

Created but Misplaced Being?

The Body-Soul Relationship and Gender Dysphoria

By Rev Dr Edmund Fong

Bringing a theological slant into the issue of gender dysphoria raises the following question: “Could God have created me a woman but placed me in the wrong body (and vice versa)?” So, even as Gen 1:27 tells us that “male and female [God] created them” (ESV), could an individual with gender dysphoria fall under the curious case of what I call a “created but misplaced being”? In this article, I wish to explore the possibility of this curious state in relation to the body-soul relationship.

I begin with the first broad position that outlines the body-soul relationship: materialism. Materialism views the human being as a purely physical entity; we comprise no additional non-physical or spiritual substance. Even if certain materialists allow for the presence of mental entities or realities, they would reject the idea that these mental entities could be integrated to form a united ‘mental’ self that can be spoken in terms of a conscious ‘I’.

There are difficulties relating to how gender dysphoria sits with materialism. At the centre of gender dysphoria lies a conscious and united belief concerning the individual as a whole person: the gender I experience or am is discordant

with that indicated by my bodily or biological sex. Materialists have responded by either challenging the whole idea of consciousness or allowing at most for one’s conscious experiences to be nothing more than mental representations of certain qualities of objects (like colour) made to the human brain. These responses, however, fail to adequately account for the real and undeniable presence of the unitive and wholly conscious self — the ‘I’ — that is experiencing gender dysphoria.

The above leads to the outcome that the Christian materialist really has no room to assert the claim that ‘I’ have been created a certain gender but misplaced in the biological body of the opposite gender, for in materialism, there is no unitive and wholly conscious ‘I’ present other than the ‘I’ constituted by my body cells, all of which, it can be argued, have been stamped with a certain biological sex.

Unlike materialism, the other broad position of substance dualism maintains that there are two distinct mental and physical realms or substances — the soul and the body — and both are fundamental and non-reducible. As ontological distinct entities, the mental and physical substances can be in causal relationships with one

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At first glance, substance dualism might lead one to conceive of a “created but misplaced being” scenario: my soul is ‘female’ but I have been mistakenly placed in a ‘male’ body or vice versa. A deeper look, however, at two varieties of substance dualism — emergent dualism and Thomistic dualism — holds that thought in check.

Emergent dualism states that the soul (or mind) is an emergent entity or mental substance that emerges from a properly configured physical system, in this case the body with all the biological, chemical and neural relationships, and interactions. Once emerged, the soul subsists as a distinct substance that is ontologically distinct and separable from the body.

Thomistic dualism presents the soul as the substantial form that animates or actualises matter — in this case a body — to be a living human body. This understanding leads some Thomistic dualists to maintain that the soul could be properly characterised as sexed or gendered on account of the fact that it serves as the vivifying or actualising principle of actually existing sexed human beings.

Together, I believe that emergent dualism and Thomistic dualism rule out the possibility of a created soul sexed (or gendered) one way but placed in a body sexed another way.

On account of emergent dualism, the soul is not created ‘externally’ and subsequently ‘plopped’ into a body, but the soul emerges ‘internally’ from the physical, chemical and neural operations in the created human body. The body’s biological development of sexuality serves as the proximate cause for the ‘gender’ of the soul.

As for Thomistic dualism, because of the unitive soul-body relationship and the soul serving as the

vivifying and animating principle for a human body which is biologically sexed one way, it is virtually impossible for the soul to be sexed (or gendered) another way.

This leaves the last variety of substance dualism: Cartesian dualism, which in its stronger forms construes body and soul to be so fundamentally different that there is little interdependence between the two substances. The soul is often seen as that which is real and the sole constituent in one’s personal identity, with the human body often ending up being viewed as a nonpersonal instrument of the self.

‘Strong’ Cartesian dualism could do damage in severing the link between sex (understood as a biological identity) and gender (understood as a psychological identity). Because the soul and that alone is what constitutes the real ‘me’ and my sexual identity as a characteristic of my body is not definitive for the gender identity of the real ‘me’, the door is opened to the possibility that my soul could be sexed (or gendered) one way but misplaced in a body sexed another way.

There is a way out for Cartesian dualists, and it is by maintaining that the soul is not ‘gendered’ by itself in abstraction from a human body. In this model where souls do not instantiate one gender essentially but only derivatively as a common property it shares with the body sexed in a particular way, it is difficult to envisage a case of a soul gendered one way mismatched with the wrong body.

In short, the major accounts of the body-soul relationship understood within theological anthropology outlined above reveal the implausibility of the “created but misplaced being” scenario, where God creates a human soul ‘gendered’ one way but misplaces the soul in a human body biologically sexed another way. ❖



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