

# *Real Gender: A Cis Defence of Trans Realities*, by Danièle Moyal-Sharrock and Constantine Sandis

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Moyal-Sharrock, Danièle, and Constantine Sandis, *Real Gender: A Cis Defence of Trans Realities*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024. xv, 269 pp.

## Transphobia as language on holiday?

In *Real Gender: A Cis Defence of Trans Realities* (2024), Danièle Moyal-Sharrock and Constantine Sandis want to defend the credibility and social rights of transgender people. The book is largely structured around undermining myths and hostile images spread by “gender critics” or TERFs (Trans-exclusive radical feminists) and thus aims to make itself relevant to an ongoing societal discussion while making timeless, philosophical remarks with references to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s later works.

The book pulls in two different directions, aiming to influence an ongoing polemical debate while at the same time carrying the ambition to deliver a philosophical work on language philosophy and gender. The authors shape their arguments around the views of different so called TERFs, making them almost the main addressee of the book. The book description promises a biological argument for gender diversity, which can be seen as an attempt to attract a general audience which pre-

sumably does not have any relation to Wittgenstein or ordinary language philosophy. By bringing forward remarks on biology and gender, the book also makes itself at home in a discussion where questions of nature/nurture and constructivism/objectivism are hot topics. The question is, however, if the remarks on biology are even that central to the view put forward in *Real Gender*.

For a reader who has knowledge in philosophy of science or feminist theory, there are no innovative remarks about biology here. The authors broadly follow the same view that has been put forward by many feminist scholars such as, among others, biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling, since the end of the last century (see Fausto-Sterling 1992; 2000). However, questions about the relationship between scientific concepts and the reality they describe are important and relatively unknown outside of academic contexts. The attempt to open these questions, of how the nature of gender can be understood simultaneously as a social construc-

tion and a material matter to a wider audience is therefore welcome, since the discussion about gender can hardly develop if we do not manage to leave the culture/nature distinction behind us. The element of Wittgenstein's criticism is a fresh addition in this context – it is apt to point out that the polemical discussion around “What is a woman?” can be diagnosed as one that is, in Wittgenstein's words, held captive by a picture (PI: § 115; Moyal-Sharrock & Sandis 2024: 183). Examples concerning the relationship between words and things, such as the chapter on “vegan cheese”, “non-dairy-dairy products”, etc., bring the discussion down to an everyday level and are likely to get even a reluctant reader thinking.

Philosophers may, however, be surprised by the connections made between a biological perspective on gender and Wittgenstein's concept of “bedrock”. The authors argue that a person's gender is an unshakable “bedrock” in a person's identity, and that a transgender person's gender is experienced with the same self-evidence as a cis-person's. Moyal-Sharrock and Sandis support this with the help of transgender people's own stories, where one's own gender perception is often described as something that one tries to shake off without success, and where coming out as transgender is the result of a final acceptance of something that will not change. With the help of several such examples, Moyal-Sharrock and Sandis turn against radical constructivist views, e.g. the idea that an

individual develops a sense of their gender only by cultural interpellation. The use of real-life examples is important at a time when unrealistic ideas about transgender people as impersonators with dubious intentions have an unfortunate political impact. However, it is up for discussion whether the term “bedrock” belongs in this context.

For Wittgenstein, “bedrock propositions” build up a common grammatical basis on which our disagreements can play out. Wittgenstein also writes about “hinges” to get across the same idea:

The questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn. (OC: § 341)

For Moyal-Sharrock and Sandis, statements like “I am a woman” or “I am a Finn” can be expressions of “personal” bedrock propositions. Here, we are entering a controversial topic regarding Wittgenstein's concept of bedrock propositions. Bedrock propositions are not generally understood to include subjective matters, so one could argue that the actual “bedrock” certainty in the context would be that “everyone has a gender”, and that this is the “hinge” around which the entire discussion on gender revolves. But on the other hand, perhaps matters like “I am a woman” or “I am a Finn” can be described as bedrock certainties on the basis that they are in no way simply subjective, not even for a trans-woman or an immigrated Finn. They

are not concepts that have emerged from a subjective interior, but are categorizations that are manifested in social life, or, to use Moyal Sharrock and Sandis' words, they are "enacted" (Moyal-Sharrock, Sandis 2024: 116, see footer 49). Someone may, of course, for one reason or another, dispute one's "authenticity" in both cases, but that does not prevent the categories from being completely self-evident for an individual and their immediate circle, or, in other words, function as a bedrock on which the intra- and interrelations are founded.

A more complicated matter here is Moyal-Sharrock and Sandis' claim that this subjectively experienced gender likely has "biological underpinnings". While Moyal-Sharrock and Sandis turn against a radical constructivism, in which the material body remains out of reach behind the veil of language, they accept that culture shapes how we understand the body, while facts such as the need for food and water, seeing with our eyes or having physiological gender differences are there regardless. And just as it is difficult to see colors for which we lack words, so our concepts and cultural customs around gender shape how we view the body (Moyal-Sharrock, Sandis 2024: 162).<sup>1</sup> The authors seek a middle ground, where biology should not be understood as a defining factor, but rather as the place from where a psychological

predisposition to live as a certain gender originates. This, they argue, explains why transgender individuals often show determination about which gender they belong to already in early childhood.

Although I find Moyal-Sharrock and Sandis' portrayal of transgender experiences sympathetic, and that the hypothesis of a biological predisposition as such is entirely conceivable, I want to ask if there are not two different language games being played here: One is about the possible biological causes behind gender diversity, the other about how we conceptualize gender in science or in everyday life. Having the "bedrock-gender" functioning as a pre-linguistic root behind our own concepts of gender does not match very well with Wittgenstein's idea of bedrock or hinge certainty, since he is not talking about certainties that can be tested through empirical observations. This merging of their view on biology and the idea of bedrock certainty is, in my view, superfluous in regard to their overall argument where the moral questions seem more important than the empirical ones. The discussion of how we "can know" someone is serious when they claim to belong to a gender that they have not been assigned at birth works analogously with Wittgenstein's discussions on certainty about whether someone is feeling pain (PI; OC). I wish this discussion was deepened, especially as what I find to be the strongest line of thought in *Real Gender* is the point

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<sup>1</sup> Moyal-Sharrock and Sandis refer to Margaret Mead when making this remark.

made on theory as such – that is, that a theory or a definition of gender cannot precede our decisions about human dignity and rights. Real Gender succeeds in showing how trans-lives already exist and are *lived* (and have been lived throughout human history), in the most concrete sense. Therefore, all debates around where gender stems from and the intellectual arguments done by TERFs are completely off target. Gender is manifested in our lives in various ways, and there are as many perspectives on what a woman or man is as there are people living as women and men in the world. To try to define what gender is, once and for all, by using biological concepts or by trying to pin down some social, defining factors will never capture every possible case (PI: § 65). Or in other words, a definition may work in some respects, but will in some other context prove to be non-applicable. Wittgenstein was criticizing logicians for not engaging with the lived and animal nature of language, and

Moyal-Sharrock and Sandis do right in claiming that the TERF-perspective in a similar way is creating a grammar detached from the very lived circumstances where words like man and woman gain their meaning.

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