



To Be or Not to Be: Nonbinary or ‘Enby’

Vincent E. Gil, PhD, FAACS

September, 2022

By the time we’re old enough to understand the concept, most of us are taught that there are two sexes, male and female. It’s an idea known as the **sexual binary**. The construct is grounded in absolutes, like the apposition of coffee or tea. But the reality is that in *procreation*, we get more than males or females: we also get **intsex** individuals, those born with a sexual biology or morphology that doesn’t fit the binary.

We also know not everyone fits neatly into a box labeled either “male/masculine” or “female/feminine”—what we know as **gender**—the way an individual understands, internalizes, and demonstrates who they feel they are.

When people identify as not 100% of either, the current term used is **nonbinary** (or **NB**, “**enby**” for short). Before the turn of this present century, the common term was **androgynous**, and it has meant having the qualities we deem belong to both genders. **Non-binary** doesn’t necessarily change the mix in qualities, but it does broaden the meaning today, as we will see below.

The fact is that for millenia, many cultures have recognized—and even revered—more than two sexual forms, and by extension, also more than two gender expressions. Navajo culture, for example, has long recognized people who are both “boy and girl”—known as *nádleehí*. These are “two-gender” or “third gender” persons.

On nearly every continent and through recorded history, cultures have recognized, sometimes revered and integrated more than the binary format. But terms such as “**transgender**,” “**gay**,” “**non-binary**,” etc., are strictly new constructs which overturn rather fixed historical assumptions: that there are only two sexes (male/female); that there are only two *sexual orientations* (gay/straight); and that there are only two genders (male/masculine or female/feminine).

In our present cultural milieu, someone who defines as **non-binary** in gender may use the term as an umbrella; and thus could describe themselves as having *no gender* (“agender” or “nutrois”); multiple genders (“polygender”); both genders (“androgynous,” “genderfluid”); or any other gender that is not fully related to being strictly male or female (i.e., “genderqueer,” “omnigender”). For those that define as masculine *or* feminine, male *or* female, the term is now “**cisgender.**”

For the **cisgender** among us, understanding a nonbinary gender identification, as well as the labels and language surrounding it can be confusing. And as the lexicon has evolved, not every person who identifies outside the scope of traditional male and female genders prefers the same descriptors. Thus there are “variations on the theme” (of gender) that may sound astounding to some. These new labels all describe what is now socially prevalent, legally allowable, and thus desirable: a personal label for one’s experience of gender and what the individual feels best describes their identity. These trends, of course, go very contrary to the standard definitions and ideologies that have been reality for most in modern cultures.

Nonbinary Gender—Origins

First let’s clarify some terms. In contemporary speak, **gender** and **sex** are often used interchangeably; but gender and sex are *not* the same thing. Doctors label sex on one’s birth certificate based on genitalia, hormones, and chromosomes; gender labels and ensuing identity is what one derives from one’s body and one’s socialization; “who you feel you are as a person at the very core of your being.” Sex is biological while gender is formed both from the biological substrate (you do *know, experience*, how your body feels and acts biologically), and from all the experiences and influences that are socialized into you *because of your sex*. To say, “gender is a socialized construction,” is to then acknowledge that while biology “predisposes,” culture and experiences also “dispose.” Gender thus becomes the internalized experiences of our body and self that helps form our identity—our **gendered identity**. Sex remains our biological and reproductive entity. “Like it or not,” it’s an irreducible substrate.

For someone to state they are **non-binary** thus means the person is acknowledging that they have not felt, or no longer feel, their core identity matches binary gender schemas as commonly defined—and such can include their socialization, roles, affects, attitudes, values, and ideology.

This self-labeling capacity is a rather novel event in 21st century Western cultures, given that heretofore, individuals have been socialized into experiences *within* a binary framework, and have thus used binary labels only for self-descriptors. To say one doesn’t “feel” or “match” that framework is to at once make a statement of how their internal identity feels to them, but also to demand a space for recognition beyond standard identifications. Such can include the philosophical, the sociological, the legal, and the religious.

The complexity of this can get very muddled in the process: Is the person who is claiming their non-binaryness meaning they identify with *both* gender frames—equally? fluidly? (What we called *androgynous* before?) Is it that they don’t have/or/no longer have a gender framework?

And, what are the implications for not only their identity and self-presentation, but their *sexual orientation*—to whom one is erotosexually attracted? (Keep in mind, gender identity is separate

from *sexual orientation*: Gender identity is our internal experience of our gender; *sexual orientation* refers to whom we are erotosexually attracted. One does not necessarily determine the other.) For a person who is non-binary, sexual attraction may depend on how these see themselves outside the rigid binary. Nonbinary people can be attracted to men, women, both, and/or other nonbinary people. Nonbinary people can remain oriented to the sex that is the apposition of their sex, and thus non-binary-ness may speak (little, or not at all) to the sexual predilections of the person outside the common norm; but it may speak volumes about their identity and self-presentation. In today's world, being non-binary may solely speak to the novel ideology of self being adopted, and/or to the political events of our times which, when personalized, questions the binary and makes legal room for alternatives.

Parental Struggles

Parents oftentimes struggle when their young/adult children “out,” identifying with a novel pronoun or making a statement of non-adherence to the binary, as in “*I’m non-binary, and I’ve felt that way for a long time.*” Any parent rooted in 20th century upbringing and life, who is not up to date with the “gender moment” and its shifting vocabulary (2000s—*to date*), is going to have issues understanding, sometimes accepting, what the offspring is believing is their truth. I’ve been asked many times by parents, “*What are they really telling me?*” and often confuse these types of statements with—again—sexual orientation (“Is he gay?”). In fact, the person may be only stating they don’t feel they fit into a binary schema. And this could be, as mentioned, not fitting into gender *roles*, or gender *constructions*, or gendered *expectations of behavior*, or ultimately, how they wish to self-identify and present.

Ideological Shifts that Lead to Identity Shifts

I’ve also encountered young adults who determine their gender identities based on a shift into novel ideologies of self, and not a shift in their core self per se. These start to ‘pick up’ and utilize novel terms for self-describing that match growing refusals to adhere to gender *role socializations* tied to ideologies which support a binary schema. In such cases, it’s not that the person is bringing to the forefront how they’ve “always felt,” as much as how any ambiguities of gender or role (which we *all have*), have allowed them permission to now embrace a change—a change which is now very “in” as well. (It’s cool to be gender diverse! Just check the number of websites and posts, and how these garner significant acclamations and followers.)

Such ideological shifts that lead to self-labeling switches are communicated *as if* the person—the *more truthful person*—now emerges. And it may be true that the individual, now as labeled, represents the fulcrum of slow and progressive changes these have made in self-evaluations and perceptions over a period of time. All this, often unseen by parents, thus their surprises when “all of a sudden” their young adult child “outs” to them.

In such cases, we are needing to make a big distinction with *gender dysphoria*—which is a clinically recognized mental health element in those that feel their gender identity doesn’t match their *sexual body*. Dysphoria has been studied significantly since the 1950’s and has a clinical diagnosis with explicit criteria outlined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association* (abbreviated, DSM-v.5) Being non-binary as described often gets

confused with gender dysphoria; but most non-binary persons are not saying they are at war with their bodies, that their bodies and their heads don't "match"; i.e., sex and gender identity are off-course.

Thus, if a person is beginning to describe themselves as non-binary, but there is no history of gender-body *dysphoria*, the non-binary dissonance most likely emanates from feeling gender-*nonconforming*; gender-*role alienated*, or coming from a point of discord in ideological recognitions of gender and identity (gender-*ideology* conflicts).

How Do You Know If You're Nonbinary?

Novel self-descriptors allow what anthropologists said for centuries about the power of language: *Provide the terms, and the entity labeled crystallizes*. That doesn't mean the entity didn't exist before the language terms. What language does is provide terms that solidify beliefs about the entity, and through lexical repetition come to grow an element, a condition, into a verbal *fact*. Language terms once used repeatedly alter old ones, and thus ensure modifications to perceptual changes can take root. "We side with words even when they seem to contradict the reality" (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Philosophicus*, 3, 261).

Until recently, at least in the United States, there weren't words to describe what people who did not identify as binary were feeling. In the case of those with gender dysphoria, clarifying what it means and providing clinical evidence, medical terms explaining the condition, has helped legitimize the plight of individuals with dysphoria. For others, those growing up with new terms, or having novel terms available to them as these formulate their self-concept via learning and social experiences, now avail them with the lexicon to make determinations not heretofore probable. And all this is now beginning to coalesce in people at much younger ages.

And here's the underbelly: novel terms don't stand separate from novel ideology about persons. Both arise hand in hand. Schools now teach novel gender ideology as part of their sexuality curriculum; and it can begin as early as kindergarten, with books like the "*Gender Unicorn*," where terms like gender, gender-fluid, and "head and body not being OK with each other" are taught. Gender now exists on a "**continuum**" between maleness and femaleness; it may vary with one's predilections; and it may even be absent (ie., you may be genderless by 'nature', or may come to not want or express gender.)

Thus, to answer the question of how one "knows" one is non-binary depends significantly on those factors we've mentioned: body knowledge, socialization, identifications, self-experiences, and exposure/education. Society has also permitted and legalized (in the U.S. and many European countries) self-definitions overriding sexual biology and conventional gender constructions. This enables persons to move forward in embracing novel terminology which these feel best fits with their self-evaluation, ideology, and social presentation, without contestation.

If one accepts the notion of a gender continuum vs. a binary, then the self-descriptors are virtually limitless...which is exactly what has occurred here in the U.S., in Great Britain and other

developed Western countries. **You know you are non-binary when *you determine* that the binary under which you may have been living, internalizing, is no longer “your truth.”**

And as I’ve alluded above, a problem with this is determining whether the person’s non-binaryness is the result of an historical disjunction between **gender identity** and **body** (in which case it’s *not* non-binaryness; it’s dysphoria); or whether there’s a *gender-role/socialization* disjunction—this, of short or long duration. Or, as a third possibility, whether the growing realization of non-binaryism is tied to a personal shift in ideology which can then help shift one’s personal self-identification, and thus encourage one to identify with new gender labels. Being clear on what is “going on” is critical to understanding the individual and the individual’s journey to the non-binary label.

Non-Binary or Genderfree, Gender-Neutral Childrearing

These ideological transitions can also account for some young parents now “opting” for *gender neutral* childrearing. If parents embrace a novel philosophy of gender which not only underscores the social construction of gender, but also recognizes it as a “fluid” (read malleable, changeable) item in development, these may opt for **‘gender-free’ rearing**. In short, this method “lets the child’s self-identity *emerge* without the constraints of maleness/masculinity or femaleness/femininity being channeled into them.” (Lucas-Stannard, *Gender Neutral Parenting*, Introduction. 2013.) (Reading such advice often sounds like older feminist critiques of gender stereotypes, and thus supports for androgyny.)

Raising children “genderless” isn’t an easy thing, although vogue at this point and thus, myriad tomes and takes on the subject.

However, parents will eventually have to legitimize the sexual anatomy of their child, and how that anatomy is explained. Usually, by age three a child is not only aware of their sexual anatomy, these have also learned “kid’s terms” for them: “wee-wee,” “tu-tu,” etc., and for some, terms that are anatomically factual, i.e., “**penis**,” “**vagina**,” etc. (this, if parents desire good correspondence between the child’s body parts and the child’s affective self.) Not choosing a binary gender *strategy* doesn’t eliminate needing to help the child understand their sexual anatomy—which in 99.2% of humans, comes in male or female formats.

That anatomy isn’t devoid of being related—in the real world—to gendered language, gendered scripts, and gendered ideologies. Navigating this trajectory with children who have been taught otherwise at home may render parental efforts confusing: “*You are a boy, but you don’t have to do boy things.*” Or, “*You are you, and the fact you have a penis doesn’t require that you wear pants or go by he/him. A penis doesn’t make you a ‘he’. You can be a they/them.*”

The question that will remain is, exactly, how does that boy navigate a world that is not yet and predominantly not non-binary?

Is Gender Fluidity the Same as Nonbinary?

Gender fluidity is fluctuation between the binary of male and female gender expression. This often takes the form of “shifting” between binary gender identities in some way, which for some can happen frequently and for others might be a slower or less frequent shift. The shifts may be internal, that is, how the person feels; or the shifts may be expressed externally, again in some way contextual, most often in self presentations which then incorporate dress or style to ‘fit’ the current gender expression. To answer the question academically here, gender fluidity is *not* the same as being non-binary: Fluidity may allow individual identifiers beyond the binary male and female.

How is that possible? you ask. Some individual ‘fluids’ label their gender in terms of nature; or in terms of what these see in certain other species, etc., somewhat akin to those identifications made by Native Americans with the spirit of animals like the bear, the eagle, the owl.

I mentioned **androgyny** earlier. The term androgyny is used now to mean different things. Some use the term to describe how someone expresses fluid gender (looking/acting like a blend of masculine and feminine aspects), while others may use it to describe their internal experience of their gender (identifying as a blend of masculine and feminine aspects). A gender fluid person might choose to express their gender by having an androgynous *appearance* at times, or a gender fluid person might *experience themselves* as androgynous at times.

They/Them & Other Pronouns

Pronouns, or the way people describe themselves, have also been altered by new conventions of gender. While pronouns can be deemed customary and thus be taken-for-granted, novel ideology makes pronouns as much a part of self-identification rights as gender labels themselves. This is especially true for those that consider themselves non-binary.

How does one know what to call another person today? The only factual way is to ask them! It’s also trending, on items like email, etc., to designate “your preferred pronouns” under your name, e.g., “he/him” or “they/them.”

“They/them” is a gender-neutral pronoun that bends English grammar some when used as a singular, yet has become commonplace among non-binary persons. Such usage doesn’t prevent a non-binary person from still using a binary pronoun like he/him. Some people are comfortable with two or more pronouns, such as she/they. There are newer neo-pronouns as well, like xe/xem/xyr, ze/hir/hirs, and ey/em/eir. Titles like Mr. and Mrs. have also been replaced by some via the use of Mx: a new convention that doesn’t give away the sex of the person, like the old Ms. did.

Pronouns can also shift in genderfluid individuals, these at times using some binary, and at other times using specific pronoun identifiers. The bottom line: one can’t make any assumptions today, especially when dealing with Millennials, Gen Z or Mosaics. Moreover, in formal settings, businesses, or medicine, there is no normalization: present your pronouns when asking for the other’s: “Hi I’m Jo Smith. I use he/him pronouns. What pronouns may I use when speaking about you?”

Christianity, Gender, and Ruckus

In this short piece I can't deconstruct all the ins and outs of how Christian theology, ideology, and praxis intersect with the gender moment. Neither can I offer resources or advice to parents who may be confronting an “outing” child, adolescent, or young adult. Those efforts coalesced in my recent book, *A Christian's Guide through the Gender Revolution* (Cascade, 2021). I urge you to read it! (Available through Amazon.com—just put in my name, *initial* included, and title!)

Here, I offer some determined questions to guide your exploration of this complex situation... a “moment” which I've likened to a tsunami at the church's doorstep: the church has once again to face a seismic shift in how many in contemporary society are seeing “the person.” The changes go to the very core of how a theology of creation and self are understood.

- How can Christians understand novel viewpoints and data on intersex births, on transgender/gender dysphoria? On novel gender identities beyond dysphoria?
- How do these understandings assist in revisiting Christian understandings of binarism? What elements can be open to revision? What elements need to be upheld to hold your faith's core?
- More to parental interests: How can you begin to understand your child's expressions of gender without your judgment? How can you receive their story with grace, love, and sound information to guide you?
- How can you unravel what they are saying—*truly saying*—about their gender and identity? What aspects of attentive listening do I need to engage to do so accurately? —
- Ultimately, how do I learn to live with dissonances, yet love, extend mercy, and provide conciliation?

Christianity certainly has it's “plate full” with novel gender ideology, its novel taxonomies of self, as well as all the new lexical descriptors—terms, pronouns, etc. There are elements in church doctrine and dogma that certainly require another look. There are elements too fundamental to the faith and to how we are made to short-change. In between, there are resting places to learn and to ponder. I leave you with the words of the Apostle John, who encouraged us with,

Let us stop saying we love people. Let us really love them, and show it by our actions. Then we will know for sure, by our actions, that we are on God's side; and our consciences will be clear, even when we stand before the Lord.

—I John 3:18–19 (NLT)

NOTES: This article is based on information culled from PsychNET's *Gender Identity* webpage (2022) at <https://psychnet.APA.org>. The comments and statements made are parsed by me and therefore, opinions and definitions are my own and not PsychNET's. Expanded Christian commentary on this subject and many other subjects relating to gender, gender identity, gender dysphoria, the “gender moment” and the “gender revolution” come from Gil, Vincent E., *A Christian's Guide through the Gender Revolution* (Cascade, 2021). ©2021. Vincent E. Gil. Author's Common Law Copyright. *This article can be reproduced and cited under the provisions of common law copyrighting.*