

# Reasons and Pronouns

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Traditionally, we think of gendering and misgendering as a binary distinction involving correct and incorrect pronoun use.

Roughly, you gender someone correctly when you attribute to them the correct gender pronoun, and misgender someone when you attribute to them the incorrect gender pronoun.

One common theory of gendering a person correctly is that it is just a matter of linguistically matching that person's self-conferred gender.

## Theses of this Talk

The concepts of gendering and misgendering are underspecified, and actually encompass a much broader range of phenomena than traditionally thought.

Correctness does not exhaust the explanatory and moral space of gendered pronoun attribution.

Gendering and misgendering are located in a broader schema of normative properties than correctness and incorrectness.

## Assumption of this Talk

Gender often involves a self-conferred identity that is not fixed by biological parts.

## Bad Gendering, Misgendering, Defective Gendering

(a) **Deviant Gendering.** Harden believes that gender pronouns are grounded only in biological sex, and that people should not be allowed to pick their own pronouns. He also believes that “he/ him” applies to anyone wearing a trucker hat. Harden uses “he/ him” for Joey, a trans man wearing a trucker hat who Harden sees from a distance.

Something doesn't sit quite right about calling this case a straightforward example of correct gendering: it makes us uneasy somehow. Why?

Harden has correctly gendered Joey, but for the wrong reason.

What explains the uneasiness, I suggest, is that a gender attribution can be *correct* while lacking other important normative and explanatory properties.

Call something a case of *good gendering* when someone is attributed a gender for the right sort of reason.

Something can be a case of correct gendering without being a case of good gendering. **Deviant gendering** is a case of correct gendering, but not of good gendering.

An example of good gendering *and* correct gendering: Meyer has recently come out as nonbinary to their friends, so Meyer's friends use “they/them” pronouns for Meyer.

Some cases of good gendering are misgendering.

Example: River has been using they/them pronouns, so River's friends use they/them for River. However, River has decided to use she/her pronouns going forward, but forgot to tell her friends. So River's friends still use they/them.

Call something a case of *bad gendering* when someone is attributed a gender for the wrong sort of reason.

Some cases of bad gendering are cases of correct gendering, as in **Deviant Gendering**. In that case, Joey is correctly gendered, but for the wrong sort of reason.

Some cases of bad gendering are cases of misgendering, as when someone refuses to use someone's self-attributed gender pronouns.

For example, if one of Meyer's friends continues to use "he/him" for Meyer because of the genitals Meyer was born with even after Meyer has declared their pronoun preference, that is a case of both misgendering (because Meyer's friend attributes the wrong gender to Meyer) and bad gendering (because Meyer's friend attributes the wrong gender to Meyer for the wrong sort of reason.)

Problem: what counts as the "wrong sort of reason" to make something a case of bad gendering?

We can distinguish between morally insidious reasons and morally uncomplicated reasons.

Not every case of gendering someone for the wrong reason is a case of gendering them for a morally insidious reason. Consider:

(b) **Egg**. Yara, a trans woman, suspects that her close friend Marq, who uses "he/ him" pronouns, is trans but in denial about it. Yara uses "she/ her" for Marq, and because of this, Marq immediately realizes that Yara is right, and switches preferred pronouns to "she/ her".

Yara seemed to sense that Marq was a woman, and so on some views, correctly gendered Marq. This might be a case of correct gendering, but it doesn't quite seem to be a case of bad gendering given Yara's intentions.

Consider also:

(c) **Conceptual Difference**. Tala, a Native American individual who self identifies as two-spirit, visits friends in San Francisco. Tala's friends use the pronouns they/them for Tala because those pronouns seem like the "closest" thing to use for two-spirit pronouns, even though they/ them pronouns does not capture the concept of being two spirit.

In this case, Tala is misgendered. But not *badly* misgendered: the mismatch Tala's felt gender and the attributed gender is not for a morally problematic reason.

And consider:

(d) **Secret Agent**. Cian is a cisgender male secret agent who dresses convincingly as a woman while undercover. An unsuspecting barkeep uses "she/her" to refer to Cian.

In this case, Cian is misgendered for a morally innocuous reason, but it is not a case of bad gendering. Cian also plays an intentional role in the subterfuge.

(e) **Closeted Family Dinner**. Bailey isn't yet out to her parents as a trans woman. So she asks her partner to gender her "he/ him" and use Brian, Bailey's family-given name, at a family dinner. Bailey's partner obliges, and uses "he/him" and the name Brian at dinner.

This is a case of misgendering, but not a case of bad gendering. Bailey's partner's attribution of the wrong gender to Bailey is for a morally compelling reason. And Bailey has specifically requested to be called Brian in this instance, even though the name does not match Bailey's gender identity.

Call something a case of *defective gendering* when someone is attributed a gender based on an incomplete or defective gender concept.

(f) **Self-misunderstanding.** Ricardo was assigned male at birth. But since he was a child, he has felt like a girl. He has always wanted to wear dresses, relates more to the female dolls than the male ones, and does not identify with male-gendered names, norms, or social roles. But Ricardo has also grown up in a sheltered, conservative religious community, and does not have the concepts of pronoun changes or gender identities. Ricardo refers to himself as "he/him," but if he had grown up in a different community, he would choose another name and the pronouns "she/her."

Arguably, this is a case of both misgendering and defective gendering. On other views, it is correct gendering, but it is still defective gendering.

### Expansiveness: A Fuller Taxonomy of Gendering and Misgendering

A well fleshed out model of gendering and misgendering should include an account of the reasons involved in gendering an individual. Call this view *Expansiveness*.

Expansiveness is to be contrasted with the view that the only relevant norms connected to correctness are the typical norms that apply to all assertions, such as truth and evidential support.

The moral norms connected to gender attribution include promoting individual self-determination, social respect and support for all individuals, and social coordination. These norms outstrip mere "match" between gender attribution and self-conferred pronoun.

Reasons for gender attribution are rooted in many different norms.

One norm is to track a conventional correlation between how a person presents and their assumed pronouns.

Another norm is to respect self-declared gender pronouns.

Another norm is to respect a person's wish to not be publicly outed.

Some hold that a norm is to use gender-neutral language for everyone until pronouns can be declared.

These norms can compete, converge, or co-exist comfortably.

It is controversial which norms are the most overriding ones, even in queer communities.

While my examples have centered around a few reasons for gender attribution, many cases involve many reasons for attribution. The moral profile of gender attribution can be complicated.

### Some Benefits of Expansiveness

It draws attention to the possibility of disagreement about the right sorts of normative reasons behind gender attribution language.

(i) Dembroff and Wodak (2018) argue that a third personal gender-neutral pronoun should be used for everyone, to remove the burden from trans and non-binary individuals to constantly out themselves.

(ii) E.M. Hernandez (2021) argues that gendered language should only be used in socially subversive ways.

It allows for disagreement about normative existence and nonexistence of categories.

There are some social category attributions (e.g. slurs) for which there are rarely morally good reasons

to attribute that social category.

Creating or destroying social categories can be a form of amelioration.

It aligns with empirical research.

According to Bailey, Dembroff, and Wodak et. al (2024), pronouns reflect ideology as well as linguistic practice across a variety of languages.

It aligns with the semantics and pragmatics of gender pronoun attributions.

Davis and McReady (2020) argue that some gender pronoun attributions can function as slurs.

Domenico Kirk-Giannini and Glanzberg (2024) argue that there are normative reasons to use preferred gender pronouns that mirror those of not using racial slurs.

It aligns with the experiences of trans, nonbinary, and genderqueer individuals.

As Roelofs (2020) puts it: a pronoun declaration is a request to be viewed in a particular way, not just a request to have certain language applied. There are strong moral reasons to respect this wish.

It provides a useful frame for several metaphysical debates in the philosophy of gender.

Applications of ameliorative gender concepts-- that is, concepts applied for the purpose of correcting social injustices-- might turn out to be cases of bad gendering.

Gender abolitionism, according to which there are no gender categories, might take all cases of gendering to be bad gendering.

### Objections

Objection 1: This view overintellectualizes gendering and misgendering. The bar is too high for good gendering.

Reply: norms of attribution are context-sensitive.

Objection 2: If Expansiveness is correct, we should all be nervous about whether we have "the right sort of reasons" for gender attribution.

Reply: as with many concepts, we should strive to be the best reasoners we can be. Perfection might be an unrealistic goal.

### Some Lessons for Social Metaphysics

It is plausible to say that gender categories are partially constituted by the norms that we use to attribute them.

The composition of the social category *woman*, for example, is sensitive to moral norms for attribution.

For many other social categories, in contrast, whether or not someone belongs to them is independent of the moral reasons why someone might classify them that way.

Examples: barista, postal worker, airplane watcher, sweater collector

Borderline cases of reasons sensitive social categories: professor, citizen

Reasons sensitivity of social categories can change across worlds, societies, cultures, and times.

Sometimes, a social category that is not reasons sensitive becomes reasons sensitive.

This transition often marks a transition of a social category from non-joint-carving to joint-carving.

Evaluating social categories for reasons sensitivity on a case-by-case basis reflects the messiness of the social world. Systematicity is a desideratum of fundamental metaphysics, but it is not necessarily a desideratum in social metaphysics.

Expansiveness lays the groundwork for a reasons-first theory of gender.

According to a reasons-first theory of gender, a person is a gender G because there are sufficient appropriate moral reasons to treat them as G.

This view falls in line with current normative theories of gender, including, Diaz-Leon (2016), who argues that "woman" is a politically significant term; and Cosker-Rowland (2024), who proposes that someone is a gender G if it is fitting to treat them as G.

A reasons-first theory of gender addresses Ding's Euthyphro problem for gender.

### Conclusions

A full theory of gendering and misgendering should include reasons for pronoun attribution.

The relevant norms of gender attribution outstrip typical non-moral norms for assertion and for category attribution. This moral component is a distinctive mark of gender categories and some other social categories.

Such expansiveness about gendering and misgendering supports a reasons-first theory of gender.

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