

Saving Masculinity and Femininity from the Morgue: A Defense of Gender Essentialism¹

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This essay offers a contemporary defense of gender essentialism that engages the growing body of academic literature, provides clarity on what is essential about gender, and explains how it is politically good for all people—especially women. Therefore, the goal of this essay is to recover and defend an essentialist understanding of gender. It rejects many of the narrow extremes of traditional evangelical gender essentialism of the past without abandoning essentialism altogether. The essay proceeds in three broad steps. First, gender is defined broadly and then from a conservative evangelical viewpoint. Second, essentialism is defined, and potential defeaters are engaged on the various versions of essentialism. Finally, the goodness of essentialism is explored.

Key Words: essentialism, femininity, gender, manhood, masculinity, sex, womanhood

The Philosophy of Gender is an explosive field of study in contemporary academic philosophy and theology, particularly among feminists. Robust and riveting debates abound—but one thing has become largely clear: gender essentialism is supposedly dead.² Gender essentialism, like nearly all traditional understandings of gender, is a primary target for feminists because of its apparent implicit sexism through patriarchy and androcentrism.³ Despite the death knell from the wider academic community, most conservative evangelical thinkers continue to assert the terminology of gender essentialism. Yet, much of their scholarship on gender has a striking level of ambiguity and a stunning lack of depth and

engagement with the broader academic community.⁴ Therefore, if gender essentialism is to be defended in the current academic climate, it needs serious rehabilitation. A contemporary defense requires engagement with the growing body of literature, clarity on what is actually essential about gender, and how it is *politically good* for all people—especially women. Therefore, I attempt to recover and defend an essentialist understanding of gender. I will reject many of the narrow extremes of traditional evangelical gender essentialism of the past without abandoning essentialism altogether. My method is largely philosophical rather than biblical. While biblical exegesis has a very important role in this conversation, it is necessary to engage the larger community from a natural aspect as well. This does not mean I intend to contradict Scripture or that I neglect its supreme importance—only that I hope to defend apart from simple proof-texts.

The Definition of Gender

Before defending gender essentialism, it is necessary to clarify terminology. Conservative evangelicals often assume sex and gender are the exact same thing, but this is not always agreed upon. Traditionally *sex* refers to *biological* features such as chromosomes, sex organs, and hormones. If someone has a Y chromosome, they are male.⁵ If someone doesn't, they are a female. *Gender* typically refers to clusters of *social* characteristics and abilities (e.g., norms, positions, performances, phenomenological features, self-ascriptions, or roles).⁶ Given this distinction, sex and gender can be defined broadly as follows:

Sex: *Biological* features of a person such as chromosomes, sex organs, and hormones

Gender: *Social* features of a person such as norms, positions, performances, phenomenological features, behavioral traits, self-ascriptions, and roles

For much of history, sex and gender were seen as largely coextensive. If someone had male sex organs, they were a man (i.e., masculine). If someone had female sex organs, they were a woman (i.e., feminine). This is the *traditional coextensive* view. On this view there is no substantial

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² Natalie Stoljar, "Essence, Identity, and the Concept of Woman," *Philosophical Topics* 23.2 (Fall 1995): 261.

³ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 22.

⁴ See, e.g., Owen Strachan, *Reenchanting Humanity: A Theology of Mankind* (Geanies House, UK: Christian Focus, 2019), 174.

⁵ Denny Burk, *What Is the Meaning of Sex?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 180–82.

⁶ Sally Anne Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 42–43.

sex/gender distinction. While it is possible to separate the terms for conceptual purposes, gender is *causally* linked to one's biological sex—being *biologically* caused rather than socially caused. Many take this to mean that it is not only our bodily structure that is determined by our sex but our emotional tendencies and personal interests as well.⁷ But this is not universal in the literature. Therefore, while gender does conceptually differ from sex, focusing on social features rather than biological, it isn't free to be understood apart from it because biological properties have causal influence on social properties. As a result, gender is metaphysically grounded in biological sex. Whereas gender may be “constitutively constructed” since it makes reference to social features, it is not causally grounded because social features do not play a causal role in bringing it into existence.⁸

However, since at least the twentieth century, with the advent of modern technology there has been an overwhelming urge to separate sex from gender.⁹ Some have attempted to merely reduce the causal role of biology while others have claimed the term gender refers to social features that are *not* linked to biology at all.¹⁰ Therefore, man and woman are socially constructed terms like wife, criminal, and hero.¹¹ To be a man or woman requires particular social properties and relations.¹² Therefore, depending on the role one performs or the social norms one inhabits, a male could be gendered as a woman. For example, depending on the culture, a male performing traditional domestic duties at home would be feminine and a female being the sole-breadwinner for a family would be masculine. This is the *revisionary disjunctive* view. Now, there are two broad ways the revisionary view is cashed out. The less radical view agrees with the traditional view and sees sex as referring to biological features, but it argues that gender is based purely on social features. This is the *soft revisionary disjunctive* view. Sex remains a legitimate category grounded in biology, but gender is often unhinged from biology. The more revisionary option sees *both* sex

⁷ Strachan, *Reenchanting Humanity*, 132.

⁸ Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 87.

⁹ Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 184.

¹⁰ Tomas Bogardus, “Evaluating Arguments for the Sex/Gender Distinction,” *Philosophia* 48.3 (July 2020): 873–74; Mari Mikkola, *The Wrong of Injustice: Dehumanization and Its Role in Feminist Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 21–22.

¹¹ Alex Byrne, “Are Women Adult Human Females?,” *Philosophical Studies* 177.12 (December 2020): 3783–84.

¹² Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 86.

and gender as referring to social norms, requiring the traditional view to be completely false—women and men are not defined by their biology at all but entirely by their social location. This is the *strong revisionary disjunctive* view.¹³ For the purposes of this paper, I ignore the strong revisionary disjunctive version, assuming that sex is a biological reality since Gen 1:27 (“male and female he created them”) and contemporary science all but require it.

Given these definitions, there are two broad ways to understand gender. First, on the traditional coextensive view, gender refers to social features but is biologically grounded, meaning that biology causes and directs one's gender. As Charlotte Witt explains, “There is no plausible way of thinking about gender that is entirely detached from bodily, biological existence even if—as we have just seen—those biological processes, or sexual and reproductive functions, are complex and culturally mediated.”¹⁴ Second, on the revisionary disjunctive view, gender is a social construct that is *not* grounded in biology. They can be defined broadly below:

Traditional Coextensive View: Gender is *biologically* grounded

Revisionary Disjunctive View: Gender is *socially* grounded

Now, it is important to note that these distinctions can be (*and often are*) blurred. For example, the traditional view can allow for more social construction and the revisionary view can allow for some level of biological direction, but I will use these strict distinctions for the sake of clarity. It is also important to remember that regardless of the view one takes on what grounds gender, gender is primarily about *social* characteristics. The question is not whether gender is social but what *grounds* these social characteristics.¹⁵

Conservative Evangelical Beliefs About Gender

Evangelical theological conservatives typically assume the necessity of both sex and gender. Since sex is essential and gender is biologically grounded in sex, gender is essential too. They often cash out these essential gender features in culturally traditional ways, regularly calling them

¹³ See for example Adrian Thatcher, *Redeeming Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Charlotte Witt, *The Metaphysics of Gender*, Studies in Feminist Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 36.

¹⁵ While many conservative evangelical thinkers assume only a traditional coextensive understanding has the conceptual resources to maintain gender essentialism, I think both views can accommodate gender essentialism. Despite this, I intend to focus on the traditional coextensive view since it is the most held view among conservative evangelical thinkers.

“duties and vocations.”¹⁶ For example, John Piper, while noting the similarities between his mother and father, claims their differences are “not mainly a biological fact” but “mainly a matter of personhood and relational dynamics.”¹⁷ From these differences he defines masculinity as leading, providing, and protecting.¹⁸ Owen Strachan is similar, considering masculinity to be about toughness, assertiveness, physical fortitude, and bravery.¹⁹ For him a “failure to show strength means a failure of manhood.”²⁰ He also suggests that “provision is part of manly identity and the role given to men by God in the home.”²¹ These gender norms are *essential* to men. Men necessarily display toughness and assertiveness because of their biological sex. Regarding femininity Piper defines it as those who “affirm, receive, and nurture” men.²² Strachan again echoes Piper, saying, “The woman is called to see herself as her husband’s helper. The Lord makes the woman in order to bless the man and serve him.”²³ Ray Ortland Jr. is no different, claiming that “a man, just by virtue of his manhood, is called to lead for God. A woman, just by virtue of her womanhood, is called to help for God.”²⁴ Therefore, masculinity is directed outward and femininity is directed inward.²⁵ More recent conservative evangelical scholarship has suggested broader definitions, such as Patrick Schreiner, who defines masculinity along the lines of sonship, brotherly love, and potentiality for paternity, and femininity about daughterhood, sisterly love, and potentiality toward maternity.²⁶

Regardless of how the various exemplar evangelical authors define gender, a theme emerges from their definitions and examples. Masculinity

¹⁶ Strachan, *Reenchanting Humanity*, 144.

¹⁷ John Piper, “A Vision for Complementarity: Manhood and Womanhood Defined According to the Bible,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 31. Admittedly, I am bewildered by this claim and find little clarity in Piper’s piece as to what it means that it isn’t mainly a biological fact but a fact about personhood.

¹⁸ Piper, “A Vision for Complementarity,” 35.

¹⁹ Strachan, *Reenchanting Humanity*, 140.

²⁰ Strachan, *Reenchanting Humanity*, 139.

²¹ Strachan, *Reenchanting Humanity*, 162n41.

²² Piper, “A Vision for Complementarity,” 48.

²³ Strachan, *Reenchanting Humanity*, 135.

²⁴ Raymond C. Ortland Jr., “Male-Female Equality and Male Headship,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 102.

²⁵ Patrick Schreiner, “Man and Woman: Toward an Ontology,” *Eikon* 2.2 (Fall 2020): 76.

²⁶ Schreiner, “Man and Woman,” 85.

is biologically driven to *achieve, create, and protect* whereas femininity is biologically driven to *nurture, receive, and sustain*.²⁷ Therefore, I take it that conservative evangelical definitions of gender are broadly understood as follows:

Conservative Evangelical Masculinity: Biological males are biologically ordered to be achievers, creators, and protectors

Conservative Evangelical Femininity: Biological females are biologically ordered to be nurturers, receivers, and sustainers

These particular social characteristics (e.g., achievement for masculinity and nurturing for femininity) are essential because they are stipulated in Scripture. And the gender roles in creation “were corrupted, not created, by the fall.”²⁸ Therefore, the various gender features described in Scripture are an assumed theological good. As Schreiner suggests, “Paul and the rest of the authors in the Bible did not *construct* gender roles. They *recognized* them. They based sociological and organizational instructions on a deeper reality found in creational order.”²⁹ Therefore, they assume that these gender norms are powerful social practices with natural grounding.³⁰ But where in Scripture do they find gender defined as *these* social characteristics and actions?

Some of the primary texts conservative evangelical thinkers draw gender characteristics from are 1 Kgs 2, 1 Pet 3:7, Deut 22:5, and 1 Cor 11. Consider Deut 22:5, which says, “A woman shall not wear a man’s garment, nor shall a man put on a woman’s cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD your God.” Owen Strachan extrapolates from this text that “the grouping of cross-dressing with sexual immorality shows us that this practice is part of a complex of behaviors that are wrong through and through.”³¹ Jason DeRouchie agrees, claiming that “*loving others and God means that people will maintain a gender identity that aligns with their biological sex and will express this gender in a way that never leads to gender confusion in the eyes of others.*”³² Therefore, it is believed that certain gender norms are essential based on one’s biological sex. Consider also 1 Cor 11, specifically 11:7–15:

For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and

²⁷ Schreiner, “Man and Woman,” 76.

²⁸ Piper, “A Vision for Complementarity,” 35.

²⁹ Schreiner, “Man and Woman,” 72.

³⁰ Steven Wedgworth, “Good and Proper: Paul’s Use of Nature, Custom, and Decorum in Pastoral Theology,” *Eikon* 2.2 (Fall 2020): 97.

³¹ Strachan, *Reenchanting Humanity*, 174.

³² Jason DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017), 448 (emphasis original).

glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God. Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering.

This text is admittedly difficult to understand, but there are several aspects that are relevant. First, there is an assumed distinction of gender norms based on biological sex. Second, this is taught by “nature.” Therefore, the Bible appears to require gender to be essential and linked to sex. Many conservatives have concluded from this that whatever is traditional is essential. For example, throughout Owen Strachan’s recent anthropology book he continually identifies masculinity and femininity with traditional 1950s American household arrangements. He decries “the dadmom, who stays at home to care for the kids while the wife provides for the family.”³³ Elsewhere he explains that a woman’s “vocation” is to “sacrifice her own free time, her serious intellectual and vocational interests ...” and her goals are “to care for little children, make healthy and tasty meals for her loved ones, organize, manage, and clean a home, express support and love ... her husband as he works hard to provide, and teach her progeny the word of God in all its fullness.”³⁴ However, it is not clear *what counts* as essential or *what it means* to be essential for these thinkers. Yes, masculinity and femininity are essential, but what does it mean for them to be essential and how much of their characteristics are needed for it to remain masculine or feminine? Can a male function as a nurturer and remain masculine? Can a female work outside the home and remain feminine?

Gender Essentialism Defined

Given these various understandings of gender and the desire for it to be essential among conservative evangelical thinkers, I will clarify what gender essentialism means and which versions are worth revitalizing for conservative evangelicals. Essentialism in general means that certain properties of objects are necessary for identity. These properties are the most central, objective, and context-independent *de re* facts about these

³³ Strachan, *Reenchanting Humanity*, 162n41.

³⁴ Strachan, *Reenchanting Humanity*, 158.

objects that cannot be lacked—whereas others are accidental and can be either lost or lacked.³⁵ In other words, essentialism holds that there are context-independent facts that every object has in every world in which it exists. Most often these essential/necessary properties are understood as having causal/explanatory power, relevance for kind classification, or minimal necessity for identity.³⁶ But depending on the thinker, which properties count as necessary vary, as do their taxonomies of essentialism. Therefore, I need to clarify various versions of essentialism before determining how to defend gender essentialism.

For my purposes, I will only note five variants of essentialism. First, there is the rather unpopular *maximal essentialism* that takes everything to be essential for identity—whatever properties an object has are essential. If it loses any property it is no longer the same object. Second, there is the view popularized by Saul Kripke—*origin essentialism*—where what is essential is an object’s origin story. If an object came from somewhere else, it would no longer be identical to itself. Third is the view of *sortal essentialism*, which requires an object to be of the same kind. Whatever kind an object is, it cannot change kinds without becoming a different object.³⁷ The members of each kind are determined by possession of a certain property or cluster of properties.³⁸ Fourth is the view that an entity’s essence either explains or causes its characteristics. Whatever is the fundamental causal or explanatory power is essential and whatever is on the receiving end of the causal or explanatory relation is accidental.³⁹ As Edward Feser explains, this version of essentialism is “not a property or cluster of properties. It is rather that *from which* a thing’s properties *flow*,

³⁵ L. A. Paul, “The Context of Essence,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 82.1 (March 2004): 170; Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010), 14.

³⁶ Charlotte Witt, “Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Theory,” *Philosophical Topics* 23.2 (Fall 1995): 321.

³⁷ Teresa Robertson Ishii and Philip Atkins, “Essential vs. Accidental Properties,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/essential-accidental/>; Penelope Mackie, *How Things Might Have Been: Individuals, Kinds, and Essential Properties* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 118.

³⁸ Alexander Bird, “Essences and Natural Kinds,” in *The Routledge Companion to Metaphysics*, ed. Robin Le Poidevin et al., Routledge Philosophy Companions (New York: Routledge, 2009), 497.

³⁹ Michael Gorman, “The Essential and The Accidental,” *Ratio* 18.3 (September 2005): 286.

that which *explains* its properties.”⁴⁰ The essential is explanatorily basic.⁴¹ Call this version *causal essentialism*. Fifth, Charlotte Witt has advocated for what she calls “uniessentialism” wherein an object’s *function* is the essential property it must have. For example, when is a heap of materials a house? When it *functions* to shelter. It is a singular individual property that is essential.⁴² As another example, consider the Coke machine. It must have the *function* to provide a Coke in exchange for money. It can take whatever shape or form it wants. As long as it dispenses Coke in exchange for money it remains a Coke machine.⁴³ Therefore, being a male or female produces particular social norms. Their bodies either play the role of conceiving and bearing or begetting.⁴⁴

As can be seen, defending gender essentialism requires clarity as to *which* essentialism one means. While a rejection of “essentialism” is common in feminist literature, there is a growing realization that such a rejection fails to account for the varieties of essentialism.⁴⁵ There isn’t just one essentialism. Moreover, even if an essentialism is targeted, such as a sortal essentialism that affirms that men and women share some common feature or criteria that defines them, there still isn’t agreement on what these properties are.⁴⁶ Therefore, one must be careful in navigating a defense of essentialism. Fine grained distinctions are necessary at every turn.

Defeaters for General Gender Essentialism

Before expanding on the various virtues or possibilities of gender essentialism, it is necessary to consider the objections to *any* form of gender essentialism. While many theological conservatives are content to proof-text their way to gender essentialism without considering objections, this strategy is insufficient in the current cultural climate that is predisposed to reject such views. For example, some thinkers go so far as to suggest that the entire edifice of “substance metaphysics” is a mere power grab

⁴⁰ Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*, Editiones Scholasticae 39 (Heusenstamm: Ed. Scholasticae, 2014), 230.

⁴¹ Ross D. Inman, *Substance and the Fundamentality of the Familiar: A Neo-Aristotelian Mereology* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 42.

⁴² Witt, *The Metaphysics of Gender*, 6.

⁴³ Witt, “Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Theory,” 325–26. Note also that Witt categorizes origin and uniessentialism as varieties of “individual essentialism” and sortal essentialism as “kind essentialism.”

⁴⁴ Witt, *The Metaphysics of Gender*, 40.

⁴⁵ Felipe do Vale, “Can a Male Savior Save Women? The Metaphysics of Gender and Christ’s Ability to Save,” *Philosophia Christi* 21.2 (Winter 2019): 318–19; Witt, “Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Theory.”

⁴⁶ Mikkola, *The Wrong of Injustice*, 28.

kept in force by the univocal hegemonic discourse. One of the most popular defenders of this view is Judith Butler, who claims that “the notion of an abiding substance is a fictive construction produced through the compulsory ordering of attributes into coherent gender sequences.”⁴⁷ Therefore, identity as a concept is completely irrelevant. There is no such normative ideal and any talk of “being” a sex or gender is flatly impossible.⁴⁸ Butler claims that “the literalization of anatomy not only proves nothing, but is a literalizing restriction of pleasure in the very organ that is championed as the sign of masculine identity.”⁴⁹ She has suggested that gender is “always relative to the constructed relations in which it is determined.”⁵⁰ Therefore, if any form of essentialism is to be maintained the major objections must be met.

Charlotte Witt has identified four primary arguments against gender essentialism. The first argument is the *exclusion argument*, which claims that any version of gender essentialism will invariably exclude certain women and thus cannot be true. The second argument is the *instability argument*, which claims that groups are unstable because of language being inherently normative and productive and not representing reality. Essentialism rests on a mistaken view of language that thinks language can be purified from its normative content. The third argument is the *power argument* that claims gender essentialism just points to power congregations and not enduring substantial realities.⁵¹ The fourth argument is the *core argument* that identifies essentialism with biologism. Since gender is socially constructed it can’t be essential.⁵² Women are *not* naturally passive, irrational, and emotional because gender is socially constructed rather than biologically grounded.⁵³ The complexity of human relationships cannot be reduced to biological ones.⁵⁴ I will focus on responding to the exclusion and core arguments below as they are the most powerful in my opinion. I consider the others rather innocuous and sufficiently defeated elsewhere.⁵⁵

⁴⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 33.

⁴⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 23, 26.

⁴⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 97.

⁵⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 14.

⁵¹ Witt, “Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Theory,” 323.

⁵² Witt, “Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Theory,” 324.

⁵³ Stoljar, “Essence, Identity, and the Concept of Woman,” 262.

⁵⁴ Elaine Storkey, *Origins of Difference: The Gender Debate Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 28, 33.

⁵⁵ See Witt, “Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Theory.”

The most popular argument against essentialism is the exclusion argument, which hinges on the varied experience of humans across the globe.⁵⁶ Because of the diversity of experiences, to claim that there is a binary gender characteristic that is essential to each sex is naïve. Consider even 1 Cor 11—most assume it doesn't require women to wear head coverings in today's context.⁵⁷ But gender *essentialism* is supposed to mean that these social practices are necessary. If this is true, why assume other gender norms are essential if it's admitted that some can change? Many gender essentialists simply assert that there are the same differences everywhere.⁵⁸ From their assumption that there is not a truly varied experience, they ignore the examples of variation that would lead to the exclusion argument. Since most intuitively agree that the differences between men and women are the same across all contexts there is no reason to admit of the diversity of experiences. When pressed about this variation, the reply is often that *most* women are more nurturing than men and this *can't* be by accident.⁵⁹ Variations be damned. Others reply vaguely that while the cultural outworking can differ, there is an unchanging truth that men and women are different. For example, the reason head coverings were a mere cultural outworking is because they symbolized something deeper in that culture than they do in the current one.⁶⁰ Another reply notes the fact that variations aren't simply between the sexes but within the sexes. Therefore, variations or vagueness alone do not disrupt gender essentialism since most are willing to accept that being a human is an essential property despite the variations between humans.⁶¹ Thus, the problem with the exclusion argument is epistemological rather than metaphysical at its core. Moreover, for one to make good on this objection, they must deny that there are common features of any sort.⁶² If there is even one common feature among men and women, the objection loses its force.

Second is the core argument. This argument can be deflated rather

⁵⁶ Mikkola, *The Wrong of Injustice*, 30.

⁵⁷ Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women, & Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 19.

⁵⁸ See, e.g., J. Budziszewski, *On the Meaning of Sex* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2014), 46.

⁵⁹ Budziszewski, *On the Meaning of Sex*, 50–51.

⁶⁰ Benjamin L. Merkle, "Paul's Arguments from Creation in 1 Corinthians 11:8–9 and 1 Timothy 2:13–14: An Apparent Inconsistency Answered," *JETS* 49.3 (September 2006): 533; Thomas R. Schreiner, "Head Coverings, Prophecies, and the Trinity," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 138.

⁶¹ Thatcher, *Redeeming Gender*, 139.

⁶² Witt, "Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Theory," 329–30.

easily if gender isn't causally socially constructed. It is also deflated if essentialism is not equated with biologism. Just because gender is biologically grounded (i.e., caused, directed, linked), doesn't mean it is biologically determined in every respect.⁶³ Moreover, even socially constructed objects can have features that are necessary to satisfy kind membership. Charlotte Witt's Coke machine example is paradigmatic. To fall under the kind "Coke Machine" one *must* dispense Cokes.⁶⁴ Therefore, essentialism can be maintained even on socially constructed identities. If this is true, the argument lacks force.

There is one final argument against essentialism worth noting. Charlotte Witt offers her own argument that *persons* cannot be essentially gendered since persons are capable of self-reflection (e.g., having a first-person perspective) and self-reflection is an inner mental property that exists independently of social relations. Only a whacky object would be essentially gendered if gender is a social role. Therefore, it is a category mistake to apply gender to persons since gender is a social term whereas human organism is a biological term. If gender is essential, it won't be essential to human organisms because persons aren't the right sort of thing to be gendered since they are immaterial first-person perspectives.⁶⁵ Therefore, gender isn't essential to human organisms or persons. But why accept either of these premises? Both are contentious and the likelihood of affirming both of them is small.

Rehabilitating Gender Essentialism

Given the claims of conservative evangelical thinkers that certain gender norms are essential and are caused by biological sex, which essentialism is best suited for the claim that gender is essential? Whereas many conservatives often flippantly use "essential" language, their meaning is often vague and unclear. Therefore, I will consider each possibility in turn.

Evaluating Maximal Essentialism

Maximal essentialism may capture the claim from some conservative evangelicals that desire a maximal set of gender norms and activities to be properly masculine or feminine. Rather than a global maximal essentialism in the sense that every single property of a person is essential, this

⁶³ This is precisely why I avoid the terminology of "biological determinism." Despite the conceptual overlap between terms like determinism and causation, determinism is often linked with a complete causation that negates any freedom or variation.

⁶⁴ Witt, "Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Theory," 325.

⁶⁵ Witt, *The Metaphysics of Gender*, 65.

would be a local maximal essentialism where *each and every* traditional gender feature is essential. In certain statements Owen Strachan appears to affirm such a view. His understanding of masculinity is about toughness, assertiveness, physical fortitude, bravery, provision in the home, etc.⁶⁶ His understanding of femininity is even more specific. Females are to sacrifice their free time and intellectual and vocational interests. They are to care for children, make meals, organize and clean the house, and support their husbands.⁶⁷ But here is the problem: becoming overly specific like this doesn't match the generality of masculinity and femininity. Men and women can do these same specific acts in their own way. What if I, as a male, stay home to watch the children for an evening while my female wife shops for her birthday? I am then functioning in a traditionally feminine way, acting as the primary caretaker. But if this is an irregular activity, why would I be required to be feminine? Therefore, men can care for children without violating their masculinity. Women can be brave without violating their femininity. It is rather odd to claim that every single gender feature is essential. In fact, it's flatly implausible. Moreover, maximal essentialism is fraught with philosophical difficulty and should only be exercised as a last resort.

But maybe the claim is not that every traditional gender feature is essential but that every scriptural gender feature is essential. These are the social features that are required to avoid "*gender confusion*."⁶⁸ But even a local scriptural maximal essentialism is posed with two problems. First, their gender lists typically include social practices that go beyond Scripture and eliminate others that are within. See Owen Strachan's list again. Nowhere does Scripture say that females must necessarily clean their homes whereas men, due to biology, circumvent this "role." The closest that something might come is Titus 2:5 where Paul commands the older women to teach the younger women to work at home. But nowhere is it claimed that this gender role is *essential* to females nor is it *inessential* to males. The second problem remains as above—if gender essentialism needs all of these norms, roles, performances, etc. to be essential for masculinity or femininity then males and females will be in a constant state of flux from masculinity to femininity because none of these social actions are fundamentally necessary to their identity. It is one thing to say that biological males and females are essentially biologically *ordered* to particular social features but to stoop to a crude form of deterministic biologism for the sake of traditional gender norms is self-defeating.

⁶⁶ Strachan, *Reenchanting Humanity*, 140.

⁶⁷ Strachan, *Reenchanting Humanity*, 158.

⁶⁸ DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament*, 448 (emphasis original).

Evaluating Origin Essentialism

Origin essentialism does little to defend the essential aspect of gender, at least for conservative evangelicals. It would allow for Sally to practice whatever gender roles or traits she desired and remain gendered as feminine so long as she couldn't be born again another way. Therefore, it's unlikely that anyone desiring to maintain gender essentialism defends a thin origin essentialism as sufficient.

Evaluating Sortal Essentialism

Sortal essentialism appears to capture much of what conservative evangelicals desire without the problems of maximal essentialism. To claim that both sex (*male* and *female*) and gender (*man* and *woman*) are natural kind terms fits well with many of their thinkers.⁶⁹ As Joshua Farris explains, "The descriptive content of what makes one male or female is a natural property essentially instantiated by each individual."⁷⁰ Since gender is something that is essential beyond individuals and can be instantiated without a social network it constitutes a natural kind. Those that are masculine must have a certain number of properties. Men *must* achieve, create, and protect. Women *must* nurture, receive, and sustain. These properties are normatively *and* biologically essential to biological males and females.

But there are several problems for this sort of gender essentialism. First, if the claim of gender essentialism is supposed to be that there is a direct biological link to these essential qualities, why is it that other genders can fulfill them? Can women *never* achieve, create, and provide?⁷¹ Property sharing simply doesn't constitute a kind by itself. Men and women can both achieve. Men and women can both nurture. The virtues listed by Owen Strachan, John Piper, and Ray Ortlund Jr. for defining masculinity and femininity are done by both in the Bible.⁷² Therefore, it is unclear what would constitute an essential natural gendered kind. Maybe they would lean on J. Budziszewski's proposal that masculinity and femininity are the social expression of sexual powers for procreation.⁷³ In other words, females are potentially mothers, and males are potentially

⁶⁹ Bogardus, "Evaluating Arguments for the Sex/Gender Distinction," 888.

⁷⁰ Joshua R. Farris, *An Introduction to Theological Anthropology: Humans, Both Creaturely and Divine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 224.

⁷¹ Marc Cortez, *Resourcing Theological Anthropology: A Constructive Account of Humanity in the Light of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 205.

⁷² Schreiner, "Man and Woman," 80–81.

⁷³ Budziszewski, *On the Meaning of Sex*, 24.

fathers.⁷⁴ However, the natural kind of masculinity and femininity would be incredibly thin, amounting to physical generating and bearing children—even to only *potentially* doing so. This is a far cry from the robust natural kind gender essentialism that most conservatives would desire. Another option is from Patrick Schreiner’s recent proposal. He realizes the challenge that comes from definitions like Strachan’s, Piper’s, and Ortlund’s since they are “not true in enough situations to stand as the heart of masculinity and femininity.”⁷⁵ Therefore, he defines masculinity and femininity as follows: “The fundamental meaning of masculinity is sonship, brotherly love, and potentiality toward paternity. The fundamental meaning of femininity is daughterhood, sisterly love, and potentiality toward maternity.”⁷⁶ His third aspect mirrors Budziszewski, but do the other two additions avoid the problem? I don’t think so. First, defining gender as sonship and daughterhood doesn’t convey much. These terms reduce to a biological male or female for Schreiner with no further content. The reason he adds these terms is because they don’t need to be actualized like motherhood and fatherhood.⁷⁷ But they don’t explain why both genders can fulfill the various virtues in the same way. Nor do they clarify the distinction in natural kind for gender. Yes, it can explain the difference between sexual natural kinds, but it doesn’t explain the robust gendered natural kind that requires certain properties to be essential given that these necessary properties are instantiated by both sexes. The second aspect of his definition is also lacking. Defining gender as love that is brotherly and sisterly is mostly vacuous. He fails to fill out this concept in his article, but I take it that he means a similar locution as Budziszewski who admits that both males and females instantiate the same virtues. They merely inflect them differently.⁷⁸ As Kintner and Wester say, “The sex of the person displaying each trait will shape the way it is displayed. Our biological sex matters and is central to our lives as human beings.”⁷⁹ Both are loving but they are loving in distinct sexed ways. But this doesn’t comport with a robust gender essentialism that desires to maintain robust social features for males and females. It can maintain difference between the sexes, but maintaining robust social features instantiated by males and females is entirely lacking.

⁷⁴ Budziszewski, *On the Meaning of Sex*, 54–59.

⁷⁵ Schreiner, “Man and Woman,” 86.

⁷⁶ Schreiner, “Man and Woman,” 85.

⁷⁷ Schreiner, “Man and Woman,” 85.

⁷⁸ Budziszewski, *On the Meaning of Sex*, 51.

⁷⁹ Jenn Kintner and Joshua Wester, “Sameness and Distinction: Rethinking Assumptions about God’s Design of Men and Women,” *Eikon* 2.2 (Fall 2020): 22–31.

A second problem is this: if we want to have masculinity and femininity reflect the objective facts of nature, *which* properties are necessary and/or sufficient for kind membership? Being nurturing? Being creative? Having a uterus? Is it essential for me to fulfill the role of bread-winner? Of aggressor? Of achiever? Of father? As a reminder, typically an object x has a property P essentially if and only if x has P in every world in which x exists.⁸⁰ There are lots of possible worlds where a male doesn’t achieve, doesn’t create, doesn’t protect, doesn’t display brotherly love, isn’t a father, etc. Does this mean they are not masculine? Does this mean these characteristics aren’t masculine?

Maybe one would reply threefold: (1) Gender is a complex and unanalyzable universal. No necessary and sufficient conditions can be discerned.⁸¹ Therefore, it’s not a problem that the properties can’t be completely discerned. (2) Natural kinds such as gender are rich sources of inductive knowledge. We can infer from subsets of properties to the remainder of properties.⁸² While we may not have complete clarity on the necessary and sufficient conditions, we can make educated assumptions. As Farris says, “Gender is not reducible to a physical reality, but the physical reality is the obvious epistemic evidence for gender and is lawfully connected to it. In this way, biological sex places limitations on gender, and biological sex yields specified social realities.”⁸³ (3) Gender essentialism is more about *potentiality* than actuality. Masculinity and femininity are social characteristics that have certain levels of potential capacity that differ. One doesn’t need to function in these ways to be masculine or feminine—they just need the potential to do so. But if this is the definition of gender essentialism, the concept is far thinner than many often claim it to be. It is hard to make sense of claims like Owen Strachan’s that “provision is part of manly identity and the role given to men by God in the home” if gender essentialism is properly about potentiality rather than actuality.⁸⁴ A second problem is that gender appears to be a phase sortal rather than a substance sortal. I wasn’t always an adult male. At one time I was a child. If my gender changed at some point, is it really essential? A concept is supposed to be a sortal concept *only* if it provides a criterion of identity (principle of individuation) and gender doesn’t seem to fit the bill.⁸⁵ There are two replies here. First, essential properties can be added at a point in

⁸⁰ Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, 60.

⁸¹ Mari Mikkola, “Elizabeth Spelman, Gender Realism, and Women,” *Hypatia* 21.4 (Autumn 2006): 92.

⁸² Bird, “Essences and Natural Kinds,” 502.

⁸³ Farris, *An Introduction to Theological Anthropology*, 226.

⁸⁴ Strachan, *Reenchanting Humanity*, 162n41.

⁸⁵ Mackie, *How Things Might Have Been*, 120.

time and remain essential. Second, it isn't clear that my gender changed from childhood to adulthood. While the term for it may have changed, the specific social characteristics of gender didn't—neither did my sex.

Evaluating Causal Essentialism

Causal essentialism is a strong fit for maintaining the conservative evangelical understanding of masculinity and femininity since it claims gender is biologically grounded. It also avoids the sortal essentialism cost by not requiring particular social characteristics to be displayed—it only requires that there be an essential causal explanation for them. In this case, the causal explanation is being created as a male or female. The causal explanation is *not* ultimately social factors. While social factors may play some role, they are not the basic grounding for them. The idea is that “God has built, or etched, an order into the world ...”⁸⁶ Men are *ordered* to certain virtues and women to others—or at least ordered to certain expressions of them. For example, a mother is ordered to express nurturing in a different way than a father upon the birth of a child. Since only the mother is capable of breastfeeding a child, she is given to a form of nurturing that the father is not. While the father can display the same amount of nurturing, he cannot display the virtue in the same ways. Therefore, the social characteristics can be shared by both, but each sex has the potential to display them differently.⁸⁷ Here the core distinction is biological sex rather than the expressed action. For example, Aimee Byrd says, “I do not need to do something in a certain way to be feminine.... I simply am feminine because I am female.”⁸⁸ This is the key insight—social features can change but the grounding is in biological sex.

Given this explanation, does this mean men and women would have different *telos*? Aimee Byrd finds the proposal that Christians should have different goals (e.g., manhood and womanhood) as wrongheaded. Virtues are not gendered. Never are we exhorted to be “masculine” or “feminine.” Everyone has the single *telos* of knowing and enjoying God.⁸⁹ However, this critique lacks bite. Yes, all human beings have the same ultimate *telos* of knowing and enjoying God, but this doesn't eliminate the reality of a subordinate *telos*. As a father I have the *telos* of generating and training

⁸⁶ Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P. O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 89.

⁸⁷ A key question that I lack the space to address here is exactly *how* biological properties cause social properties.

⁸⁸ Aimee Byrd, *Recovering from Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: How the Church Needs to Rediscover Her Purpose* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 114.

⁸⁹ Byrd, *Recovering from Biblical Manhood & Womanhood*, 109–11.

my children. This doesn't overrule my ultimate *telos* of knowing and enjoying God, but it is a legitimate *telos* in its own right, though subordinate. Therefore, this proposal *does* mean that men and women have a different subordinate *telos*.

A final question for causal essentialism is whether it really fulfills the robust gender essentialism that many conservative evangelicals desire. I don't think it does since it allows for extreme flexibility in the virtues displayed by the sexes—but I think that's because conservative evangelicals desire something far more robust than is philosophically feasible or biblically warranted. Claiming that certain roles are essential to males or females is incoherent. While each sex can be ordered to particular tasks or roles, this doesn't negate the possibility that others function alternatively.

Evaluating Uniessentialism

Uniessentialism fits well with the language and examples of many conservative evangelicals that exhort one to fulfill the gender *function*. As Owen Strachan suggests, a “failure to show strength means a failure of manhood.”⁹⁰ Masculinity in this case relates to function. When a male is functioning in strength, he is masculine. When he is functioning in weakness, he is effeminate. But it seems like gender could change in ways that are inconsistent with the essential character that they desire if this is true. Strachan and company want an essential—as in absolutely necessary—gender. This is based upon how one acts and is subject to change.

Rehabilitating Essentialism

Based on the above descriptions, I take it that causal essentialism is best suited for gender essentialism. However, this does require a revision to the conservative evangelical definitions of masculinity and femininity. It is not that men and women are ordered to cause specific traits but that they are ordered to *primarily* cause specific traits. The distinction here is fine grained. It is this: Human beings of either sex can practice every virtue indiscriminately. Men are not designed to practice protection whereas women are designed to practice nurturing, as if it is a scale of extremes with men and women on opposing sides and only physically capable of pursuing certain virtues. Men and women can pursue all the same virtues—love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, self-control, etc. However, biology does determine that men have differing levels of *capability* than women to display particular virtues and differing levels of *potentiality* to display them. The conservative evangelical position has too often made

⁹⁰ Strachan, *Reenchanting Humanity*, 139.

statements akin to maximal essentialism that require specific social features to be essential when the essential aspect is sex, which essentially orders men and women to inflect the virtues in gendered ways. Given the essential nature of gender, how does this impact the goodness of creation? How is it good news for males and females?

The Goodness of Gender Essentialism

Social justice has been a prime concern of feminist philosophy for decades. Dismantling the systems and structures that promote oppression, domination, and discrimination is at feminism's core.⁹¹ Feminism is an eminently practical discipline. Thus, if gender essentialism is to captivate a new generation, it must not only appeal to the head but the heart and hands. Moreover, gender essentialism has often been used to justify oppression of women. For example, feminists have suggested that if gender is completely biologically determined, then no one is responsible when women are hurt through oppressive structures.⁹² Feminine and masculine gender norms have resulted in behaviors that reinforce women's subordination by teaching them to be passive, ignorant, docile, and emotional helpmates.⁹³ Traditional gender norms have constrained women from being free as active agents.⁹⁴ Therefore, feminism has worked to release all humans to more just designs of living, to free them from patriarchal civil and ecclesial structures and intellectual systems that support those structures.⁹⁵ But is gender essentialism oppressive?

Before displaying the positive aspects of gender essentialism, I will consider whether the claim that gender essentialism is necessarily harmful to women is true. The claim appears to be that gender essentialism perpetuates sexism and oppression of women. But correlation does not mean causation. Moreover, it could be abuse of gender essentialism that causes sexism and oppression.⁹⁶ There is no empirical evidence that links gender essentialism in the way defined here to sexism or oppression—unless sexism is defined in a radically thin way that assumes a belief in difference is sexism. But I take it that most feminists do not do this. For example, consider Mari Mikkola's account of "dehumanization" as an "indefensible setback to some of our legitimate human interests, where this setback

⁹¹ Mikkola, *The Wrong of Injustice*, 1; Johnson, *She Who Is*, 29.

⁹² Mikkola, *The Wrong of Injustice*, 21.

⁹³ Mikkola, *The Wrong of Injustice*, 25.

⁹⁴ Mikkola, *The Wrong of Injustice*, 47.

⁹⁵ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 9.

⁹⁶ Bogardus, "Evaluating Arguments for the Sex/Gender Distinction," 881.

constitutes a moral injury."⁹⁷ Therefore, sexism and patriarchy "systemically target women and prevent them from being able to lead certain kinds of lives."⁹⁸ But claiming that gender is essential in a causal sense, leading to certain virtues in certain circumstances, doesn't prevent women from leading lives free from morally injurious setbacks. It is fully consistent with a physical, mental, and social well-being, promoting the basic goods of life such as life, health, the absence of pain/suffering, non-stigmatization, the absence of groundless anxiety, friendship, minimal income, and access to a tolerable environment.⁹⁹

The obvious counter example is likely that of the pastoral office. Conservative evangelicals point to 1 Tim 2:12 as proof that women cannot lead certain kinds of lives. Women are not allowed to teach men. But this command need not be linked to gender essentialism. It's clear that God can stipulate norms irrespective of underlying biological realities such as with the priesthood and the Levites.¹⁰⁰ But the perceptive reader is likely to notice 1 Tim 2:13–14, which grounds the command of 2:12. The Apostle grounds this command in *creation*.¹⁰¹ He says that women cannot teach *because* woman was formed second and was deceived. However, this is not an ontological fact about women but rather a historical fact about them. The Apostle's grounding, therefore, is not primarily biological but redemptive-historical.

The primary benefit of gender essentialism is that physical bodies lend themselves to particular gender norms such as bearing and feeding children or career vocation.¹⁰² Such an observation is in harmony with current research in biology that documents sex differences in numerous areas such as anthropometric traits, energy metabolism, brain morphology, and immune and cardiac function.¹⁰³ Men and women differ not just in brain activity but in brain organization and development.¹⁰⁴ Sex influences numerous areas of the brain including emotion, memory, vision, hearing, facial processing, pain perception, navigation, neurotransmitter levels,

⁹⁷ Mikkola, *The Wrong of Injustice*, 145.

⁹⁸ Mikkola, *The Wrong of Injustice*, 150.

⁹⁹ Mikkola, *The Wrong of Injustice*, 168.

¹⁰⁰ Cortez, *Resourcing Theological Anthropology*, 209.

¹⁰¹ Douglas Moo, "What Does It Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority Over Men?," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 190.

¹⁰² Strachan, *Reenchanting Humanity*, 145.

¹⁰³ Sahin Naqvi et al., "Conservation, Acquisition, and Functional Impact of Sex-Biased Gene Expression in Mammals," *Science* 365, no. 6450 (July 19, 2019): eaaw7317, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaw7317>.

¹⁰⁴ Budziszewski, *On the Meaning of Sex*, 38.

stress hormone action on the brain, and disease states.¹⁰⁵ Larry Cahill even notes that “sex differences exist in every brain lobe, including in many ‘cognitive’ regions such as the hippocampus, amygdala and neocortex.”¹⁰⁶ If gender is grounded in biology and whatever is natural is good, it is good to be in harmony with one’s body. The physical make-up creates the intended function. Our bodies have a *telos* and our psychology should follow it. The subjective should follow the objective.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I argue that gender essentialism isn’t dead—nor is it even at the morgue. While many may have assumed it was dying, it actually has a long life ahead of it. While it is true that the various versions of maximal essentialism, which are often flippantly buttressed by conservative evangelicals, are dead ends, this does not mean that gender essentialism is. There are various avenues to affirm gender essentialism and maintain a broad commitment to the distinction between the men and women. I hope this essay has been a small nudge to chasten conservative evangelical claims about gender without giving up the central desire to promote the goodness of essential difference.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Larry Cahill, “Why Sex Matters for Neuroscience,” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 7.6 (June 2006): 477.

¹⁰⁶ Cahill, “Why Sex Matters for Neuroscience,” 478.

¹⁰⁷ I would like to thank Felipe do Vale for his insightful comments and criticisms on an early draft of this paper.