

National Geographic's "Gender Revolution": Bad Argument and Biased Ideology

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by Andrew T. Walker and Denny Burk within *Sexuality*

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The January 2017 issue of *National Geographic* is dedicated to exploring what it calls the “[Gender Revolution](#)”—a post-Sexual Revolution movement that seeks to deconstruct traditional understandings about human embodiment, male-female sexual dimorphism, and gender. In an article titled “Rethinking Gender,” Robin Marantz Henig cites evolving gender norms as a justification for the Gender Revolution. But Henig’s argument is not only unpersuasive, it’s also based on a radical proposal about human nature that is at odds with both natural law and biblical anthropology.

The purpose of this essay is not to address every facet of gender that Henig explores. Rather, our goal is to address some of the more glaring errors in the piece. Many of the criticisms below apply not only to Henig’s article, but to the broader philosophical problems inherent within the transgender movement.

Gender Identity, Category Confusion, and Moral Inconsistency

First (and most problematic): Henig offers no substantive argument for why one’s internal, self-perception of his or her “gender identity” ought to determine one’s gender or have authority greater than one’s biological sex. The essay offers testimonies of people who say that their gender identity is at odds with their biological sex. But testimony is not sufficient. Asserting a claim does not demonstrate the authenticity of that claim. Readers are given no explanation for why we ought to regard the claims of one’s gender identity as *reality* rather than a subjective feeling or self-perception.

Indeed, this is the crux of the matter that plagues the transgender movement. It is based not on evidence, but on the ideology of expressive individualism—the idea that one’s identity is self-determined, that one should live out that identity, and that everyone else must respect and affirm that identity, no matter what it is. Expressive individualism requires no moral argument or empirical justification for its claims, no matter how absurd or controverted they may be. Transgenderism is not a scientific discovery but a prior ideological commitment about the pliability of gender.

Secondly, Henig commits a fallacy of composition by linking intersex conditions with transgenderism. These are very different categories. “Intersex” is a term that describes a range of conditions affecting the development of the human reproductive system. These “[disorders of sex development](#)” result in atypical reproductive anatomy. Some intersex persons are born with “ambiguous genitalia,” which make sex determination at birth very difficult.

It is precisely on this point that intersexuality is very different from transgenderism. Those who identify as transgender are not dealing with ambiguity concerning their biological sex. Transgenderism refers to the variety of ways that some people feel that their gender identity is out of sync with their biological sex. Thus, transgender identities are built on the assumption that biological sex is known and clear.

Intersexuality and transgenderism are apples and oranges, but you would not know that from reading Henig’s article. Those who are pushing the gender revolution have an interest in confusing the categories. They feel that if it can be shown that biological sex is a spectrum rather than a binary, then they can undermine gender essentialism. But intersex conditions do not disprove the sexual binary. They are deviations from the binary norm, not the establishment of a new norm. Thus, the physiological experience of intersexuality is in a different category from the psychological constructs of gender dysphoria and transgenderism. Henig problematically links these categories so as to blur gender identity and medical abnormality into one umbrella category.

Along these same lines, Henig cites one study that links gender nonconformity with autism. Whatever conclusion this study purports to establish, it does not validate a supposed transgender identity. At most, it might establish a correlation between gender nonconformity and autism, but not a causation, nor a corroboration of transgender ideology. Again, to accept wholesale that someone's gender identity is at odds with his or her biological sex is nothing more than ideology without any verification or empirical data to support such a claim. It is metaphysically impossible to verify the claim that one's professed gender identity confirms a more accurate understanding of one's gender than one's biological sex.

The final page of Henig's article celebrates the mutilation of minor children with a full-page picture of a shirtless 17-year old girl who recently underwent a double mastectomy in order to "transition" to being a boy. Why do transgender ideologues consider it harmful to attempt to change such a child's mind but consider it progress to display her bare, mutilated chest for a cover story? Transgender ideologues like Henig never address this ethical contradiction at the heart of their paradigm. Why is it acceptable to surgically alter a child's body to match his sense of self but bigoted to try to change his sense of self to match his body? If it is wrong to attempt to change a child's gender identity (because it is fixed and meddling with it is harmful), then [why is it morally acceptable](#) to alter something as fixed as the reproductive anatomy of a minor? The moral inconsistency here is plain.

Weak Science and Contradictory Claims

Third, the article obliquely references "Brain Sex Theory" to support the broader conclusion that expansive gender identities are immutable, objective, and an authentic expression of a person's true gender. Henig rightly acknowledges the shortcomings of Brain Sex Theory, but still, in the end, fails to offer any suspicion of the legitimacy of transgender claims in light of the inconclusiveness of scientific studies on this question.

This is why her argument is ultimately unpersuasive and problematic: there is no scientific consensus on what causes transgenderism. Brain-sex theories are hypotheses, but Henig writes as though the revolution we're now encountering is sound and deserves unquestioned affirmation. Were Henig to admit the lack of certainty around transgenderism, it would unravel the certainty upon which the article (and the entire issue) is based. Henig fails to address her own assumptions and admit that the categories described in the article are based on theory, not fact.

Fourth, beyond Henig's feature article, *National Geographic's* coverage is bedeviled by contradictory, incoherent claims. For example, the section titled "Helping Families Talk about Gender" counsels: "Understand that gender identity and sexual orientation cannot be changed, but the way people identify their gender identity and sexual orientation may change over time as they discover more about themselves." The first half of this sentence asserts the immutability of gender identity, but the second half of the sentence claims that people's self-awareness of such things can change over time. But is there not a contradiction here once we define our terms? Gender identity is not an objective category but a subjective one. It is how one perceives his or her own sense of maleness or femaleness ([Yarhouse, pp. 16-17](#)). If that perception is fixed and immutable (as the first half of the sentence asserts), then it is incoherent to say that one's self-perception can change over time (as the second half of the sentence asserts). One's self-perception can either change or not. It can't be both. This is a baffling contradiction contained within a single sentence, but that seems lost on the author.

Moreover, the claim that transgender identities are equally as fixed and unchanging as sexual orientation is simply not supported by any kind of scientific consensus. According to [an important report](#) published by Lawrence Mayer and Paul McHugh in *The New Atlantis*, "There is also little evidence that gender identity issues have a high rate of persistence in children." In fact, about [80 percent](#) of children who experience transgender feelings completely resolve their difficulties without any intervention after they reach puberty. To say that transgender identities are fixed and unchanging is simply inaccurate.

What Does Justice Really Require?

Fifth, the entire issue frames the "Gender Revolution" as the next frontier of social justice. This seems extraordinarily short-sighted given the accelerated pace at which the gender revolution has come to America. But

let's reframe elements of the discussion that are omitted from Henig's article and the overall issue:

- *Why should society accept a theory of gender that has so little historical adjudication?*
- *Why not ask probing questions about whether certain milieus are the cause for such newfound experiences in human history?*
- *Why not explore the politicized elements of transgenderism that are backed by an aggressive LGBT movement?*
- *Why omit the contested history behind this movement—that understandings of gender confusion as a pathology to be relieved rather than a norm to be embraced, common until the recent past, are now stigmatized if not erased from history?*
- *Why the rush to accept the claim that someone is a member of the opposite sex or possesses no gender at all?*
- *Why does justice require accepting a regime of medicine that mutilates functioning body parts all in the name of gender identity?*

Henig fails to acknowledge any dissenting voices who question the validity of transgender identities. Her article—and the magazine as a whole—takes for granted the idea that compassion and justice are mediated *only* through accepting the controversial theories contained therein. We reject this.

Finally, the article fails to address the conclusions that follow from its premises. In one caption, we read:

Henry was assigned male at birth but considers himself “gender creative.” He expresses himself through his singular fashion sense. His parents have enrolled him in the Bay Area Rainbow Day Camp, where he can find the vocabulary to explain his feelings. At six years old, he is already very sure of who he is.

This caption is unbridled radicalism. No six-year-old is sure of who he is. Radical [non-judgmental affirmation](#) is not a healthy approach for parents or a workable governing strategy for society. Are parents really supposed to suspend all form of judgment and bow to the fleeting whims of children? Does this extend to all subjects?

At one point, Henig describes an individual who is searching for an identity that “feels right.” This is frighteningly subjective and subject to endless self-reinterpretation. What “feels right” for one person offers no pathway to what *is* right. It is also an example of why the gender revolution consists of “broken cisterns that can hold no water” (Jer. 2:13). As one [viral video](#) illustrates, taking the language of “identity” and “identify” alongside “gender” leads to frivolous and ridiculous claims that in our conscience we know to be false. And indeed, that’s what is most problematic about this article: accepting the claims contained in it requires papering over the conscience. It requires making a mockery of the “law written on the heart” that our bodies bear witness to in our complementary design. As this article demonstrates, there are no boundaries to the sexual and gender revolution; only the wake of human carnage that results from suppressing the truth.

Henig makes a surprising and startling admission near the end of her essay: “Biology has a habit of declaring itself eventually.” On this, Henig is right. Humanity cannot escape the limits inscribed upon it. It is impossible to transgress biological boundaries stamped on human nature without the basic categories of human existence unraveling. If the *National Geographic* story tells anything, it tells of a society going down a path of self-willed experimentation that will

lead to misery and a denial of human telos. In truth, this movement born of effete academics and progressive mythology is nothing more than dressed-up barbarism.

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