo-Marxist criticism of the concept of gender itself.<sup>18</sup> The rise of these ideas in the popular consciousness is documented by the Q in the ever-growing LGBTQ, and the ambiguous “+” often appended. “Queer” is not the same as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans. “Bisexual” is no longer the same as “pansexual,” since bisexuality implies binarity. Finally, the rise of the “gender spectrum” idea, which contains potentially infinite genders, demonstrates the ascendance of the postmodern approach. While early criticism affirmed the reality of “sex” but attacked “gender” as a superimposed structure, newer criticism does not sharply distinguish the two.<sup>19</sup> This is seen in the ever-louder calls for the acceptance of transgender athletes to compete against their *chosen* sex, not their biological sex. The philosophy underlying this is the neo-Marxist critique of gender. What has sometimes been termed “neo-Marxism” by sociologists is an application of the Marxist “criticism” of oppression to other social hierarchies (e.g., class, race, gender, and sexuality) that goes beyond Marx’s original critique of economic, class-based hierarchies.<sup>20</sup> This is often closely connected with postmodernism.

Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, and other postmodern thinkers expanded the Marxist critique of power dynamics to other societal assumptions and structures. Baudrillard taught extensively on the use of media as a tool for maintaining social hierarchies, echoing Marx by connecting his insights with an attack on the “capitalist” structure.<sup>21</sup> Derrida, perhaps the most influential postmodern thinker, argued that any

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<sup>17</sup> For example, some leading researchers argue that gender dysphoria arises from an unusual sexual fetish in which one is sexually attracted to the conception of oneself as the opposite sex; cf. Bailey and Triea, “What Many Transgender Activists Don’t Want You to Know,” 527–29.

<sup>18</sup> Scott Appelrouth and Laura D. Edles, *Sociological Theory in the Contemporary Era: Text and Readings*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge, 2011), 374.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

<sup>21</sup> Kip Kline, “Jean Baudrillard and the Limits of Critical Media Theory,” *Educational Theory* 66.5 (October 2016): 645.

opposition of metaphysical concepts entails a power dynamic of hierarchical privileging and subordinating.<sup>22</sup> This idea underlies many popular-level appropriations of postmodernism, where concepts like “true” and “untrue” are criticized as inherently flawed. It is argued that the concept of objective truth is *itself* created to maintain the status quo. A recent bulletin by the Smithsonian Institute on racial issues, clearly indebted to critical theory, applied this by stating that “objective, rational linear thinking” is an illegitimate aspect and assumption of *whiteness*.<sup>23</sup> Derrida himself opened the door to criticism of sexuality in arguing that the West is characterized by “phallogocentrism,” which entails a privileging of the phallic, that is, the male, over against the female.<sup>24</sup> In Derrida’s theory, these oppositions must be *deconstructed*, that is, revealed to be nothing more than social constructs.<sup>25</sup>

Foucault described his life’s work as “to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are *made subjects*.”<sup>26</sup> To this end, he wrote prolifically on topics ranging from hospitals to mental institutions. For example, in *Madness and Civilization*, he seeks to expose the power dynamics at play in the creation of binary concepts such as “sane” and “insane.” This idea of the power dynamics at play in the “opposition” of metaphysical concepts underlies the attack upon the concept of gender. Foucault strongly influenced Judith Butler. Thus, Butler, perhaps the foremost modern thinker on gender, writes in her seminal work on gender,

Foucault points out that juridical systems of power *produce* the subjects they subsequently come to represent. ... Feminist critique ought also to understand how the category of “women,” the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought.<sup>27</sup>

Butler argues that the concept of “woman” is created to maintain structural power. She rejects the idea that women can be seen as a specific essential category, calling gender an “unstable fiction.”<sup>28</sup> Instead, gender is “performative,” that is, a sustained set of acts that we take to be indicative of an

<sup>22</sup> Jack Reynolds, “Jacques Derrida (1930–2004),” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/derrida/#H2>, Metaphysics of Presence/Logocentrism.

<sup>23</sup> Marina Watts, “In Smithsonian Race Guidelines, Rational Thinking and Hard Work Are White Values,” *Newsweek*, last modified July 17, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/smithsonian-race-guidelines-rational-thinking-hard-work-are-white-values-1518333>.

<sup>24</sup> Reynolds, “Jacques Derrida.”

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8.4 (Summer, 1982): 777.

<sup>27</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 2 (emphasis original).

<sup>28</sup> Appelrouth and Edles, *Sociological Theory in the Contemporary Era*, 372.

internal gender essence but is nothing more than stereotyped behavior.<sup>29</sup> As Christoph Raedl summarizes, the sexual binary is viewed as a social construct, created to *maintain a hierarchy that privileges males*.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Irene Brown and Joy Misra argue that gender maintains the hierarchy of “domination.”<sup>31</sup> To the postmodernist, what must be rejected is the association of gender with biology.<sup>32</sup> This view, while new in the depth of its radical criticism, has its roots in earlier Leninist theory, which argued that the nuclear family was a capitalist institution that kept women in subjugation.<sup>33</sup> We are left with a theory that views human beings as infinitely malleable. Much of what was previously seen as dictated by nature is revealed to be nothing more than a societal construct. It does not matter what genitalia one happens to be born with. One could be “gender fluid” and change gender every day. From the perspective of postmodernism (“standpoint epistemology”) individual *self-identification*, not biology, is the authoritative source of truth.

We should not underestimate the extent to which the postmodern critique dominates the language of trans activism. Further, it should be noted that postmodern theory is a loose categorization of ideas that are not always internally consistent. In popular discussions, some might argue that a trans athlete is objectively a woman, while simultaneously holding that the only thing that makes them a woman is self-identification. Thus, a quasi-biological argument is combined with criticism of gender itself. Trans activists are not necessarily self-conscious critical theorists. Nevertheless, the “modernist” and “postmodern” views summarized above are the intellectual fountain-heads of trans activism. Though the resulting ideology is a curious blend of contradictory propositions, this may be unproblematic if “truth” itself is an (oppressive) social construct. Nevertheless, ideas have consequences.

### 3. Examining the Trans Experience

To be trans is to sever one’s gender identity from one’s biological sex. The outcomes in the lives of those who suffer from gender dysphoria and choose to follow the advice of trans-affirming philosophies are sobering.

According to a recent University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) study, transgender and gender-nonconforming people have a lifetime

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 373.

<sup>30</sup> Christoph Raedl, *Gender: Von Gender-Mainstreaming zur Akzeptanz sexueller Vielfalt* (Giessen: Brunnen, 2017), 22.

<sup>31</sup> Irene Brown and Joy Misra, “The Intersection of Gender and Race in the Labor Market,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 29 (June 2003), 489.

<sup>32</sup> Raedl, *Gender*, 22.

<sup>33</sup> Alexandra Kollontai, “Communism and the Family,” in *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, trans. and ed. Alix Holt (Westport, CT: Laurence Hill, 1978), 250–60.



suicide attempt rate of 41%.<sup>34</sup> This astronomical rate has long been the object of speculation. According to the 2013 edition of the DSM-5, published before the UCLA study, “Gender dysphoria ... is associated with high levels of stigmatization, discrimination, and victimization, leading to negative self-concept, increased rates of mental disorder comorbidity.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, mental disorder comorbidities were unequivocally attributed to discrimination. The UCLA study, which evaluated the results of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS), was tasked specifically with investigating this claim. They concluded, “Overall, the most striking finding of our analysis was the exceptionally high prevalence of lifetime suicide attempts reported by NTDS respondents across all demographics and experiences.”<sup>36</sup> The suicide attempt rate did increase dramatically in certain circumstances: 78% for those who experience sexual or physical violence at school, 69% for those who experienced homelessness, and 54% for those who experienced discrimination in some other form.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, the baseline for suicide attempts (41%) remained at least ten times higher than that of the general population. The 2019 update of the study expanded the data to include not only suicide attempts but also serious suicidal thoughts. It showed that 81.7% had seriously considered committing suicide.<sup>38</sup> It would not be unreasonable to assume that between 90% and 100% of trans and gender-nonconforming individuals experience extreme depression.

Perhaps the most shocking finding of the 2014 survey was the *adverse effect* of transgender therapy.<sup>39</sup> Dividing respondents into “Do Not Want It,” “Want It Someday,” and “Have Had It,” the survey examined the effects of trans-affirming therapies on the suicide rate. Of these categories, those with the highest suicide attempt rate were those who either *wanted* treatment or had already had it; that is, those most fully embracing transition were most suicidal. On average, those who had already had the therapy had a 33%

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<sup>34</sup> Anne Haas, Philip Rodgers, and Jody Herman, “Suicide Attempts among Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Adults: Findings of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey: 2014 Version,” Williams Institute, January 2014, <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Trans-GNC-Suicide-Attempts-Jan-2014.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), “Gender Dysphoria.”

<sup>36</sup> Haas, Rogers, and Herman, “Suicide: 2014 Version,” 1.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Jody Herman, Taylor Brown, and Ann P. Haas, “Suicide Thoughts and Attempts among Transgender Adults: Findings from the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey,” *Williams Institute*, September 2019, <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Suicidality-Transgender-Sep-2019.pdf>, 1.

<sup>39</sup> For a similar analysis of the data from the UCLA study, see James Beevers, “A Brief Survey of Christian Sexual Ethics,” <https://wts.academia.edu/JamesBeevers>, 15.

higher suicide rate than those who did not want it.<sup>40</sup>

Predictably, the later edition of the study, now called the “full version” on the website, removed this data. The new graph on transgender therapies erases the “Do Not Want It” category and focuses on alternate metrics which occasionally show a temporary minuscule reduction in suicide attempts “over the last 12 months” for those who receive therapies, even though the *lifetime* attempt rate remains higher for those who undergo therapy.<sup>41</sup> Even in this selectively chosen data, the suicide rate for those who have not “transitioned” remains by far the lowest, particularly if they do not *want* to transition at all.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, the Williams Institute now claims that one of the three *key findings* of the study is that “access to gender-affirming medical care is associated with lower prevalence of suicide.”<sup>43</sup> This “summary” is at odds with the findings of the study, which are further supported by a Swedish long-term follow-up study of those who underwent transgender surgery, which showed that even ten years later, the suicide rate remained astronomically high.<sup>44</sup> The Swedish study concluded that while surgery may alleviate the distress of gender dysphoria, it is by no means a cure.

Lastly, the evidence indicates that manifestations of gender dysphoria, especially in the case of minors, are not nearly as fixed as might be presumed. As Paul McHugh notes, at least 70%–80% of children who report at clinics with transgender feelings spontaneously lose those feelings as they grow into adulthood.<sup>45</sup> Other studies have concluded that only 12% of male children who report gender dysphoria persist in this identity.<sup>46</sup> By definition, those who are cemented in their gender identity through puberty blockers or “gender-affirming” treatment become “trans” or some related

<sup>40</sup> This figure is the mean between “Do Not Want It” and “Have Had It”; see Haas, Rogers, and Herman, “Suicide: 2014,” 8, table 5.

<sup>41</sup> Herman, Brown, and Haas, “Suicide: 2015,” 17.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 17, table 4.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Williams Institute, “Report: Suicide Thoughts and Attempts Among Transgender Adults,” September 2019, <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/suicidality-transgender-adults/>.

<sup>44</sup> Cecilia Dhejne et al., “Long-Term Follow-Up of Transsexual Persons Undergoing Sex Reassignment Surgery: Cohort Study in Sweden,” Karolinska Institute, February 22, 2011, <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article/file?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0016885&type=printable>, 5.

<sup>45</sup> McHugh was one of the first to provide sex-reassignment surgery at Johns Hopkins in the 1970s. He canceled the program when he realized that the treatment was not bringing about positive effects; cf. Paul McHugh, “Transgender Surgery Isn’t the Solution,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 13, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/paul-mchugh-transgender-surgery-isnt-the-solution-1402615120>.

<sup>46</sup> Devita Singh, “A Follow-Up Study of Boys with Gender Identity Disorder” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2012), ii.

designation. Of these, approximately 40% will attempt suicide and 80% will contemplate suicide.<sup>47</sup>

These statistics represent dramatic personal suffering. It is not obvious that the interests of those who suffer from gender dysphoria align with the interests of the critical theorists who wish to abolish the concept of gender. While the experiences of those suffering from gender dysphoria are weaponized to argue that gender is a social construct, it is questionable whether the rejection of creation as the normative standard has borne positive fruit in the lives of those who have adopted a trans self-concept.

#### **4. Conclusions and Methodological Implications**

An ethical evaluation of transgenderism must focus on its underlying ideology. Merely quoting the biblical evidence that gender binarity is the created norm is a facile response. Transgenderism is only *one* fruit of a society-shaping philosophy that demands a Christian response. Thus, we have first focused on “trans-affirming” ideas and approaches. We have shown that, while some seek a biological basis for gender dysphoria, critical theory is the driving force behind the evolving landscape of trans-affirming approaches. The following ethical evaluation will address both biology and critical theory.

### **III. Toward an Ethical Evaluation of Transgenderism**

The following evaluation of transgenderism and associated phenomena does not deal with gender dysphoria *per se*. A person’s level of comfort with their physical body and what Scripture says about it are not the subject of this discussion. Rather, the evaluation will focus on the ideologies and actions associated with “trans-affirming” behavior, self-presentation, self-conceptualization, and therapeutic intervention. It will be argued that a biblical worldview must categorically reject all trans-affirming approaches in favor of counseling and treatment that affirms the bodily reality of those suffering from gender dysphoria. Those who wish to approach the issue scientifically (“modernists”) should abandon trans-affirming therapy as the way forward, particularly in light of the post-therapy suffering of trans individuals. This issue is best explored by first critiquing critical theory, associated with the postmodern approach, and then evaluating the ethical issues through a biblical lens.

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. the data from the 2014 and 2015 versions of the NTDS study cited above.

### 1. Critical Epistemology

Postmodern critical theory is epistemologically flawed and fundamentally irreconcilable with a biblical worldview. Critical theory views all reality through the lens of power and so sees propositions that claim to reflect objective truth as hegemonic power plays. Postmodernism famously rejects any objective *religious* claim as just such an epistemological power play, which should give Christians pause.<sup>48</sup>

This view makes a truly postmodern ethic impossible. While postmodernists make ethical claims, including the implication that the identified power plays are wrong and should be resisted, there is no limiting principle that hinders the application of radical criticism to their own claims. Standpoint epistemology is intrinsically relativistic. Herein lies the true problem with the postmodern project of creating “critical genealogies” to identify areas where power structures have colored society’s lenses. Critical theory retains the implicit presumption of a universal standard by which the “subordinations” (e.g., cis-normativity, patriarchy, racism, institutionalization, and ableism) are judged unfair and deeply wrong. Critical theory is associated with a metanarrative that runs from oppression to liberation.<sup>49</sup> But meta-narrational claims about the proper teleology of humankind are inherently theological. The conclusions drawn about the nature and purpose of humankind are informed by metaphysical assumptions.

In the biblical worldview, there is a knowable ethic that corresponds to the will of the Creator. The twentieth-century apologist Cornelius Van Til writes,

Man cannot think and cannot act truly unless he thinks and acts analogically. The very presupposition of man’s being able to sin is that from the outset God created him a perfect moral character. And the very possibility of sin implies *the plan of God as its background*.<sup>50</sup>

As Van Til notes, the idea of a binding ethic presupposes that there is a knowable standard by which an action is to be evaluated. If this standard is to be binding on all humankind, it must come from one who has authority over all humankind. In Van Til’s language, humans fundamentally orient

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<sup>48</sup> Robert Segal, “All Generalizations Are Bad: Postmodernism on Theories,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74.1 (March 2006): 158–59.

<sup>49</sup> Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer, “The Incompatibility of Critical Theory and Christianity,” *The Gospel Coalition*, May 15, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/incompatibility-critical-theory-christianity/>.

<sup>50</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 36.

themselves *analogically*, that is, they imitate the divinely created standard. This is an irreducible presupposition of the biblical worldview. The post-modern critical theorist cannot explain, without self-contradiction, why the oppressed ought to be liberated. Critical theory is unable to produce an “ought” without borrowing from the presuppositions of the Christian worldview. Thus, not only the *conclusions* of critical theory must be critiqued; the epistemology employed in coming to those conclusions must be critiqued as well. The standard by which all ethical claims must be measured is the Creator’s will as revealed in Scripture and general revelation.

## 2. The Goodness of the Body

Fundamental to the biblical worldview is the conception of human beings as psychosomatic unities of body and soul. Trans-affirming approaches operate from the deeply metaphysical presumption of an inner essence, not unlike a soul, that constitutes the true self, inhabits the body, and can *be* a gender different from that of the body. As Melissa Moschella notes, this popular conception involves a body-self dualism.<sup>51</sup> The “I” or “self” is the conscious, thinking thing, while the body is a nonpersonal instrument of the self.<sup>52</sup> The “dualist,” who perceives that their sexual organs do not match their internal gender, concludes that the best course of action is to change the body.<sup>53</sup> The New Testament was written in a philosophical context that has striking parallels to this view, and the echoes of Greek philosophy in the trans-affirming view are difficult to overlook.<sup>54</sup> By contrast, the biblical view affirms that human beings *are* body and spirit. As Jürgen Moltmann notes, although many in the Middle Ages thought of “likeness to God” as beginning only beyond the body, the creation story teaches that human beings “in our full bodiliness” are created in the image of God.<sup>55</sup> We read in Genesis 2 that the man was created “from the dust of the ground” (*‘aphar min ha’adamah*, עפר מן־הָאָדָמָה) and afterward infused with the breath of life (v. 7). First Corinthians 6 is perhaps the most crucial text on this issue. Paul asks his readers, “Do you not know that your bodies [*ta sōmata humōn; τὰ*

<sup>51</sup> Melissa Moschella, “Sexual Identity, Gender, and Human Fulfilment: Analyzing the Middle Way Between Liberal and Traditionalist Approaches,” *Christian Bioethics* 25.2 (2019): 195.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Plato, Phaedo 64a-e, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Plat.+Phaedo+64&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0170>.

<sup>55</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 101–2.

σώματα ὑμῶν] are *members* of Christ?” (v. 15). In verse 19, he informs his readers that the *body* is the temple of the Holy Spirit. In context, Scripture is teaching that the actions of the body are not negligible, counter to the quasi-Platonic dualism that had influenced the Corinthian church but is foreign to Scripture.<sup>56</sup> Paul teaches that not only is the *soul* united to Christ, but so also is the *body* (v. 15). This teaching is mirrored in his insistence that the body will be raised (1 Cor 6:14; 15:35–50; Acts 17:32). As the Westminster Confession states, God “created man, male and female, with reasonable ... souls, ... after his own image” (4.2).<sup>57</sup> “Man” is not coterminous with “soul.” In the early church, this question was strongly debated in the context of Christology. Docetism, the view that Christ only seemed to have a body, was categorically rejected. No one without a body could be truly human.

This basic truth has everything to do with an ethical evaluation of transgenderism. The biblical worldview makes it impossible to affirm the claim that trans persons *are* something separate from their body. Fundamentally, gender dysphoria is the perception that one’s body does not match one’s gender. Consequently, as McHugh notes, it is a “disorder of *assumption*.”<sup>58</sup> Other disorders of assumption include bulimia, the idea of dangerously thin people that they are, in fact, overweight. The transgender person assumes that what is given in nature is *wrong*.<sup>59</sup> Body integrity identity disorder (BIID) is not unlike gender dysphoria in this sense. People with BIID desire “the amputation of one or more healthy limbs or ... desire a paralysis,” believing that certain limbs are foreign elements that do not truly belong to their “self.”<sup>60</sup> Those with BIID explicitly compare their desire for amputation to the desire of transsexuals for surgical reassignment.<sup>61</sup> Intentionally paralyzing a person with BIID would be a grievous violation of the Hippocratic principle of nonmaleficence. However, instead of opting to help those with gender dysphoria to bring their *perception* in line with bodily reality, doctors routinely perform amputations on otherwise healthy reproductive organs. In some states, including California, counseling a

<sup>56</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 462.

<sup>57</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646; repr., Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1990), 32; <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/westminster-confession-faith/>.

<sup>58</sup> McHugh, “Transgender Surgery Isn’t the Solution.”

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Sabine Müller, “Body Integrity Identity Disorder (BIID)—Is the Amputation of Healthy Limbs Ethically Justified?,” *American Journal of Bioethics* 9.1 (January 2009): 36.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

person under the age of 18 to accept their birth sex is illegal.<sup>62</sup> From a biblical worldview, this rejection of creation is reprehensible, indefensible, and merciless toward those suffering from gender dysphoria. Certainly, the encouragement of transgender inclinations in children, pushing them toward the physical strains and lifelong miseries of a gender transition, is a form of socially acceptable child abuse.<sup>63</sup>

From a biblical perspective, those suffering from gender dysphoria should be helped to accept their body through various therapies. The body should not be irreversibly damaged in pursuit of greater conformity to a hypothetical internal essence. From the Christian perspective, this arises from the fundamental truth that the body is not ancillary to the identity of an individual, nor is there a gendered internal essence at odds with created reality. The extreme suicidality of postoperative trans individuals should be a sufficient datapoint to argue for the rejection of the “internal essence” theory. Changing the body to match the hypothetical internal essence does not decrease the profound confusion and suffering; indeed, it adds to it.

### 3. *The Binariness of Sex*

The final point that must be addressed is the question of the binariness of sex. As discussed above (II.3), critical theory attacks the concept of the gender binary as a social construct. In the view of deconstructionist trans advocates, humans are born on a gender spectrum. Approximately half have male genitalia and the other half have female genitalia. The idea that those with male genitalia should be seen as belonging to the category “men” is a social construct, created primarily by men to disenfranchise women. Thus, many trans advocates hold that, while *biological* sex is binary, *gender* is multi-form.

In this study, we have drawn no sharp distinction between gender and sex even though, as mentioned, this distinction is crucial to some. This is because there is no unanimous distinction drawn by trans-affirming activists and theorists. If the concept of biological sex were truly not the subject of the debate, there would be no argument in favor of including trans-*gendered* athletes in sporting events of the opposite *sex*. The distinction between male sports and female sports is drawn not on the basis of societal stereotypes about gender but on the basis of physical sex. Not only is the idea of a

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<sup>62</sup> Legislative Counsel, “Sexual Orientation Change Efforts: Senate Bill 1172, Ch. 835,” September 30, 2012, [https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=201120120SB1172](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201120120SB1172), Section 1e.

<sup>63</sup> Though deeply relevant, the subject of providing irreversible puberty blockers to children is beyond the scope of this study.



gender spectrum biologically untenable, but it is also antithetical to the biblical view of gender and sexuality. Given the essential unity between bodily sex and the designation of “woman” and “man” attached to the respective sexes throughout Scripture, it is safe to conclude that Scripture knows no bifurcation between sex and gender. Consequently, references to “man” and “woman” in Scripture refer to both sex and gender. In light of this, the scriptural case is unambiguous.

Many modern issues are not explicitly addressed by Scripture and must be evaluated by way of analogy. This is emphatically *not* the case with transgenderism. The binarity of gender is not a foregone conclusion of the biblical text but an explicit teaching affirmed throughout Scripture. In the creation account of Genesis 1:27, the terms “male and female” are highlighted to point to sexual distinctions in the creation of humankind.<sup>64</sup> In the extended creation account, Eve is created separately from Adam, not to fill a deficiency of *number* but to fill a deficiency of *role* (לֹא־מָצָא עֵזֶר; *lo’ matsu’ ezer*, “a helper was not found”; Gen 2:20). Eve was not a second Adam; she filled a deficiency of kind. Precisely this creation account is used throughout Scripture to affirm the distinctive *gender roles* of the sexes (Eph 5:22–33; 1 Tim 2:13; 1 Cor 11:8). Furthermore, Scripture emphatically forbids any blending of the sexes. Women are to be distinguished from men and neither are to blur the line, even in matters of dress (it prohibits cross-dressing in particular: see Deut 22:5; 1 Cor 11:14)!<sup>65</sup> Indeed, the distinction between men and women, especially in marriage, reflects something about the nature of God himself and his relationship with his covenant people (see Hosea; Eph 5:22–33). The distinctions between men and women reflect Christ’s relationship to the church. Consequently, they are not mere points on a wider spectrum. The implication of an essential difference between bride and groom is woven into Ephesians 5.

Scripture univocally views the very concept of sex and gender as created by God to correct what would otherwise be “not good” (Gen 2:18). The binarity of sex and gender is not an afterthought, nor is it a foregone conclusion of the biblical text. It is explicitly taught and affirmed. The gender binary is not a societal construct of Western civilization. Rather, it is created by God and clearly recognizable in nature.

<sup>64</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC 1 (Dallas: Word, 1987), 33.

<sup>65</sup> The meaning of the prohibition of wearing “things pertaining to women” is debated; some argue that it refers to the cultic practice of priests wearing female clothing in the service of goddesses, though this remains unconvincing. Cf. Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10–34:12*, WBC 6b (Dallas: Word, 2002), 495–96.



#### **4. Conclusions and Practical Implications**

The two biblical truths that make it impossible for a Christian to adopt a trans-affirming stance are 1) the body is not ancillary to the psychosomatic unity that defines human identity in the biblical worldview and 2) the binarity of gender or sex is not a social construct but is defined by God and woven into the fabric of nature. In the biblical worldview, identity is given by the Creator (Eph 3:15; Acts 17:38), not created by the creature.

Christian churches and counselors should proceed with those who suffer from gender dysphoria in the same way they proceed with other individuals with disordered assumptions. The word of God teaches that true freedom is found in receiving our identity from God, not turning inward to create or decipher our (gender) identity. Consequently, the Christian is equipped with the most powerful counseling tool: the truth. Both experientially and theologically, transitioning does *not* alleviate the burden of gender dysphoria. True freedom is found in accepting one's identity as created by God, even if there may remain a level of discomfort with one's physical body. Nothing hinders those with gender dysphoria from living lives of fruitful discipleship in obedience to the word of God and dependence upon Christ. Their struggles and sufferings may be unique, but these are not insurmountable (Phil 4:13), nor are secular trans-affirming approaches equipped to alleviate them. Finally, the hope of the resurrection and the shedding of the "body of death" (Rom 7:14), with its disordered desires and imperfections, is the *final* hope for those suffering from gender dysphoria. The church is uniquely equipped to minister to the suffering since her Savior is no stranger to suffering.

#### **IV. Summary and Conclusions**

To provide an ethical evaluation of the various issues surrounding transgenderism, it has been necessary to spend much of this study defining the issues. We have argued that trans-affirming approaches are to be rejected.

A trans-affirming approach fails to find justification even within a modernist, scientific view. The evidence for an objective "brain sex" is inconclusive at best and biased in its interpretation. Furthermore, this theory is significantly undermined by the results of trans-affirming therapies. One would expect greater conformity between one's "brain sex" and one's physical body to alleviate the mental suffering trans individuals face. Instead, these problems are compounded by all forms of therapy (cf. section II.3).

Finding no objective basis for transgenderism, postmodernists turn to neo-Marxist critical theory. Derrida, Foucault, and Butler focus heavily on

the systems of power involved in the *production* of the concept of gender. Given the suffering that those with gender dysphoria face, this move is both philosophically problematic and deeply unethical. Critical theory weaponizes gender dysphoria to prove a wider point about power dynamics in society. “Cis-normativity” (the notion that one’s birth or cis gender is normative) becomes one more epithet, not unlike sexism, heteronormativity, racism, classism, or capitalism, by which the critical theorist attacks the structure of society. Through the ascendance of critical theory in the popular consciousness, the trans-affirming movement has gained significant political impetus, leading directly to the affirmation of trans identities. As we have shown, this inexcusable encouragement of a serious “disorder of assumption” directly harms those who suffer from gender dysphoria.<sup>66</sup> It is not unfair to compare the encouragement of gender transitions with encouraging a bulimic person to lose weight.

Postmodern epistemology cannot provide a rationale for adopting its conceptualization of society. By stripping itself of a metaphysical basis, it loses its ability to speak with ethical authority. Consequently, any ethical evaluation must be drawn from Scripture, not the relativism of standpoint epistemology. Critical theory is only able to produce an “ought” from its criticism by blending its worldview with the Christian worldview, in which moral imperatives are grounded in the will of God. Scripture speaks with remarkable clarity to the issues raised by transgenderism. Human identity, in the biblical worldview, is not limited to the soul as true “self.” Instead, body and soul are united in an inseparable unity. The body is created by God and is fundamentally “good.” Consequently, it is not justified to engage in the mutilation of the physical body in pursuit of a hypothetical inward identity. Lastly, the binarity of sex is unmistakably taught by Scripture, not merely implied. Biblical teaching is unintelligible if gender exists along a spectrum.

An ethical approach to the suffering of trans individuals must seek to provide counseling and care in the pursuit of aligning self-conceptualization with the physical body. The method by which these are brought into alignment is not the mutilation of the body; rather, it is helping individuals accept what God has created. Any philosophy that weaponizes the suffering of gender dysphoria for social criticism is reprehensible and incompatible with Christianity.

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<sup>66</sup> As explained in section III.2, “disorder of assumption” describes phenomena such as bulimia and body identity integrity disorder, in which one’s perception of the body is out of step with what is given in nature.