

An Externalist Dispositionalist Theory of Transgender Identity: A Metaphysical Approach

By Bruno dos Santos Queiroz*

This paper defends an externalist dispositionalist theory of transgender identity within the metaphysics of gender. According to this theory, transgender identity occurs when there is a dissonance between biological sex, understood as primary and secondary sexual characteristics, and gender, conceived as a set of relatively stable dispositions objectively identifiable through their external expression. Gender, like sexual orientation, appears to have a neurobiological basis, shaped in part by prenatal hormones influencing fetal neural development. While gender and sex formation is multifactorial, current scientific evidence highlights intrauterine neurodevelopment as a key determinant of both gender identity and sexual orientation. This paper distinguishes gender identity from sexual orientation and gender expression, situating them within a dispositionalist externalist framework. Three main arguments are presented: neurobiological, psychological-dispositional, and enactivist-ontological. Objections from queer constructivism, performativity theory, phenomenology, and biological reductionism are discussed and addressed. The paper concludes that gender is an objectively real, dispositional, and relational phenomenon that emerges from the interaction between biology, psychology, and the environment, supporting a nuanced understanding of transgender identity.

Keywords: *Transgender Identity; Gender Metaphysics; Dispositionalism; Externalism; Gender Identity.*

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to defend an externalist dispositionalist theory of transgender identity within the metaphysics of gender. This theory maintains that transgender identity arises when there is a dissonance between biological sex, conceived as primary and secondary sexual characteristic, and gender, conceived as a set of relatively stable psychological dispositions that are objectively identifiable through their external expression. This paper utilizes the term 'transgender identity' to refer to a strictly metaphysical, non-pathologizing psychophysical condition, prioritizing contemporary terminology while maintaining a focus on objective dispositional structures.

Gender, much like sexual orientation, appears to have a neurobiological basis, particularly shaped by prenatal hormonal influences on fetal neural development. While the emergence of both gender and sex is multifactorial, current empirical evidence indicates that intrauterine neurodevelopment constitutes a primary determinant for the formation of gender identity and sexual orientation.

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Despite the growing scholarly attention to gender, conceptual errors remain common in public and academic discussions. Sexual orientation is often mischaracterized as a mere “tendency” or “inclination” (Roberts, 2022), an account that is contradicted by phenomenological experience, which reveals sexual orientation as constitutive of personal identity. Similarly, transgender identity is frequently reduced to a subjective feeling or a personal preference (Roberts, 2016), overlooking its stable, natural, and constitutive nature.

This paper argues for a clear distinction among three core components of human identity: sexual orientation, gender expression, and gender identity, each with specific ontological and psychological features, as well as systematic interrelations. To classify transgender identity as a 'feeling' or 'preference' is a metaphysical category error. Just as it is incorrect to call a physical property like 'solubility' a 'feeling' of the substance, it is incorrect to call a constitutive psychophysical disposition a 'subjective state'.

Contemporary philosophical inquiry seeks non-essentialist frameworks to account for the full spectrum of lived experience while addressing political and social implications (Daves, 2021). A significant challenge in this field involves articulating the relationship between biological reality and social understanding (Wallerstein, 2022). Historically, definitions of gender were based on visible anatomical features, though modern perspectives acknowledge that gender identity may not align with the sex assigned at birth (Horniczak, 2024).

This study situates itself within an interdisciplinary, it emphasizes that a robust account of transgender identity must be built upon three integrated argumentative axes: (i) the *Neurobiological Axis*, which identifies the intrauterine and hormonal bedrocks of identity (Swaab et al., 2022); (ii) the *Psychological-Dispositional Axis*, which frames identity as an intrinsic, stable power rather than a transient state (O’Laocha, 2024); (iii) the *Enactivist-Ontological Axis*, which accounts for the embodied and relational "givenness" of the self (Daves, 2021).

Roadmap

The objective of this paper is to defend the externalist dispositionalist framework as a robust account of transgender identity. The investigation follows a clearly structured logic. *Section: Methodology* establishes the methodological framework through a systematic taxonomical analysis of the research corpus from 2021 to 2025. It justifies the selection of contemporary texts as primary data for mapping the current philosophical “pressure points” that necessitate a new theoretical approach.

Section: Discussion constitutes the core theoretical engagement and is organized into five movements. In *Basic Definitions*, essential terminology is clarified to prevent categorical errors and establish the conceptual pillars of the study. In *Hypothesis*, the central thesis is introduced framing gender identity as an objective psychophysical reality. *Problems with Other Approaches*, systematically outlines the philosophical shortcomings of rival positions, including Internalism, Fictionalism, and other forms of Non-Dispositionalist Externalism. In *A Proposed Solution*, the

preceding arguments are synthesized to present the positive case for Externalist Dispositionalism. *Defensive Synthesis*, solidifies the argument by anticipating and responding to objections from queer constructivism, performativity theory, phenomenology, and biological reductionism. Finally, *Section: Conclusion and Outlook* summarizes the findings and discusses the broader implications of the externalist dispositionalist framework for future research in gender studies.

Methodology

This paper adopts a theoretical-analytical methodology aimed at defending an externalist dispositionalist theory of transgender identity. While engaging with contemporary literature, the review functions instrumentally, providing both empirical and conceptual support for the arguments rather than constituting the primary focus. The objective is to construct a coherent and rigorously structured defense of the thesis, integrating insights from neurobiology, psychology, philosophy of gender, and related disciplines.

The methodology of this study is grounded in a systematic taxonomical analysis of current philosophical discourse. The research corpus is comprised of a targeted selection of academic monographs and peer-reviewed articles published between 2021 and 2025. This specific timeframe was chosen to capture the most recent 'externalist turn' in gender philosophy. The method involves identifying recurring ontological themes and categorizing them according to their foundational premises. By treating these texts as a primary data set, the study moves beyond a descriptive literature review to provide a rigorous mapping of the theoretical 'pressure points' that necessitate an externalist dispositionalist approach.

These sources were chosen for their relevance to key aspects of gender identity, sexual orientation, and the neurobiological and dispositional bases of gender expression. The preliminary bibliography was refined through inspectional reading (Adler & Van Doren, 2010), identifying works that most directly contribute to the development of the theoretical framework. Detailed notes and summaries were produced for these texts, emphasizing arguments, definitions, and evidence that illuminate the structure and stability of transgender identity.

The analytical reading followed the three-stage approach outlined by Adler and Van Doren (2010). In the first stage, each work was surveyed to identify central questions, thematic structures, and conceptual problems addressed by the author. The second stage involved interpreting the ideas in light of the thesis, extracting relevant propositions, key arguments, and empirical evidence. The third stage consisted of critical evaluation, assessing points of agreement and disagreement between authors, as well as gaps, limitations, or inconsistencies in the literature.

A syntopic reading was also conducted to integrate these works into a cohesive argument. This involved establishing common terminology, formulating guiding questions for the thesis, and mapping areas of convergence and divergence within the literature. Such integration allows the literature to function as an instrumental tool, supporting the theoretical defense rather than determining the research outcomes. Following the reading, interpretation, critical judgment, and syntopic articulation,

the materials were compiled in the form of summaries, which serve as the foundational basis for drafting the discussion.

In constructing the thesis of this paper, arguments were selected to support the hypothesis to be defended (that gender can be correctly explained according to an externalist dispositionalist approach), while also addressing potential objections. The presentation of arguments adheres to the rules outlined by Weston (1996), which involve distinguishing premises from conclusions, using clear, precise, and unbiased language, and avoiding logical fallacies.

In addition to logical rigor, the writing of this paper prioritizes coherence, clarity, conciseness, and precision. Coherence ensures that the text is intelligible and free of confusing or obscure phrasing. Clarity ensures that ideas are communicated accurately and accessibly, avoiding ambiguity, vagueness, or indeterminacy. Conciseness organizes information objectively and efficiently, while precision involves distinguishing between what must be explicitly stated for clarity and what can be reasonably inferred from what is already presented (Martinich, 2002).

This paper aligns with the concerns of analytic philosophy, emphasizing careful analysis of theses and positions. A primary methodological concern is the clear definition of concepts, which is addressed in the first part through the establishment of a taxonomy that will be used throughout the text. Even if readers disagree with certain definitions or classificatory choices, explicitly stating how terms are used prevents confusion and reduces disputes arising from semantic differences rather than substantive disagreement.

The syntopic reading process was particularly crucial for reconciling the 'biophysiological variance' found in neuroscience with the 'dispositional stability' required for a metaphysical theory of identity. By mapping areas of convergence, such as the enactivist understanding of the mind, I was able to construct a framework where neurobiological data does not dictate identity but serves as a constitutive element of a broader psychophysical disposition. This methodological approach ensures that the resulting theory is not a mere hybrid of existing views, but a distinct, analytically rigorous defense of externalist dispositionism.

Discussion

Basic Definitions

It is common in discussions of sex and gender to commit categorical errors, which occur when a phenomenon is incorrectly classified, thereby obscuring its ontological depth. For instance, some have described sexual orientation as a mere "tendency" or "inclination" (Roberts, 2022). However, phenomenological evidence from the analyzed corpus demonstrates that this characterization is inaccurate. As Bettcher (2014) argues that gender identity is experienced not as a transient whim but as a constitutive dimension of the self that shapes desires, social relationships, and daily decisions. It means that identity should be understood as an intrinsic cluster of properties defining the subject's relational architecture, remaining a stable potentiality even when not actively manifested in behavior.

First-person accounts reflect this embeddedness, aligning with the dispositionalist and causal perspective associated with Anjum (2023), where identity functions as a stable psychophysical structure rather than a superficial tendency. Empirical and systematic reviews, such as those by Frigerio, Ballerini, and Valdés Hernández (2021), further demonstrate that these orientations are grounded in durable structural and functional brain differences. Even authors who challenge certain gender ideologies, such as Stock (2021), acknowledge the "givenness" and reality of these orientations as grounded structures. Accordingly, categorizing these identities as mere "inclinations" constitutes a categorical error that overlooks both lived experience and the robust evidence provided by the contemporary researchers cited in this study.

Similarly, traditionalists often speak of transgender identity as if it were a subjective feeling (Roberts, 2016). They say, "No one is a woman just because they feel like one." This is incorrect: gender is not a feeling. Gender is a natural, constitutive, and relatively unchangeable identity of a person's way of being. Again, this is attested not only by the phenomenological experience of transgender people but also by the first-person phenomenological experience of all cisgender people regarding their own gender.

To provide phenomenological evidence to the contrary, one may look to the experience of 'structural friction' described in trans philosophy (Bettcher, 2014; Daves, 2021). Unlike a mere inclination, which suggests a transient desire, the 'givenness' of gender identity manifests as a durable psychophysical bedrock. For instance, just as a native language remains a stable cognitive disposition even when the subject is silent (O'Laocha, 2024), gender identity persists as an objective reality that precedes and resists social performance.

Therefore, we can distinguish two constitutive elements of any person's identity: (i) *their sexual orientation*: related to the psychological dispositions a person has regarding whether their sexual attraction is connected to a particular gender expression. (ii) *their gender identity*: the fact that a person naturally possesses, as part of their dispositional psychological constitution, the identity of "man," "woman," or, if they do not fully fit into either of these two identities, "non-binary."

Sexual orientations are more connected to gender expression than to gender identity. Gender expression refers to the gender a person appears to be when presenting themselves, generally interpreted objectively by observers. Dissonance can exist between gender expression and gender identity, not only among transgender people but also among cisgender people, for example, when a cis man is mistaken for a woman because he has long hair.

Sexual orientations are as follows: (i) *heterosexuality*: when the individual's sexual attraction is exclusively or almost exclusively toward individuals with a gender expression opposite to their gender identity; (ii) *homosexuality*: when the individual's sexual attraction is exclusively or almost exclusively toward individuals with a gender expression matching their gender identity; (iii) *bisexuality/pansexuality*: when the individual's sexual attraction is not exclusive to a specific gender expression; (iv) *asexuality*: when a person does not feel sexual attraction or only experiences it in romantic contexts (*demisexuality*).

Gender expressions, in turn, are threefold: (i) masculine; (ii) feminine; (iii) androgynous. Likewise, gender identities, as mentioned, are also threefold: (i) man;

(ii) woman; (iii) non-binary. Biological sex can also be categorized in three ways: (i) male; (ii) female; (iii) intersex. The natural diversity of human sexuality allows for a wide variety of combinations among these categories. There is no natural norm dictating that biological sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, and gender expression must align. Furthermore, no combination of these types is more “normal” or “pathological”; rather, they are normal expressions of the natural diversity of human sexuality.

To explain the breadth of human sexual and gender diversity, various competing theses have been proposed. I offer the following taxonomy to categorize these positions. This taxonomy was developed in light of the selection of texts published between 2021 and 2025, representing the most recent shift in the philosophical landscape.

(1) Internalism: Gender is primarily an internal reality, centered on consciousness, experience, and subjective self-perception.

(1.1) *Simple Internalism:* Gender is defined by a person’s actual psychological state of self-identification (cf. Eickers, 2025; Horniczak, 2024).

(1.2) *Ideal Internalism:* Gender is defined by the psychological state of self-identification a person would have under ideal conditions of self-knowledge, coherence, and complete information (cf. Daves, 2021).

(2) Externalism: Gender is ontologically dependent on external factors not reducible to a person’s self-consciousness, whether biological, normative, social, or dispositional.

(2.1) *Genetic-biological externalism:* Gender is identical to biological sex, determined by genetic or gonadal characteristics (cf. Stock, 2021).

(2.2) *Neurobiological externalism:* Gender is determined by brain configuration and neuroendocrine patterns, not by genitals or chromosomes (cf. Swaab et al., 2021; Swaab et al., 2022; Frigerio et al., 2021; Watson, 2022).

(2.3) *Naturalistic family-resemblance externalism:* Gender is a natural category not distinct from disjunctive-type sex, constituted by a chain of partial similarities among biological, hormonal, anatomical, behavioral, and psychological properties (cf. Carter, 2022).

(2.4) *Normative externalism:* Gender is the social role a person must perform according to their biological sex, defined by moral norms (cf. Miki, 2022).

(2.5) *Social externalism:* Gender is a socially constructed reality, constituted by practices, institutions, and norms structuring public recognition of someone as a man, woman, or another gender (cf. Stumpp, 2024).

(2.6) *Dispositionist externalism:* Gender consists of a set of relatively stable psychological dispositions, with a neurobiological basis and observable behavioral expression (cf. O’Laocha, 2024).

(3) Fictionalism: Gender is not a real property but a symbolic or linguistic construction without objective ontological correspondence.

(3.1) *Performative fictionalism*: Gender is a performativity characterized by the stylized repetition of acts producing the appearance of a gender essence (cf. Stock, 2021).

(3.2) *Eliminativist fictionalism*: Gender does not exist as an ontological category and should be abolished as a descriptive concept of human reality (cf. Gheaus, 2023)

It is interesting to note that those who follow positions (2.2) and (2.3) believe that the gender of a truly transgender person is the gender with which they correctly identify; that is, a trans woman is biologically a trans woman, or the biological sex of a trans woman is female. Curiously, positions (2.1), (2.2), (2.3), and (3.1) deny the distinction between sex and gender, either by considering both a biological reality and both a fiction.

Hypothesis

The central hypothesis of this research is grounded in the externalist dispositionalist perspective (2.6). While this framework utilizes the concept of "psychological dispositions," it remains distinct from internalist subjectivism for two primary reasons. First, these dispositions are not understood as inaccessible mental states, but as structures that can be objectively identified through their manifestation in the subject's life-world. Second, this model adopts an enactivist understanding of the mind, viewing cognition as "extended" and relational rather than "private" or "internal." Therefore, I define gender identity as a relational cluster of dispositional properties. To provide a concrete example: just as 'fragility' is a dispositional property of glass that manifests only when struck, gender identity is a stable psychophysical structure that manifests through the organism's interaction with the social environment. It is not a hidden 'feeling,' but a latent orientation that becomes visible through conduct.

Under this enactivist conception, transgender identity is defined as an extended process: the specific, recursive manner in which an organism interacts with its social and physical environment. Consequently, the "truth" of gender is not located within a "private internal theater" of the mind; rather, it emerges from the relational coherence between brain, mind, and conduct. Furthermore, I contend that position (2.3), provided it maintains a rigorous sex/gender distinction, remains conceptually compatible with the externalist dispositionalism defended here.

Transgender identity is, in my view, a stable, natural, and constitutive psychophysical dispositional structure. It is not a subjective state of self-identification, but an objective way of being-in-the-world where the individual's neurobiological and psychological dispositions align with a gender category different from their sex assigned at birth. Because gender is dispositional rather than emotional, it possesses predictive constancy. It manifests as a set of relatively stable behavioral and relational patterns that are objectively identifiable to outside observers, much like other natural psychological dispositions such as personality or sexual orientation.

While position (2.3) provides a valuable non-binary framework through its 'cluster' approach to natural categories, it risks over-emphasizing anatomical fluidity at the expense of identity stability. By situating these naturalistic clusters within an

externalist dispositionist framework (2.6), we can view the various biological and behavioral traits not merely as a checklist for 'participation' in a gender, but as the objective, observable manifestations of a persistent psychophysical disposition. In this sense, a trans woman does not 'become' more of a woman as she acquires more feminine cluster-traits; rather, her stable dispositional identity is what renders those traits and her engagement with them ontologically intelligible.

Problems with other approaches

After establishing the externalist dispositionist framework, this section evaluates rival theories to show why they fail to account for the objective givenness of gender identity. The discussion proceeds through three cases: (i) Internalism, which reduces identity to a private mental state and struggles to explain the durable character of the self; (ii) Fictionalism, which treats gender categories as useful fictions and overlooks their material and neurobiological substrates; and (iii) Non-Dispositionalist Externalism, which acknowledges social reality but lacks a metaphysics of dispositionality,

(i) The Problems of Internalism

Internalism, as formulated in contemporary literature, maintains that gender is, above all, an internal reality rooted in consciousness, subjective experience, and the individual's reflective self-perception (Horniczak, 2024). In its simplest formulation, so-called *Simple Internalism*, gender is defined by the subject's actual psychological state of self-identification, that is, by how they recognize and understand themselves (Horniczak, 2024). This perspective conceives gender identity as the deeply felt internal experience each person possesses, which may or may not coincide with the sex assigned at birth (Coleman et al., 2022). In this view, identity is understood as a conscious mental construction that provides the subject with a sense of biographical continuity and narrative coherence (Lemma, 2023).

The defense of internalism rests fundamentally on the principle of First-Person Authority (FPA), according to which each individual holds an epistemic privilege over his or her own gender identity (Eickers, 2025). Following this line, authors such as Talia Mae Bettcher (2014) argue that self-declaration should be treated as the best and ultimate indicator of belonging to a gender category, functioning as a normative criterion of identification for the individual (Horniczak, 2024). The strength of this authority is twofold: ethical-political, because it safeguards the person's autonomy and privacy, and epistemic, because it recognizes that the subject has privileged access to their own mental states (Horniczak, 2024). Thus, when communicating aspects of their mental life, including their gender identity, the person publicly claims a primary authority that validates their self-definition as adequate for social circulation (Eickers, 2025).

Moreover, internalism finds methodological support in phenomenology, whose emphasis on lived experience offers a starting point that epistemically legitimates subjective reports (Daves, 2021). From this perspective, transgender experiences and identities are taken as valid from the outset, without the need for external mediation or verification. Gender identity, thus understood, acquires the status of an

“existential identity,” expressive of the values, commitments, and reasons for action that the agent deems fundamental (Mullin, 2025). Decisional autonomy, central both to ethics and to contemporary political claims, seems to reinforce the internalist conception, allowing self-declaration to suffice on its own without requiring external validation (Horniczak, 2024).

However, despite its ethical and subjective robustness, Simple Internalism faces significant philosophical criticisms. The first points to its circular structure: by defining identity solely in reference to subjective states, the theory fails to provide substantive informational content (Horniczak, 2024). To claim that being a man is identifying as a man does not clarify what “being a man” means; it merely shifts the problem.

A second objection arises from the tension between epistemology and metaphysics. Knowing a feeling does not amount to knowing a gender identity, since subjective states can be mistaken, irrational, or unrepresentative of the ontological reality they purport to express (Watson, 2022). Thus, even first-person testimony would not be epistemically decisive if it implies robust metaphysical claims about the nature of gender (Watson, 2022).

To expand on the nature of these dispositions, we must distinguish them from mere 'propositional attitudes' or 'transient moods.' Within an externalist framework, a gender disposition functions as a robust psychological 'habit of being' that organizes the subject's cognitive and affective life. This structure is not 'hidden' in a private theater of the mind; rather, it becomes visible through its consistent expression in the world. By framing gender as a stable dispositional state, we account for the ontological depth reported in trans experiences while maintaining an objective criterion for identification that moves beyond simple, unmediated self-declaration.

Added to this is the contextualist critique, according to which the intelligibility of identities is always intersubjective and situated. Although FPA prioritizes self-declaration, such authority operates within specific normative and linguistic frameworks, meaning that the very interpretation of self-definition must remain coherent with the context in which it is formulated. Historically, internalism also preserves problematic remnants of the so-called “wrong-body model,” which presupposes a fixed and dominant meaning of “sex” and thereby reproduces norms it intended to subvert. This model contributes to processes of *reality enforcement*, through which trans people are treated as deceptive when their gender presentation contradicts the supposed “bodily reality” (Daves, 2021). Such logic not only sustains forms of transphobia but also creates internal hierarchies, as when individuals who have undergone gender-affirming surgeries claim a more “authentic” identity than those who have not.

In clinical contexts, internalism further produces a double-bind problem. Relying on subjective reports for diagnosis and access to medical care may pressure trans individuals to tailor their narratives to professional expectations, risking being deemed fraudulent if they describe experiences considered atypical (Daves, 2021). Finally, an exclusive dependence on subjective self-determination fails to account for cases involving persons with severe cognitive limitations, who lack an articulated self-perception but nonetheless require social recognition and classification (Barnes, 2022).

In light of these criticisms, some authors defend an *ideal internalism*, which seeks to overcome such limitations by asserting that the relevant self-identification

is the one formed under ideal conditions of procedural rationality and adequate access to information. However, this reformulation remains insufficient. From an informational standpoint, to say that “being a man is identifying as a man under ideal conditions of rationality and information” still fails to provide substantive content to the meaning of “being a man.” Moreover, there is a deeper problem: ideal internalism appears self-undermining. If, for a person to be correct in identifying as a man, they must be in appropriate epistemic conditions, this implies that there exists a criterion for what being a man means that is not simply self-identification. Otherwise, it would make no sense to claim that better informational access brings the individual closer to a more accurate understanding of their identity. Thus, in attempting to refine Simple Internalism, Ideal Internalism ends up implicitly acknowledging a parameter external to subjectivity, which, paradoxically, undermines internalism itself.

(ii) The Problems of Fictionalism

The fictionalist approach treats gender as a fiction, either an illusion produced by a stylized repetition of performative acts (performative fictionalism) or a category that ought to be eliminated altogether (eliminativist fictionalism). Performative fictionalism, rooted in Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, argues that the stylized repetition of acts creates the appearance of a gender essence, though this essence is merely an imitation without an origin. While this approach aims to expose the artificiality of gender constructions, performance is still judged according to its cultural intelligibility. This demand for coherence imposes a fundamental limit on the subject: if a performance is deemed “unthinkable,” it is excluded from recognition. For transgender subjects, this criterion can be oppressive, as it implies something close to the idea that “passing” is a prerequisite for being trans and for obtaining recognition,

The idea that gender is related to a stylized repetition of performative acts appears to conflate gender identity with gender expression. A person’s manner of acting concerns the behavioral dimension through which they express their gender identity, and cannot be confused with gender identity itself. Furthermore, the rejection of substantial ontology seems to be a radical background assumption of performative fictionalism, which appears to fall into a reductionism that collapses the human being into their behaviors, akin to behaviorist or Sartrean approaches. This view seems incompatible with the notion that every action is the action of a being; philosophically, it is unintelligible to speak of an act without speaking of the agent who performs it.

Eliminativist fictionalism, in turn, suggests that gender concepts should be abolished. While it seeks to free individuals from restrictive gender roles, this view introduces philosophical and practical problems concerning political effectiveness and the reality of subjective experience. If gender concepts were abolished, it would become unclear how feminism could meaningfully do justice to the way transgender people understand their own gender identities. The concept of gender identity, even if fictional or constructed, is often necessary to explain why misgendering constitutes serious harm and why institutions sometimes require identity declarations (Gheaus, 2023). Because identity is an objective psychophysical reality, misgendering is not just a social slight but a failure to recognize a person's ontological reality.

Some have suggested replacing gender with terms such as “sexual dysphoria” or “aspirational gender roles,” but this approach risks reducing trans *gendered* experience to trans *sexual* experience, failing to explain trans people who are comfortable with their sexed bodies and do not wish to modify them (Gheaus, 2023). Moreover, many trans individuals maintain that their self-understanding is not merely a superficial cultural product but reflects a deep ontological reality of who they are (Watson, 2022). In this way, fictionalism seems to contradict the substantiality of the phenomenological first-person experience transgender people have of themselves.

Furthermore, gender is so fundamental that perceiving others as “women” or “men” is practically unavoidable (Gheaus, 2023). Gender functions as a metaphysical unifier of our social identities (Miki, 2022); purging it from perception would be nearly impossible. There is also the “concern of desirability”: without some criterion for who counts as a woman, the feminist movement risks losing coherence (Gheaus, 2023).

Trans-exclusionary theorists such as Kathleen Stock (2021), who adopt a form of eliminativist fictionalism when they claim that internal identity is a “fiction,” use this to argue that refusing to affirm someone’s identity is not hateful; they frame the refusal to use a preferred pronoun as a matter of individual autonomy or conscience. However, this ignores the “severe harms” that result from refusing to respect someone’s gender identity. Non-affirmation of gender identity has been linked to significant psychological harms, such as anxiety and depression, showing that refusing to engage with the “fiction” has devastating real-world consequences (Mulch, 2023).

(iii) The Problems of Non-Dispositionalist Externalism

Non-Dispositionalist Externalism encompasses theories that define gender based on objective external factors, whether biological, normative, or social, without primarily grounding it in neuropsychological dispositions (O’Laocha, 2024). This perspective ranges from classical forms of essentialism to naturalistic cluster models, normative role theories, and some social-constructionist approaches (Stumpp, 2024). A central critique of these extreme formulations is that they tend to be philosophically mono-causal, prioritizing a single explanatory factor, whether biological or social, and failing to capture the complexity inherent in human sex and gender experiences (O’Laocha, 2024). Naturalistic family-resemblance externalism represents an exception to this limitation, as it considers individuals across a set of diverse factors, albeit with some biological emphasis.

Genetic-biological externalism holds that gender is identical to biological sex, determined exclusively by binary and immutable properties, such as chromosomal composition or gonadal structure. However, this model lacks nuance and is contradicted by biological reality, as it fails to account for the diversity of ways in which individuals can be born with varied combinations of sex determinants. An example of this complexity is individuals with Complete Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (CAIS), who possess XY chromosomes but identify and live as women (Stock, 2021). By imposing an inflexible binary model, this essentialist approach oversimplifies scientific reality and exposes individuals to significant social and psychological harm, relying on biological conceptions that are now scientifically outdated (O’Laocha, 2024).

Similarly, neurobiological externalism attempts to ground gender identity in objective patterns of the brain and the neuroendocrine system (Swaab et al., 2021; Frigerio et al., 2021; Watson, 2022). Although preliminary research suggests neurobiological differences associated with gender identity, current scientific knowledge allows for correlation but not causation (Horniczak, 2024). It remains uncertain whether these brain differences are the cause of gender identity or the result of hormonal interventions, rendering the explanation insufficient to establish an objective and universal definition of gender.

Normative externalism, in contrast, conceives gender as a prescriptive social role derived from biological sex and regulated by moral norms (Miki, 2022). Conservatives who acknowledge the distinction between sex and gender but view transgender identity as a moral problem adopt this perspective, for instance. According to this view, male individuals should perform the gender “man” and female individuals the gender “woman” so that any deviation, as in the case of transgender people, would be morally wrong. This approach falls into the common ethical fallacy of attempting to derive moral prescriptions from natural states. It also relies on *sui generis* gender norms that classify individuals into only two gender roles based on perceived sexual characteristics without providing rational justification independent of religious or metaphysical beliefs (Gheaus, 2023). Beyond being epistemologically problematic, this approach perpetuates inequality and restricts individuals’ freedom to develop their abilities and pursue a full life, compromising the safety and opportunities of both women and men (Ryan, 2025).

Social externalism, on the other hand, posits that gender is a socially constructed reality defined entirely by the practices, institutions, and norms that structure public recognition (Stumpp, 2024). However, this conception ignores the significance of the body and neglects experiences of gender dysphoria, in which individuals experience intense distress regarding their biological conditions (O’Laocha, 2024). By externalizing internal suffering as a problem of social perception, the model fails to provide an adequate foundation for addressing bioethical issues related to medical interventions. Furthermore, by reducing gender to a social construct, absurd consequences may arise, such as the possibility that a person’s gender could change according to societal or geographic context (Espinosa, 2024).

Finally, externalism based on naturalistic cluster models defines sex and gender as natural categories constituted by chains of partial similarities among biological, anatomical, and psychological characteristics (cf. Carter, 2022). Inspired by Wittgensteinian approaches, this model allows a person to participate more or less in a given sex or gender depending on how many cluster characteristics they possess. Hormonal and anatomical transformations can increase or decrease participation in a given gender over time. Despite offering greater flexibility, this model faces two main difficulties: it does not fully capture the intuition that biological sex and gender are distinct, nor the intuition that gender tends to be relatively fixed and stable. On the other hand, this approach is not entirely incompatible with dispositionalist externalism and can, in fact, be incorporated within it.

A Proposed Solution: Externalist Dispositionalist Theory

The central thesis of this paper is that gender identity is not a monolithic internal state, but a multidimensional construct emerging at the intersection of these three axes:

- (i) *The Neurobiological Axis*: This represents the physiological and neurological substrates that provide the "material potential" for identity.
- (ii) *The Psychology-Dispositional Axis*: As the core of the dispositionalist approach, identity is understood here as a set of dispositions that manifest under specific conditions, rather than a fleeting or purely subjective "feeling."
- (iii) *The Ontological-Enactivist Axis*: Drawing from enactivism, this axis posits that identity is "brought forth" or enacted through the subject's interaction with their environment.

I begin with the idea that there is a real distinction between sex and gender, while maintaining that these two instances influence each other, especially considering that sex evolves over the species' evolutionary process and gender has a neurobiological basis. Therefore, the distinction between biological sex and gender identity is the starting point. Sex corresponds to biological characteristics, chromosomes, genitals, hormones, and secondary sexual characteristics, while gender refers to the set of psychological, behavioral, and relational dispositions that structure the way a subject engages with the world. Thus, a trans woman is not a "man who feels like a woman," but a person whose dispositional system, both psychological and neurobiological, aligns with the female gender.

Regarding the *neurobiological axis*, the neurobiological literature on gender identity provides substantial evidence of correlations between brain structure and gender identity, while also expressing caution regarding claims of causation and the notion of rigidly "male" or "female" brains. Research indicates that aspects of the hypothalamus and other neuroendocrine structures exhibit patterns associated with gender identity, supporting the externalist view that gender has an objective basis in the configuration of the brain and body (O'Laoha, 2024; Horniczak, 2024; Swaab et al., 2021; Frigerio et al., 2021). Case studies further suggest that gender identity can be innate and stable, exemplified by individuals whose internal sense of gender conflicts with the sex assigned at birth, indicating the existence of a physical basis, such as a genetic or neurobiological predisposition, for knowing one's own gender (Watson, 2022; Daves, 2021).

Moreover, prenatal development and intrauterine hormonal factors appear to play a significant role in shaping gender identity, providing a relatively stable foundation that goes beyond mere subjective perception or social construction (Horniczak, 2024; Pilgrim, 2021). The multifactorial perspective rejects monocausal and simplistic explanations, recognizing that gender identity results from the complex interaction among chromosomes, internal and external genitalia, hormones, secondary sexual characteristics, as well as social and cultural factors (O'Laoha, 2024; Daves, 2021). This approach allows for understanding that an individual's experience of gender can simultaneously involve biological and social elements, consistent with the lived

experience of transgender individuals who integrate both internal feelings and social norms and expectations in the construction of their identity (Daves, 2021).

However, I do not commit to the thesis that there is such a thing as a “male brain” or “female brain.” My perspective on the mind rejects cerebrality (the thesis that the mind’s basis is only the brain) and adopts an enactivist extended notion of the mind. Moreover, I do not believe that gender can be reduced simply to brain states, nor that the neurobiological basis is the sole determinant of gender. Gender is determined in a complex multifactorial manner that prevents simplistic talk of a “male brain” or “female brain”. Gender is thus not 'located' in a 'male' or 'female' brain; it is an emergent, relational way of being-in-the-world that integrates biological variance with psychological and social interaction.

My second point of argument is the *psychological-dispositional axis*. From a psychological point of view, gender identity manifests as a set of stable dispositions that organize subjective experience and practical conduct. These dispositions include ways of perceiving the body, expressing oneself, behaving, and relating socially. While internalized and subjectively experienced, they are objectively identifiable, meaning they can be recognized intersubjectively from the coherence and persistence of patterns of behavior and self-expression.

Gender identity, therefore, is not an ephemeral feeling (“today I feel like a man, tomorrow a woman”) but a continuous dispositional structure defining the person’s way of being. Thus, gender is psychological but not subjectivist; it is dispositional and embodied. This aligns with: (i) our intuitions that gender is not something someone merely “feels” they are; (ii) the phenomenological experience, both cis and trans, of gender as an inherent, natural, and relatively unchangeable psychological identity; (iii) the recognition that truly transsexual people exist in the world whose gender does not correspond to their biological sex.

My third point is the *ontological-enactivist axis*. From an ontological perspective, dispositionist externalism rejects both psychological internalism and reductionist biologicism. Under an enactivist conception, the mind is not a private, isolated entity but an extended and embodied process: the way the organism interacts with the world, expressing itself bodily and socially.

From this perspective, gender is neither a mental idea nor a mere social convention but a form of psychophysical organization of human experience, a specific way of inhabiting the body and the world. Gender dispositions are real because they are actualized in observable practices, emotions, and behaviors that express coherence among brain, mind, and conduct. Therefore, gender is ontologically relational and objectively real, emerging from the articulation between body (biology), mind (psychology), and environment (expression and social interaction). This position avoids both biological reductionism, which confuses gender with sex, and performative subjectivism, which dissolves it into mere language or fiction.

If the set of dispositions that constitutes gender is understood as objective and stable, my view is compatible with a form of Aristotelian essentialism regarding gender. Aristotelian essentialist perspectives maintain that certain core characteristics essences define the nature of entities and unify their observable properties. Applied to gender, this approach suggests that gender functions as an essential trait that organizes and gives coherence to the social identity of individuals. In other words,

gender is not merely a superficial label or a collection of external roles, but a central dimension that constitutes the social agent one is; without it, an individual cannot fully exist as a coherent member of society (Miki, 2022).

My view has also some advantages over other views. In the literature, extreme positions of crude biological essentialism and crude social constructivism are often seen as philosophically limited and practically harmful (O’Laocha, 2024). I share this view. Phenomenological approaches offer an alternative: they suggest that gender and sex should be understood as aspects of a person’s contextual identity. For instance, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the sexual schema emphasizes the body’s intrinsic ambiguity, which allows for a non-essentialist understanding of sexuality. This framework can help make sense of the diverse experiences of trans people, highlighting the legitimacy of identities that do not fit into strict binary categories (Daves, 2021).

Empirical research also supports non-binary perspectives. The Multidimensional Variance Paradigm (MVP) model of sex highlights bio-physiological variation among individuals (Ellis & Reilly-Dixon, 2024). Evidence from cross-sex hormone therapy shows that the human endocrine system is plastic, challenging the idea that sex is fixed at birth (Ellis & Reilly-Dixon, 2024). Further, biological sex involves multiple factors beyond genital anatomy, such as neuroendocrine patterns, indicating that sex is never purely binary (Cooke, 2022). Dispositionalist accounts of gender consider this complexity, particularly in cases involving intersex traits or Gender Dysphoria, emphasizing the human and contextual aspects of gender (Anjum, 2023).

Answers for Possible Criticism or Questions from other Approaches

Below, I respond to some objections that could be raised from different perspectives against my view:

(1) **Queer Constructivist Objection:** Gender cannot be understood as a natural or neuropsychological fact because social practices, languages, and recognition norms constitute it. Gender identity, according to this line (Butler, Haslanger, Ásta), is inseparable from the symbolic and institutional structures that make it intelligible. Therefore, saying that gender is a “psychophysical disposition” ignores the constitutive role of culture and power in shaping modes of feeling and self-perception as male or female.

Response: The dispositionalist position does not deny that gender is socially recognized, nor that social factors are among those that determine gender. Our psychological dispositions are in reciprocal constitutive correlation with social factors, and this is not ignored in my perspective.

(2) **Performativity Objection:** Judith Butler’s queer theory shows that gender is a performativity, i.e., a set of repeated acts producing the appearance of a gender essence. Thus, what externalist dispositionalism calls the “dispositional core” is, in fact, an appearance resulting from reiterated performativity of action and language.

Response: Reducing gender to mere performativity does not do justice to its ontological reality. Performativity correctly describes how gender is expressed but not its ontological origin. Performative acts express preexisting dispositions: they

are manifestations of the psychophysical structure constituting gender identity. Therefore, dispositionalism can incorporate performativity as a phenomenological level of expression without reducing gender to performance. Thus, performativity theory is correct if conceived as a theory of expression, not of gender identity.

(3) **Phenomenological Objection:** A phenomenological perspective (Prosser, Salamon) would assert that gender is a structure of being-in-the-world (Heidegger), and reducing it to observable or neurobiological dispositions eliminates the existential aspect of trans identity, the embodied “being-in-the-world.”

Response: Externalist dispositionalism is compatible with phenomenology, provided an enactivist understanding of the mind is adopted: dispositions are not hidden brain entities but modes of engagement with the world manifested in experience. Recognizing gender as dispositional does not deny its phenomenological lived experience but grounds it in a psychophysical structure explaining its stability and coherence over time. Therefore, a phenomenological-existential theory of gender can be compatible, depending on its formulation, with my view.

(4) **Self-Knowledge Objection:** Dispositionalist theory might seem to undermine a trans person’s self-understanding: if gender is something that can be externally and objectively identified, not merely felt, then self-declaration loses legitimacy.

Response: Dispositionalism does not replace self-identification but ontologically justifies it. That dispositions can be objectively identified does not imply independence from consciousness, but that they are real both in first- and third-person perspectives. Thus, self-declaration is valid because it expresses a real dispositional state, which can also be analyzed neuropsychologically. *Prima facie*, we should accept a person’s self-declared gender. My theory, however, allows explaining that people can misidentify their own gender or whether they are transsexual. Therefore, although, my theory allows for the possibility of misidentification, it strongly supports self-declaration as the most reliable first-person evidence of an underlying stable disposition.

(5) **Biologist Objection:** Reducing gender to psychological and cerebral dispositions is incoherent, since the biological aspect is sex, not gender. If gender has a brain basis, it would merely be a dimension of biological sex. Therefore, transsexuality would be a form of dysfunction, not a legitimate gender category. It is argued that a man is an adult human male and a woman is an adult human female, and policies should ultimately reflect these metaphysical truths about biological sex (Stock, 2021; Joyce, 2021)

Response: Dispositionalism rejects the identification of biology with genitivity. The relevant biological basis for gender is not genetic code or sexual organs, but the neuroendocrine configuration organizing behavior and identity. Gender, therefore, has a biological basis but is not reducible to anatomical sex. Moreover, my perspective, in admitting that gender determination is multifactorial, does not treat the neurobiological basis deterministically. The idea that transsexuality (or transgender identity) is a biological dysfunction is a legacy of outdated biology, contrary to the best available biological and psychological science.

(6) **Epistemological Objection:** There are no sufficiently clear empirical criteria for identifying gender dispositions. Talking about “stable psychophysical dispositions” seems metaphysical or vague, as neurobiological evidence is correlational, not causal.

Response: All ontological theories in the human sciences work with degrees of dispositional inference (as in theories of personality, emotion, or sexual orientation). The fact that correlations are not universally deterministic does not invalidate the ontological class, it only indicates that gender is a multifactorial probabilistic phenomenon, not a simple essence. Dispositionalism thus assumes moderate realism: there is a complex underlying psychophysical structure, recognizable through behavioral and neuropsychological constancy.

Conclusion and Outlook

Transgender identity, when understood through an externalist dispositionalist framework, emerges as a stable and objective psychophysical reality, rather than a mere subjective feeling or social construct. By integrating neurobiological, psychological-dispositional, and enactivist-ontological perspectives, this approach demonstrates that gender identity is grounded in observable dispositions that are relationally expressed in behavior, cognition, and social interaction. While social, cultural, and normative factors shape the expression and recognition of gender, these factors complement rather than replace the underlying dispositional structure.

Just as a robust understanding of biochemical mechanisms is necessary for interpreting psychedelic experiences, a rigorous analysis of the dispositional and neurobiological bases of gender identity is essential to avoid mischaracterizations and metaphysical errors. Recognizing the objective reality of gender dispositions does not negate personal experience or social recognition; rather, it provides a coherent framework in which subjective experiences, social norms, and neurobiological evidence can be meaningfully integrated.

This perspective encourages interdisciplinary dialogue between philosophy, neuroscience, psychology, and social theory, offering a nuanced and scientifically informed understanding of transgender identity. By situating dispositionalist externalism at the intersection of objective reality and lived experience, we advance both conceptual clarity and practical insight for ethical, social, and medical considerations. Adopting an externalist dispositionalist framework carries significant ethical weight. If transgender identity is an objective psychophysical reality, then social recognition and legal status are not mere matters of courtesy but of ontological justice. Misgendering, in this view, constitutes a serious harm because it denies the stable, natural dispositions that constitute the subject's way of being. Furthermore, while this theory allows for empirical inquiry into the neurobiological basis of gender, it reinforces the First-Person Authority of the individual as the primary epistemic witness to their own stable dispositional states.

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