

## 9 Bedrock Gender

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### Abstract

As Stephen Whittle (2015) remarks: “People have increasingly tried to find what it is that makes trans people say: ‘I’ve got an unswerving conviction that I know my gender – it isn’t the one that was labelled for me when I was a child’”. This “unswerving conviction” has been deemed unreliable because nonbiological by trans exclusionary philosophers. We explore the nature of this conviction and find it has the “animal” nature of Wittgenstein’s bedrock certainty. While this certainty is *in itself* nonmoral, its being an indubitable part of one’s personal bedrock gives it an existential quality which should make it morally unquestionable by others. This isn’t to say that we need to be certain about our gender to earn the right not to be questioned about it, but it at least moves the unquestionability of gender from something that is an exclusively cis prerogative to one that is just as equally a trans prerogative.

### 1. Existential self-identity

It’s difficult to establish where exactly my sense of self and my gender part ways within my self conception. To me, my being as a woman is as intertwined with my self conception as anything else; being tall, the scar on my left wrist that still aches, the freckles that dot my face and arms.

If that self conception were changed, either by choice or by force, would I even still exist as myself, or would I then be someone else completely? (Katelyn Burns 2021)

Talia Mae Bettcher makes a distinction between our metaphysical and existential self-identities (2009, 110-12). Whereas our *metaphysical* self-identity is a self-conception answering to the question “What am I?”; our *existential* self-identity answers to the question “Who am I?” “not in a trivial sense but *in a deep sense*, as in: “Who am I, really?” – “What am I about?” “What moves me?” “What do I stand for?” “What do I care about the most?”:

Unlike metaphysical self-identity, existential self-identity is not a *conception* of self. Rather, the fact that one holds all of the beliefs that one holds (true or false, self-regarding or not) goes into the set of facts that determines “who one is, really.” Much of one’s attitudes, values, and commitment go likewise into making this determination. This falls

under the reach of FPA [First Person Authority] (ibid., 110; our emphasis).

So that one's existential self-identity – who one is – is not the product of a self-conception; not the result of a wishing or desiring or imagining oneself as being such and such or having such and such an identity. Our existential self-identity is who we are prior to conceiving or imagining. Self-ID doesn't result *from* –but rather *grounds* – our self-conception;<sup>1</sup> it grounds any conception or imagining we can have of ourselves. “How do you know you're a girl?”, Willow's mother asks her trans daughter, to which Willow answers: “I know, because I feel it deep down where the music plays” (in Pine 2014, 2). Trans man Adam Smith (2018 [no p ref?](#)) has a similar answer:

Transgender identity is about how the beholder feels on the inside—so it is [hard] to explain. One way is to talk about being comfortable wearing the clothes you want. But fundamentally transgender identity is not about wearing this shirt or that skirt, or even using this bathroom or the other one. It is about how someone feels on the inside. It is about how they alone feel about who they are. It is all on the inside. That makes it hard for others to grasp. But transgender people just want the world to perceive them in the same way as they see themselves. Society has to try harder.

But some trans exclusionary feminists – we'll refer to them as TEFs<sup>2</sup> – don't want to try harder. For them, *feeling* that one is a man or woman just doesn't cut it. Sophie Allen (2018 [p ref?](#)), for example, believes that trans accounts of gender as something internal to the individual – such as a deeply held feeling or conviction that one is “in the wrong body” or that one is a woman (although male-bodied) – invite questions about the nature of this feeling and how we can be sure it's there:

The biological basis for this feeling is extremely controversial .... This presents some serious problems: What is this feeling based upon if it is not biological? Why do people seem to lack this feeling if they are not transgender? How is it different to being convinced one is a dog, or had a past life, or is younger than one's true age?

We deal elsewhere with the difference between being convinced one is a dog and being convinced one is a wo/man.<sup>3</sup> What we'd like to address here is the *feeling* of being a wo/man expressed by many trans people, and explore the gender certainty which prompts it and the existential / moral worth it is bound up with.

## 2. *Feeling one's gender*

Gender dysphoria or incongruity is often described as the feeling that one's body doesn't match one's gender; or that one was born in the "wrong" body. As Arabelle J. (2020 [p ref?](#)) writes:

With gender identity, each transgender and nonbinary person travels their own road. For many, though, the feeling emerges early – before we're even six years old – that our gender identities don't match up with what we're told by our birth certificates and by those around us. For others, this feeling comes later in life.

And here's film director, Jake Graf:

I have always felt since I was a child that my body didn't match my identity. I've made changes with surgery and hormones, but I still feel my body is not the one that I was meant to be in. Although I'm now comfortable with myself and in my own body I do still feel a slight disconnect with parts of it and would always describe myself as having been born in the wrong body. It's [sic] important people can use that phrase for themselves, without having to feel uncomfortable about it.<sup>4</sup>

The "wrong body" trope or narrative that Graf is alluding to has been rejected for several reasons: its pathologizing aspect;<sup>5</sup> its tacit acceptance of the mainstream practice of representing genital status through gender presentation;<sup>6</sup> people's reticence to call their body "wrong".<sup>7</sup> For philosopher Polaris Koi:

"Born in the wrong body" is an approximation: it can help clarify. But I always felt like my body was mine; only it needed changing to help me navigate this world. Most urgently, I needed for people to stop misgendering me as female. So I needed my body to cooperate with that. (In conversation)

In recognition of the fact that, for different reasons, not all trans people feel their birth body as "wrong", as also to acknowledge that one's gender identity need not be linked to one's external or observable body at all,<sup>8</sup> we suggest thinking of gender dysphoria as the feeling or awareness of a disconnect between the gender one is assigned at birth and one's *felt* gender.<sup>9</sup> For Charlie Kiss (2018 [p ref?](#)): "It felt strange having a woman's body; as if it wasn't really mine. ... In my thoughts, my mind would always present me to myself as a man".<sup>10</sup>

What we need to clarify is the notion of gender as a feeling (or of *feeling* one's gender). Is gender a feeling? Is there something it is like to feel like a woman or a man or

both or neither? And if there is such a feeling, does it apply to cis people? Do cis people feel their gender?

TEFs claim that gender is not something cis people feel. Recall Sophie Allen (2018):

The biological basis for this feeling is extremely controversial ... . What is this feeling based upon if it is not biological? Why do people seem to lack this feeling if they are not transgender?

Jane Clare Jones also questions this “kind of internal gender essence or subjective sense of one’s own gender that many of us simply don’t recognize as a description of our own being as men or women” (2018 [p ref?](#)). Similarly, in “Feeling Like a Man”, Daniel Kaufman (2019 [p ref?](#)) writes:

Now, I am a man, but if you asked me what it *feels* like to be one, I couldn’t answer; while I *am* a man, there is no sense in which I *feel* like one. *Being* a man is a matter of belonging to a certain sex-category, specifically, the male one, but there is nothing that it *feels like* to be male.<sup>11</sup>

Kaufman doesn’t deny that there are things that *only males can feel*: for example, what it feels like to have an enlarged prostate. But “to feel something that only males can feel is not the same as feeling male, and certainly, it is not something that *makes* you male” (2019). Nor does he deny that there is something like feeling masculine or manly. So that one might feel manly after an especially tough workout, but such feelings of manliness are not the same as something it feels like to be male. Rather, he says, they are little more than the products of sexist expectations.

The obvious response to Kaufman is “cis privilege”: cis people don’t really notice, or think about their gender because they’re not made to suffer from it. A cis person doesn’t *feel* they are a man because their manhood is not being challenged, not put in question. As Natalie Reed (2012 [p ref?](#)) puts it, “cis is treated as the null hypothesis. It doesn’t *require* any evidence. It’s just the assumed given”; “the Null HypotheCis”, as it were.

Kaufman’s contention that there is no sense in which one can be said to feel like a man suffers from what Wittgenstein would call a “one-sided diet” of examples (PI §593) – the single example being that of cis men (let’s charitably extend to cis people). Kaufman assumes that *all* men must share his lack of *feeling like a man* because he doesn’t envisage that not all men are cis men, nor that maybe not all cis men have the same subjectivity. In response to an anonymous comment, he writes: “Anyone can say anything they like. Given that I am man/male, if there was something it felt like to be one, I think I’d know it.” To which the anonymous commentator replies that this response “is shaky at best”:

There can be something that it “feels like” to be an X that passes entirely unnoticed because one is never forced to confront it or notice it. I.e. there is something that it “feels like” to have arms but it is very hard for those with arms to identify that proprioceptive feeling. If we disconnected the feeling to your arms for 10 minutes, you’d certainly notice what it’s like to have arms once the connection was re-established. What’s so hard about this basic point? (In Kaufman 2019)

Or what if people reacted to him as a woman rather than a man? Mightn’t that awaken outraged feelings of manhood in Kaufman?

Willow’s description of her gender certainty as originating “deep down where the music plays” is a beautiful iteration of a strong leitmotif in many trans kids and adults’ descriptions of the source and certainty of their gender as a “deeply held, internal sense of gender” (Sirois 2020). That sense of gender which remains as quiescent as the certainty of existing in cases where a challenge to one’s gender is not (yet) experienced. In such cases, there is no need to speak of it or describe it to others in palpably phenomenological terms such as a “feeling”. One simply *is* one’s gender – whether cis, trans, gender fluid etc.<sup>12</sup> Upon being asked how they experience their gender, cis people we have asked replied something along the lines of “I’ve never even thought about it. I’m just me”. This also applies to trans kids before they are questioned, challenged or contradicted about their gender.

Until we are asked about it – asked to think about it or asked to prove it – for most of us, gender goes without saying. Until their gender is put in question – either by themselves (e.g., through the realisation that they don’t look like what are usually called or treated as boys / girls), or by others (e.g., a parent telling their child s/he is not a boy / girl), trans kids’ testimony shows that they take their real gender as much for granted as cis kids do.<sup>13</sup>

So that it is usually in the case of challenge, conflict, incongruence, dysphoria that this deep, internal sense of gender, which Julia Serano describes as “an unconscious knowing”, is awoken, brought to the surface, and reflected upon. This mostly nonconscious sense of gender can become – when challenged – *felt*. Serano (2016a, 80) describes how she lived it:

the thoughts I have had of being female always felt vague and ever-present, like they were an unconscious knowing that always seemed to defy conscious reality. ... I knew there was something wrong with me being a boy before I ever could consciously put it into words.

This awareness, or “unconscious knowing” of one’s gender is often described as less an awareness of the mind than one of the body; and the incongruence, when realised, can be a *felt* realisation. As Serano (2016b) explains:

The terms transgender and transsexual are *experiential* — individuals have an internal experience of gender that they can either try to repress, or outwardly express via being gender non-conforming, or transitioning to their identified gender, respectively.

This deeply internal sense of gender can cause, or manifest itself in, a desire to transition, socially and/or physiologically, so as to give the body the social and/or physiological existence it calls for. Here is Joy Ladin (2013, 3-4), poet and Professor in English at Stern College for Women at Yeshiva University, on those “sweet circles of estrogen that I dissolve under my tongue” which allow her to become who she is:

I never thought I would see myself in the mirror. I never thought I would hold the means to become myself in my hands, that I would taste it dissolving under my tongue. Every day that I take this medication brings me slowly—very slowly, for there is so much to change and my body is so reluctant after all these years— closer to being the person I have always paradoxically wished to become and known myself to be.

Though there are few aspects of my physical form unravaged by testosterone’s effects, thanks to my medication, those effects are diminishing. For the first time in my life, when I look in the mirror, I see someone who has begun to resemble—me.

### 3. Gender as embodied

**Kit Porter** : What’s male inside? What’s female inside? Why can’t you be the butchest butch in the world and keep your body?

**Max** : Because I wanna feel whole. I want the outside of me to match the inside of me.

*The L Word* (TV Series, 2006, 1)

In his book, *Second Skins: The body narratives of transsexuality*, trans man Jay Prosser counters the social constructionist view of gender by claiming that one’s sense of gender, as depicted in transsexual narratives, fundamentally arises from the body and not from socialization. He revives the “born in the wrong body” trope – cast aside by social constructionists for assuming a dissonance between the body and an innate gender identity– by insisting that it rightly expresses the feeling of being born in an external or material body that does not align with one’s internal body – that is, the body that “should

have been” (Prosser 1998, 84) – and with one’s *felt* gender. One feels trapped within a restrictive, “other” or second skin which misrepresents the reality of the inner body, and from which sex reassignment surgery can bring release: “Surgery strips the body bare to what it should have been” (ibid., 82).

Prosser (ibid. 100) evokes the mirror scenes that punctuate, and have become a convention of, transsexual autobiographies:

The difference between gender and sex is conveyed in the difference between body image (projected self) and the image of the body (reflected self). For the transsexual the mirror initially reflects not-me: it distorts who I know myself to be. “My life was a series of distorted mirrors”, female-to-male Mario Martino metaphorizes his life before transition: “I saw myself in their crazy reflections as false to the image I had of myself. *I was a boy!* I felt like one, I dressed like one, I fought like one.” The mirror misrepresents who I know myself *really* to be ... Yielding this recognition that I am not my body, the mirror sets in motion the transsexual plot: it is once it is shattered in its visual reflection, once the material body is seen not to be the felt body that the material body can be approached in bits and pieces – an assembly of parts to be amputated and relocated surgically in order that subject may be corporeally integrated.

Laura-Anne Marie Charlot (2021) describes her own relationship with mirrors:

1. I had an epiphany when I was 5 years old, in 1961: I wished I could be a girl, and that my name was Laura, not Larry. My entire life, I have hated the name my parents gave me — it never felt “right” — and I hated to look at myself in mirrors.
2. I felt compelled to cross dress from age 8, and I never understood why, until I was 59 and finally sought help and guidance from a transgender support group.
3. I suffered a severe “gender crisis” on June 4th, 2016 and committed myself to Transition. I immediately felt better, and have never questioned myself in the aftermath as to whether or not my transition was the right thing to do. Almost from that day, my self-perception changed radically: I stopped hating to look at my face in mirrors. That face hasn’t changed significantly, yet the face I see is that of someone who deserves to be loved ... I really hated myself, for almost 60 years.

Now I don’t. ...

But know this: whether you can see your femininity in the mirror or not, it is there in your mind and your soul.

Prosser's focus is on the *internal body's* resistance to its assigned gender, on the real body's calling out for the sexual transition that will enable one's real gender to *come out*, we might say<sup>14</sup>. This, which we term *the call of the sexed body*, is something Christine Penn (2018) describes in her explanation of why she wanted "the" surgery:

When I started taking hormones, I experienced some of what I would consider some of the strangest side effects. It felt as if my body was yelling at me, internally, as I was overwhelmed with the feeling that it was ... "about time" and "we expected this a long, long, time ago"! It's really hard to put that in words and it's likely an experience that only trans people go through, but to me, it was a feeling of biologic acceptance (if such a thing even exists). After being disconnected such a long time ago, I felt as though my mind and body were quite literally reconnecting.

The transsexual autobiographies he documents reveal, writes Prosser, "the extent to which embodiment forms an essential base to subjectivity" (1998, 7), thereby putting in question theories that view the body as a product of culture. Reading "individual corporeal experience" back into theories of the body, Prosser (1998, 7, 40) challenges these cultural theories, and in particular Judith Butler's conception of the body as "the psychic projection of a surface". This is a conception Gayle Salamon subscribes to in viewing the felt sense of the body as a product of cultural interpretations and intersubjective constructions rather than as something grounded in subjectivity. In fact, Salamon (2010, 1-2) challenges "the notion that the materiality of the body is something to which we have unmediated access, something of which we can have epistemological certainty". There can be no such certainty for Salamon because our body is not the object of an individual but of a cultural, or intersubjective, experience. Note that Salamon (2010, 154) does not question the *feeling* at the basis of gender self-identification –

not only do MTFs [Male to Female trans people] "feel like women", but most assert that they have never felt like men. Whether they are MTFs or FTMs, whether they identify as men, as women, or as some other term, it is the persistence and strength of *feeling* that creates their sense of identity. Indeed, that persistent feeling of gendered identification is the cornerstone of the clinical identification of transsexuality.



– what she questions is its provenance. For her, the feeling of gender identification does not emanate from the body but is a product of cultural interpretation (Salamon 2010, 2-3). The Butlerian influence is clear. Indeed, Butler praises Salamon’s focus “on the intersubjective construction of transgender ... and how the gaze of the Other – anticipated and solicited – works to ‘build’ a bodily schema” (in Salamon 2010, blurb). Views like Butler’s and Salamon’s seek to deter us not only from the notion of an innate sense of body, or proprioception, but also from an *internal* sense of gender. As Salamon (2010, 124) contends,

... it is impossible to conceive [of] a *purely internal* felt sense of gender, [in] that the social structures of gender are always attending and informing that felt sense.

For Salamon (2010, 124), there is no *purely internal* felt sense of gender whereby one first knows oneself to be a man and therefore asks others to see one as such, for “even the most interior felt sense of gender seems to be [merely] confirming the social binary by which gender becomes legible”. For, so runs the argument, one “feels like *a man* and not some obscure and private gender for which there is no name or common cultural point of reference”. And so asking to be seen *as a man* is not asking to be seen as something which is “the willed and wilful creation of a fully autonomous subject” (Salamon 2010, 124-5); it is an already culturally informed request or demand. According to the social constructionist theories of body Salamon subscribes to, “I can only have access to my body through the mental image that I have of my body, an image that is extremely fluid and possesses only a tenuous cohesion to the biological body” (ibid. 147).

On Salamon’s view, then, the fact that someone is asking to be seen “*as a man*” (“man” being a social construction) implies that both body and gender are a product of social construction, and therefore that there can be no purely internal felt sense of gender<sup>15</sup>. To repeat: for her, the materiality of the body is not something to which we have unmediated access or epistemological certainty. Both body and gender are cultural constructions to begin with, and not bases of subjectivity.

But – and here is the crux – if the gender category assigned to us is more fundamental than any subjective sense we can have of our gender, how is it that trans children can resist the gender category into which they are being enculturated? If gender is uniquely a product of social conditioning, how are trans children able to resist enculturation into the gender in which they are raised and insist that their gender is the one they are socio-culturally discouraged from owning? A resistance which often includes a life of pain and alienation, attempted suicide, or indeed suicide. And the same can be said of some intersex children who – due to a decision made on the basis of genitalia seeming slightly more female or male – are raised as a certain gender, which some of them come to reject.

What is it, if not some inner call of the body pre-existing any cultural inscription, that makes a child *feel* they are different from what people take them to be and raise them to be? And, once they have acquired language, verbalise it as having been miscategorised or

misconstrued? What would be the source of their resistance to the gender they are being enculturated in, and of their assurance about their felt gender?<sup>16</sup> Bettcher (2017, 399) also makes the point

Consider a trans person who is raised to see themselves as male and to follow male-assigned gender norms. While the body image may be layered, saturated and encrusted through historical accumulation, it is difficult to see why there would be a significant gendered incongruence between body image and the material body. What are the worldly experiences that this trans woman might have had that could have given her the body image of a woman, given her constant subjection to the norms that determine and gender such interactions in advance?

There is no question that gender is also a product of social forces, but this cannot be the whole story. While recognising the undeniably social aspect of gender, we must also contend with the equally undeniable – and invincible – sense some trans people have, since infancy, of their real gender, despite being treated and raised in their assigned gender. As trans woman Emily VanDerWerff (2020) puts it: “Gender is a social construct, except for all the ways in which it sure seems like it’s deeply ingrained within my very self”.

What we must make of this “deeply engrained” sense of gender which seems not only *not* to stem from socialisation but, in many cases, to defy it, is that gender is not uniquely a product of social forces. It is not, *pace* Gayle Salamon (2010, 181), merely “created – and enforced – through other peoples’ expectations and interpretations of one’s bodily appearance and behavior”. There is something that predates and transcends socialisation. This something is reflected in the shift in terminology adopted by trans people who feel that transitioning does not change their gender but merely *affirms* the one they were born with, or have always been – when they replace the terms *Male-to-female (MTF)* and *female-to-male (FTM)* with *affirmed female* or *trans-woman*, and *affirmed male* or *trans-man* (Edwards-Leeper & Spack 2012, 322).

What predates socialisation is an animal or visceral sense of who we are, a call which children as young as eighteen months respond to and express. Not cultural interpellation but the call of the body is primitive and often determinant – overriding or deafening, as it can do, cultural interpellation. The call of the body may be, as we have seen, a call for the *sexed body* – that is, the desire for a body whose primary sexual characteristics would accord with one’s felt gender – but it needn’t be. In some cases, and more specifically in the case of children, the call is not for a *sexed*, but for a *gendered body* – a body which *presents* like the gender one feels. And for some, this call of the gendered body

becomes, with pubescence, a call for the sexed body; whereas for others, the call for a gendered body remains sufficiently answered by a change in gender presentation or gender acknowledgment. There is no need for sexual transition, be it hormonal or surgical: social transition will do. Emi Koyama (2003, 249) draws attention to those “realities of trans experiences in which physical sex is felt [to be] more artificial and changeable than their inner sense of who they are”.

And for Jan Morris (2018 [1974]), 17-18; 21):

That my inchoate yearnings ... that my conundrum might simply be a matter of penis or vagina, testicle or womb, seems to me still a contradiction in terms, for it concerned not my apparatus, but my *self*. ... I have had no doubt about my gender since that moment of self-realization beneath the piano [as a young child]. Nothing in the world would make me abandon my gender, concealed from everyone though it remained: but my body, my organs, my paraphernalia, seemed to me much less sacrosanct, and far less interesting too.

Though “concealed”, one’s felt gender remains. It is not obliterated by socialisation, in spite of all its normalising impact; in spite of its sometimes nefarious effects on our “self”. For, society’s attempts to misgender someone has nothing less than a depersonalising effect. Here is Cassie LaBelle’s (2020) touching testimony:

By my late twenties, I had a group of good friends, a steady job, and a wife. I figured I was an introverted man with a light case of depression, not a deeply depersonalised trans woman.

And yet.

When I finally did self-accept as a trans woman, it was such a euphoric rush. Don’t get me wrong, I was abjectly terrified of what the future would hold, and I still had no idea if I could ever walk out into the world presenting as my true self. But also: I was a girl, now and always. I had solved the big puzzle at the inside of myself, and suddenly there was a cause I could point to as the reason why my life had been filled with so much pain and confusion. Coming out didn’t fix everything, but at least I knew who I was and what I needed to do to improve my quality of life. I could finally end my lifetime of depersonalization and re-enter my body: an activity that seemed no less ludicrous than trying to drive to Mars, but one that I nonetheless attempted anyway.

The repersonalisation process really kicked off about a month after I began HRT [hormone replacement therapy], when I started feeling like a missing piece of my soul had begun to coalesce after a long absence. [It was like feeling] part of myself had been frozen at the core of my being since the start of puberty. Twenty years trapped in the ice. Twenty years gone....

... Regardless, I'm here now. I'm no longer trapped in the ice at the center of myself. I'm here and I'm alive and I'm in charge and oh my God does the air smell sweet.

What wins the day here is not society but the natural, the "animal" – that deeply held, internal sense of gender which twenty years of socialisation were not able to tame.

TEFs are wrong to call "vague" and "fleeting" the "feeling" or "deep, inner sense" trans people refer to in conveying their challenged certainty about their gender. It characterises something as existentially real and intrinsic as their gender is to most cis people. Something which trans people nevertheless cannot "prove" because gender is taken – by most people generally and TEFs in particular – to be necessarily linked to the visible body. And, as Jennifer Finney Boylan (2013, 22) explains, looking beyond, or beneath, the visible body requires imagination:

Gender is many things, but one thing it is surely not is a *hobby*. Being female is not something you do because it's clever or postmodern, or because you're a deluded, deranged narcissist.

In the end, what it is, more than anything else, is a *fact*. It is the dilemma of the transsexual, though, that it is a fact that cannot possibly be understood without imagination.

After I grew up and became female, people would often ask me, How did you *know*, when you were a child? How is it possible that you could believe, with such heartbroken conviction, something that on the surface of it, seems so stupid? This question always baffled me, as I could hardly imagine what it would be like *not* to know what your gender was. It seemed obvious to me that this was something you understood intuitively, not on the basis of what was between your legs, but because of what you felt in your heart. Remember when you woke up this morning – I'd say to my female friends – and you knew you were female? *That's* how I felt. *That's* how I knew.

Of course, knowing with such absolute certainty something that appeared to be both absurd and untrue made me, as we said in Pennsylvania, kind of *mental*.

And for Vic Valentine (2018):

There was nothing about my interests or my likes or dislikes and my personality that meant that I could not be a woman or grow up and live as a woman, as would have been expected based on what my body looked like when I was born but, actually, to me, the idea of that felt wholly impossible and suffocating, and I just knew that that was not who I was. It is difficult to convey to other people that sense of certainty about that discomfort. I realize that, for the vast majority of people, it is just an automatic thing. However, it is absolutely the case that trans people just know that the cues that other people may pick up on about us do not match up with our sense of who we are, and that is why we do certain things, make changes and ask people to try to work with us to see us differently.

For, besides the sexed call of the body experienced by some trans people, the deep *feeling* or *sense* generally alluded to by trans people seems to us a way of expressing the kind of intuitive, bodily certainty many of us implicitly feel about our gender but are never questioned about. A certainty which is for them, as we saw Jennifer Finney Boyle maintain, indubitable; and whose manifestation is visceral.

#### 4. Gender as *bedrock certainty*

When we start looking for approval of our feelings, and assurances that they're real and that they count, beyond the subjective certainty and realness of *experiencing those feelings*, we're lost...You're never going to get any certainty beyond the certainty you yourself assert, or any assurance beyond the sense of *I am. This is who I am. This is what I am experiencing. This is what I want. This is what I need to do.* That's all the evidence you'll ever have, and all the evidence you'll ever need (Natalie Reed 2012).

In Julia Serano's (2016, 151) experience, "[v]irtually all transsexuals<sup>17</sup> describe experiencing a profound, inexplicable, intrinsic self-knowing regarding their own gender". It's fair to say that, if asked to describe their relationship to their gender, cis people might use those same words – though perhaps – for reasons discussed earlier – putting less existential weight on the words "experiencing", "profound" and "inexplicable". The unifying concept here is "intrinsic self-knowing".

Of course, room must be made for gender uncertainty and the "element of choice" about their gender felt by some people (we return to this later) but, for many, gender is not an object of uncertainty or choice. The "deeply held, internal sense of gender" of which we spoke remains a strong leitmotif in trans testimonies and the compulsion to question or

reject the gender assigned at birth is not a choice, but an existential imperative – the burden of living in the wrong gender being so unbearable that some prefer suicide<sup>18</sup>. Indeed, even transitioning itself (social or physical) is often felt to be not a choice, but an existential imperative. Christine Penn (2018) is one of many for whom having “the” surgery is “not elective, and no matter how high the risks are, I’d still be willing to do it anyway”. For Elliot Page (in Steinmetz 2021), top surgery<sup>19</sup> was “not only life-changing but lifesaving”. As for Jan Morris (2018 [1974]), 91; 117):

[Sex change] is one of the most drastic of all human changes, unknown until our own times, and even now experienced by very few: but it seemed only natural to me, and I embarked upon it only with a sense of thankfulness, like a lost traveller finding the right road at last. ... Love, luck and resolution had saved me from suicide – for if there had been no hope of ending my life as a woman, I would certainly have ended it for myself as a man.

In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein (§359) speaks of a visceral kind of certainty – describing it as “something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal”. By saying that it lies beyond justification, Wittgenstein is recognising the arational aspect of this certainty and distinguishes it from knowledge – treating it as a certainty that is not epistemic. This doesn’t make it less important than knowledge; in fact, it is more fundamental than knowledge in that it constitutes the “bedrock” or “substratum of all [our] enquiring and asserting” (OC, §162).<sup>20</sup> This bedrock certainty, as we might call it, *underpins* the logical foundation of our thoughts and actions – of all that we say or do.<sup>21</sup> Some of our bedrock certainties are *personal*.<sup>22</sup> Here are some examples: “I am a man”; “I am heterosexual”; “I have no children”; “I have been to Paris”; “I am typing these words on my PC”; “I have just had lunch”; “I have a headache”.<sup>23</sup> These are “animal” certainties in that they are not due to reflection, but constitute its basis. Certainties that – recall Bettcher at the start of this chapter – are not determined *by*, but rather determine our conception of ourselves.

Note, however, that, as Wittgenstein (PI, §43) famously stressed, meaning is dependent on context or use. So that the very same sentence (e.g., “I am a man”) can have different meanings depending on its use: it can be used to formulate someone’s bedrock certainty about their gender, but it can also be used to express a conclusion they’ve only just reached about their gender or their still pondering their gender or their informing someone of their gender. So that not all instances of “I am a man” are expressions of bedrock certainty. For some people, their gender is not an object of certainty at all, but an object of hesitation and struggle towards certainty. This does not remove from the fact that for many people – trans and cis – gender *is* a bedrock certainty which they feel as intrinsically part of their personal bedrock as having a body or existing.

Wittgenstein makes an important distinction within the category of bedrock certainties. Some certainties cannot be ousted from bedrock on pain of “knock[ing] from under my feet the ground on which I stand in making judgments at all” (OC, §492). For both authors of this chapter, doubting or rejecting even one of the following certainties – “I am a wo/man”, “I speak English”; “I live in London”; “I have been to Paris several times”; “I have lived with X for years”) – would be a sign of pathology: “Here a doubt would seem to drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos. ... the foundation of all judging would be taken away from me” (OC, §§614-15). That is, the very basis of our self-trust, and therefore our trust in the world, would evaporate. However, other bedrock certainties – e.g., “I was born in Brussels”; “X and Y are my biological parents” – are not immovable. Something can occur which makes some bedrock certainties lose their hardness or become fluid (OC, §96), and therefore no longer be part of our personal bedrock, without the shift being ground-shattering, without it signalling pathology or chaos.<sup>24</sup>

For some people, gender is, to borrow a term from Sophie Grace Chappell, “a brute given” (Facebook entry 23/6/2020), which can never be ousted from bedrock. But not for all. A cis man can live in the bedrock certainty of being a man for 30 years and feel that certainty dissolve and be either replaced by a new certainty (e.g., being a woman or bigender) or by none at all. Here, an “alteration” of the bedrock occurs (OC, §99) which – though it deeply affects the individual – does not drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos. This is comparable to losing proprioception,<sup>25</sup> though in the case of gender certainty, its being ousted from bedrock is not a pathological phenomenon. Something has happened – be it a call of the body or the soul – to dissolve gender certainty, oust it from bedrock. And inasmuch as it had been a bedrock certainty, its dissolution or ousting does not belie its former standing fast.

Nor does a certainty being *second nature* – arrived at after years of pondering and questioning – prevent it from becoming bedrock. What makes a certainty bedrock is not its longevity but (among other things) its animal or reflex-like nature. When Julia Serano says that someone can authoritatively say “I’m a woman” because they have experienced their gender identity as a “lifelong self-knowing” or because, like Serano (2016, 151; 216) herself, they have put it together over the years like a puzzle, both of these (her use of the word “knowing” notwithstanding) can be bedrock certainties. For certainty can set in once the puzzle is complete. Once, as Cassie Brighter (2021) puts it, having drifted hopelessly, one finds land:

For trans people, gender dysphoria can feel like a nagging psychological “itch” or like your soul is burning from the inside out.

For trans people, after experiencing hopelessness, fear, not belonging, disassociation, numbness, apathy, and hopelessness, finally putting it all together and realizing “oh I get it now, all of this is because I’m trans” can be a life-altering moment.

Imagine a castaway who's been adrift in the ocean for months.  
And then one morning they see land on the horizon.

Many people – both cis and trans – are bedrock certain about their gender. For Martie Sirois (2018): “Trans people aren't confused; they know who they are with the same conviction that cis people know who they are”. And Stephen Whittle (2015) speaks of an “unswerving conviction”:

People have increasingly tried to find what it is that makes trans people say: “I've got an unswerving conviction that I know my gender – it isn't the one that was labelled for me when I was a child”.

The source of this certainty is visceral, or – to use Wittgenstein's term – animal. Inspired by Jay Prosser's emphasis on the internal body, we have referred to gender certainty as “a call of the body”. And, for many of us, our gender certainty is comparable to the certainty of having a body, of existing, of being in pain etc. Such certainties are *animal* certainties in that they unreflectively underpin our thinking, speaking and acting, and in that they are *embodied*. Nothing can be more inherent to us than this. Jennifer Finney Boylan (2013, 107):

Sometimes while I worked I put on a skirt and a knit top, just so I could work without being distracted. Then I'd think, *Why am I doing this?*

And the response came, the same one as when I was fourteen:  
*Because I can't not.* ... I felt like I always had to *choose* to be James.  
Being Jenny, though, isn't like that. I just am.

Rowan Moore (2021), having accompanied his 19 year old trans son Felix through his transition, writes:

Being trans is not something you can take off and put on like clothes,  
or put on hold while others discuss the rights and wrongs of your  
situation. It is part of who you are.

This takes us back to Bettcher's characterisation of our *existential* self-identity as answering to the question “Who am I?”. For those whose gender manifests itself as a bedrock, embodied certainty, there is no prising it apart from who we are. In such cases, being a certain gender is not part of one's *conception* of oneself; rather, it is part of what determines “who one is, really”; part of the indubitable basis upon which we can conceive and carry out our lives. For many of us – cis and trans – being our gender is as unquestionable as being *tout court*. It is not unquestionable because we have decided it would be, but because it is as much part of who we are as being a teacher or a brother or a



son. So that, in such cases, for a third party to question someone's gender is equivalent to their questioning other parts of that person's bedrock. It is equivalent to questioning their sanity.

This is not to say that we need to be bedrock certain about our gender to earn the right not to be questioned about it. What this does is move the unquestionability of gender from something that is an exclusively cis prerogative to one that is also a trans prerogative. Cis and trans – we all begin on level playing fields: there are those who are bedrock certain about their gender and those who are not. Trust must be our first reflex towards all – the certain and the uncertain, amongst trans and amongst cis. And if TEFs want to worry about deception, let's make sure they apply that worry to cis as well as trans people.<sup>26</sup>

## 5. Gender uncertainty

We have been focusing on gender certainty for reasons just discussed. But some trans people don't have or have never had the certainty about their gender that we've been talking about. Stephanie Burt remarks that the usual narrative describes many trans lives but not all. It goes as follows:

Assigned one gender at birth, we'd felt like the other since childhood. That feeling—which had nothing to do with sexual desire—grew until life in the wrong gender seemed not worth living. So we came out as trans women or trans men to loved ones and health-care providers, who gave us the courage, the hormones, and maybe the surgery to live as who we always were, and then we were fine (Burt 2019).

This narrative “excludes people whose experience of being trans has shifted over their lives. (Some regret or reverse their transitions; many more do not)” as well as “people with more complicated experiences of gender and sexuality and ... nonbinary people, who live as both genders, or neither” (Burt 2019). These more complex trans gender narratives are not, for being more difficult to grasp, less worthy of acknowledgement and respect. Nor should the uncertainties some trans people feel move us to question their integrity. Gender is a many-splendored thing and in focusing on bedrock *certainty*, we do not mean to downplay the varying degrees to which the lives of transgender people may be filled with all sorts of *uncertainty*. But even the most uncertain trans person can have the *negative certainty* that – whoever they may or may not be – they are *not* cisgender.<sup>27</sup> This negative certainty is bedrock.

## 6. Conclusion

There are many things that all humans share unequivocally: we are all born and we all will die; we need to eat, breathe air, sleep; we cannot fly unaided; if our heads are cut off, they will not grow again; we cannot make ourselves invisible; unlike the neonates of some other species, human babies cannot look after themselves; we have feelings, emotions, needs etc. In such things, we are all the same. A human baby who talks or feeds itself, an invisible man, a flying Superman – these are the stuff of fiction, not of reality.

There are also things about which we are different. Not all of us sleep eight hours a night; not all of us can or want to have children; we are not all of the same sex, gender or sexual orientation; and some of us have no sex, gender or sexual orientation. There are definite but also infinite ways of being human and we should be wary of declaring (as so many have done throughout history) who does and does not count as a human being, who does and does not count as a woman or as a man. Of course, there are obvious cases of *what* does not count as man or woman: a lion can be male but can't be a man. We do not call lions "men". But of human beings who say they are men or women, we should be wary of saying – as TEFs do – that they are not.

The trans experience is not a one-size-fits all experience; not this "unitary, easy-to-understand trans story" (Burt 2019). Trans gender narratives are often narratives of uncertainty, or continuing exploration rather than discovery. Talia Mae Bettcher affirms that there isn't always "the solidification of a fixed 'transgender/transsexual' identity"; one can be, in the words of C. Jacob Hale (1998a, 318), "a border-zone dweller: someone whose embodied self exist[s] in a netherworld constituted by the margins of multiple overlapping identity" (Bettcher (2007), 62, n10);? YES Hale (1998a), 318). But for many people, be we trans or cis, there is no vacillation or choice about gender. Our gender is as compelling for us as it is for Katelyn Burns (see this chapter's epigram): it is indissociable from our being.

Jan Morris speaks of Dr Harry Benjamin (1885-1986), an endocrinologist and sexologist known for his pioneering contribution in the recognition of transsexuality and the development of medical interventions for transsexual and transgender people. He was, in the 1950s, deep in the problem of gender identity, writes Morris (2018 [1974], 41-42):

He had explored every aspect of the condition, and he frankly did not know its cause: what he *did* know was that no true trans-sexual<sup>28</sup> had yet been persuaded, bullied, drugged, analysed, shamed, ridiculed or electrically shocked into an acceptance of his physique.

For Stephen Whittle (2006, xiii), "perhaps the most controversial issue in sex and gender theory" is whether the basis of gender identity is "essential and biologically based, or ... socially constructed? ... increasingly, trans people are questioning whether the deeply held self-understandings they have can be entirely due to nurture and environment". We don't believe they can – not entirely. It seems that current science agrees with this – with there being biological underpinnings to gender.<sup>29</sup> However, what interests us here is not the science – still tentative – but the phenomenology. How gender is felt and lived by people

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whose gender is challenged rather than enculturated is important both for a better general understanding of gender and for a better understanding of how we ought to respond to people whose gender is not obvious to us. What matters – it is worth repeating – is that we recognise that for many trans people, being their felt gender is as unquestionable as being *tout court*. To question it is to question their existence – and that is immoral.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The fact that existential self-ID precedes self-conception doesn't entail that the former is genderless, for gender itself can precede self-conception.

<sup>2</sup> In an effort to avoid the acronym TERF for "trans exclusionary radical feminist", considered by some as a slur.

<sup>3</sup> Moyal-Sharrock & Sandis (2023, Ch. 3).

<sup>4</sup> <https://mermaidsuk.org.uk/news/do-you-still-use-the-phrase-born-in-the-wrong-body/>

<sup>5</sup> See e.g., Bettcher (2014, 384).

<sup>6</sup> See Bettcher (2014, 401).

<sup>7</sup> For this, and other negative reactions to the "wrong body" trope, see the Mermaids link in note 11.

<sup>8</sup> According to the 2015 US Transgender Survey (updated December 2017), "twenty-two percent (22%) of respondents reported that they wanted to transition someday, 13% were unsure, and 3% did not want to transition" <https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/usts/USTS-Full-Report-Dec17.pdf> (47).

<sup>9</sup> On our use of the term, "felt gender" simply designates the gender someone takes themselves to be. Cf. Scheim & Bauer (2015, 6).

<sup>10</sup> Here, we might note the proximity of feeling *qua* awareness of a disconnect and *feeling one's gender*, as captured by the expression *felt gender*.

<sup>11</sup> While we would agree that it is nonsense to suppose that there is "something" that is ~~is-~~(or feels) like to be a woman, man, human, or bat (see Hacker 2012), it simply doesn't follow from this that no individual person can feel like a man or woman. Moreover, such feelings are not to be equivocated with feeling male or female.

<sup>12</sup> In fact, the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) defines gender identity as "a person's *intrinsic sense* of being male (a boy or a man), female (a girl or woman), or an alternative gender (e.g., boygirl, girlboy, transgender, genderqueer, eunuch)" in their latest [Standards of Care](#) *put into References, with URL*, I put into References but wonder if we shouldn't just put URL here. Up to you. (102; our emphasis).

<sup>13</sup> See Olson et al (2015): studies "provide evidence that, early in development, transgender youth are statistically indistinguishable from cisgender children of the same gender identity". These findings were reiterated by Gülgöz et al (2019) in a comprehensive study of gender development (e.g., gender identity and gender expression) in 3- to 12-year-old trans children who, since early childhood identified and lived as a gender different from their assigned sex. In this study, published in the [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America](#) *put into References*, (PNAS) *It is in the references under Gulgoz et al, as PNAS*, they found that transgender children strongly identify as members of their current gender group and show gender-typed preferences and behaviours that are strongly associated with their current gender, not the gender typically associated with their sex assigned at birth.

<sup>14</sup> Prosser's revival of the "wrong body" trope is legitimate in that he applies it to *transsexual* people in particular, rather than to transgender people generally. For, not all transgender people experience

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their gender identity as internally connected to their external body (or their sexual organs), whereas transsexual people do so “by definition” (Prosser 1998, 43).

<sup>15</sup> Salamon need not deny that any given individual may have felt associations with gender, just as they might with ~~with~~ pretty much anything else (e.g. colours, numbers, or day of the week). But synaesthesia and related abilities are not evidence that there is some shared – let alone universal – internal felt sense of any of the things in question (though we can allow that for the average person in Western employment Mondays tend to have a very different phenomenology to Saturdays).

<sup>16</sup> We address elsewhere (Moyal-Sharrock & Sandis 2023, Ch. 4) the popular notion that the allegedly exclusively socio-cultural source of transhood can be seen in its media-induced increase.

<sup>17</sup> According to Serano’s definitions, a “*transsexual*” is “anyone who is currently, or is working toward, living as a member of the sex other than the one they were assigned at birth, regardless of what procedures they may have had” (Serrano 2016, 31). Transgender people, by contrast, are defined by Serano as people who identify and/or live as a different gender from the one assigned to them at birth (ibid., 12). As she (ibid., 28) makes clear, not all transgender people are transsexual, though arguably all transexual people are transgender (since a person who has had their sex altered against their will is not a transexual on Serano’s definition).

<sup>18</sup> See *More than half of transgender and nonbinary youth have seriously considered suicide — The Trevor Project National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health 2020* URL:

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2020/>; and

<https://www.suicideinfo.ca/resource/transgender-people-suicide/>. **Previous is the URL** Almost half (48 per cent) of trans people in Britain have attempted suicide at least once; 84 per cent have thought about it. More than half (55 per cent) have been diagnosed with depression at some point.

*Trans Mental Health Study 2012* (sample size = 889): [https://www.scottishtrans.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/trans\\_mh\\_study.pdf](https://www.scottishtrans.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/trans_mh_study.pdf) (~~Trans Mental Health Survey 2012~~ **References** . A

2018 survey by the Human Rights Campaign shows more than half of transgender male teens report attempting suicide in their lifetime, while 29.9 percent of transgender female teens said they attempted suicide. Among non-binary youth, 41.8 percent of respondents stated that they had attempted suicide at some point in their lives; <https://www.hrc.org/blog/new-study-reveals-shocking-rates-of-attempted-suicide-among-trans-adolescen>.

<sup>19</sup> Removal of both breasts and reconstruction of the chest to a male shape.

<sup>20</sup> Wittgenstein uses other metaphors for this certainty – notably that of a “hinge” which must stay put if the door is to turn (OC, §341; §343) – but we prefer to use the bedrock image in this chapter.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Wittgenstein (OC, §655). For a more detailed discussion of the nature of these “bedrock” certainties, see Moyal-Sharrock (2007).

<sup>22</sup> *Personal* bedrock certainties are part of the taxonomy of bedrock certainties suggested by Moyal-Sharrock (2007): they are complemented by *universal*, *local* and *linguistic* certainties.

<sup>23</sup> Note that though they can be formulated into sentences for philosophical discussion, our bedrock certainties are, as such, animal; they are enacted, not propositional, certainties.

<sup>24</sup> For a more elaborate discussion on the dissolution of some bedrock certainties, see Moyal-Sharrock (2007, 145-7).

<sup>25</sup> And, as Oliver Sacks (1985, Chapter 5) explains, the “certainty” of having a body.

<sup>26</sup> We typically take people’s declarations seriously *by default*, questioning them only in cases where there is reasonable suspicion. Anyone can lie about anything. People pretend to have migraines to get out of obligations or fake their CVs with claims that are often very hard to falsify or verify. No one is suggesting we stop using resumes because some people fake theirs. It is discriminatory to bring up arguments of deception in order to stop a particular practice, but not others. Being trans is not reasonable suspicion. To have trust in other analogous areas but not where trans people are concerned is plain bigotry (See Moyal-Sharrock & Sandis [Forthcoming]).

<sup>27</sup> At the very least, uncertainty about one’s gender is in itself sufficient for not *identifying* as cisgender.

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<sup>28</sup> Morris's employment of the term "transsexual", more prevalent at the time she was writing, also refers to transgender people.

<sup>29</sup> We provide testimony from endocrinologists and other scientists in Moyal-Sharrock & Sandis (2023).

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