

Do Intersex Individuals Disprove the Gender Binary?

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“She might have the physical attributes of a woman but Jennifer Pagonis was in fact born intersex, meaning she is genetically male and has the reproductive organs to match.”¹ This was the opening sentence in a *Daily Mail* article titled “I Exist in the Gray’.” Pagonis was born with a rare genetic condition called Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome. The article explains, “Androgen insensitivity syndrome (AIS) is when a person who is genetically male (who has one X and one Y chromosome) is resistant to male hormones (called androgens). As a result, the person has some or all of the physical traits of a woman, but the genetic makeup of a man.”² The Intersex Society of North America further explains:³

“In an individual with complete AIS and karyotype 46 XY, testes develop during gestation. The fetal testes produce mullerian inhibiting hormone (MIH) and testosterone. As in typical male fetuses, the MIH causes the fetal mullerian ducts to regress, so the fetus lacks uterus, fallopian tubes, and cervix plus upper part of vagina. However, because cells fail to respond to testosterone, the genitals differentiate in the female, rather than the male pattern ... The newborn AIS infant has genitals of normal female appearance, undescended or partially descended testes, and usually a short vagina with no cervix. Occasionally the vagina is nearly absent.

The reality of intersex individuals is commonly presented as evidence refuting a gender binary and a universal definition of biological sex. According to an article titled “It’s Time for People to Stop Using the Social Construct of ‘Biological Sex’ to Defend Their Transmisogyny”:⁴

“Since “biological sex” is actually a social construct, those who say that it is not often have

¹ Whitelocks, “I Exist in the Gray’: 29-Year Old Who Looks Like a Woman but Has Male Genitalia Speaks Out About Rare Intersex Condition.”

² Ibid.

³ Intersex Society of North America, “Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS).”

⁴ Mey, “It’s Time for People to Stop Using the Social Construct of ‘Biological Sex’ to Defend Their Transmisogyny.”

to argue about what it entails. Some say it's based on chromosomes (of which there are many non-XX/XY combinations, as well as diversity among people with XY chromosomes), others say it's genitals or gonads (either at birth or at the moment you're talking about), others say it's hormone levels (which vary widely and can be manipulated), still others say it's secondary sex characteristics like the appearance of breasts, body hair and muscle mass (which vary even more). Some say that it's a combination of all of them. Now, this creates a huge problem, as sex organs, secondary sex characteristics and hormone levels aren't anywhere close to being universal to all men or women, males or females. ... While it is true that gender and sex are different things, and that gender is indeed a social construct, sex isn't the Ultimate Biological Reality that transphobes make it out to be.

The implication of such arguments is that intersex individuals represent a third gender that is neither male, nor female. However, as in the argument cited above, this line of reasoning is usually extrapolated out to refute any objective and universal classification for biological sex, thus affording the possibility of a vast array of sexes. The assumption is that because intersex conditions are exceptions to the normal classifications of male and female, these individuals cannot be male or female.

According to the Intersex Society of North America, "'Intersex' is a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male."⁵ The U.S. National Library of Medicine divides intersex into 4 categories:

- 46, XX intersex—"The person has the chromosomes of a woman, the ovaries of a woman, but external (outside) genitals that appear male. This most often is the result of a female fetus having been exposed to excess male hormones before birth."⁶
- 46, XY intersex—"The person has the chromosomes of a man, but the external genitals are incompletely formed, ambiguous, or clearly female. Internally, testes may be normal, malformed, or absent."⁷
- True gonadal intersex—"The person must have both ovarian and testicular tissue. This may be in the same gonad (an ovotestis), or the person might have 1 ovary and 1 testis. The person may have XX chromosomes, XY chromosomes, or both. The external genitals may be ambiguous or may appear to be female or male."⁸
- Complex or undetermined intersex—"Many chromosome configurations other than simple 46, XX or 46, XY can result in disorders of sex development. These include 45, XO (only one X chromosome), and 47, XXY, 47, XXX - both cases have an extra sex chromosome, either an X or a Y. These disorders do not result in a condition where there is discrepancy

⁵ Intersex Society of North America, "What Is Intersex?"

⁶ Medline Plus, "Intersex."

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

between internal and external genitalia. However, there may be problems with sex hormone levels, overall sexual development, and altered numbers of sex chromosomes.”⁹

Despite the transgender community’s dependence upon intersex in their efforts to disprove the gender binary, the Intersex Society of North America readily acknowledges that “many intersex people are perfectly comfortable adopting either a male or female gender identity and are not seeking a genderless society or to label themselves as a member of a third gender class.”¹⁰ Intersex individuals are still born male or female, even if their anatomy is not considered to be typically male or female.¹¹ As Darreact notes in an article at *Darwinian Reactionary*, “[S]ex is a functional biological norm, and individuals can deviate from this norm in many different ways. ... And so, being a male isn’t whether you are XY, it is whether you are supposed to be XY; it is whether this is what would have been the biologically normal result had the process that determines sex worked as designed.”¹² The presence of the Y chromosome is supposed to trigger a whole series of events which will result in a biologically distinct male, but just because something may interfere with and distort the original design such that it does not function in the way it was intended does not negate that it was supposed to have a specific function. This is why we speak of brain damage, heart deformities, sterile sperm, and other such abnormalities by using qualifiers which indicate that something is failing to function according to its biological intent.¹³ The heart remains a heart; the sperm remains a sperm, and the brain remains a brain even if they are not functioning properly. A deformed heart remains a heart, even if it is an exception to the norm. Likewise, a person’s biological sex remains male or female even if it is an exception to the norm and does not function according to its biological intent.

An analogous example is the story of Jaxon Buell who was born with a rare birth defect that occurs when the beginnings of the nervous system develop incorrectly. This condition prevented most of Jaxon’s brain from forming, leaving half his skull flat.¹⁴ Most likely he will never be capable of talking and of walking independently.¹⁵ Nevertheless, he remains human. Without most of a brain, he does not fit into the normal classification for humans, but the mere fact that his brain did not develop according to its biological intent does not negate his humanity. In the same way, the mere fact that sex organs may not develop according to their biological intent does not negate the individuals’ biological gender.

Despite the ambiguity of sex organs in intersex conditions, most intersex individuals are still discernably male or female. For example, in the case of 46, XX, the U.S. National Library of Medicine reports, “The person has the chromosomes of a woman, the ovaries of a woman, but external (outside) genitals that appear male. This most often is the result of a female fetus having been exposed to excess male hormones before birth.”¹⁶ Thus, a 46, XX individual is biologically

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Intersex Society of North America, “Why Doesn’t ISNA Want to Eradicate Gender?”

¹¹ Intersex Society of North America, “What’s the Difference Between Being Transgender or Transsexual and Having an Intersex Condition?”

¹² Darreact, “Sex Is Not A Social Construct.”

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “Presents Pile Up for ‘Miracle Baby’ Born Missing Most of His Brain.”

¹⁵ Wright, *et al.* “Florida ‘Miracle Baby’ Born Without Most of His Brain Beating the Odds.”

¹⁶ Medline Plus, “Intersex.”

female. A “female fetus” develops abnormal physical features because of “having been exposed to excess male hormones before birth”, but the individual remains biologically female.

Likewise, as in the case of Jennifer Pagonis, a 46, XY individual is “genetically male” but “unable to respond to the hormones that produce a male appearance.”¹⁷ Despite the possible presence of female sex organs, these organs are not fully developed, lacking a uterus, fallopian tubes, and a cervix.¹⁸ As such, the individual is unable to conceive or even to menstruate. The presence of female sex organs is not because the individual was biologically intended to be female. It is evident that the individual was biologically intended to be male, but the developmental process was hindered by a genetic deficiency in the X chromosome.¹⁹ The fact that his body failed to fully mature in a biologically normal manner does not negate the fact that he is genetically male, and he was supposed to develop male genitalia. As such, a 46, XY intersex individual is biologically male, despite his appearance.

Citing the Consortium on the Management of Disorder of Sex Development’s *Clinical Guidelines for the Management of Disorders of Sex Development in Childhood*, the American College of Pediatricians released a statement, saying, “The norm for human design is to be conceived either male or female. Human sexuality is binary by design with the obvious purpose being the reproduction and flourishing of our species. This principle is self-evident. The exceedingly rare disorders of sex development (DSDs), including but not limited to testicular feminization and congenital adrenal hyperplasia, are all medically identifiable deviations from the sexual binary norm, and are rightly recognized as disorders of human design. Individuals with DSDs do not constitute a third sex.”²⁰ Intersex conditions do not negate the reality of the male and female binary any more than mutations and defects negate any other objective reality. Likewise, the reality of intersex conditions does not prove that biological sex is merely a social construction. Biological sex exists independent of what we choose to call it. As the blogger EvolutionistX notes, “Reality doesn’t care what you call it.”²¹ He also writes:²²

“All “socially constructed” really means is that the definition of a word—or concept—is agreed upon via some form of common consensus. Thus, the meaning of words can be changed if everyone decides to do so.

“Gay” was once socially constructed to mean “happy.” Now, by popular consensus, “gay” means something else. ... When people start making a big deal out of social constructivism, it is natural to think this must be some big, profound, important insight, otherwise they wouldn’t be going on for so long.

¹⁷ Whitelocks, “I Exist in the Gray’: 29-Year Old Who Looks Like a Woman but Has Male Genitalia Speaks Out About Rare Intersex Condition.”

¹⁸ Intersex Society of North America, “Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS).”

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ American College of Pediatricians, “Gender Ideology Harms Children.”

²¹ EvolutionistX, “Reality Is a Social Construct.”

²² EvolutionistX, “Transsexuals Prove That Gender Is Real.”

But people only pull out this argument when they want to deny the existence of actual reality, not when trying to argue that your notion of “ornamental shrub” is socially constructed and you should plant a blueberry bush.

Reality exists, no matter how we care to conceptualize it and organize the data we’re getting about it. Most categories that weren’t invented for the sake of a novel (“elves” probably *are* totally made up,) exist because they serve some sort of functional purpose. Being able to call someone “male” or “female,” “black” or “white” or “Bantu” or “Japanese” allows me to convey a bundle of information to the listener—a feature of language obvious to virtually everyone who has ever engaged in conversation, except to folks trying to eliminate such words from the language on the grounds that they are made up and so carry no information.

What makes this subject difficult to discuss is that we are speaking about real human beings whose bodies failed to develop in the way they were biologically intended to develop. As such there are very real emotions attached to this idea that some people do not fit the normal classifications of male and female. By no means do we wish to convey the idea that such individuals are less valuable because they are intersex. When speaking of biological intent—or what is a biologically normal function—we are compelled to question what God’s intent was when He created intersex individuals. Does God make mistakes when He creates some people? And if God does not create mistakes, then how can we say that something is not functioning according to its biological intent?

Examples abound within creation where something fails to function according to its biological intent, and human bodies are no exception. Children are born with deformed limbs, life-threatening diseases, mental retardation, and all kinds of additional defects. This is not because God created these defections. When God designed mankind, He created male and female in perfection. [Genesis 1:27 and 31](#) says, *“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. ... And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.”* However, mankind chose to sin, and with that sin came a corruption of God’s original design. As such, God continues to create in perfection, but God also permits sin to influence His creation ([Rom. 8:19-21](#)). Sometimes the influence of sin is evident, such as in the development of children who are born to alcoholics and drug addicts. Sometimes it is not as evident, such as the children of healthy parents who are born with physical abnormalities. Regardless, sin has a corrupting influence upon all of God’s creation. God does not make mistakes, but He has chosen to permit His creation to live with the consequences of mankind’s mistakes.

Every person has suffered the corrupting effects of sin. For some it is manifested in temptations. Maybe they are naturally inclined toward addictive substances, fits of rage, sexual immorality, or any number of additional temptations. For others it is manifested in a mental condition such as autism, schizophrenia, multiple personality disorder, or any number of additional mental challenges. For still others it is manifested in physical defections such as predisposition to diseases, physical handicaps, physical deformities or abnormalities, and any number of additional physical challenges. Regardless of how the corrupting influence of sin may manifest itself in our lives, we all suffer its

effects to varying degrees. As Pastor Brad Neese teaches, we are all broken people in need of a Savior. This is the essence of [Romans 3:23](#), “[A]ll have sinned and fall short of the glory of God ...”

Our weaknesses—our defects—testify to our need of a Savior who can redeem our bodies. Without these evident defects, we may never realize the extent of our plight. Therefore, God permits sin to wreak havoc upon His creation in order that we might recognize where the rebellion of sin leads, and we might repent of our sinful behavior, submit to God’s commandments, and accept the sacrifice that Jesus Christ made on our behalf ([Rom. 8:19–23](#)). For this reason, [Romans chapter 3](#) goes on to say, “[A]ll have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by [God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” Likewise, [Romans 10:9–11](#) says, “[I]f you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.’”

From what will we be saved? We will be saved from the due punishment for our sins ([Rom. 6:23](#)), but we will also be saved from the corruption of sin upon our bodies. [Romans 8:23–24](#) reminds us that all who have placed their faith and confidence in Jesus Christ will eventually experience a complete redemption of their body, “[W]e ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved.”

Intersex conditions are not evidence of a third gender; intersex conditions are evidence of the effect of sin upon God’s creation. More importantly, intersex conditions are evidence of our need for a Savior who will redeem not only our souls, but also our bodies.

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