

Article

# Pronoun Problems<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In recent years, pronouns have become a white-hot interface between language and social and political issues. “My pronouns are *he/they*” signals allegiance to one side in the culture wars, as does “My pronouns are *whatever*.” But there is surprisingly little philosophical work at this interface; this paper aims to chart the main questions and argue for some answers, with the hope of stimulating more research.

**Keywords:** pronouns; presupposition; sex; gender; transgender

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In English, third-person singular pronouns come in grammatically feminine and masculine forms: *she, her, hers, herself; he, him, his, himself*. (Here called *FM pronouns*.) There is also a neuter pronoun *it*, used to refer to inanimate objects, plants, and some animals, and occasionally young children.<sup>2</sup> Is it simply considerate to use *she* when speaking of a transgender woman (a natal male whose sex-of-living is female), or is there more at stake?<sup>3</sup> (Section 4) Are any new issues raised by the recent proliferation of non-binary identities, with the consequent request for *they/them* pronouns? (Section 5) Is non-binary

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally an invited chapter for *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Philosophy of Language*, which is why it is structured like a survey. After receiving the invitation, I wrote to one of the two editors, “Just to be clear on the assignment. This is an entry about issues like: whether (or why) we should call Demi Lovato ‘they,’ or Elliot Page ‘he’; whether we should call everyone ‘they,’ etc.? ... Obviously I’ll try to keep it respectful but I should warn you in advance that any balanced and frank discussion of this topic is bound to annoy some people. (I won’t be offended if you want to reconsider.)” The editor replied, “All systems go. Thank you for agreeing to this.” Subsequently, the other editor implied on Twitter that my chapter would not be published, and I was told that a contributor to the Handbook had threatened to withdraw her chapter if mine appeared. In the end, my chapter was rejected, with no possibility of revision.

<sup>2</sup> *One* is a third-person singular pronoun but cannot be used to refer to a particular individual.

<sup>3</sup> Useful phrase *sex-of-living* taken from Peggy Cadet, “Androgen insensitivity syndrome with male sex-of-living,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 40 (2011): 1101–2; having a female sex-of-living either

they a good idea? (Section 6) And is it feasible to follow the Swedes and add a sex-neutral (epicene) pronoun, or imitate Finnish and Hungarian by ditching FM pronouns altogether? (Section 7) The last section briefly raises two other topics: deception and compelled speech. The first three sections discuss some preliminary matters.

## 1. Pronouns and Sex

As McConnell-Ginet observes:

English speakers learn very early to use *she* (and the rest of the paradigm: *her*, *hers*, and *herself*) for specific individual (presumptively) female referents and *he* (and *him*, *his*, and *himself*) whenever speaking of those we take to be male.<sup>4</sup>

Consider some examples. (1) commits the speaker to the claim that the individual in question is female:

1. She is in the field.

If Mollie the mare is the salient animal in the field, then (an utterance of) (1) is true and unproblematic. If Boxer the stallion is in the field then there is *something* wrong with (1). When it is pointed out that the animal is male, an appropriate response would be “Whoops, *he* is in the field.”

Small animals of whatever sex are sometimes referred to with masculine pronouns:

2. There is a spider in the bathtub. Please get him out.

Even here, corrections can be made. If your arachnologist spouse points out that the spider is actually female, switching to *her* is appropriate. (Thus the pronoun in (2) is not like the metaphorical use of *she* to refer to boats. In that latter usage, (1) could be used correctly to make a claim about the location of a yacht on a trailer.<sup>5</sup>)

On the face of it, we are like horses. If the animal in the field is a human female, then (1) is fine; if the animal is a human male, it isn't. There is no special FM pronoun for humans only. If someone is in the bathroom plucking their eyebrows, next to a cat on the floor licking itself, and these are the only two occupants, then (3) is true and unproblematic just in case the person and the cat are female:

3. Every (human or non-human) animal in the bathroom is grooming herself.

If either the cat or the person is male, then there is something wrong with (3), and typically a correction would be in order. (We are ignoring whether uttering (3) in a particular context would be rude, offensive, or otherwise ill-advised.)

Interestingly, *she* is more committal for the speaker than *female*. Consider:

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involves being female and not disguising this fact, and/or making some attempt to be perceived or treated as female. Transgender women and men are understood in this paper more narrowly than suggested by the parenthetical in the text: they change their sex-of-living due to gender dysphoria (see Section 3).

<sup>4</sup> Sally McConnell-Ginet, *Words Matter: Meaning and Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 199. See also John Payne and Rodney Huddleston, “Nouns and noun phrases,” in *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, ed. Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 488–89; Greville G. Corbett, *Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 12–13.

<sup>5</sup> FM pronouns are (or have been) used for a wide variety of personified entities, e.g., the Sun (*he*), rivers (*he*), the Moon (*she*), the Earth (*she*), storms (*she*); no such conventions are needed to apply FM pronouns to stuffed animals and toys with an obvious fictional sex.

4. That animal is female and in the field.

(4) commits the speaker to the animal's being female, but this vanishes under negation:

5. It is false that that animal is female and in the field.

(5) does not commit the speaker to the claim that the animal is in the field, and neither does it commit the speaker to the claim that the animal is female.

However, the parallel commitment of (1) persists if the sentence is negated. (6) commits the speaker to the claim that the referent of *she* is female, just as (1) does:

6. It is false that she is in the field.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps *she* induces a Gricean conversational implicature, to the effect that the referent is female? If so, the relation between (1) and the claim that the referent is female is like that between (7) and (8) (uttered in a suitable context):

7. The bull is in the field.

8. We shouldn't walk across the field.

This is clearly wrong, because conversational implicatures like (8) are "cancellable": "The bull is in the field, but he's perfectly harmless" removes the suggestion that we shouldn't walk across the field.<sup>7</sup> A speaker cannot similarly cancel the commitment incurred by (1):

9. #She is in the field, but that animal is not female.<sup>8</sup>

That leaves two candidates for the relation between pronouns and sex. First, *conventional* implicature, where the implicature is semantically encoded. One of Grice's famous examples was "He is an Englishman; he is, therefore, brave"; Grice took *therefore* to implicate that bravery was some kind of consequence of being an Englishman.<sup>9</sup> (This is not cancellable, hence not a conversational implicature.<sup>10</sup>) Other (more plausible) examples of conventional implicatures employ honorifics like *Dr.* or noun phrases like *a doctor* used as appositives. (10) and (11) commit the speaker to the claim that Ampleforth is a doctor:

10. Dr. Ampleforth is at the door.

11. Ampleforth, a doctor, is at the door.

The commitment is not cancellable, and it remains under negation:

12. Dr. Ampleforth isn't at the door.

13. Ampleforth, a doctor, isn't at the door.

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<sup>6</sup> See Yasutada Sudo, "On the semantics of phi features on pronouns" (PhD thesis, MIT, 2012), 21.

<sup>7</sup> See H. Paul Grice, "Logic and conversation," in *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 39, 44–45.

<sup>8</sup> Infelicity is marked in this paper with #.

<sup>9</sup> Grice, "Logic and conversation," 25.

<sup>10</sup> It might not be a conventional implicature either (Kent Bach, "The myth of conventional implicature," *Linguistics and Philosophy* (1999): 327–66, 330; Christopher Potts, *The Logic of Conventional Implicatures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 213).

One hypothesis, then, is that *she* conventionally implicates that the referent is female.

That is not the only possibility for the relationship between (1) and the claim that the referent of *she* is female. The other is *presupposition*, as illustrated by (14) and (15):

14. Muriel has stopped ruminating.

15. Muriel was ruminating earlier.

Someone uttering (14) presupposes (15)—that is, assumes its truth for the purposes of the conversation. (15) is part of the conversational background, not something that might be “at issue.” To object to (14) with “You’re wrong” is to object to the claim that Muriel is not presently ruminating; it is not to object to (15).

There is a vast literature on presupposition, and much disagreement among theorists.<sup>11</sup> For present purposes it is enough to note one difference between presuppositions and conventional implicatures, namely that presuppositions can be removed by some predicates, including non-factive attitude verbs and verbs of saying. These are called *presupposition plugs*.<sup>12</sup> The presupposition of (14) is not removed by negation:

16. Muriel hasn’t stopped ruminating.

But it is removed if (14) is in the scope of *believe* or *say*. Neither (17) nor (18) presupposes (15):

17. The farmer believes that Muriel has stopped ruminating.

18. The farmer said that Muriel has stopped ruminating.

However, conventional implicatures are unaffected. (19) and (20) commit the speaker to Ampleforth’s being a doctor:

19. The farmer believes that Dr. Ampleforth is at the door.

20. The farmer said that Dr. Ampleforth is at the door.

That might be held to decide the matter in favor of the conventional implicature hypothesis, because (21) and (22) commit the speaker to a female referent for *she*:

21. The farmer believes that she is in the field.

22. The farmer said that she is in the field.

In fact, the issue is much more complicated, not least because theorists do not agree on the boundaries between presupposition and conventional implicature. This can be left unsettled here, but it will be useful to pick a side for illustrative purposes. The semantics literature generally comes down on the side of the presupposition view, but because FM

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<sup>11</sup> Surveys: Christopher Potts, “Presupposition and implicature,” in *The Handbook of Contemporary Semantic Theory*, ed. Shalom Lappin and Chris Fox (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015); Philippe Schlenker, “The semantics–pragmatics interface,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Formal Semantics*, ed. Maria Aloni and Paul Dekker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Potts, “Presupposition and implicature,” 172. Terminology from Lauri Karttunen, “Presuppositions of compound sentences,” *Linguistic Inquiry* 4 (1973): 169–93, 174; Karttunen is unsure whether *believe* is a plug (188–90).

pronouns at least behave much like words with conventional implicatures, we will pick the latter. That is, we will assume that FM pronouns give rise to conventional implicatures about the sex of the referent, or the sex of the creatures in the relevant domain of quantification. Both views hold that *she* introduces the “not-at-issue” content that the referent is female. Nothing material will be affected if it turns out that the phenomenon is best classified as a kind of presupposition.<sup>13</sup>

Languages are not immutable: the use of *they* for non-binary people is an example of rapid linguistic change, at least in some subcommunities. Perhaps FM pronouns have undergone, or are in the process of undergoing, change too. To investigate this thoroughly would require a different paper. Moreover, Dembroff and Wodak—the authors of the main philosophy paper on the political/social issues raised by pronouns, to be discussed in later sections—agree that “our actual use of *he* and *she* marks male and female.”<sup>14</sup> To keep the discussion manageable, problems and prospects for an alternative account of FM pronouns will have to be deferred.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. Sexing and Gendering

Imagine that a person of interest to the police runs into a field. The dispatcher at headquarters does not know the suspect’s sex, but it is clear that the suspect is an adult. The police officer on the ground utters (1), “She is in the field,” into his radio, thus communicating to the dispatcher, not just the whereabouts of the suspect, but that the suspect is female. The officer and the dispatcher both know that the suspect is an adult,

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<sup>13</sup> For a defense of the conventional implicature view, see Owen Greenhall, “Pronouns and conventional implicature,” *Fifth Barcelona Workshop on Issues in the Theory of Reference* (2007), [link to this article](#) (which makes the point about plugs mentioned in the text; see also Robin Cooper, *Quantification and Syntactic Theory* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1983), 180–81). Although the commitment to sex is not plugged, it is (usually) backgrounded like a presupposition. Sentences like “Boxer is male, but he’s not very aggressive” do not sound redundant; cf. Potts, *The Logic of Conventional Implicatures*, 33–34. Further, the commitment to sex does disappear in some contexts, e.g., “If this horse is a colt, I will take him to get gelded” (cf. Sudo, “On the semantics of phi features . . . ,” 33). The presuppositional view is in, e.g., Irene Heim and Angelika Kratzer, *Semantics in Generative Grammar* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 244–45; Daniel Büring, “Pronouns,” in *Semantics: An International Handbook of Natural Language Meaning*, Vol. 2, ed. Klaus von Stechow, Claudia Maienborn, and Paul Portner (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2011), 987–88; François Recanati, “Pragmatic enrichment,” in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Language*, ed. Gillian Russell and Delia Graff (New York: Routledge, 2012), 6; Robin Dembroff and Daniel Wodak “He/she/they/ze,” *Ergo* 5 (2018): 371–406, 385; “How much gender is too much gender?” in *The Routledge Handbook of Social and Political Philosophy of Language*, ed. Justin Khoo and Rachel Katharine Sterken (London: Routledge, 2021), 373, n. 8 (both times citing Heim and Kratzer). For a defense, see Sudo, “On the semantics of phi features . . . ,” especially 36–38; see also Andreas Stokke, “Features of referential pronouns and indexical presuppositions,” *Inquiry* 65 (2022): 1038–115. For more on conventional implicature see Schlenker, “The semantics–pragmatics interface.”

<sup>14</sup> Dembroff and Wodak, “How much gender is too much gender?” 363.

<sup>15</sup> One could argue that there has been a linguistic shift, and in some ordinary contexts, FM pronouns now do not implicate sex, but something else. However, it often happens (even on network television) that people who are against trans women competing in a female sporting category will refer to a particular trans woman as *he*, or (in print) put *she* in scare quotes. (Whether they *should* do that is another matter.) These people are not rejecting the athlete’s gender identity; neither are they (primarily) concerned to deny that the athlete is a woman. Rather, they instinctively think that there is something amiss with *she* for males, and the athlete’s sex is the salient topic. It is not credible that they are incompetent speakers, and objectors typically do not claim that some *linguistic* error has been made.

The upshot is that *any defensible alternative account will not significantly affect the issues discussed in this paper*, only the details of their presentation. All that is needed is that in many ordinary contexts FM pronouns implicate (or presuppose) sex.

so the officer has also effectively communicated to the dispatcher that the suspect is a woman. In an alternative scenario, the suspect is known to be a child; in this case by uttering (1) the officer also communicates that the suspect is a girl.

Similarly, if it is known that the referent is an adult lion, then the additional information communicated by uttering (1) is that the animal is a lioness. But the fundamental semantic connection is between FM pronouns and sex. The information that the animal is a lioness can be explained as an entailment from what is conventionally implicated—that the animal is female—and the background knowledge that the animal is an adult lion.

One might think that the explanation in the case of *woman* is parallel. Just as *adult lion* and *female* entail *lioness*, *adult human* and *female* entail *woman*. A speaker who knows that the referent of *she* is an adult human is therefore committed to the claim that the referent is a woman. In fact, the entailment is routinely denied by philosophers who have proposed answers to Simone de Beauvoir's question: What is a woman?<sup>16</sup> Although there is no consensus in the philosophical literature on an answer, there is a near-consensus that *woman* is compatible with *male*. By the same token, *man* is compatible with *female*, and (although this is rarely discussed), *girl* is compatible with *male* and *boy* is compatible with *female*. This position is sometimes motivated by the conviction that transgender (trans, transsexual) women are women and transgender men are men, or that at least some of them are, and that these people remain their natal sex.

*Woman, man, boy, girl* are often called *gender terms*.<sup>17</sup> Other gender terms include *non-binary* and *agender*; for the sake of the argument we will not question whether the latter should be grouped with *woman* and *man*. Since *female* and *male* are (in this usage) not gender terms, the terminology reflects the near-consensus view just explained. A related term is *misgendering*, which (in the case of transgender women) Kapusta takes to mean:

something broader than simply the use of male pronouns, or of designations associated with being male . . . the notion includes the use of gender terms that exclude transgender women from the category *woman*.<sup>18</sup>

To “misgender” someone sounds like it involves a factual mistake—getting the person's “gender” wrong, for instance saying of a man that he is a woman. That is not the usual understanding of the term, however, and Kapusta herself is neutral on whether transgender women are included in the category *woman* (i.e., whether they are women). As the quotation from Kapusta indicates, a sufficient condition for misgendering a transgender woman is simply reference to her with masculine pronouns. The *misgendering* terminology is confusing, and will not be used here.

Let us say that *gendering* is conveying that someone is a woman, man, girl, boy, non-binary person . . . and so on for other gender terms. (Construe *conveying* broadly, to include asserting, implicating, and presupposing.) *Sexing* is conveying that someone is female or male.

Imagine that farmer Frederick, an unexceptional middle-aged male, is climbing over a stile leading into a field. Julia and her companion are looking down on the field from a nearby hill. Julia's companion utters (1), “She is in the field,” pointing to Frederick. Frederick has been mistakenly sexed. Has he been mistakenly gendered? That depends.

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<sup>16</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 1949/2011), 3.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Elizabeth Barnes, “Gender and gender terms,” *Noûs* 54 (2020): 704–30.

<sup>18</sup> Stephanie Julia Kapusta, “Misgendering and its moral contestability,” *Hypatia* 31 (2016): 502–19, 502.

Suppose that orthodoxy in the metaphysics of gender is correct, and that adult females of our species are not guaranteed to be women. Suppose, further, that Katharine knows this and is the utterer of (1). When Julia tries to correct Katharine by saying, “Wrong, that’s not a woman,” Katharine protests that she never said or implied such a thing. Katharine rightly takes this “correction” to be like someone responding with “Wrong, that’s not a woman” to:

23. That person is a preschool teacher.

Preschool teachers are extremely likely to be women, but someone who utters (23) is not committed to the person’s being a woman.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, suppose that orthodoxy is wrong and that *woman* is like *lioness*. Suppose, further, that Benjamin is Julia’s companion in this alternative scenario; he utters, “She is in the field,” pointing at Frederick. Benjamin knows that (*adult human*) *female* entails *woman*, and accepts Julia’s correction, “Wrong, that’s not a woman.” In the first scenario, Katharine does not mistakenly gender Frederick; in the second, Benjamin does.

This is a complication that should be kept in mind in what follows. Fortunately, as will be explained in Section 3, whether the orthodox view of gender is correct is not especially relevant to this paper.

### 3. Courtesy Pronouns and Linguistically Correct Pronouns

Tom is a transgender man. A natal female and a “tomboy” growing up, Tom suffered from *gender dysphoria*, “the aversion to some or all of those physical characteristics or social roles that connote one’s own biological sex.”<sup>20</sup> Tom’s dysphoria did not abate after puberty, and in his twenties, Tom “transitioned” to male, with the assistance of surgery and testosterone.<sup>21</sup> Thanks to that powerful hormone, Tom’s voice deepened, fat redistributed, muscle and facial hair grew. Tom presents as a neatly bearded man in his thirties at work and in his leisure time, and uses bathrooms and facilities appropriate for his sex-of-living. Tom’s dysphoria is now greatly reduced, and he is getting on with life, concentrating on his career and relationships, and not bothering anyone else.

Tom’s *courtesy* pronouns are the masculine ones, the pronouns that match his sex-of-living. Tom’s colleagues all use them when talking about Tom in his absence, not out of courtesy but because it would never occur to them to do anything else. Only a few of Tom’s colleagues know that he is a trans man.

Did Tom literally change his sex from female to male? Of course, if he did, then the propriety of referring to Tom with feminine pronouns is a non-issue: this is inappropriate just as a feminine pronoun for farmer Frederick is inappropriate. However, Tom has not changed sex. Some animals do change sex in normal ecological conditions, but mammals don’t, and Tom’s medical treatment comes nowhere near to approximating actual sex-changes in the wild; in that sense, it is cosmetic.

We will assume, then, that no sex change has occurred. (We could also consider a version of Tom with no medical treatment, and only a social transition; here a sex-change

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<sup>19</sup> However, one could use (23) to conversationally implicate that the person is a woman.

<sup>20</sup> Margaret S. Schneider et al., *Report of the Task Force on Gender Identity and Gender Variance* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2009), 28.

<sup>21</sup> Some testimonies: Aaron Devor, *FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016). Tomboys: Lisa Selin Davis, *Tomboy: The Surprising History and Future of Girls Who Dare to be Different* (New York: Hachette, 2020).

is not credible in the slightest. But we will stay with Tom as described.) Let us say that feminine pronouns are Tom's *Linguistically Correct (LC)* pronouns: the conventional implicature of feminine pronouns, applied to Tom, is true. (The fact that *she* is one of Tom's LC pronouns does not entail that it is permissible to use *she* to refer to Tom.)

Did Tom literally change from being a woman to being a man? On orthodox views in the metaphysics of gender, he did. And if Tom *is* a man, then to convey that he is a woman, or not a man, is to convey something false. In the terminology adopted here, it is to mistakenly *gender* Tom. The propriety of saying or implying that Tom is not a man is a non-issue: this is inappropriate just as saying or implying that farmer Frederick is not a man is inappropriate.

Now using *she* for Tom might well suggest to the uneducated that he is not a man, but (granted orthodoxy) that is not the pronoun's fault. The unwanted suggestion that Tom is not a man could be removed (perhaps!) by explaining that Tom has changed *gender*, not *sex*. Still, it is clear that at least in some circumstances, *she* should not be used to refer to Tom, even among the educated who accept that there are female men.

An alternative hypothesis is that *woman* entails *female* and *man* entails *male*. If this is correct, Tom is not a man, since his natal sex is his present sex. Saying that Tom is not a man is then not to make a factual mistake, just as referring to Tom by his LC pronouns implicates nothing false. If (accurately) using *she* to refer to Tom is objectionable, presumably saying (truly) that Tom is not a man is objectionable for similar reasons.

The upshot is that, for present purposes, controversies about gender terms like *woman* and *man* can be ignored. Either *man* applies to Tom or it does not. If it does, then *man* is not worth discussing: Tom is a man and there's no reason to avoid saying so. And if *man* doesn't apply to Tom, then *not a man* or *woman* adds little to the issue already raised by *she*.

#### 4. LC Pronouns and Transgender Women and Men

To use feminine pronouns for Tom is to correctly sex him, to conventionally implicate (or presuppose) that he is female. It is not very interesting to be told that Tom's LC pronouns should not be used at work. Tom is not playing a frivolous game of dress-up: he has undergone drastic medical treatment for a serious psychological condition. To use Tom's LC pronouns would be cruel and a gratuitous invasion of his privacy. What is interesting, however, is whether it is ever permissible to use Tom's LC pronouns in an ordinary conversational context.

Imagine that two of Tom's close friends, who know his history, are talking about him in private. Tom's sex is relevant to the conversation—perhaps they have read something about the effects of high levels of testosterone in natal females and are concerned for Tom's health. Or perhaps they are wondering if Tom, who always wanted children, could get pregnant while continuing to take cross-sex hormones. Or perhaps they are talking about the treatment of females by males, and why Tom does not receive this treatment, despite his sex. Probably it would be easier and feel more natural for them to continue to use Tom's courtesy pronouns, as they usually do, and state Tom's sex—somewhat awkwardly—by saying “He is female.” Or they could use his name, or find some euphemistic substitute for *female*. But what if they used his LC pronouns? Would Tom have been wronged in any way?

Dembroff and Wodak, in their agenda-setting paper on FM pronouns,<sup>22</sup> argue that he would. They give four arguments for the following claim:

**TW** We have a duty not to use *he* to refer to transgender women.

(We can concentrate on the first three; the fourth basically comprises the first three taken together.<sup>23</sup>) Clearly Dembroff and Wodak would endorse the corresponding thesis for transgender men, and their arguments can be presented with Tom as the example, making the appropriate substitutions. In our terminology, their generalized claim is:

**TW/M** We have a duty not to use LC pronouns for transgender women or transgender men.

How strong is this duty? If someone is going to be shot unless LC pronouns are used, Dembroff and Wodak would concede that the duty is overridden, but seem disinclined to make many more concessions. In particular, they think that “private acts” of using LC pronouns for transgender women or men are “bad” and “problematic,” although not as bad as doing this publicly.<sup>24</sup>

Dembroff and Wodak’s “first and most obvious reason” in favor of not using Tom’s LC pronouns is that “it expresses disrespect towards [him] in virtue of [his] social identity, and thereby also expresses disrespect to those who share [his] social identity (i.e., other transgender [men]).”<sup>25</sup>

This reason is not so obvious. When social identities come with approved ways of speaking—*Doctor* for physicians, *Father* for priests, *Comrade* for members of the Party, and so on—it can be impolite to leave these out. Addressing Father O’Brien as *Mr. O’Brien* might mildly disrespect him, and the clergy in general. But is there much, if anything, wrong with using *Mr. O’Brien* when speaking of him in his absence? (Note that *Mr.* has no incorrect conventional implicature or presupposition.) And not all social identities deserve respect anyway—perhaps including some religious identities. If using Tom’s LC pronouns is to egregiously disrespect him, that must be because of some distinctive feature of the transgender case.

And Dembroff and Wodak offer one candidate for a distinctive feature. Someone who uses Tom’s LC pronouns expresses “disrespect towards [Tom] by referring to [him] as [*she*], thereby communicating that [he] is a [woman].”<sup>26</sup>

Since gender terms like *woman* and *man* are a distraction, the point should be recast in terms of communicating that Tom is female. And that, we are supposing, is true: Tom *is* female. (Contrast referring to Father O’Brien as *Mr. O’Brien*: in some contexts, that conversationally implicates that O’Brien is not a priest. But here what is implicated is false: O’Brien is a priest.)

Now it is also true that using Tom’s LC pronouns *could* conversationally implicate that Tom is some kind of fraud or “evil deceiver,”<sup>27</sup> and that Tom is offending against nature or God: his sex-of-living should match his natal sex. That is undoubtedly problematic. But

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<sup>22</sup> Dembroff and Wodak, “He/she/they/ze.”

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 379.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 375–76.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.

<sup>27</sup> Talia Mae Bettcher, “Evil deceivers and make-believers: On transphobic violence and the politics of illusion,” *Hypatia* 22 (2007): 43–65.

in another context, for instance in the conversation between Tom's friends, there is no such implicature.

How are Tom's friends disrespecting him? They are not revealing any secrets, or trying to humiliate Tom or exacerbate his dysphoria. Neither are they conveying anything false: it is *true* that Tom is female, and there's no shame in that. Tom's sex may be irrelevant in most contexts, but it is not entirely irrelevant, and it is relevant in the conversation between Tom's friends.

Indeed, we may suppose that Tom himself agrees with the following remarks from a (non-fictional) transgender man:

I wasn't identified as a female at birth. My sex was observed—not assigned. It wasn't some random & spontaneous guess. My biological sex is still relevant in many aspects of my life. The fact that I'm a trans man does not erase my biology. This shouldn't be controversial to say.<sup>28</sup>

Dembroff and Wodak's initial argument is not very convincing, then. It has two important similarities with their other two arguments, worth noting at this point. First, the argument has nothing specific to do with pronouns. If someone said at work that Tom is female, this would be to disrespect him just as much as using feminine pronouns would. Dembroff and Wodak's fundamental objection is (in effect) to *correct sexing*, whether implicated via pronouns or stated explicitly.

Second, the argument doesn't just target the correct sexing of individuals. Correctly sexing transgender men in general is also problematic, on Dembroff and Wodak's view. FM pronouns are still relevant in this case, since they can be anaphors to singular indefinite noun phrases like *a transgender man*, or fictional names like *Tom*.

Dembroff and Wodak's second argument against using Tom's LC pronouns is that

it implies that we may withhold from them certain resources (understood broadly), to which they are genuinely entitled. Categorizing [Tom as a male] carries a vast number of practical implications and entitlements: it implies that [Tom] has appropriate access to [male] spaces, such as bathrooms and locker rooms . . . .<sup>29</sup>

Tom would cause a commotion if he marched into the female bathroom, and no issues arise about Tom using the one for males. One should not be hyper-legalistic about bathroom signs. Boys may use the bathroom marked *Men*, even though boys are not men. A father may take his small daughter into a bathroom with ♂ on the door. Rules and regulations need to be interpreted in a flexible commonsense way. Since Tom's being female does *not* imply that he is not entitled to male spaces, merely conveying Tom's sex does not imply this either.

The analogous point applies equally to trans women, although in this case there are well-known complications. Categorizing a trans woman as female, according to Dembroff and Wodak, implies that she

has appropriate access to [female] spaces, such as bathrooms and locker rooms; that she can appropriately take part in [female] social groups; that she can apply for scholarships, jobs, or housing intended for [female] applicants; and so on.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> [link to this tweet](#).

<sup>29</sup> Dembroff and Wodak, "He/she/they/ze," 376–77.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

Dembroff and Wodak assume that trans women are entitled to these resources, and conclude that correct sexing is wrong. But, as with Tom, the fact of a trans woman's sex does *not* imply that she is not entitled to female spaces, and so neither does correct sexing.

Although correct sexing does not prejudge issues about entitlement (or the weaker notion of permission), it is disputed whether trans women are entitled (or permitted) to use (certain) female spaces. In this respect, the situations of trans men and trans women are importantly different. To take two examples, it is not obvious that transgender women should be allowed to compete in weightlifting events for females. Neither is it obvious that transgender women should be housed among the general population in the female prison estate. These issues arise because of differences between the sexes: in the case of weightlifting, because of the male advantage in strength; in the case of prisons, because of the asymmetric threat males pose to females.<sup>31</sup> It is not possible to debate these issues properly without correctly sexing trans women.

Dembroff and Wodak's third argument turns on "gender-specific norms." The actual norm they consider in the case of trans women is "*women shave their legs*"<sup>32</sup>; a corresponding norm in Tom's case would be: *men (should) take their hats off indoors*. Keeping the focus on sex, let us modify that to: *males (should) take their hats off indoors*.

This norm does not apply to Tom, since he is not male. Suppose Tom decides to act as if the norm applies to him, and removes his hat on entering someone's house. According to Dembroff and Wodak, using feminine pronouns for Tom would "undermine the intelligibility" of this action:

[Tom] can only be recognized to conform to *or* violate the norm if the norm is recognized as applying to [him]. So if Tom is [referred to] as a [*she*], the intelligibility of his actions and choices is undermined.<sup>33</sup>

However, pronouns (and correct sexing more broadly) are irrelevant. The norm does not apply to Tom, no matter how he is referred to. If this fact makes Tom's action unintelligible, then pronouns are not to blame. And in any case, Tom's action is still perfectly intelligible even if the norm does not apply to him. A tourist may visit a country with certain norms of greeting (say, bowing) that do not apply to foreigners; nonetheless, the polite tourist bows when meeting his hosts, even though he is not expected to. There is nothing unintelligible (or wrong, for that matter) about the tourist's action, and the same goes for Tom.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Sports: Helen Joyce, *Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality* (London: Oneworld, 2021), ch. 9; Edward Schiappa, *The Transgender Exigency: Defining Sex and Gender in the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2022), ch. 7. Prisons: Michael Biggs, "Queer theory and the transition from sex to gender in English prisons," *Journal of Controversial Ideas* 2 (2022): 1–21; Schiappa, *The Transgender Exigency*, ch. 8. One problem is that males with no history of gender dysphoria may fake a cross-gender identification to get transferred into the female estate (James Barrett, "Written evidence submitted by British Association of Gender Identity Specialists to the Transgender Equality Inquiry," *House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee*, December 8 (2015), [link to this article](#).)

<sup>32</sup> Dembroff and Wodak, "He/she/they/ze," 378.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Another point is that although the norm as stated does not apply to Tom, plausibly the norm that is actually in force *does* apply to him. Suppose that Tom is an overly literal-minded fellow, and has read in a book of etiquette that males should take their hats off when indoors. Good manners are important to Tom, and he naively asks his close friend Moses, "As a trans man, I am of the female sex, so does that mean that I can keep my hat on?" "Of course not," we may imagine Moses replying, "when in Rome, and all that."

We are back where we started: Tom should not be gratuitously embarrassed or humiliated or accused of a crime against nature. But there are plenty of situations where using Tom's LC pronouns is to do none of these things.

There are further cases to consider. To wittingly use courtesy FM pronouns instead of LC ones is to participate in a kind of pretense.<sup>35</sup> Usually that is to the benefit of the person referred to: using courtesy pronouns presents them to others as they wish to be presented. But sometimes the speaker may have reasons for not using words that invert a person's actual sex.

Here's one example. When a married father becomes a transgender woman, this can be highly stressful and emotional for the family.<sup>36</sup> It was for the writer Christine Benvenuto and her three children, whose husband announced he was transgender after more than twenty years of marriage. She kept to the old pronouns:

*She.* Pronouns, of course, become problematic around a person crossing gender lines. I still use the male variety to refer to Tracey because even now I can't think, speak, or write about this person any other way. This results in minor conversational oddities such as the following:

Acquaintance: "Have you asked Tracey about this? What does she say?"

Me: "I have asked him. He says . . ." <sup>37</sup>

Understandably, Benvenuto does not think that her difficulty in using feminine pronouns for Tracey is a problem she needs to fix.

Another example is provided by Karen White, a UK transgender woman who was charged with multiple rapes (among other offenses). White, who had not had sex-reassignment surgery, was sent to a female-only prison, HMP New Hall, where White sexually assaulted some fellow inmates.<sup>38</sup> Stock, who uses courtesy pronouns by default, draws the line at "trans women who assault or aggress women. So, for instance, I will not call Karen White 'she' nor 'her'."<sup>39</sup> One might think this choice is permissible.<sup>40</sup>

Some feminists go much further. Jeffreys, for instance, offers a mirror image of Dembroff and Wodak's argument from respect:

Another reason for adherence to pronouns that indicate biology is that, as a feminist, I consider the female pronoun to be an honorific, a term that conveys respect. Respect

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<sup>35</sup> Kathleen Stock, *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism* (London: Fleet, 2021), ch. 6.

<sup>36</sup> Overview of gender dysphoria in adults: Kenneth J. Zucker, Anne A. Lawrence, and Baudewijntje P. C. Kreukels, "Gender dysphoria in adults," *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology* 12 (2016): 217–47.

<sup>37</sup> Christine Benvenuto, *Sex Changes: A Memoir of Marriage, Gender, and Moving On* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012), 192.

<sup>38</sup> Biggs, "Queer theory . . . "; according to some reports, White's commitment to a trans identity was half-hearted (Lucy Bannerman and Mark Lister, "Rapist, Karen White, in women's jail 'was trans faker'," *The Times* September 10 (2018), [link to this article](#)).

<sup>39</sup> Stock, *Material Girls*, 210.

<sup>40</sup> This example raises larger issues about the importance (in some circumstances) of clearly referring to a person's sex (Kathleen Stock, "The importance of referring to human sex in language," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 85 (2022): 25–43). There is also the related fact that using pronouns that are incongruent with someone's sexed appearance can be difficult (Stock, *Material Girls*, 206–10), especially for those with communication disabilities. Space considerations preclude further discussion.

is due to women as members of a sex caste that have survived subordination and deserve to be addressed with honour.<sup>41</sup>

On the other hand, Faye would describe this as “the central belief of most anti-trans feminism: that women are a global ‘sex class’ of everyone who shares female biology,” which she thinks “specious.”<sup>42</sup> No attempt will be made to referee this issue, but one can see where both sides are coming from. At least they agree that the pronoun is political.

## 5. LC Pronouns and Non-Binary People

So far we have discussed Dembroff and Wodak’s arguments for:

**TW/M** We have a duty not to use LC pronouns for transgender women or transgender men.

This is not their main quarry, however. (TW/M), according to Dembroff and Wodak, “is not . . . very controversial.”<sup>43</sup> In their paper, (TW/M) is deployed in an argument by analogy for the corresponding claim about genderqueer or non-binary people:

**NB** We have a duty not to use LC pronouns for non-binary people.

The four arguments for (TW/M), slightly modified, are supposed to establish (NB).

Dembroff and Wodak’s working example of a non-binary person is the US rapper Angel Haze, “who identifies as genderqueer.”<sup>44</sup> Postpone the issue of what being non-binary or genderqueer amounts to. Is it “gravely wrong”<sup>45</sup> to refer to Haze as *she*? Apparently Haze does not think so:

I sound like four people when I get written about as “they”. It drives me crazy . . . Sometimes I want to be a dick and say: “Call me they”, just to see how seriously people take me. But they do take me seriously so it’s not that much fun. If you call me “him” or “her” it doesn’t matter to me. I don’t consider myself of any sex. I consider myself an experience.<sup>46</sup>

Apart from the last two sentences, this sounds very sensible; for a celebrity, Haze’s level of self-importance is admirably low.

This brings out a point made by Dembroff and Wodak themselves, that their arguments do not depend on anyone’s “preferred pronouns”: “We do not think that the duty not to misgender [i.e., use LC feminine pronouns for] . . . Haze is explained in terms of what

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<sup>41</sup> Sheila Jeffreys, *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism* (London: Routledge, 2014), 9. Cf. Holly Lawford-Smith, *Gender-Critical Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 204.

<sup>42</sup> Shon Faye, *The Transgender Issue: An Argument for Justice* (London: Allen Lane, 2021), 235.

<sup>43</sup> Dembroff and Wodack, “He/she/they/ze,” 372.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* Dembroff and Wodak harmlessly slide from *identifying as genderqueer* to *being genderqueer*, but it is worth noting that these are not the same. On any intuitive understanding of *identifying as* one may identify as an *F* without *being an F*.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 371.

<sup>46</sup> David Smyth, “Angel Haze, interview: ‘At home, I’m dead. But on stage, I’m God,’” *Evening Standard*, January 15 (2016), [link to this article](#). The singer’s Wikipedia entry ([link to this article](#); accessed April 2023) claims that Haze has “begun using [sic] *they/them* pronouns,” but the sources for this are dated before the interview quoted in the text. Accordingly, this paper accommodates Haze’s preferences as stated there.

preferences people happen to have.”<sup>47</sup> Haze’s “it doesn’t matter to me” notwithstanding, it is wrong to refer to her as this sentence does.

This is surprising. Admittedly, people can be oblivious to cutting remarks or other kinds of verbal insults and attacks; they can be wronged without realizing it. But can Haze—who seems to have given the matter some thought—really be this confused?

Since Dembroff and Wodak’s four arguments for (TW/M) are unpersuasive, the project of adapting them to establish (NB) is not promising. Looking at the first two arguments will be instructive, though. Before doing that, we need to say something briefly about *being* non-binary.

A common definition—in the words of a “non-binary sex educator” consulted by *Teen Vogue*—is that a non-binary person is “someone who does not identify as a man or a woman, or solely as one of those two genders.”<sup>48</sup> Another common more-or-less equivalent alternative is that non-binary people “identify as neither male nor female.”<sup>49</sup> But what does this mean? It is uncharitable to interpret Haze’s “I do not consider myself of any sex” as a *biological* remark. Haze is a standard-issue female and she makes no attempt to disguise this fact.<sup>50</sup>

Numerous self-declared non-binary people have offered explanations, and one consistent theme is that to be non-binary, or “outside the gender binary,” is to be in some respects feminine and in other respects masculine:

I don’t like to classify myself as simply “masculine” or “feminine”. I tend to be most comfortable in masculine clothes, while some of the personality traits I’m most proud of are that I’m compassionate, thoughtful, and emotionally expressive—traits that are often linked with femininity.<sup>51</sup>

I find myself embracing a combination of manly and womanly characteristics. For instance, I love wearing makeup, being all smooth and shaved, baking bread and desserts, but I also like lifting weights and I am quite minimalistic with my furniture.<sup>52</sup>

If this is what being non-binary amounts to, a significant proportion of people are going to be included, which might be an unwelcome result. However, for present purposes we can adopt this explanation as a working hypothesis, and not try to refine it further.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Dembroff and Wodak, “He/she/they/ze,” 384.

<sup>48</sup> Suzannah Weiss, “12 things people get wrong about being non-binary,” *Teen Vogue*, May 20 (2022), [link to this article](#); see also Dembroff and Wodak, “He/she/they/ze,” 372.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Having said that, some self-declared non-binary people do seem to believe that they are neither female nor male.

<sup>51</sup> Vera Papisova, “Here’s what it means when you don’t identify as a girl or a boy,” *Teen Vogue*, February 12 (2018), [link to this article](#).

<sup>52</sup> Mario Novoli, “Non-binary: Political stance or ‘just’ trans?” *Medium*, December 5 (2021), [link to this article](#).

<sup>53</sup> See also Weiss, “12 things people get wrong . . .”; Meg-John Barker and Alex Iantaffi, *Life Isn’t Binary* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2019), ch. 2; Eris Young, *They/Them/Their: A Guide to Nonbinary and Genderqueer Identities* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2019); Jamie Windust, *In Their Shoes: Navigating Non-binary Life* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2020). According to Dembroff, to be non-binary is to adopt “an unabashedly political identity,” to question “why we categorise people as women and men at all” (Robin Dembroff, “Why be nonbinary?” *Aeon*, October 30 (2018), [link to this article](#); see also Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Vintage, 1995)). One problem with this is that some avowedly non-binary people also make a point of saying that they are women or men. More to the present topic, mocking someone’s *political* identity is not usually thought to be much of a sin. Cf. Lawford-Smith, *Gender-Critical Feminism*, 136.

Let us now turn to the first two of the four analogous arguments for (NB). Just as using *she* for Tom is to (allegedly) disrespect him, so too is using *she* for Haze:

Referring to Haze as *he* or *she* expresses disrespect towards Haze in virtue of their social identity, and thereby also expresses disrespect to those who share their social identity (i.e., other genderqueer people). It does so by communicating that Haze (*they*) either identifies as [male] (*he*), or identifies as [female] (*she*).<sup>54</sup>

However, this is *disanalogous* to the corresponding situation with transgender women and men. Using *she* to refer to Tom communicates that Tom is female, which is true. But here the problem is said to be that using *she* for Haze communicates something *false*, namely that she is not non-binary.

There is no good reason to convey that Haze is not non-binary, since she is and is happy to say so. But would feminine pronouns do that? Non-binary people themselves may prefer FM pronouns. As *Teen Vogue* reports:

Non-binary people can also have a variety of pronouns. Some go by they/them, some go by she/her, some go by both, and some go by more than that. The only way you can know is to ask.<sup>55</sup>

Accordingly, (24) and (25) are not infelicitous:

24. She identifies as neither female nor male.

25. He is non-binary.

In *some* contexts referring to Haze with (LC) feminine pronouns will conversationally implicate that she is not non-binary, but in many contexts it won't. Dembroff and Wodak's first argument for (NB) therefore fails.

The second argument for (NB) concerns resources. Although using FM pronouns for Haze "may not imply that we may withhold *existing* resources,"

it suggests that we may refrain from *establishing* resources that are accessible to genderqueer persons. That is, to use *she* or *he* for individuals like Haze implies that they can and should fit into a binary and gender-specific organization of restrooms, legal identification, educational institutions, social clubs, dating apps and so on.<sup>56</sup>

Let us grant for the sake of the argument that Haze should be able to use special genderqueer restrooms, to have *GQ* or *NB* on her driver's license, and so on. Using *she* for Haze need not suggest otherwise. An analogy: Julia, who is in a wheelchair, needs to use special restrooms for the disabled, not the standard "binary" restrooms for females. Calling Julia *she* obviously does not suggest that these accommodations should not be established. The second argument for (NB) also fails.

As with (TW/M), we are back where we started. Angel Haze is no more deserving of humiliation and unkindness than Tom is. If using *she* to refer to Haze in her presence would upset her, that is a consideration against doing so. But there is nothing evidently wrong with using her LC pronouns in private conversations, especially when her sex is

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<sup>54</sup> Dembroff and Wodak, "He/she/they/ze," 376, substituting *male* for *man* and *female* for *woman*.

<sup>55</sup> Weiss, "12 things people get wrong . . . ."

<sup>56</sup> Dembroff and Wodak, "He/she/they/ze," 377.

relevant. And since she presents as female, her sex is considerably more relevant than Tom's.

Having said that, is the enthusiasm for non-binary *they* (along with exotic coinages like *ze/xir*), and the consequent pressure to share one's pronouns, a welcome development?

## 6. The World of *They*

A non-binary person may look exactly like a vanilla woman or man, with a gendered name to match. Judith Butler, referred to with feminine pronouns in thousands of pages over many years, and as patently female as she always was, is now legally non-binary. "I am enjoying the world of 'they'," she remarked recently.<sup>57</sup> (*They* was Merriam-Webster's word of the year in 2019.) Although Butler herself does not mind *she/her*, *they/them* are her pronouns in the more progressive reaches of journalism and academia.

Assuming that the account of being non-binary in Section 5 is along the right lines, non-binary people were around long before the word was coined. As Butler says, "When I wrote *Gender Trouble* [in 1990], there was no category for 'non-binary'—but now I don't see how I cannot be in that category."<sup>58</sup> Butler was non-binary in 1990, despite the lack of the contemporary non-binary signal, reference with *they/them* pronouns.

Butler does not suggest that non-binary people were somehow *deprived* back in the day, because no special pronouns were in use and they were referred to by FM ones. Perhaps the later introduction of the term *non-binary* was a positive step, allowing non-binary people to categorize themselves and understand their experiences, but pronouns are an entirely different matter.<sup>59</sup> Decades past indicate that being non-binary and being correctly sexed can happily coexist. Some non-binary people are now very particular about pronouns, but a non-binary female (say) may be fine with *she*.

These points bring out a massive disanalogy between non-binary *they* and courtesy pronouns for transsexuals. Judith Butler used to be called *she*; in contrast, there was never a time when transsexuals were routinely referred to with LC pronouns. The pioneering sexologist Harry Benjamin and others in the 1960s and 70s instinctively used pronouns for trans women and trans men that matched their sex-of-living.<sup>60</sup> As they saw it, if one wanted to help these people live productive and happy lives, this was the only option. (By the same token, if one wanted to be mean, the choice of pronoun was clear.<sup>61</sup>)

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<sup>57</sup> Alex Bollinger, "Judith Butler calls out transphobia as 'one of the dominant strains of fascism in our times,'" *LGBTQ Nation*, September 7 (2021), [link to this article](#).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), ch. 7. On the other hand, *gender-bender* (which is at least fairly close to *non-binary*) goes back to the 1970s.

<sup>60</sup> See, e.g., Harry Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (New York: Julian Press, 1966), 14–15, 159; Benjamin's foreword to Christine Jorgensen, *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography* (New York: Paul S. Eriksson, 1967); Richard Green and John Money, eds., *Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 1969), 39, 186–87, 250–51. Clinicians stated a patient's sex when necessary, and used LC pronouns for patients before sex-reassignment.

<sup>61</sup> When the UK newspaper *The Sunday People* notoriously outed the fashion model April Ashley as a transsexual in 1961, the headline had *her* in scare quotes: "'Her' Secret Is Out." But that is as far as the paper went: the body of the story used Ashley's courtesy pronouns (Michael Seamark, "Cabin boy who became first Briton to have a sex change operation is awarded an MBE for services to transgender equality," *Daily Mail*, June 15 (2012), [link to this article](#)).

Whether someone should be referred to with *she* or *he* used to be obvious, even if sometimes it was unobvious whether the pronoun matched the person's sex. There was thus no need to make any announcements, or to wear pronoun badges, or to have pronouns in one's email (or snail mail) signature. Politeness and decency brought about the desired result by themselves. And, no doubt, many trans women and trans men thought this the ideal arrangement.

Although the vast majority need no pronoun badges, those who do will stand out even more if they are the only ones. Hence the trend in universities and elsewhere—for everyone to state their pronouns, non-binary or not. Not everyone is on board: the iconic gender-bending Culture Club singer Boy George once described current pronounmania as a “modern form of attention seeking.” Unsurprisingly, this was not well-received.<sup>62</sup>

Still, perhaps respecting people's pronoun preferences is a harmless indulgence, like calling Elaine's boyfriend (in the famous *Seinfeld* episode), *Maestro*. If using *they* makes a few people feel better, why not go for it?

The downside arguably outweighs the upside. Imagine what it would be like if *they* was consistently used for (often gender-atypical) self-declared non-binary people, reinforced by the majority's preference for *she* and *he*. Feminine and masculine pronouns would be more strongly associated than they are now with gender stereotypes. Given the non-binary tendency to avoid self-ascribing *woman/girl/man/boy*, and the strong link between these gender terms and FM pronouns, *woman* and the rest would also be more strongly associated than they are now with gender stereotypes. *Masculine woman* and *masculine girl* might start to sound jarring, surely an unhealthy result. Self-declared non-binary people frequently proclaim their desire to overturn gender stereotypes, but the widespread use of non-binary *they* risks producing exactly the opposite result.

There is at least an initial case, then, for resisting the world of *they*, along with the practice of sharing one's pronouns.<sup>63</sup>

## 7. The Epicene Reformation

English does have a defect which has been long-recognized: there is no singular epicene pronoun—like the Finnish *hän*—appropriate for any person. It would be convenient to have the option of answering “Where does Smith live?” (asked by someone ignorant of Smith's sex) with some polite version of “It lives in London.”

A frequent claim is that masculine pronouns have a sex-neutral sense in sentences like (26):

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<sup>62</sup> Josh Milton, “Boy George slammed as ‘transphobic’ after mocking pronouns as a ‘modern form of attention seeking,’” *Pink News*, January 8 (2020), [link to this article](#).

<sup>63</sup> See also Rebecca Reilly-Cooper, “Gender is not a spectrum,” *Aeon*, June 28 (2016), [link to this article](#); Colin Wright, “When asked ‘What are your pronouns,’ don’t answer,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 4 (2022), [link to this article](#); Andrew Doyle, “The liberal case against pronouns,” *UnHerd*, March 2 (2022), [link to this article](#). For some reservations about sharing pronouns, combined with sympathy for the world of *they*, see Brian D. Earp, “On sharing pronouns,” *The Philosopher* 109 (2021): 107–15, [link to this article](#). Dembroff and Wodak argue against proliferating pronouns, “introducing a new gender-specific pronoun for each non-binary gender identity,” on the ground that “learning dozens is infeasible” (“He/she/they/ze,” 390). (English pronouns, as they note, are “closed class” words, which change members very slowly.) The worry is well-taken; another objection is that it is unclear how these many pronouns are supposed to differ. Presently used alternatives like *per/pers*, *ey/em*, *zel/hir*, and *faelfaer* do not seem to have *different* conventional implicatures (or presuppositions).

26. Every one of us knows he is fallible.

According to the 1979 edition of Strunk and White's classic *Elements of Style*, "*He* has lost all suggestion of maleness in these circumstances."<sup>64</sup> If the sex-neutral *he* is genuine, that wouldn't solve the problem, because the alleged sex-neutral sense cannot be used to answer the question about Smith. Neither can that sense appear in a sentence like (27), where Julia is female:

27. If Julia has done his homework, he can leave.

Moreover, sex-neutral *he* is a myth in any case. The chair of the local Women's Institute cannot use (26) to state a generalization about the Institute's membership. Here's another sort of example:

28. If either of your parents were alive he would be horrified at what you're doing.

(28) should have a perfectly acceptable reading with sex-neutral *he*, but it does not.<sup>65</sup> And since FM pronouns are not human-centric, sex-neutral *he* should work for other animals. Yet (29) just invites the complaint that female foals have been ignored:

29. Every foal is suckled by his mother.

Not only did Strunk and White endorse sex-neutral *he*, they also deprecated singular *they*.<sup>66</sup> But singular *they* dates back to the fourteenth century.<sup>67</sup> (30) is fine:

30. Every one of us knows they are fallible.

Sometimes it is suggested (usually in the context of non-binary *they*) that singular *they* is the all-purpose pronoun that we need. For example, the BBC reported in 2019 that the singer Sam Smith "came out as non-binary and asked fans to use the pronouns they/them instead of he/him." The BBC noted the ensuing grammatical controversy, but said that "these identifiers are nothing new and have actually been used throughout the history of literature," describing the non-binary usage as "reclaiming pronouns like 'they' in the modern era."<sup>68</sup> But this is wrong, because the traditional singular *they* cannot be used deictically (while demonstrating a person). (31) is not acceptable when pointing at farmer Frederick:

31. #They are in the field.<sup>69</sup>

Neither can singular *they* be used anaphorically when the antecedent is a proper name, as in:

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<sup>64</sup> William Strunk and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style* (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 60, partly quoted in Dennis E. Baron, *What's Your Pronoun?: Beyond He and She* (New York: Liveright, 2020), 41. The supposed sex-neutral *he* is now very much out of favor, along with *mankind* (Brian D. Earp, "The extinction of masculine generics," *Journal for Communication and Culture* 2 (2012): 4–19).

<sup>65</sup> Example from Geoffrey K. Pullum, "The use and abuse of 'they,'" *National Review*, March 8 (2021), [link to this article](#). An exception that proves the rule: if the salient deceased parents are two gay men, (28) is OK. See also Payne and Huddleston, "Nouns and noun phrases," 492–93; Rachel Lagunoff, "Singular *they*" (PhD thesis, UCLA, 1997), 100–1.

<sup>66</sup> Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*, 60.

<sup>67</sup> Lagunoff, "Singular *they*," 19.

<sup>68</sup> BBC, "A brief history of gender neutral pronouns," *BBC News*, September 22 (2019), [link to this article](#).

<sup>69</sup> As a referee points out, there are deictic cases where *they* is acceptable. Seeing someone coming towards us on a narrow path, I might say to my companion, "Let them pass."

32. #Napoleon is drinking their whiskey.<sup>70</sup>

Singular *they* is therefore *not* an all-purpose sex-neutral pronoun. When Angel Haze complained, “I sound like four people when I get written about as ‘they’,” her instincts were correct.

Could non-binary *they* step in to fill the breach? Using non-binary *they*, (31)—uttered when pointing at Haze—is felicitous. True, it offends against mainstream English grammar, but so what? Dembroff and Wodak point out that this is not like offending against the rules of morality<sup>71</sup>; as Humpty Dumpty observed “The question is, which is to be master—that’s all.”

However, there are two problems. The first is that (at present) non-binary *they* is not appropriate for everyone. In a typical context, (33) suggests that Smith has some preference for *they*:

33. Smith has recorded their new album.<sup>72</sup>

The second is that bucking ingrained habits is difficult. As Pullum says, using non-binary *they* is to try to “override a constraint that has been a natural part of our unconscious grammar throughout our lives.”<sup>73</sup> Perhaps we should make a fresh start, and introduce a completely new pronoun, as the Swedes did with *hen*.

*Hen*, supplementing *hon* (*she*) and *han* (*he*), was originally coined in the 1960s, and took off in 2012 with the publication of a children’s book, *Kivi and Monsterdog*, in which *hen* allows Kivi’s sex to remain unspecified.<sup>74</sup> Appearing in the official Swedish dictionary in 2015, it has been a partial success. *Hen* has been steadily increasing in use, but as of 2019 the ratio of occurrences of *hen* to FM pronouns in the Swedish press was estimated at 1:122.<sup>75</sup>

Interestingly, the many similar proposals for English, dating back to the nineteenth century, have failed completely. Here are a few from a list compiled by Baron:

*ne* (c. 1850); *thon* (1884); *hi* (1884); *hiser* (1884); *ir* (1888); *ons* (1889); *e* (1890)<sup>76</sup>

Even the “neopronouns” *ze* and *per* are nothing new, dating from 1972.<sup>77</sup> The sexologist John Money once proposed the Turkish sex-neutral pronoun *o* “for immediate adoption into English,”<sup>78</sup> but no one took any notice.

What about something considerably more ambitious? Dembroff and Wodak advocate for getting rid of FM pronouns altogether. They offer three arguments. The

<sup>70</sup> See Lagunoff, “Singular *they*,” 6, 80–83. A referee supplies an exception: “I know nothing about Smith, except that they are a singer” (acceptable given ignorance of Smith’s sex). Two of Lagunoff’s many examples illustrating other kinds of grammatically singular antecedents with *they/them* (Appendix I): “I know **someone** who climbed Mt. Everest. **They** were hard core”; “Now, **who** doesn’t have enough faith in **themselves**?” Emphasis in original.

<sup>71</sup> “He/she/they/ze,” 401–02.

<sup>72</sup> See also *ibid.*, 393.

<sup>73</sup> Pullum, “The use and abuse of ‘they’.”

<sup>74</sup> Natalie Rothschild, “Sweden’s new gender-neutral pronoun: *hen*,” *Slate*, April 11 (2012), [link to this article](#).

<sup>75</sup> Anders Svensson, “Hen fortsatte att öka under 2019,” *Språktidningen*, January 8 (2020), [link to this article](#). In a 2018 survey, nearly half of respondents said they never used *hen* (Marie Gustafsson Sendén, Emma Renström, and Anna Lindqvist, “Pronouns beyond the binary: The change of attitudes and use over time,” *Gender & Society* 35 (2021): 588–615, 603).

<sup>76</sup> Dennis E. Baron, “The epicene pronoun: The word that failed,” *American Speech* 56 (1981): 83–97.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>78</sup> John Money and Patricia Tucker, *Sexual Signatures: On Being a Man or a Woman* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1975), 117.

first depends on the argument for (NB) that we have already examined, so can be passed over.<sup>79</sup> The last argument is that FM pronouns (and other gender markers) have “harmful effects on social cognition about gender.” This is a complicated issue that cannot be treated properly here, and Dembroff and Wodak acknowledge that the “evidence is not conclusive.”<sup>80</sup>

The second argument is that FM pronouns can put people in “morally problematic” positions. For instance, if Frederick, a gay man, says he is going on holiday with his partner, and someone asks “Oh, is she looking forward to the sun?” Frederick is in a tight spot if he doesn’t wish to reveal his sexual orientation.<sup>81</sup> If the only pronoun option were the equivalent of *hen*, the problem would not arise.

Fair enough, but obliterating *she* and *he* will not guarantee privacy. What if Frederick and his partner are invited to a barn dance at a neighboring farm? What if someone, on hearing that Frederick and his partner have a baby, offers to donate a breast pump? *Hen* is not going to come to Frederick’s aid. Social attitudes towards homosexuality are a more feasible target—and of course in recent years they have been transformed.

Given the dismal failure to introduce an epicene English pronoun, the minor incursion of *hen* into Swedish, and the fact that mastery of FM pronouns will be needed in the future to understand the enormous past stock of English books, movies, and other media, it is unrealistic to expect that *she* and *he* could be marginalized, let alone driven to extinction. In this case, changing the world is easier than changing the word.<sup>82</sup>

## 8. Deception and Compelled Speech

To close, a brief mention of two other issues, neither yet addressed at any length in the philosophical literature.<sup>83</sup>

The first concerns childhood social transition, where a gender dysphoric child adopts a new name and clothing appropriate for the target gender, and is referred to with courtesy FM pronouns. The reality star Jazz Jennings, for example, socially transitioned from male to female at age five. This is a controversial practice, because social transition may make it harder for the child to desist later—to revert to living as their natal sex, avoiding surgery, treatment with cross-sex hormones, and compromised fertility.<sup>84</sup>

The problem is that the use of a socially transitioning child’s courtesy pronouns can deceive them. Conventional implicatures (and presuppositions) are sometimes deceptive:

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<sup>79</sup> See Dembroff and Wodak, “He/she/they/ze,” 389–92.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 398, 396.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 392.

<sup>82</sup> When *Le Petit Robert* recently added a Gallic attempt at *hen – iel* – to the online version of the dictionary, the French education minister denounced it as “wokisme” (Roger Cohen and Léontine Gallois, “In a nonbinary pronoun, France sees a U.S. attack on the Republic,” *New York Times*, November 28 (2021), [link to this article](#)).

<sup>83</sup> For some discussion of the second issue, see Stock, *Material Girls*, 206–11.

<sup>84</sup> Thomas Steensma et al., “Factors associated with desistance and persistence of childhood gender dysphoria: A quantitative follow-up study,” *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 52 (2013): 582–90. Desistance: Kenneth J. Zucker, “The myth of persistence: Response to ‘A critical commentary on follow-up studies and ‘desistance’ theories about transgender and gender non-conforming children’ by Temple Newhook et al. (2018),” *International Journal of Transgenderism* 19 (2018): 231–45; and Devita Singh, Susan J. Bradley, and Kenneth J. Zucker, “A follow-up study of boys with gender identity disorder,” *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 12 (2021): 1–18. Pro social transition: Diane Ehrensaft et al., “Prepubertal social gender transitions: What we know; what we can learn—a view from a gender affirmative lens,” *International Journal of Transgenderism* 19 (2018): 251–68.

“Ampleforth, a doctor, is at the door” can be used to get someone to wrongly believe that Ampleforth is a doctor. *She*, used of a male, can be similarly used to deceive.<sup>85</sup>

Return to our trans man Tom. He was never under any illusions, and others’ use of the pronoun *he* does not deceive him about his sex. But children are different. They have an imperfect understanding of sex, and the use of feminine pronouns for a young dysphoric natal male child is effectively deceptive: children are often present when adults talk about them in the third person.<sup>86</sup> If *girl* is similarly deceptive, substituting *trans girl* might be a solution, but *she* and *her* are compulsory with a social transition to female.

This is not deception about trivial matters, like saying that the Tooth Fairy will come tonight or that the (open) candy store is closed. And in any case, some argue that it is even wrong to deceive children about Santa.<sup>87</sup> Perhaps paternalistic considerations, invoked in many medical contexts, justify the use of courtesy rather than LC pronouns for some children, but the answer isn’t obvious. We will have to leave the problem there.

The second issue concerns compelled speech. Consider the following case:

In 2017 Maria MacLachlan was assaulted while she was waiting to attend a public meeting in London about proposed reforms to the Gender Recognition Act 2004. One of her attackers, Tara Wolf, who self-defines as a ‘trans woman’, was convicted of assault by beating in April 2018. While MacLachlan was giving evidence at Wolf’s trial for the assault in the Magistrates Court, the presiding District Judge instructed her to call Wolf “she” or “the defendant”, as a matter of “courtesy”. MacLachlan has said that she tried to do this, but that because she was nervous while giving her evidence, she kept reverting to calling Wolf “he”. The judge is reported to have described this as “bad grace” on MacLachlan’s part, and to have given this as one of the reasons for his decision not to award her financial compensation for the assault.<sup>88</sup>

The *Equal Treatment Bench Book* provides guidance for the judiciary of England and Wales to ensure fair treatment of people appearing in court or before tribunals. Before a revision in December 2021 the *Bench Book* said: “It is important to respect a person’s gender identity by using appropriate terms of address, names and pronouns,” with no indication of exceptions.<sup>89</sup> That changed in the December revision:

a victim of domestic abuse or sexual violence at the hands of a trans person may understandably describe the alleged perpetrator and use pronouns consistent with their gender assigned at birth because that is in accordance with the victim’s experience and perception of the events. Artificial steps such as requiring a victim

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<sup>85</sup> See Sally McConnell-Ginet, “Prototypes, pronouns and persons,” in *Ethnolinguistics: Boas, Sapir and Whorf Revisited*, ed. Madeleine Mathiot (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), 71.

<sup>86</sup> Childhood development of sex labeling, sex stereotypes, sex segregation, etc.: Sheri A Berenbaum, Carol Lynn Martin, and Diane N Ruble, “Gender development,” in *Child and Adolescent Development: An Advanced Course*, ed. William Damon, Richard M. Lerner, and Deanne Kuhn (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2008). Young children’s understanding of FM pronouns: Jennifer E Arnold, Sarah Brown-Schmidt, and John Trueswell, “Children’s use of gender and order-of-mention during pronoun comprehension,” *Language and Cognitive Processes* 22 (2007): 527–65.

<sup>87</sup> David Kyle Johnson, “Against the Santa Claus lie: The truth we should tell our children,” in *Christmas Philosophy for Everyone*, ed. Scott C. Lowe (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

<sup>88</sup> Maureen O’Hara, “Compelled speech: Gaslighting in the courtroom,” *Coventry Law Journal* 24 (2019): 55–69. See also Lawford-Smith, *Gender-Critical Feminism*, 136–37.

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in O’Hara, “Compelled speech . . . ,” 63.

to modify his/her language to disguise this risks interfering with his/her ability to give evidence of a traumatic event.<sup>90</sup>

Another example is the New York City Civil Rights (NYCCRL) Law, which:

requires employers and covered entities to use the name, pronouns, and title (e.g., Ms./Mrs./Mx.) with which a person self-identifies, regardless of the person's sex assigned at birth, anatomy, gender, medical history, appearance, or the sex indicated on the person's identification.<sup>91</sup>

Examples of pronouns in the guidance to the NYCCRL include *ze/hir*.

The law goes beyond requiring employees to be polite and respectful when dealing with members of the public. Preferred pronouns are not relevant in a face-to-face meeting. As written, the law requires employees to use preferred pronouns when talking about someone in private, regardless of the person's appearance.

Should employees have to use non-standard pronouns? A more interesting question is about the conventional implicatures (or presuppositions) of standard FM pronouns. Someone who accepts that Ampleforth is at the door should not be legally forced to go the extra step, and utter "Ampleforth, a doctor, is at the door"—especially if Ampleforth is not a doctor. Ampleforth's feelings are not a consideration. Are FM pronouns different, and if so, why?

One might think that pronouns present at best superficial problems, such as whether to add *xe/xem* to the official list of preferred pronouns at an elite liberal arts college. But on closer examination the issues run deeper. English feminine and masculine pronouns sometimes produce an unavoidable collision between social and sexed reality.

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<sup>90</sup> *Equal Treatment Bench Book, December Revision* (London: Judicial Office, 2021), 336.

<sup>91</sup> NYC Human Rights, "Legal enforcement guidance on discrimination on the basis of gender identity or expression: local law no. 3 (2002); N.Y.C. admin. code §8-102," *NYC.gov*, February 15 (2019), [link to this article](#).