

NEWS & OPINIONS

As D.E.I. Challenges Rage in the U.S., Can The 'Ontological Turn' Help Us Better Understand Differences in Intersex and Transgender Lives? Inhabiting the 'Ontological Penumbra' as a Christian Medical Anthropologist¹

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“Certainty is the great enemy of unity. Certainty is the deadly enemy of tolerance.”

*From film “Conclave” (2024).
Address by the Dean of the College of Cardinals
upon sequestration of the Conclave.²*

Introduction

In the United States, the recent and peaceful transition of democratic power has also ushered in an

unprecedented number of Executive Orders (EOs) by the new administration,³ edicts which usher in a time of significant change. Two EOs especially affect both the status of persons in American society as well as ontologies of being, since these seek to eliminate historic diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts and redefine what the government now recognizes as “legal,” or “real,” regarding sex and gender.⁴ Such edictal moves and redefinitions carry broad political, sociocultural, medical, and personal implications. The EOs also effectively remove established and historic guardrails for protected classes of persons.⁵

¹ Merz and Merz (2017).

² Masthead quote from film *Conclave* (2024), manuscript written by Peter Straughan, who adapted its script from the novel of the same name by Robert Harris (*Conclave—A Novel*. Vintage 2017).

³ EOs are presidential directives—edictal in nature—and orders the government to take specific actions. Such usually mean ensuring implementation of a certain rule or declaring a new policy priority. They cannot override federal laws or statutes, which are the responsibility of Congress to enact or dismiss. At the present time they are, however, being implemented despite many overriding congressional/constitutional rules, and thus are being challenged in courts country-wide.

⁴ Both EOs were directives signed the day after the U.S. presidential inauguration (January 20, 2025). These were titled, “*Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing*,” and “*Defending Women From Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government*.”

⁵ In the U.S., federal law has so far protected individuals from discrimination or harassment based on nine “protected classes”: sex (including sexual orientation and gender identity), race/color, age, disability, national origin, religion/creed, and genetic information. Many state laws take their cue against harassment and discrimination based on these classes, and up till now, so have

I use the current sociopolitical climate as a foil in situating and critiquing implicit and explicit government assumptions made, especially about sex and gender. I then use ethnographic histories from two subjects that do not fit the given sex/gender binary to give a sense to the reader of the empirical phenomena being questioned by the administration. As a medical anthropologist who specializes in sexuality and gender, I argue here for a better anthropological—and indeed Christian anthropological—understanding of how *intersex* (persons born with DSD) and persons diagnosed with *gender dysphoria* challenge implicit assumptions these EOs make about natural ontologies of sex and gender. My ethnographic and clinical experiences with intersex and transgender lives provide factual contexts by which central arguments in this piece are elucidated.

At the same time, I recognize and differentiate cultural change processes which have recently, and more generally challenged natural ontologies of being. In earlier work (Gil 2021; 2022; 2023(a)(b); 2025) I have attempted to distinguish what is clearly a *political ideology of expressive individualism, a social movement of self-identification*, from ontologies of body and self among DSD and persons with gender dysphoria. These distinctions I keep in view as I discuss the changes being made to the understanding of persons, sexes, and gender by new government edicts.⁶

I propose subject individuals mentioned do not view themselves or their world via natural ontologies of being and thus, in fact, ultimately embody *intuitive ontologies* (cf. Boyer and Barrett 2015). Such are implicit understandings not shared by a majority, and differ in how body-concepts, self-identity, and navigating the world are perceived, organized, and experienced. I understand these intuitive ontologies are first used by subjects to structure an embodied self-knowledge vs the knowledges of “others” unlike them;⁷

and following, structure decision-making on how to self-present and navigate the normed world.

This opinion piece thus suggests it is centrally important to *understand embodiment* as a means of comprehending ontological premises which develop in these populations (cf. Barnes, 2019). Intuitive ontologies were often dismissed prior to the “gender moment” (Gil 2021); now, this administration’s EO’s *legally* dismisses them. Such individuals are left fitting only into normed, legal binary categories, or (again) not be recognized.

In his autoethnography, anthropologist Jamie Barnes (2019) suggests we “take seriously” different ontologies of selfhood, the “different worlds” persons often inhabit and describe; recognize our normed limitations on adequately understanding them in order to avoid premature ontological closure (cf. Jordan 1997). This is a difficult task in itself, since we must be able to also generate *détente*.

For certain, there are differences between intersex persons and persons with historic gender dysphoria, and I do not “same” them here. Yet both groups exhibit similarities in ways and means of arriving at intuitive ontologies, understanding their embodiment, and understanding “others.” Their means become demonstrations of very particular forms of “embodied worldings.” (Barnes 2016, 38). Thus, my aim in presenting and deconstructing their stories in brief, below, is to bring forth processes used to arrive at intuitive ontologies. Ultimately, the goal is to demonstrate how different embodiments can contradict the generalizations government EOs have brought forward.

Applying conceptual and theoretical notions from the ‘ontological turn’ can help anthropologists embrace the ambiguity of different “worldings.” Such a ‘place to inhabit’ is the “ontological penumbra” (Merz & Merz 2017), a space in which, while not all is solvable or understood, provides deferral of critique (Bessire and Bond 2014), opens up alterity, and gives

many employer policies. The EOs disband decades of work promoting diversity, promoting equity at sundry levels, and inclusion of all persons without prejudice.

⁶ The “why” and “what” of these edicts is implicit in their explanations. But such also reveal significant flaws in both scientific facts related to becoming human and being human, as well as to their objectivity and fairness.

⁷ Here, I underscore Jamie Barnes’ argument that “a focus on embodiment is essential in understanding the formation of ontological assumptions, and . . . that researchers have ethical responsibilities to practice an ‘ontological reflexivity’ that goes beyond the conceptual of recent ontological work. Indeed, this thorny and engaging issue of dealing with alterity stretches back to the foundations of the discipline” (Barnes 2019, 24-25).

opportunity for one to comprehend others' lives by way of their lived realities.⁸ It also places anthropologists and social scientists in a better position to recognize and unpack human diversity despite political challenges against such. Rather than a certainty which cements position-taking, we can learn to live with and respect ambiguity, uncertainty, and others' lived experiences. For Christian anthropologists in particular, a penumbral landing place also helps us embrace largesse in the meaning of *imago Dei*.

Anthropology's Ties to DEI

Anthropology as a complex discipline has historically contributed to understanding human behavior, values, beliefs, and social institutions created in the process of living and surviving together. In fact, one of the greatest assets of anthropological methodology/holistic approaches is to comprehend the *insider's perspective*, which can then expose the lived realities and experiences of others in their own words and terms.

Moreover, anthropologists have themselves confronted inherent biases in their field, inclusive of questioning theories and methodologies (Clifford and Marcus 2010; Zenker 2014), shifts which opened up consideration of differing ontological "realities," different ways of persons "being" and understanding the world—in effect ushering in a controversial, but important "ontological turn" that now sits along with traditional theories of culture, relativism, self, and

society (Vivieros de Castro 2015). Anthropological insights have been used to understand differing socializations, bring to light preconceived notions of the "other"—ethnocentrism, biases, and privileges—all of which have become necessary and first-step understandings when engaging diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts (Hermeking 2022)⁹.¹⁰ Our training and field experiences allow us to point out forms of inequities, discrimination, micro-aggression, unconscious biases, all which directly impact diversity outreach.

My subdiscipline, medical anthropology, significantly contributes to understanding health and disease differences among groups. Cultural data are integral to addressing how health disparities affect different groups and how such knowledge helps combat diseases.

Since the 1960's, medical and biological anthropologists have also studied human sexuality in depth and on par with biologists, neuroscientists, psychologists, and medical sexologists. (Herdt 1981; 1996; Williams 1986; Nanda 1990; Guttman 1996; Fausto-Sterling 2000). More recently, Christian anthropologists like myself have engaged "the gender moment" (Gil 2021; 2023; 2025; Paris 2011, DeFranza 2015), moving into research domains that explore gender, diversity, and sexual change (Kessler 1998; Preves 2003; Karkazis 2008; Villain 2010; Davis 2015). We are engaged in debates on definitions of gender, of identity; in understanding the roots of novel sex/gender performances and their ideologies. We seek to unpack

⁸ From Merz & Merz (2017, 2): "The ontological penumbra is a space where the self and the other, ignorance and certainty . . . meet, overlap, and intertwine. It is a reflexive space of dialogue, encounter and engagement, which is also marked by ambiguity and plurality, as well as creativity and productivity where "the other" . . . needs to be recognized as our counterparts. We suggest that by occupying the ontological penumbra with our whole being, we are then well positioned to contribute towards the formation of a post-secular anthropology."

⁹ I am quick to acknowledge here the current ruckus regarding DEI that preceded EO14151, which I examine below. After George Floyd's murder in 2020, DEI's rise was meteoric, America dramatically declaring its commitment to social justice through protests and attempts at racial reconciliation. Initiatives—corporate and governmental—surged to correct inequities, in the process making DEI a corporate and social mantra. The shorthand made something very complex a prerogative for quick fixes. However, DEI as mantra did not allow time nor incentivization to grapple with the deep, systemic changes that true equity requires. By 2024 politicians and religious conservatives against critical race theory were mounting a backlash against DEI, dropping "equity" from "frameworks," opting for the more neutral "inclusion" label. Ultimately, DEI became a "woke" endeavor, and religionists urged the faithful to follow biblical precepts rather than man-made ones. DEI ultimately became weaponized politically, religiously nefarious, causing chilling effects on organizations and companies that might otherwise have embraced equity practices. The stage was set for the new administration's EO to ban DEI.

¹⁰ For example, see Blue Monarch Group, which is a company formed by anthropologists to specifically work with organizations and corporations. <https://bluemonarchgroup.com>. Adapting DEI strategies to the local context is best illustrated by Armand (2021).

their distinctions from, and connections to biological sex, all while keeping open scientific understandings of human biology, gender essentialism, psychological dynamics, cultural ideology, and culture change.

Thus our government's doing away with the tenets of DEI will compromise anthropological contributions to overall equity and inclusion; but also health equity, health as a human right, and the legal status of sex-variant persons in our social system. Ultimately, it strips the possibility that academics and researchers would continue exploration of lived realities without having to worry about legal restrictions, or limitations brought on by social constructions of persons in the present moment.

I turn to examining two recent EOs that significantly impact personal-social-legal premises, and our work.

Two Executive Orders (EOs) in Particular

Executive Order (EO) 14151: "Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing."

(Quotes are from the EO and *italicized*.)¹¹

It's necessary to discuss EO 14151 since it foregrounds issues which this edition of the *OKH Journal* has as its focus, migration and immigration; and which also apply to the subsequent EO explored here that legally redefines sex and gender. I will discuss 14151 briefly, then focus on EO 14168 thereafter.

EO 14151 guts nearly all U.S. affirmative action history. The ensuing absence of programs and means to promote affirmative action generated by this EO will

move the culture clock back to before the Civil Rights Act of 1964, through which—among other items—it *outlawed* discrimination in employment based on race, religion, sex, color, or natural origin.¹² These actions are now seen as "*dangerous, demeaning, and immoral race and sex-based preferences...*"

This EO returns us to the days when people of color, women, and other marginalized groups such as immigrants lacked the means and tools by which to ensure these were treated fairly and evaluated on their merits. Such moves also significantly impact educational outcomes by withholding Federal program funding for justice-impacted children and adults. Many of these are immigrants' children—now 'collateral damage'—regardless of whether the children were born in the U.S. or elsewhere.

Separately, but as part of dismantling DEI initiatives thought to be "*engineering race and gender into every aspect of public life,*" directives issued were also aimed at removing transgender military, cutting off medical supportive services to transgender and intersex persons via government programs, and removing from government data documents with any traces of nomenclature or content that do not align with the EO's understanding of persons. Research and data produced by government grants that differed in nomenclature of persons from the now edictal are already disappearing from government websites.¹³

For academic research anthropologists, the future under this EO is certainly less tenable: funding from a variety of federal agencies is no longer available for work that 'misaligns' in any way with the government's ideology or its new definitions of persons (many being

¹¹ In the words of the EO, "*Critical and influential institutions of American society . . . have adopted and actively use dangerous, demeaning, and immoral race and sex-based preferences under the guise of so-called 'diversity, equity, and inclusion.'*" "*The public release of these plans demonstrated immense public waste and shameful discrimination. That ends today. This administration resists any efforts to socially engineer race and gender into every aspect of public and private life.*"

¹² President Biden continued Johnson's legacy with an executive order of his own titled "Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce," which worked to promote "equal opportunity" and also defined each of the terms for federal use. Pew Research Center polls (May 12, 2023) found that the majority of U.S. adults (56%) favored increasing DEI at work, and that DEI is "a good thing." See <https://pewresearch.org/diversity-equity-inclusion-in-the-workplace>.

¹³ As I write this at the beginning of February, 2025, newspaper headlines are reading such as "CDC Scrubs Data on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity" (Corryn Purtill and Karen Kaplan, *Los Angeles Times* February 1, 2025). On my subsequently searching the CDC website, I indeed found that HIV research databases, and pages upon pages of vital, historical medical information have disappeared. There is now a graveyard of dead links, many of which had been active days or hours before. This appears as only the beginning of the 'purge.'

unprotected minorities); or with demographic groups historically highlighted in DEI work.¹⁴

But the larger challenge comes with the following EO:

Executive Order (EO) 14168: “Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government.”
(Quotes are from the EO and italicized.)

My comments here begin with a critique of the definitional—then proceeds to the EO’s implications. As stated earlier, this EO overlaps significantly with EO 14151 given the targeted groups, which until recently have been protected classes. Most severely, this EO redefines what *legally* constitutes *sex* and *gender* in the U.S., without, however, a shred of bio-socio-cultural data given to validate government definitions. The argument behind the change is premised on the protection of women’s rights and “*freedom of conscience.*”

The Baseline

This EO’s definitions erase the lives of those born with DSD (disorders of sexual development), commonly known as *intersex persons*, since there is no room for them in a binary model. Currently, that’s

about 5,799,476 persons (or 1.7% of the 2025 population) in the U.S. alone,¹⁵ and a sexual category which has been historically recognized in biomedicine as well as many ethnomedical systems cross-culturally.¹⁶ These individuals not only exist, but have wrestled for their acknowledgement and inclusion of their voices in determinants of what constitutes the “sex” of a person.¹⁷ As anthropologists, we are witness to those myriad forms of natal genetic intersex expressions—historically and cross-culturally documented—which do not readily fit into a binary schema. (Perhaps we should introduce ‘Guevedoces’ to the presiding U.S. administration.)¹⁸

The Definitions Themselves

One can ponder why these lack established medical and lexical terms to define *men*, *women*; but instead, use terms and vocabulary best suited for fourth graders:¹⁹ “*Female[s]*” are defined as “*those that produce the large reproductive cell*”; and “*Male[s]*” as “*those that produce the small reproductive cell.*”

The material as stated is ripe for late-night television ridicule. It is, however, important to underscore that there *are* established biological terms for reproductive cells that define and separate these: such are, of course, “*ova*” produced by women, and

¹⁴ As an example, I’ve received several grants from the University of California Systems to study HIV among Latinas in the U.S., regardless of their legal status. These grants were enabled via funding from the NIH to study HIV in minority populations (including immigrant groups) and funneled through the UCs as initiatives for research. Studying such populations via federal grant funds is now severely in question since immigrants are considered *personae non gratae*; and as well, *because HIV is intimately tied to LGBTQ+ populations*, now scorned by the current administration.

¹⁵ U.S. Census Bureau (2025), “Estimates of Intersex (DSD) Born Persons in the United States.” U.S. Bureau of the Census, December 30, 2024. <https://www.census.gov/2024/stories>.

¹⁶ See Gil (2021).

¹⁷ See Dreger (1998); Fausto-Sterling (2000); Vilorio (2017). There are organizations like OII (Organization Intersex International) that advocate and promote intersex persons’ rights, promote their inclusion in discussions on sex and gender.

¹⁸ *Guevedoces* are persons with an intersex variation that causes them to appear first as females in form at birth, but at puberty develop male genitalia. The condition is caused by a deficiency in the enzyme 5- α -reductase as a fetus, which prevents the body from producing, initially, dihydrotestosterone (DHT), a male sex hormone. This hormone *does* get activated and is produced at puberty, morphing the once “female” organs into male ones. See Imperato-McGinley, Julianne; Guerrero, et al. (1974).

¹⁹ See the language differential as compared to other former presidents: <https://www.newsweek.com/trump-fire-and-fury-smart-genius-obama-774169>.

“sperm” produced by men.²⁰ No chromosomal references at all are given in the EO.²¹

“Sex” is defined as “*the individual’s immutable biological classification as either a male or a female.*” Again, this “*immutable*” binary definition omits inclusion of XYY, XXX, XXY, and XO persons—all deemed in medicine as *mutated* intersex expressions.²² For fact-checkers: Section 3 of this EO reads that “*women are biologically distinct from men*”; and developmentally this is *eventually* true, yet the statement has a significant omission: Without exemption, both men and women *start out as bipotential*, meaning we are *not* biologically so distinct from the beginning regardless of our chromosomal make-up.²³ We share an identical ‘genital bud’ as well as bipotential parts—*two sets*—which then in utero develop differently, *potentiate or vestigate* to make a man *or* a woman. (The process is “*differentiation.*”) There are significant and identical traits in both males and females, as well as every fetus getting the necessary and baseline “X” chromosome.

“Defending Women”

The EO’s suggestion is that American women need

to be “*defended*” from gender ideology of the “*extreme*” type (never defined outright but suggested as that which challenges normed female formats). The EO supposes all women are “*at risk*”—particularly of trans-women allegedly taking their places—toilets, identities—ready to dislodge natal women from all female spaces.²⁴ The wording suggests that males with gender dysphoria who transition (i.e., become trans-women), “*fundamentally attack women by depriving them of their dignity, safety, and well-being.*”

I’m not at all sure how a Laverne Cox or Caitlyn Jenner “*fundamentally attack*” the average American woman. I’m also not sure the average American woman cares to pay much attention *to* Laverne *or* Caitlyn . . . although, natal women have gone on record favoring trans’ protection from discrimination.²⁵ And it is a fact that *those that are most afraid* when needing use of women’s spaces such as bathrooms are *trans women*, given the social vitriol often expressed to them if recognized as trans.²⁶

We do know *gender dysphoria* is a psychiatrically diagnosable identity disturbance, and thus classified as such in the DSM 5-TR.²⁷ While there is continued controversy about treatments and whether sex/gender transitions ease the dysphoria (Gil 2021), the one

²⁰ Now accuracy counts here. Most of us in the sciences use genetic markers “X” or “Y” to define gametes (their chromosomal pairing or trisomy), and use “O” for a gamete absence. Such nomenclature in biomedicine/genetics generally ‘defines’ what is chromosomally male, chromosomally female, or what may present as gonadal dysgenesis.

²¹ The “*large-or-small reproductive cell[s]*” alluded to in the EO come later in the human life-course, when our bodies are capable of *maturing* (in the case of females), or *producing* (in males) reproductive cells—processes normally engaged during puberty.

²² Some mutated intersex variations in humans are: Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS), Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia (CAH), Klinefelter Syndrome, Turner Syndrome, Ovotesticular Syndrome, Clitoromegaly, Gonadal Dysgenesis, Hypospadias, Aromatase Deficiency, and Mixed Gonadal Dysgenesis; all of which involve sex chromosomes, gonads, or internal/external genitalia alterations that don’t fit typical male or female classifications. There are over 30 observed intersex variations among humans with DSD.

²³ Let’s be clear here that the fetus first develops as bipotential, ‘We are “both” before we become “either.” It is hormone action guided by the genetics that creates *differentiation*. Thus, we are more biologically similar than distinct. For a good review of the *biological-essentialist* position that men and women are different ‘kinds’, see Saguy and Joel (2021). Also see Fine (2011).

²⁴ Curiously, this argument sounds a lot like those put forth by lesbian groups regarding the ‘take-over’ of what is a *woman*, what is *female*, negating the social recognition of trans-women as women. See Burt (2022). See also Worthen (2022).

²⁵ Pew Research Center (2022). “America’s Complex Views on Gender Identity and Transgender Issues.” June 28. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2022/06/28/americans-complex-views-on-gender-identity-and-transgender-issues/>.

²⁶ For an emotional autoethnography of a trans woman’s experience with women’s bathrooms, see Bellot (2016).

²⁷ American Psychiatric Association (2013). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.

certainty here is such medical options and real-life data have resulted in extensive social controversies and set the stage for global, political, religious, and ideological polarizations on the topic.²⁸

Ideological Responses and Legal Definitions

Of most interest then is this EO's effort to correct "*gender ideology extremism*" via government's issuance of a dictum that there are only "*two genders*" and (as stated earlier) "*two sexes*."²⁹ I certainly understand the not-so-civil war ushered in by gender ideology in this epoch of the "gender revolution," but government imposing a dictum on "legal" gender and sex definitions without corroborating scientific facts for stances it takes only aggravates already contested situations.³⁰

Cultural ideologies, narratives, ontologies and epistemologies about males and females; about

masculinities and femininities, sexuality, gender identity, are ongoing conversations and cognates in every culture system.³¹ What is being pushed in this EO is not just prescriptive; it is a dictum by government for *how a person can be legally classified* via determined definitions. (For understanding its implications, and limits on how government can parse identity, see this footnote.³²)

This EO is a political response to liberal gender ideologies which emerged during the "gender moment" (Gil 2000-2017+). I note my repeated efforts in print to *distinguish* how the "gender moment" split into two ideological factions, and what this splitting now entails.³³ What follows is a quick but necessary recap of this split before I discuss the lived experience of DSD and gender dysphoric persons; what their intuitive ontologies may be telling us.

²⁸ Gil (2021), chapters 3, 4, 7, 8.

²⁹ In the interest of culture histories gathered by anthropologists, historians, and other social scientists, let's underscore the reality that many cultures world-wide include "third gender" persons (broadly stated here for expediency). As well, many culture groups, inclusive of historical Rabbinical Judaism have acknowledged and included varied sex/gender identities beyond the binary, such as the Judaic *aylonit, saris, tumtum, and androgynos* (Gil 2021, 78).

³⁰ The EO decries any gender identity ideology that does not align with the new government's views. It not only challenges without hesitation, but by edict will not tolerate a differing viewpoint in any of its government departments or employees. The federal government now interviews position-seekers and asks openly who they voted for, and whether their views align with the current administration's. See editorial, "Want a Job in the Trump Administration? Be Prepared for the Loyalty Test," *New York Times*, December 4, 2024.

³¹ See Best and Puzio (2019).

³² My central concern here is this EO's effect on the status of persons and the government's intentionality to legally redefine persons regardless of personal autonomy as constitutionally enshrined. See Ruocco (2016). Ruocco is quoted here, as are others, to clarify constitutional guarantees: "The antitotalitarian principle [in the Constitution] respects 'the balance which our Nation, built upon postulates of respect for the liberty of the individual, has struck between that liberty and the demands of organized society'" (citing *Poe v. Ullman*, 367 U.S. 497, 542 [1961] Harlan, J., dissenting) (195). Thus, "there is not an unlimited, unburdened right to define oneself. Rather, the antitotalitarian principle prevents the state from *taking over*, or *taking advantage* of, those processes by which individuals are defined" (citing Dean Spade, *Documenting Gender*, 59 *Hastings, L.J.*, 731-753, 2008, 195). "[Regardless] the government affirmatively produces identity and conformity by documenting and enforcing 'legal' sex categories, as when a baby is born and assigned a sex of birth via chromosomal and genital appearance and recorded on a birth certificate" (196). This identity affects how the individual navigates sex-segregated facilities, legal documentation, gendered expectations, and interactions with state and nonstate entities. For most people, this assigned legal sex will raise little to no concern because most people identify with their assigned legal sex and ensuing gender identity. Nevertheless, "the proper focus of constitutional inquiry is the group for whom the law is *a restriction*, not the group for whom the law is *irrelevant*" (196).

³³ Readers who are not familiar with my work, please know I have researched and written extensively on gender, sex, and identity, and *do separate* what may be *social contagion, culture-bound syndromes of gender identity and nonconformity* from factual gender dysphoria and DSD; distinctions that the EO does not in the least make. See Gil (2021) and other publications, book reviews, in earlier editions of this very journal (2023; 2024; 2025).

The Split

One side gives voice to those seeing binary sex categories as hegemonic—as socioculturally, psychologically, and personally stifling and discriminatory (cf. Butler 1991–2006 and generally, genderqueer theory). These voices became the ‘gender *identity* movement’ and molted quickly into one advocating individuated sex/gender self-identification—*with, or without dysphoria*.³⁴ Identity is seen as a self-right needing no prescriptives, discarding in the process anatomy, biology, cultural learning, as mediators of self-knowledge and gender identity. What matters is what the person believes about themselves.

The other side of this debate refutes to ‘normalize’ any variance in gender *or* sex, affirming only binary ontologies of embodiment and thus disavowing a sex/gender “spectrum.” There is a secular and religious component here which upholds Christian and other religions’ creation narratives of two sexes; and which thus affirms only a binary format. Unfortunately, the refusal of factual genetic and psychological disorder distinctives misrecognizes persons born with DSD and those with actual gender dysphoria, and does not allow spaces for these

conditions. Neither does this stance segregate DSD or GD as distinct from the social movement to self-identify. In effect, two camps that became polar opposites.³⁵

Contexts: DSD and Dysphoric Persons

‘Lost in the tussle’ is the reality that individuals with DSD and factual, persistent, sometimes life-long gender incongruity not only *exist*, but likely inhabit *intuitive ontologies of which we understand little*.³⁶ Social acceptance does not imply progress in understanding these ontologies or working out implications without significant controversies. Moreover, we have continuing issues in the Christian church if such non-conforming individuals also claim to be “believers” (cf. DeFranza 2011; Gil 2021). EOs now threaten their legal identification as well.

Ontological Misalignments

Throughout my work with these individuals I’ve noticed how often their experiences do not align nor fit with natural ontological expectations, thus their relating to the “normal” world as outsiders. These see

³⁴ Or, at times, regardless of a dysphoria diagnosis—trivialized—turning attention to the self as the only arbiter of identity ‘no matter what.’

³⁵ The gender identity movement quickly infused social media with novel paradigms on sex and gender, with self-identification as its centerpiece. It moved to rapidly assert the medical mutability of hormonal profiles and sexual anatomy to fit one’s desired self-perception. And, it especially targeted younger-age persons, many of whom struggled with body and self-image, identity, peer pressures, and family dynamic issues. Here was a “way out” for all troubled young selves. (Gil 2022; 2023; 2024). It became ‘cool’ to be non-bi (“enbi,” “nb”) or trans; it diffused throughout social media, social institutions and cultural frames exploiting DEI narratives. Proponents verbally chastised dissenters, then moved to help prohibit the psychological/psychiatric community from exploring the roots of gender dissonance, wrongly calling such efforts “conversion therapies” (per APA prohibitions).

The other, as a visceral reaction to the effects of the former, became the politicized negation of any ideology or facts that moved the sex/gender needle beyond the binary. Sadly, in doing so it erased DSD bodies as concrete, medically validated variations of the binary, as well as the factuality of gender dysphoria. It negated (rightly in my view) a “gender spectrum” and underscored the immutability of biological sex and gender once formed—a rallying cry for conservative Christians to also protest and take political action. Many such conservatives also wrongly labeled believers who did not adhere to heteronormative self-presentations, despite cultural/generational changes broadly in view; despite some who were DSD; despite some with verified dysphoria—and accused many of these of placing self-identity over one’s identity in Christ (Gil 2021).

Within the religious right, this outrage cemented a need for civil and political mediation of what was taken to be an outrageous accost on natural human ontologies, the family, and on the fundamentals of human creation.

³⁶ Boyer and Barrett (2015) refer to intuitive ontologies as the way humans naturally categorize and come to understand the world—*their world*—based on cognitive deductions and predispositions garnered through their self-reflections and experiences. These include notions of self, identity, embodiment. Relating to sex and gender, humans expect distinct categories of beings. But when experience and self reflections do not match, these tend to reject the normative since the binary may be cognitively salient but disorienting in light of what they understand about themselves. Intuitive, deep-seated cognitive affects are turned to, rather than normative ideological and ontological positions.

cracks in sex/gender categories that most individuals do not see. They experience different forms of embodiment, self-perceptions, and thus engineer different means for social navigation. Many intersex and gender dysphoric individuals thus develop a heightened metacognition around sex and gender—where others without these conditions intuitively accept the norm. They, however, must actively construct an understanding of self, of physical embodiment, and ultimately do so based on what seems most credible *because of how they experience their selves and lives*.

Such individuals tend to also develop specialized competencies organized around recurrent, adaptive challenges—challenges that are in many ways functionally distinct, but that result in a specialized architecture for how to understand self and navigate among unlike others.³⁷ Here, agency is distributed throughout the environments within which such persons make their lives; actors being also acted upon; their performances shifting along with environmental assumptions and their demands for accommodation. More on these points later.

Understanding Unique Ontologies

I've learned from those with DSD or gender dysphoria that their unique, intuitive ontologies can be understood via *listening to their stories, observing their performances* as these manifest *in embodied forms*, and also *as historical verbalizations* when explaining to interested others who they are and what they are all about (see Blaser 2009; Gil 2021; Boylan 2013; Salazar 2011).

Natural ontologies and embodiments do exist *to them*; but these *are not them*. Such a statement is hard for us, the “outsiders,” to imagine—given it is far easier for us to “same” experiences (cf. Blaser 2013) than it is to embrace an “ontological turn” that may make these *intuitive other ontologies* weigh in as equally ‘real’ to normative ones we know.

Here, I am extending the “ontological turn” beyond its usual application in cross-cultural and religious contexts, to the deeply personal and embodied experiences of individuals with DSD or gender incongruity. By my advocating we in the social sciences inhabit an “ontological penumbra” (Merz & Merz 2017), I am pushing for “epistemic humility” (Barnes 2019)—a recognition that we may not be able to fully access or critique the world these individuals inhabit but must nonetheless engage with it, *and them*, as they are.

This demands “methodological deferral” (Barnes 2019)—where we prioritize understanding other’s explanations, their presence and experiences over theoretical impositions, even when these disrupt normative ontologies—since our own cognitive defaults may prevent us from grasping the full reality of *their reality*.

What Do Their Voices Tell Us?

I’ve abbreviated two subjects’ ethnohistories as examples, collected over the course of years of knowing these individuals and engaging them as subjects in my work. Summarizing here should not opaque their facts but rather make it easier to cull and acknowledge their intuitive ontologies. I explain what I’ve gleaned.

First Subject: A Girl—then Adolescent—with DSD.

Born and classified as female from birth, it wasn’t until she was seven that her parents noticed developmental “hints” that there may be some disorder: neck beginning to widen unnaturally, her fingers becoming stubby, her body itself not naturally aligning proportionately. Then medically tested, she was found to be “XO” (Turner Syndrome), the genetic absence of that other X chromosome, bringing on significant sexual-developmental distinctions, hormonal as well as major organ differences and difficulties.³⁸ She would be infertile (no uterus, a

³⁷ Boyer and Barret (2015) would probably say that these competencies are not atomic, indivisible, unitary entities; rather, they involve the orchestration of diverse neural structures according to particular inferential principles and functional goals. The organization of these competencies reflect, then, certain implicit assumptions about the domains that they handle—implicit assumptions about how the world, their world, needs to be organized, that are in turn used to structure their understanding of self, others, and how to navigate it all.

³⁸ She was born with intact external female genitalia, but internal structural deficits, including missing an ovary. Thus, she was raised as a female and a congruent female gender identity in the normative sense formed.

missing ovary, an under-functioning other), have some stunted growth and physical traits, and would be subject to close medical care for her lifetime.

By the time her parents “had the conversation,” she had already begun the process of forming intuitive categories of self and body, because by comparison with other female children at her school and with playmates, she understood she was “different.” Now she had a reason to understand she wasn’t “sick,” but instead, needing medical care because of her “conditions.” Told that she wouldn’t be having babies was construed in her eventual dialogue as another outcome that *wasn’t so unnatural*, given that many women didn’t have children and were seen as OK.

By pre-adolescence she had used her good mind and verbal acuity, acquired from her well-developed social radar, so she could ‘navigate’ the world of peers, use what she read, what she saw, what she experienced; all now blended into acuity, verbosity, as a coping mechanism. She was smarter than most; she could talk topics and segue with ease, keeping the attention on what she wanted and *not herself*.³⁹ The verbosity and constant chatter by early adolescence caused yet other labels to form around her: she was a “special needs person,” and parents continuously tried to “correct” her overt ‘superiority’ and her own self-assemblages—back-firing and making her only believe all the more she was truly different—now beyond “special.”

The identity that formed now existed in a realm of her own making. By later adolescence she was defiantly different: she had rewritten some social contracts, especially with immediate family, given their futility in reining in the independent, verbose, and brainy person she was becoming. Mother and father had become subservient to her persona and her needs. She intuited her body as “unique,” and thus ended the friction between her embodiment, that reality, and society’s cognitive assumptions about her physical non-normativity.

In a word, she had intuited her own ontological frameworks to understand her interiority, her body, and the external world. She had mentally and socially—to the degree she could—recast this embodiment that differed from those in her external world as “unique.” She navigated her own, and other’s expectations by reframing her self-concept, catalyzing her uniqueness, all the while utilizing her immense

capacity to radar environments and respond accordingly to prevent her assemblages from being threatened. Navigating any misalignments meant constantly working against the automatic recognition processes of others *about her*, and using her difference to her benefit.

She thus lives with this dual awareness, of understanding natural ontologies but experiencing herself as another embodiment. Reframing herself as “unique,” meant undergoing a cognitive epistemological re-ordering process that aligned with her own intuitive ontological framework of difference and speciality. She forms her world around these self-understandings.

Even with her lexical giftedness, she often finds it hard to voice that uniqueness when queried—and for us in turn to fully grasp the reality of her world assemblage. We have not experienced embodiment like hers; history like hers; necessity for social negotiations like hers; or the negotiation of the world that surrounds *her*.

Second Subject: Gender Dysphoria and the Mismatch of Ontological Expectations.

At age six and walking home from a Lutheran service attended with his family, he saw a nun in full habit across the street. “*Someday, I wanna be like her*” he said to his mother. “*Don’t be silly!*” the mom replied. “*We are Lutherans, not Catholic,*” totally misunderstanding “being like *her*.” And so it was that this young boy grew up, surrounded by sisters and not feeling like he “fit in” at all. Secretly, by age nine he would enter his sisters’ room and play with their clothes. He recalls having great satisfaction in “playing dress,” and even “borrowing” their underwear. By teenhood he had the courage to tell his mother and father he didn’t feel right; he didn’t feel as if he were becoming a man . . . but stopped short of telling the unspeakable: that he would have preferred being a girl; that he felt more like a girl than a boy . . .

Sensing the discord, seeing his growing effeminacy, and hearing he was being bullied in school because he carried his books “like a girl,” the parents immediately enrolled him in the Naval Cadets in high school. He was told to “suck it up” because he was a growing *man*.

³⁹ Psychology tells us that acts by children which tend to divert the gaze of others from the self provide the child with enough leeway to eventually solidify their self-concept in ways that self-justify their coping behaviors.

And *suck it up* he did. He buried those feelings of being in the wrong body and decided that if there was any hope, it would be in formally joining the military after graduating; after all, “they make men, men.” He joined the Navy and within a few months took the great step to show everyone and himself that he was “normal” by dating a woman and eventually getting married that year. The marriage turned disastrous.

For one, he “couldn’t satisfy” his wife’s needs in bed, a painful realization that his discomfort with his own body wasn’t going away. Nevertheless, he tried to persevere, and eventually that next year they had a son. This complicated the marriage even more. His response was to *try harder*, delving into his Navy career and eventually becoming a submarine warfare specialist and Navy Seal. After a decade together, the discords drove them to a divorce.

But he tried harder again, liking immensely another woman and thinking their commonalities would make it all work out. And again, he couldn’t “give” what she needed. The thought finally came, “*God, I’m ruining this beautiful woman’s life. My secret is the cause!*” He broke down and told her of his feelings, his self-identification as *transsexual*. To his surprise, she talked about what needed to happen—and it wasn’t divorce. With her encouragement he went through counseling, confirming him as a gender dysphoric male. It took a few years of therapy and a dishonorable discharge from the Navy (then) for him to pursue and eventually have hormonal and surgical reassignment. At that point, the couple settled for an amicable divorce.

A few years later, this now trans-woman felt a deep calling to ministry when attending an Episcopal church service (she had paused but never lost her faith); and determined to become an Episcopalian nun. That, she did accomplish—the first transgender Episcopalian nun—her life mission becoming a support service for the then-ravaged (1990’s) HIV populations.

Within this history are the double-binds, misalignments, and the need to constantly work against the automatic, natural ontological expectations and processes vs the intuitive ones.

Unlike those with DSD, whose physical traits may be atypical, gender dysphoric individuals have bodies that are normal and often *align* with one of the sex binaries. However, their inner experience of self and body contradicts intuitive expectations others’ bodies

generate. Their embodiment misaligns with their mind’s understanding of their body and self.⁴⁰

In this individual, there were typical early denials, denials which many gender dysphoric individuals also share about their incongruity. This is followed by attempting *strategic concealment* (passing, avoiding issues of gender or emphasizing the embodied gender despite its incongruity). Some may move to open defiance; but in many (adult) trans histories, natural ontologies are first embraced, as are attempts at believing them. Believing “this could be fixed” (i.e., their dysphoria) generates the secrecy and the cognitive denials of what has been their issue.

In this, and in many such cases, it takes repeated “failures” in attempts at body-self reconciliation, of denials to *not* hold, and actual life events—all speaking to an impending crisis—to come to terms with their dysphoria. Some then accepting the intuitive ontological framework which aligns with their historic, yet secretive self-perceptions. Such acceptance allows for a reframing of embodiment: actually ‘seeing’ the possibility of themselves ‘emerge’ as the very internal creature they believe they have always been. I’d like to call this process their eventual *inhabiting an intuitive embodiment*.

Such movement from natural ontologies that do not “fit,” to an intuitive, alternative ontology of being requires agency. In this particular case, agency was provided by life-event crises, their second spousal’s acceptance of the dysphoric condition and encouragement to transition; and the eventual understanding of what *being transsexual* implied, to enable a change of habitus. The “reconstruction” that followed was facilitated through another series of agents, that of clinical counseling, which provided the individual a space to understand fully their disorder, and ensuing decisions for sexual surgeries.

Navigating their new embodiment and self also required reframing their understanding of who this “emerging” person now was. Reconfiguring the self requires any trans person assimilate an alter-gender identity and role (or create their own individuated one) which the emergent persona is to inhabit. Natural ontological expectations of their former body-sex identity and gender role no longer apply. If these individuals retain a binary framework as an ontological other truth—such as was the case here—new feminine gender role behaviors then need to be learned and

⁴⁰ For a much more in depth explanation see Gil (2021 and 2024), and refer to the APA’s Diagnostic Manual, DSM-5TR.

oppositionally embodied.⁴¹ She changes as she learns what in fact it means to be ‘woman’.

Individuals may thus develop a unique cognitive flexibility in how they perceive their shifting identity, performance, beyond normed masculinity and/or femininity.⁴² (However, if married at the time of transition, this flexibility may not occur in their spouses, even if desired.⁴³ This is another conflictual arena to wrestle with.)

In this case, it is also worthwhile to note that the person’s *sexual orientation* did not alter: i.e., becoming a trans woman did not change whom they found erotic (women).⁴⁴ They thus never imagined a self-reference as “now a lesbian,” or as “bisexual.” For this individual, their persistent attraction to women (an historic ‘heteronormativity’ in *orientation*) never needed alteration: it was a natural ontological *fact* of their male development that remained historically and cognitively true for them. Thus, after their ‘confirmation’ surgeries they found little erotic pleasure with male partners—which they did have. What was reconfigured then was the importance of their libido: their sexual orientation and erotics becoming of secondary importance (and they spoke openly about this process).⁴⁵ Framing it as a non-sequitur, libido could then be sidelined by their eventual “calling” into ministry.

Such a significant move, enabling a self which could *negate* their eroto-sexuality, aided the person in their

taking on vows of chastity and poverty when admitted to an Episcopalian nunnery.

In both examples, these individuals’ implicit and explicit assumptions, learning to question what might be the conditions of their existence, selves, relationships, and performances, eventually gives form and reality to dynamic assemblages that stand aside natural ontologies of being. Internal ontological conflicts and external events help close down options other than those intuitively developed. Ultimately, many move to become who they’ve felt they’ve been all along.

My Trajectory into the Ontological ‘Penumbra’

Early in my medical anthropology and sexology career, and as a Christian, I admit having significant ‘issues’ embracing these individuals’ phenomenological stances as even remotely valid. Like Jamie Barnes’ (2019) experience (in a totally different instance of “ontological conflict”), my world and the world of DSD and gender dysphoric individuals had different lenses and thus explanations. What I eventually learned was that these individuals articulate their realities in terms I hardly understood; and view life through lenses I did not possess. That I, in turn, needed to embrace and try to comprehend other assemblages by not disavowing their factuality *as these*

⁴¹ Blaser (2009), in discussing ontologies of being, asserts “ontologies manifest as verbalized, embodied, and enacted *performances* through which people seek to make sense of their being . . . a performative layer.” Following this notion, Barnes (2019, 20) writes, “these performances need to be taken into account if we are to understand humans and their worlds.” Those of us attempting understanding of trans persons must acknowledge that gender roles now embraced do not come to the person through their natal history; but rather as acts of performance, perhaps historically viewed, but now enacted within social spaces that either confirm, or deny it. Embodiment and performance post-reassignment (now called “confirmation” surgery) requires significant self-reflection and assessments of social reactions to their performance.

⁴² This case is historically representative. Since the late 1990s and into the 21st century, however, the significant social accommodation of gender variances now makes it more facile for trans persons to individuate performance; i.e., performativity is no longer assumed to be congruent with rigid binary sex-role behaviors.

⁴³ See Morris (2015).

⁴⁴ Such, despite their “body” not “obeying” their erotosexual framework. It was the case here that each time intimacy was attempted with a spouse, there were repeated failures of erection when embodied as a man. This generated significant frustrations in both spouses, to the point of the earlier marriage ending in divorce. The person stated in interview, “We had a child! We stayed married so that this child could be cared for, not because we were satisfied with each other.”

⁴⁵ It would be impossible to determine whether the hormonal profile change from testosterone to estrogen would itself cause a significant decline in erotosexual interest sufficient to sideline the affect. What was shared openly was their lack of enjoyment in sexual encounters with male partners.

were lived out by them—even if I saw only ‘through a glass, darkly’.

Much like Barnes (2019, 28), who discovers a sort of methodological atheism in the social sciences that dissuades anthropologists from other’s truths without considered reflection of *alternate facts*—and one’s own biases—I had to “let go” of what I could label “misrecognitions” on their part. “Misrecognitions”—a label that then would allow me to close down explanations which were *valid to these individuals, but not to me*.

As do many still, I could then unpack the world gender dysphoric individuals inhabit and conclude it leads them to wrong deductions about their self and gender.⁴⁶ That if these transitioned, they would be solely inhabiting a “socially informed and constructed body” (Barnes 2019, 29, citing Csordas 1990, 23); and that such eventual body/self would not necessarily lead to their happiness. I garnered it would also insult the core nature of their being as created by God.

I have come to understand that in lifelong gender dysphoric individuals especially, the ‘somatovisceral dialogue’ going on between body and brain doesn’t eventually molt into an “embodied natural ontology” which can then accommodate the person’s experiences within the natural world (Gil 2022; 2024). In fact, the dissonance between what the mind and body “say” to each other, coupled with these individuals’ negative historical experiences in the world, override their acceptance of natural ontologies and “oughts” about identity. The result is their eventual development of an intuitive ontology of being that assuages such dissonances.

Is it correct then for these individuals to sex/gender transition? The polemic of who can or should respond to that question remains open and significantly controversial, in social, medical and faith contexts.

Assuredly, we cannot generalize. We *can* recognize that such lived experiences negate our common ontological expectations. We can also recognize that we may not be able to fully assess the world these individuals inhabit but must nonetheless try to

understand them, engage their experiences on their own terms.

This engagement can be especially difficult for Christians, anthropologist or otherwise, given our theological predisposition to embrace the truth of natural ontologies and dismiss other intuited ones. I have met many trans persons who, after transitioning, truly flourish as individuals *and* remain faithful Christians who reflect *imago Dei* (cf. Salazar 2011; DeFranza 2015). As bystanders, do we reify our positions, call out their non-normativity as an evil lie of social construction; or do we pause to acknowledge their humanity, dismiss seeing them as threats, and engage what Miroslav Volf (1996) has called the “embrace”? Merz & Mertz (2017, 1), speaking about that “other”, state: “These should not only be treated as subjects of study, but also recognized as valid counterparts with whom we can engage.”

In this sense, biblical admonitions to not judge, bear false witness, exercise the gifts of love and embrace, may be the better route for any positional accommodation. And it is here, in this nonjudgmental arena, that we find ourselves occupying that ‘ontological penumbra.’ The late Pope Francis’ famous interview response applies: “Who am I to judge?”⁴⁷

This positioning recognizes different ways of experiencing existence without initial judgments to cloud our understanding personal histories. It also challenges anthropology’s traditional stance of analysis through external critique (Barnes 2017). Instead, it demands that methodological deferral, where we prioritize understanding the others’ embodiment and experiences over our analytic deductions; presence and performance over theoretical propositions. Getting to this stance is especially important, given that our cognitive defaults—theological, academic, or both—may prevent us from grasping the depth of an individual’s unique self-understandings.

I am pushing for that epistemic humility by advocating we locate ourselves within this penumbral space: a recognition that we may not be able to “relate” to others’ perceptions, experiences—deeply personal and embodied—held as truths we can imagine but

⁴⁶ Again, I remind readers that I am illustrating and unpacking gender dysphoria that is accurately diagnosed and has had an historical trajectory. This, of sufficient duration and depth, trauma and self-negation to distinguish it from the now popular *social movement of sex/gender self-identification and representation sans dysphoria*. The distinction is significantly important. See Gil (2021; 2022; 2023; 2024).

⁴⁷ Pope Francis said this during a candid conversation with journalists aboard a flight from Brazil on July 28, 2013. Cited in news and by news agencies internationally.

never live through. And yet, we live in a social world with a Rousseauian agreement, and this reality needs to also be factored in when making room for personal ontologies. No person, ultimately, is an island; and we are all embedded socially. Such raises yet other significant questions for social analysis!

Yes, it is impossible for me as a Christian to dismiss the primacy of natural ontologies regarding our sexuality, inclusive of natural variations of the binary XX-XY. However, this position should not foreclose the fact that ‘others’ not in the binary statistic are themselves involved in ongoing processes of navigating their way in the world; intentionally projecting actions, seeing responses, developing intuitions and assemblages that try to answer epistemological and ontological questions about self, being, and place.

To exercise mercy and compassion rather than analytic or theological judgment seems to me to be the better Christian response here. And to be clear again here, I am speaking to détente rather than embracing any part of the war on gender. There is much that needs understanding and correction which has yet to be undertaken in socially constructive ways. We must not ‘same,’ assume, or judge as we stand in this space. Unfortunately, government edicts are not workable solutions to ontological sex/gender controversies, or what it means to be human. Of course, we must separate social movements of self-identification from the factuality of developmental and psychologically real sex-gender issues. We must work to affirm what we know through science, and faith, yet stand also in the in-between spaces of ambiguity, uncertainty, where we recognize the “other” as our counterpart—I dare say our *brother/sister*—not wholly understood but wholly acknowledged and embraced.

In deconstructing arguments as I have, I haven’t just picked apart what has been taken for granted. The goal has been to create space for deeper insights that honor both the complexities of human experience and the enduring truths that anchor us. Again, it does us well to not give in to “saming” as an epistemological truth, given looming government challenges to diversity and to the definition of persons—because “certainty *is* indeed the deadly enemy of tolerance.”

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