

SUNDAY ARTICLE

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Why Transgenderism Is a Problem for Secularism

Bernard N Howard

Secularism is a worldview that says reality can be understood without the aid of religion. In the West, it's presented as the default mode for navigating life. People talk about losing their religion or faith, but they never talk about gaining secularism. They treat secularism as the safe level playing field on which other worldviews compete against each other. But in fact secularism is one of the competing teams, and right now it's struggling to stay on its feet.

Secularist thinkers depend on materialism to explain how the universe exists without God. There's more on materialism below, but in brief it claims that everything in existence, including humanity, consists of nothing but physical matter, and so there's no such thing as "spirit" or "soul." Yet in the last few years another belief has been adopted by secularists: transgenderism, which says a man can be born into the body of a woman, and vice versa.

Materialism and transgenderism cannot ultimately coexist within secularism. We've grown used to thinking about a culture war being fought between

Christians and secularists, but the culture war now underway is within secularism itself. It's hard to predict who will win, but the West won't look the same when the war is over.

Materialism

There's a flashback scene in *Breaking Bad* where a young Walter White and his then-girlfriend Gretchen are calculating the different elements that make up the human body. Gretchen reads them out, and Walter writes them on a chalkboard. After hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, nitrogen, calcium, iron, sodium, and phosphorus have all been added up, they amount to a total of 99.888042 percent of the human body, leaving 0.111958 percent still unaccounted for. Gretchen surprises Walter by saying, "What about the soul?" to which he replies, flirtatiously, "The soul?...There's nothing here but chemistry."

"Nothing here but chemistry" is materialism's summary of reality. The inevitable question is how the chemical elements might have come into existence in the first place. Materialism's answer is the Big Bang, an explosion that brought into being all the contents of the universe, including space and time. Without any pre-existent time, there was nothing to cause the Big Bang, which means secularism says the universe began with an uncaused explosion of matter out of nothing – something materialism's opponents find improbable to say the least.

Strong Transgenderism

Materialism could easily coexist with a mild form of transgenderism, which simply says people should be free to choose a gender other than their biological gender. Materialists admit there's much about human consciousness they don't yet comprehend, and so they tend to be open-minded about people's behaviour (with the exception of religious behaviour, which they freely criticize).

However, the secular West has chosen to adopt a strong version of transgenderism, which insists transgender choices must not only be available but also universally approved. This strong transgenderism doesn't say, "Give transgender people a seat at the table" – a political statement that materialists could accept; it says, "You must uphold this transgender person's maleness despite

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his biologically female body” – a philosophical statement that materialism cannot ultimately live with.

Impossible Union

One of the most famous materialists is Daniel Dennett, the co-director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University, and one of the so-called Four Horsemen of New Atheism, along with Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens. Dennett boldly states, “We’re just made of cells, about 100 trillion of them. Not a single one of those cells is conscious; not a single one of those cells knows who you are, or cares.” Dennett doesn’t believe “you” really exist. His TED talk is titled “The Illusion of Consciousness,” and he’s fond of saying that the clothes – our cells – have no emperor [get it?].

It’s easy to see how Dennett’s nothing-but-cells position is incompatible with strong transgenderism. Those 100 trillion cells are all stamped with the same biological sex. If the conscious person is an illusion, Dennett-style materialists cannot logically accept that any human being *truly* has a gender other than the gender of his or her cells.

But other materialists might argue Dennett’s position is too extreme. Think of a castle made entirely of Lego bricks standing next to a jumbled heap of Lego bricks. You could say both the castle and also the heap are nothing-but-Lego-bricks, and yet it’s still reasonable to point out that the castle has a greater value than the heap. Similarly, a materialist might say our cells combine to form extraordinary organs such as the human brain, which has more value than a heap of disorganized cells. They could then argue that the brain has some features found more commonly in men than women (and vice versa), and transgender people may have brain features that don’t fit the sex of their cells.

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That argument, sometimes known as brain-sex theory, might seem to give materialists a way to agree with strong transgenderism. But brain-sex theory isn’t enough to bridge the gap. Transgender men aren’t saying their brains see the world in a masculine way. They’re saying they *are* men and always have been, despite their female biology. That’s why, for example, it seems right to them to change their birth certificates. Their direction of travel is firmly away from biology and toward identity. But materialism travels firmly in the opposite direction. Even materialists who aren’t so quick as Dennett to speak of nothing-but-cells are ultimately obliged to travel in that direction, because the whole point of materialism is that identity-less matter explains everything. “There’s nothing here but chemistry.”

Better Way

Christianity challenges both materialism and transgenderism. It teaches that God created the universe and humanity, and it adds, “male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27) – which refers not to our perception of our gender, but to the body we inhabit. Sharing this teaching with people experiencing gender dysphoria calls for exceptional sensitivity and gentleness. There is deep pain bound up with this issue. If we win a debate but lose the person, what have we gained? When the current attempt to unite materialism and strong transgenderism comes to its inevitable end, thereby throwing secularism into confusion, perhaps more Westerners will listen to the first-century Middle Easterner who says, “If you hold to My teaching, you are really My disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32).



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