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Gender-Affirmation and Loving Attention

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Abstract

In this article I examine the moral dimensions of gender-affirmation. I argue that the moral value of gender-affirmation is rooted in what Iris Murdoch called loving attention. Loving attention is central to the moral value of gender-affirmation because such affirmation is otherwise too fragile or insincere to have such value. Moral reasons to engage in acts that gender-affirm derive from the commitment to give and express loving attention to trans people as a way of challenging their marginalization. In the latter part of the article, I will discuss how my arguments bear on recent arguments by Robin Dembroff and Daniel Wodak on the use of gender-neutral language (Dembroff and Wodak 2018). They argue that we have a duty not to use gender-specific pronouns for anyone. Their conclusion turns, in part, on a rejection of gender-affirmation as a moral duty. The value of gender-affirmation, rooted in our moral perception of trans people, should make us skeptical of this conclusion, in favor of a more nuanced and pluralistic approach to the ethics of gendering.

Though we may hardly notice, we are constantly being gendered and gendering others. Nearly every visit to the bank or a restaurant involves a "Hello, sir" or a "Thank you, ma'am." Whenever we talk about our friends, coworkers, or spouses, we likely use gendered language—most commonly, we use gendered pronouns. "I went out to drinks with *her* last week"; "*He* is late every Tuesday"; "*She* will call *him* tomorrow." Using gendered language is nearly inescapable. Unfortunately, given the ubiquitous gendering in our society, it is extremely common for trans people to be gendered in ways that do not conform to their gender identity, that is, to be *misgendered*. In order to avoid being misgendered, many people leave preferred pronouns in email signatures or wear them as pins around strangers.[1] In most queer spaces, preferred pronouns are urged to be respected in order not only to avoid misgendering but also to gender-affirm trans people. When making introductions, it is encouraged that people share preferred pronouns along with names. Beyond using gendered pronouns, a number of other interactions can give one gender-affirmation: a trans woman having a door held open for her, a trans man getting a head nod from another man, or a genderqueer/nonbinary person[2] having gender-neutral language used for them.[3]

There is growing philosophical attention to the ethics of the language we use when interacting with trans people—specifically with regard to misgendering trans people. Stephanie Kapusta argues that dominant conceptions of womanhood exclude or marginalize trans women and explains how this in effect opens transgender persons up to a linguistic form of moral harm and oppression via gender-term deployments (Kapusta 2016). Dembroff and Wodak further explore the harms of misgendering by arguing that gendered pronouns can misgender genderqueer persons in addition to trans women and men. Furthermore, they argue that the moral harm of misgendering is based in *denying* someone's gender, making the moral duty not to misgender someone consistent with using gender neutral-pronouns for everyone. That is, they argue it is not only morally permissible to use gender-neutral pronouns for everyone, regardless of one's gender, but also that we *should* use gender-neutral pronouns for everyone (Dembroff and Wodak 2018).[4]

Although gender-*affirmation* is a regularly discussed topic and a practiced norm in queer communities, most work in philosophy (and elsewhere) has focused on the wrongs of *mis*gendering: the moral harm in being incorrectly gendered. Gender-affirmation, on the other hand, goes beyond merely avoiding misgendering: it involves actively *affirming* a person's gender.[5] As Dembroff and Wodak point out, one can avoid misgendering someone, but also not gender-affirm them (for example, by using their name) (Dembroff and Wodak 2018, 382–84).[6] It is one thing to misgender someone and another to affirm someone. In the interest of determining how we can be better allies to trans people, the topic of gender-affirmation, in addition to that of misgendering, deserves philosophical exploration. In determining what makes gender-affirmation morally distinct, we can better understand how we should engage with our trans friends, family, neighbors, colleagues, and community members.

I argue that the moral value of gender-affirmation is rooted in what Iris Murdoch called a loving and just attention. I begin by giving a brief explanation of how I understand Murdoch's notion of loving attention before tying this concept to gender-affirmation. I then argue that loving attention is central to the moral value of gender-affirmation because such affirmation is otherwise too fragile or insincere to have such value. Moral reasons to engage in acts that gender-affirm derive from the commitment to give and express loving attention to trans people as a way of challenging their marginalization.

In the latter part of the article, I will discuss how my arguments bear on Dembroff and Wodak's recent arguments on the use of gender-neutral language. They argue that we have a duty not to use gender-specific pronouns for anyone. Their conclusion turns, in part, on a rejection of gender-affirmation as a moral duty (Dembroff and Wodak 2018). The value of gender-affirmation, rooted in our moral perception of trans people, should make us skeptical of this conclusion, in favor of a more nuanced and pluralistic approach to the ethics of gendering.

Loving Attention

In response to the philosophical trends of their[7] time—an action-centered utilitarianism and behaviorism, will-focused Kantianism, and decision-focused existentialism—Murdoch wanted us to reconsider the role of the *inner* moral life of perception (Murdoch 1970).[8] I take it that their work can be read as carving out a particular aspect of the moral life these popular theories overlooked, and not necessarily a rival moral theory all its own. Murdoch's point comes out most clearly in their famous example

of M and D: M, a mother, perceives her son's new wife, her daughter-in-law D, as vulgar, undignified, noisy, and tiresomely juvenile. Murdoch stipulates that M is perfectly nice to D and never lets her perceptions of D influence her actions toward her. So, though M may believe her son to have married beneath him, she does not allow her real opinion to appear in any way toward him or D. Murdoch invites us to further imagine that M is an intelligent, well-intentioned person capable of self-criticism and eventually decides to reconsider her perception of D. M may reflect on how she is often old-fashioned, narrow-minded, snobbish, and almost certainly jealous of D. M, thus, resolves to look again. According to Murdoch, we can assume that M's behavior has not changed at all, and that we can even imagine that upon "looking again," D has moved away or has died, so that whatever changes about M, it will be a change in her inner moral life. As M reconsiders D, she realizes that D is not vulgar, but refreshingly simple; not undignified, but spontaneous; not noisy, but gay; not tiresomely juvenile, but delightfully youthful. M's change in perception, importantly, is a moral change: she is perceiving in a morally better way (Murdoch 1970, 17–18). Murdoch's point is that one's moral perception constitutes an important moral landscape in itself. Although other philosophers have recognized the importance of moral perception for our downstream moral actions, according to Murdoch important moral changes can occur entirely interior to a person's psychology.[9] M's actions toward D don't change at all, but there is still an important moral change here: she *perceives* D differently.

According to Murdoch, our perception is often distorted by our self-preoccupied nature:

> [Our perception] is not normally a transparent glass through which it views the world, but a cloud of more or less fantastic reverie designed to protect the psyche from pain. . . . [B]y opening our eyes we do not necessarily see what confronts us. We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals the world. (76–77, 82)

M's own self-preoccupation and anxieties manifest in her prejudice and narrow-mindedness, her snobbery and jealousy. These traits constitute her "falsifying veil," which she sheds in order to attend properly. It is then that she can perceive D: when she is less concerned about her own cares, concerns, needs, and desires, and starts focusing on D's. In other words, she is perceiving D *on D's own terms*.

Someone is perceived properly, in my view, when they are perceived *on their own terms*, in other words, when *their* cares, concerns, needs, desires, and self-conception are salient, rather than the cares, concerns, needs, and desires of the perceiver. When one tries to perceive in this way, they are attending with what Murdoch calls a just and loving attention. When one is attempting to perceive someone on their own terms, one is directly attempting to overcome particular distortions. The "self-preoccupied, often falsifying veil" is made up primarily of our own cares, concerns, needs, and desires, which when suspended helps move toward accuracy because the objects of our perception are no longer being distorted by our self-preoccupation.

We can see how this works by returning to Murdoch's original example of M and D. Imagine that D doesn't find the societal expectations that govern much of M's life important. She doesn't care if she is always wholly proper and perhaps believes that a too weighty concern for propriety gets in the way of enjoying life. When M perceives

D on her own terms, she can realize that she's not ignorant of being proper, but reflectively flouting such norms.

To further illuminate or explain the idea of loving attention, consider an analogy between moral perception and aesthetic perception.[10] Murdoch's notion of loving attention is meant to apply to art in addition to morals (82–90). Lovingly attending to a film, like lovingly attending to a person, is a matter of attending to it on its own terms. What kind of movie is it trying to be? A thought-provoking drama, lighthearted rom-com, or escapist, fanciful action flick? Not all movies, or all art, are trying to do the same thing, and in perceiving the movie on its own terms, we get a better chance of appreciating what it does well. If you go into a Disney movie expecting edge-of-your-seat horror, you are likely to be disappointed. What the movie is trying to be and do is important for how you see it.[11] The same, I believe, holds true for the various people in our lives. One of the exciting things about getting to know another person is learning about who they are as an individual and how they understand themselves. We often run into problems when we try to perceive others by focusing on our own cares, concerns, or desires, instead of perceiving others for who they are.

Marilyn Frye, in articulating a contrast well-suited to Murdoch's framework, has introduced the concepts of the "arrogant eye" and the "loving eye." The former refers to perception that organizes everything around it in reference to the perceiver's interests, and often creates what Frye called a "great wanting." Frye states, "The wanting doesn't care about truth: it simplifies, where the truth is complex; it invents, when it should be investigating; it expects, when it should be waiting to find out; it would turn everything to its satisfaction; and what it finally thinks it cannot thus maneuver it hates" (Frye 1983, 75). According to Frye, the job is not to deny this wanting, but to recognize and know it. In order to overcome its distorting effect, we must identify it, claim it, know its scope. Thus, Frye states that when one perceives with the loving eye, one does not "make the object of perception into something edible, does not try to assimilate it, does not reduce it to the size of the seer's desire, fear and imagination, and hence does not have to simplify. It knows the complexity of the other as something which will forever present new things to be known" (76). The loving eye for Frye is one that seeks the other person through critical checking and questioning of one's self, not suppressing the perceiver's wants and desires but recognizing how they lead one astray. Furthermore, such a task "will forever present new things to be known." Similarly, Murdoch states that loving attention is an endlessly perfectible task (Murdoch 1970, 23). So, though we aim for accurate perception, we will never obtain a complete and accurate image of others, but only continually improve our perception in that direction.

Gender-Affirmation, or Perceiving Someone on their own Terms

We may think about gender-affirmation's moral value in two ways. Acts of gender-affirmation are, of course, actions—they are open to view, as opposed to confined to our inner moral lives. When determining the value of such actions, we can think both of the consequences of those actions and the way those actions reflect the person doing the affirming. Any act of affirmation may bring about some good consequences (that is, a trans person may feel affirmed), but there is a difference between *feeling* affirmed and *being* affirmed. Merely feeling affirmed has the potential to be overturned—and quite quickly. A trans woman shopping may initially be referred to as "ma'am," which will feel affirming, only for the speaker to immediately state, "Oh, I'm sorry—*sir*," effectively stripping the affirmation away. Actions that merely create

feelings of affirmation have fragile moral value (at best) because the feeling of affirmation can quickly be replaced by feelings of dysphoria or rejection. Kapusta's discussion of "concessionary gender-term deployment" provides an illustration of such fragile apparently affirming acts. Kapusta speaks of cases where one uses "she"/"her" pronouns to refer to a trans woman, while still, nonetheless, thinking of her as "really a man." As Kapusta argues, this is merely "a pitying concession to someone who—in the final analysis—has simply got her gender wrong" and is built upon the idea of not needing to take trans people's testimony about their gender seriously (Kapusta 2016, 514). One may at first feel affirmed by such instances of being referred to with gender-affirming pronouns, but upon realization that the speaker's gender-term deployment is merely a courteous concession, one may not only feel misgendered but patronized as well. Truly *being* affirmed, in a way that has significant moral value, requires more than the use of a person's preferred pronoun, with the consequence of the person feeling affirmed. For actions of gender-affirmation to have stable moral value, then, the actions need to be rooted in something other than courtesy.

My suggestion is that the moral value of gender-affirmation is rooted in loving attention, in the sense of perceiving someone on their own terms. This includes two claims. The first is that gender-affirmation involves perceiving trans people on their own terms —for their agential identity. Loving attention, then, is at the root of gender-affirmation's moral value since it is an authentic recognition of that person's agential identity. The second claim is that the moral reason to engage in acts of gender-affirmation comes from reflecting this loving attention in our actions toward trans people. This will require recognizing two further things: that reflecting virtue in one's action is a way actions can get their moral value and that the cisnormative patriarchal society in which trans people live makes such reflection morally significant. Living as a trans person in a cisnormative patriarchal society also illuminates why gender is a significant part of a trans person's "own terms."

Living life as a trans person often involves a confusing and complex relationship with one's gender. As Talia Mae Bettcher has put it, trans people "live an 'everyday' shot through with perplexity, shot through with WTF questions" (Bettcher 2019, 8). Being trans often, if not necessarily, leads to questioning not only one's socialized gender, but the role of gender, and asking, "why do people want to know if we're *really* a man (or a woman, or nonbinary)?" Struggling with these WTF questions causes trans people to have a more tumultuous relationship with their gender, a gender that they at some point doubted and often are not accepted as. This WTF that trans people live in is due to being trans in a cisnormative patriarchal society and is the context in which these concerns play out. Given the immense mental energy spent on thinking about gender, it is often affirming to be gendered correctly. Thus, being correctly gendered often constitutes a significant care, concern for, and desire of trans people. It is part of the terms by which moral agents ought to perceive trans people if we are to perceive them with loving attention.

For trans people, one's gender is part of how one navigates the space between their self-identity and one's social position. This "bridge" identity is what Dembroff and Catharine Saint-Croix have called one's *agential identity*. It is the part(s) of one's self-identity that one presents to the world that connects with their social position. This process of presenting is what they call *externalizing* one's self-identity. Dembroff and Saint-Croix use the example of someone who is gay but has yet to come out: they self-identify as gay, but until they communicate that to others, they lack the agential identity of being gay (Dembroff and Saint-Croix 2019). They have

not externalized their self-identity. When one lovingly attends to trans people, what they are doing is giving uptake to their agential identity. By externalizing one's self-identity, one is presenting it as the terms by which they wish to be understood, the terms that one ought to attend to in perceiving them.

This account of agential identity, and particularly the externalization condition, helps clarify some nuances of when one's behavior allows for gender-affirmation. Dembroff and Saint-Croix write:

> Social phenomena, we reiterate, are messy. Intention, allowing, and acceptance are attitudes that admit of borderline cases. Someone who is just coming out as trans, for example, might well be uncomfortable with people taking her as a woman—she might be a borderline case of accepting and allowing. In this case, her agential identity with respect to gender will be vague (though her self-identity is not). Alternatively, she might be comfortable with strongly externalizing her self-identity in some contexts, but not at all in others. In this case, she may be disposed toward "code-switching" with respect to gender. (Dembroff and Saint-Croix 2019, 581)

This case, of a trans woman in the middle of her social transition, is a good example of how one's agential identity connects with the terms they wish to be perceived on. Her agential identity is vague because some contexts, say with her queer friends, may well be different from her context at work or school. She may externalize her identity as a woman to her queer friends, but not to her coworkers. A friend who straddles these two different worlds (that is, who is part of her inner queer friend group and who is also a coworker) will find that there are some contexts where they should affirm her and contexts where they should assist in her code-switching.[12] For something to be a part of one's "terms," in the relevant sense, it needs to be to externalized.

To say that the moral value of gender-affirmation is *rooted* in loving attention does not necessarily mean one must always perceive with loving attention for their acts of gender-affirmation to have moral value. Imagine a person who does not quite "get" being transgender. They cannot comprehend the idea of someone identifying with a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth because it is such an alien concept that they cannot wrap their mind around it. However, they also know that we live in a world of multiple oppressions. They reflect on the fact that their parents or grandparents once did not understand how someone could be gay and that they could be in a similar position regarding trans people. Such a perceiver may use opportunities to gender-affirm their trans family, friends, or colleagues as a way of *cultivating* loving attention. In performing these acts, they hope to cultivate an attention to their agential identity and be able to perceive them on their own terms. In this case, the affirmation that perhaps was once fragile has strengthened itself. Affirmation as a way to cultivate loving attention thus has moral value just as affirmation that comes from loving attention. This is because of how the moral value of gender-affirmation is rooted in the loving attention, whether the affirmation is a result of such attention or an attempt to develop such an attention.

Recognizing that gender-affirmation's moral value is rooted in loving attention does not exhaust what we can say about the morality of gender-affirmation. As stated before, Murdoch's own point was that moral perception is part of the *inner* moral life, not the life of choices and external actions. But just because moral perception has moral value in itself does not mean that's where the moral importance ends. Sometimes one's

actions can gain moral value by reflecting good character traits or virtue. This becomes significant when said reflection is also communicating something important to a marginalized group of people, such as giving uptake to trans people's agential identities.

At first glance, such reflecting may seem trivial or superficial. However, many actions create moral reactions in us because of what they reveal about the actor's character. Thomas Hill argues that many environmentally damaging actions that some ethicists find to be morally wrong, but struggle to articulate how they're morally impermissible, make us uneasy because they reflect a poor moral character, such as a neighbor who uproots all the beautiful trees in their yard. In light of such actions, Hill urges us to ask, "What kind of person would do that?" (Hill 1983, 214–16). The same, I believe, holds true for many morally good actions. We have reason to perform them because they reflect the kind of ideals, or virtues, we wish to cultivate and have.[13]

Hill was particularly concerned with understanding our moral reactions to environmentally harmful behavior that is difficult to call morally impermissible. For Hill, it was not about figuring out why those actions were wrong, but why we disapproved of them so strongly. When I discuss the converse case, of actions having *positive* moral value by reflecting virtue, I mean to say that the opportunity to reflect virtue gives us moral reason to do that action. It is one answer to the question, "how may loving attention influence our moral motivations for action?" In the particular case of gender-affirmation, there is additional moral value in reflecting the specific virtue of loving attention to trans people, given the active erasure they face.

My claim that actions can obtain moral value via reflecting loving attention should not be confused as a way of discounting the role of intentions, consequences, or other sources of moral value. Murdoch was carving out a space of our moral lives that is absent from many pictures but is potentially compatible with these different views. There are, after all, many ways actions obtain moral value. Gender-affirmation seems to necessarily involve how we perceive others due to fragility of affirmation when the value is placed entirely in the consequences and because of the way the agential identity is a part of one's external identity. Thus, reflecting or communicating this moral perception seems to be key to understanding the moral reasons one might have for gender-affirming trans people.

I want to stress the importance of communicating this perception to trans people given the context of living in a cisnormative, patriarchal society. When thinking about communicating one's perception to another, it is important to remember that for trans people, this is against the backdrop of a cisnormative society that actively erases and marginalizes them.[14] Since trans people are actively erased and marginalized, affirming them reifies their status and fights against this oppression. This cisnormative context is morally important for a couple of reasons. The first is how it benefits them. Being erased in this manner is how trans people experience psychological oppression (cf. Bartky 1990, 22–23). Communicating one's perception of them, and thus giving their agential identity uptake, is a way to fight against these psychic barriers.

Here one may be concerned that it is only when one is unintentionally affirmed, that is, the agent doing the gendering does not know the person is trans, that affirmation succeeds. That is, it is in *passing* as a cis woman that a trans woman is affirmed, and not in her being affirmed *as* a *trans* woman. What is important here is that she is being read as a woman. She is being perceived on her own terms. In the case where the perceiver knows she is trans, if she is still being perceived as a woman, then I believe she is affirmed. This is evident by online communities like r/transpositive, where trans people go to post pictures of themselves, in part, to be gender-affirmed by other trans

people and allies.[15] This objection raises a separate question about whether there is moral value in the stranger who affirms a trans person without realizing they are trans, since there is no *attending* to them—it's just a passing act. In this case, the trans person will feel affirmed, and the felt value for the trans person is real, but it does not have the relevant moral value: there's nothing the stranger did that is deserving of praise or recognition. Cases of unintentional affirmation are less fragile than some of the previously discussed cases, such as "concessionary gender deployments," but still lack the kind of perception that makes affirmation a moral act *for the perceiver*.[16]

The second reason that such affirmation is morally important is how reifying trans identities challenges their marginalization.[17] Gender-affirming trans people helps make them visible as paradigmatic cases of gendered experience. This needs a little fleshing out. Although cisnormativity is multifaceted, there is (at least) one way that gender-affirming trans people challenges this kind of marginalization. Bettcher has argued that the dominant cultural practice is for gender presentation and gender terms (for example, "man" or "she") to communicate genital status (Bettcher 2009, 103–7). The dominant or paradigmatic gendered experience then is for men to have one genital kind and women to have a separate kind. This way of communicating marginalizes and erases trans people in several ways. One way is what Bettcher calls "reality enforcement," where people try to determine the genital status of trans people, for example, by asking them, "have you had *the* surgery?" (Bettcher 2014, 392–97). By gender-affirming trans people, one challenges these typical communicative processes by communicating something different when using gendered terms or responding to gender presentation. It is, in Bettcher's terms, recognizing their first-person authority with regard to their gender, or similarly, in Dembroff and Saint-Croix's terms, giving uptake to their agential gender identity. Part of the moral value of gender-affirmation, then, is in its power to resist and challenge oppression, both on the individual, psychic level and on the macro-socio-systemic level (cf. Fakhoury 2019). This macro-socio-systemic level challenge is due, in part, to the way these practices promote a particular way of perceiving trans people, that is, as legitimate and paradigmatic examples of their gender.

That some of the moral value of gender-affirmation lies in resisting oppression brings to light a further point: in most cases, there is little to no moral value in gender-affirming cisgender people. Though cisgender people still have an agential gender identity, in many cases gender is not a relevant part of their "terms" that require loving attention. Drawing attention to this aspect of their agential identity would not cause much affirmation because it is already receiving uptake by society. Simply put, cisgender people are often not marginalized with regard to their gender agential identity. They are already taken as paradigmatic cases of gendered life and experience. There is no oppression here to resist or challenge. I do not mean to claim it is permissible to misgender cisgender people, but only that there is little moral value in gender-affirming them.

There are some important exceptions to this broader claim.[18] Black women, for example, often experience their gender identity stripped away from them as they are often masculinized or even made to be *genderless*.[19] Just think about common criticisms of tennis champions Venus and Serena Williams as "really being men."[20] Despite being cis, they still experience a lack of uptake for their agential identity because they are both women and Black. Disabled people report a similar experience (cf. Brown 2017). Furthermore, gender-nonconforming people who are still cis may experience the "reality enforcement" that Bettcher discusses where people find it important to determine what genitals they have. In all these cases, even though they are cisgender, they still

feel pressure from how cisnormativity interacts with race, ability, and gender presentation. Such cases may fall closer to how we wish to engage with trans people: by gender-affirming them.

I have argued that the moral value of gender-affirmation is rooted in reflecting and communicating one's perception of trans people on their own terms. Importantly, this is due to trans people living in a cisnormative patriarchal society. Given this context, gender-affirmation can often function as a way of subverting the kind of "reality enforcement" that Bettcher argues is central to trans oppression by promoting communicative practices that take trans people as paradigmatic examples of their gender and promoting that way of perceiving them. However, one might think, following Dembroff and Wodak, that there is a moral duty to use gender-neutral pronouns for everyone (Dembroff and Wodak 2018). Therefore, despite the value of gender-affirming trans people, we ought to instead use gender-neutral pronouns for everyone. I want to suggest that Dembroff and Wodak overstate the moral importance of using gender-neutral pronouns; that is, there is no moral duty to use gender-neutral pronouns for everyone. Their arguments instead support a weaker claim: that we should default to gender-neutral pronouns for people we do not know. In addition, I argue that insofar as they conceive of their project as being a moral duty, they have misdescribed the moral terrain and preemptively closed off discussions of other ways of approaching these moral issues that are important for capturing the nuances of trans life under gender oppression.

"He/She/They/Ze"

Dembroff and Wodak make an impressive case for not only the view that nonbinary people can be misgendered in the same way trans women and men are, but that the moral harm of misgendering is based in *denying* someone's gender (as opposed to neglecting to affirm one's gender), making it morally permissible to use gender-neutral pronouns for everyone, regardless of one's gender. They believe that having a duty to affirm people's gender is implausible. It would be far too demanding to have a *duty* to affirm people's gender since there are plenty of ways of interacting with trans people that don't affirm their gender—such as calling them by their first name (Dembroff and Wodak 2018, 383). Furthermore, it does not matter if someone has preferred pronouns, because it's not because of those preferences that misgendering is wrong. Instead, many of the reasons that people have preferred pronouns (like wanting to be respected as a trans person or being granted resources) are reasons for not misgendering them.[21] Since the duty to not misgender relies only on the duty not to deny people their genders, as opposed to affirming them, it is consistent with a further, more radical, thesis that we have a "duty not to use gender-specific pronouns to refer to anyone, regardless of their gender identity" (372). They go on to provide three reasons that we have this duty to not use gender-specific pronouns.

First, there is no better alternative to using gender-neutral pronouns for everyone because once we recognize the inclusion of genderqueer individuals we run into a dilemma. Either we'll need to pick a singular pronoun set to refer to all nonbinary people, or we'll have to use different pronouns for all the various gender identities that fall under the nonbinary umbrella (that is, agender, genderfluid, demi-boy, demi-girl, bigender, and so on). Neither horn of this dilemma is ideal. If we take the first horn and introduce a singular pronoun for all nonbinary people, then this will be inegalitarian since the two "binary" genders of man and woman would have their own specific pronouns, and all nonbinary people would have only one (389). To solve this problem,

we could take the other horn of the dilemma, but this would be unmanageable by our linguistic community. So, the best choice would be to pick one gender-neutral pronoun set for everyone regardless of gender identity.

Second, Dembroff and Wodak argue that since our language is so gender-laden, queer people are often forced into a tricky moral situation where they either need to out their gender identity or orientation in situations when they would prefer not to (392). Trans people, who are often read as a gender they are not, will have to either disclose they are trans or lie/withhold the truth in order to keep this information a secret. Similarly, someone might be forced to disclose or deceive others about the gender of their partner, and thus their sexual orientation. In both situations, this problem could be solved by everyone being referred to with gender-neutral pronouns.

Third, and finally, they argue that there is legitimate reason to believe that gender-laden language plays a nontrivial role in spreading gender-essentialist ideas, which reinforces sexist oppression (395).[22] Removing gender markers from language would reduce the prevalence of these ideas, and thus combat gender oppression. It is important to note that gender-neutralizing language would not only help in undermining sexist ideas about women, but also the essentialist idea that there are only two genders.

They do, however, note that this is not an exceptionless duty. They write:

> we recognize that our context abounds in countervailing considerations given that gender-specific pronouns are a beneficial resource for transgender persons. We have treated these considerations as generating possible exceptions to the general duty not to use gender-specific pronouns. (403)

Their argument is that we have a general moral duty not to use gender-specific pronouns but that this is a long-term goal, and our current social context is not ideal. Sometimes using gender-neutral pronouns implicitly denies trans men's and women's gender identity by "third-gendering" them, which is effectively a way to *mis*gender them (387). Thus, the duty to not use gender-specific pronouns conflicts with the duty to not misgender trans people in a small range of cases.[23] That there are exceptions to this general rule does not completely defeat the duty since part of the goal of gender-neutralizing English is to move away from our less than ideal social context to one that is less patriarchal and transphobic.

Dembroff and Wodak convincingly establish that the moral harms of misgendering are rooted in *denying* someone's gender. In establishing the further point that, in general, we can use gender-neutral pronouns and gender-neutral language without misgendering anyone, they do us a great service. Their account brings to our attention the space between misgendering and gender-affirmation that makes my arguments possible. Furthermore, their arguments for the link between gendered language, specifically pronouns, and gender essentialism is rigorously and convincingly stated. But I find myself skeptical that their arguments establish a *duty* not to use gender-specific pronouns for anyone. It seems to me that there is an important difference between their first claim—that we have a duty to not misgender genderqueer people—and their second claim, that there is a duty to not use gender-specific pronouns for anyone. The former presents us with an act that is straightforwardly immoral, whereas the latter presents us with an act that we often have moral reason to engage in, but it is not an act that is immoral to not do.[24] I am suggesting that Dembroff and Wodak have overstated the moral significance of this second point, and thus mis-described the moral terrain by limiting themselves to discussion of duties.

Misgendering either a trans or genderqueer person seems clearly immoral for the reasons they state: (1) it is disrespectful of the person's social or agential identity, (2) it denies them important resources, (3) it makes trans people unintelligible, and (4) it reinforces ideologies that reinforce transphobic and patriarchal oppression. These harms remain even when one unintentionally misgenders. There may be cases where one may be *excused* for misgendering, that is, not blamed or held responsible for the act, but not cases where the act is morally permissible.[25] The immoral status of misgendering here is important, because I believe it clues us into how Dembroff and Wodak are intending to use the concept *duty*.[26] That is, it is drawing a connection between something being a moral duty and failing to do the relevant act being immoral, as opposed to say, an account of moral duties that amounts to us having good reason to do that thing.[27]

None of the arguments Dembroff and Wodak give for the second thesis establish that using gendered language is immoral. Their first argument regarding the dilemma we are faced with proliferating pronouns is not a clearly moral argument. It seems to be an empirical matter about the number of pronouns one can cognitively handle. This is because, though they are correct that it would be inegalitarian to use one pronoun set for all nonbinary people, it is not immediately clear that a large number of pronouns actually would be too much for a linguistic community to handle. Furthermore, their point that using gender-neutral pronouns is not a case of misgendering still holds, so one would not necessarily need to carry all these pronouns, perhaps committing only to those "nonbinary pronouns" that their friends, family, and other close relations use. Thus, this dilemma creates a prudential reason for one to use gender-neutral language (in most cases) but not a moral reason that establishes that not using gender-neutral pronouns is immoral.

Their second argument that pronouns can often out queer, trans, and nonbinary people also fails to establish that using gendered pronouns is immoral. It is true that the constant presence of pronouns does often force queer, trans, and nonbinary people to out themselves, and that this is a moral risk. However, this supports a weaker claim than the one they make: that we should not use gendered pronouns for people we do not know. That gendered pronouns often force queer, trans, and nonbinary people to out themselves has nothing to say about cases where one uses gendered pronouns for someone they know personally and whose gender they are aware of. Gendered pronouns in these cases do not out anyone. Therefore, this argument supports a much narrower claim than the one Dembroff and Wodak want to establish.

Their third argument that gendered pronouns spread gender-essentialist ideas is the closest to establishing that it is immoral to use gendered pronouns, but there are reasons to remain skeptical. Dembroff and Wodak are correct in drawing a connection between constant gendered language, especially pronoun use, and gender essentialism. Using gender-neutral language, especially when one's gender is not necessary information, will certainly fight gender essentialism. The question is, however, whether it is the *only* way to linguistically fight gender essentialism. My arguments for gender-affirmation suggest that it is not.

Gender essentialism is the ideology that there are two, and only two, genders that are directly tied to one's "biological sex" (that is, one's genital status) and that this difference is of utmost importance. Dembroff and Wodak's proposal to use gender-neutral pronouns for everyone undermines gender essentialism by undercutting the importance of gendered categories. Via language, this approach essentially de-emphasizes gender distinctions, removing one of the ways gender essentialism reinforces the importance

of the binary genders: by putting gendered information everywhere. But as I have argued, gender-affirming trans people (including using gendered-pronouns) can often subvert the typical way gendered language functions to mark "biological sex," and thus challenges gender essentialism's connection between gender and genital status. This subversion could be even more effective if, instead of using gender-neutral pronouns for everyone, one used gendered pronouns only for trans women and men (in addition to other gender-marginalized people). This shift would center trans people (and other gender-marginalized people) as paradigmatic cases of their gender instead of as marginalized cases. A corollary argument could be given for some nonbinary people's use of neo-pronouns (like the "ze" in Dembroff and Wodak's article title). As there are nonbinary people who do not use the gender-neutral "they/them" but instead opt for neo-pronouns to mark themselves as outside of the gender binary (for example, Maia Kobabe, who uses the Spivak pronoun set "e"/"em"/"eir") (Kobabe 2019, 188–90). One can similarly argue that promulgation of such pronouns challenges gender essentialism's focus on binary gender categories. That gendered pronouns, when used in particular cases, can also fight gender essentialism weakens the case that using gendered pronouns is immoral because the same reasoning used to establish the immorality of gendered pronouns can also be used to recognize the moral value of using gendered pronouns when referring to trans people. Dembroff and Wodak are not wrong to recognize the link between gendered pronouns and gender essentialism, but they are mistaken in thinking that this link supports a moral *duty* to avoid using gendered pronouns.[28]

One may push back here, stating that gender-neutralizing English *should* be a long-term political goal.[29] Given our current nonideal circumstances, it may be the case that using gendered pronouns is affirming to trans people, which is morally fine in the nonideal context, but that we should use gender-neutral pronouns as a default with the goal of eventually gender-neutralizing English.[30] It is important to point out that this position is not one where the concept of moral duty nicely fits, so we have already moved away from Dembroff and Wodak's claim in "He/She/They/Ze." Second, as I stated previously, we should use gender-neutral pronouns as a default. Such an approach avoids forceful outing of queer, trans, and nonbinary people; it has a role in fighting gender essentialism; and it also avoids misgendering nonbinary and gender-queer people, which I have agreed with Dembroff and Wodak is immoral. However, and perhaps this is where I most distinctly depart from Dembroff and Wodak, I am hesitant to share the goal of eventually gender-neutralizing English, especially if we construe pursuing this goal as a moral duty. That is not to say that I think it would be morally wrong to pursue this goal, or that a completely gender-neutralized English in the future would be harmful for trans people. My concern stems primarily from the assumption that we can know what an ideal moral world (and the attached linguistic practices) would be from our current position. There is no reason to think that a gender-egalitarian society (that speaks English) *necessarily requires* gender-neutralizing English. Construing the project of gender-neutralizing English *as a moral duty*, one is engaging in a dangerous kind of moralism.

What I mean by "moralism" here is perhaps slightly idiosyncratic. I am not claiming that Dembroff and Wodak are making a nonmoral claim "moral"—that is, taking some parochial value as being of moral value. However, I think they are overstating the moral status of the actions in question—taking something of moral value to have universal moral value. Construing gender-neutralizing English as our end goal, and one that we have a moral duty to bring about, preemptively closes off other options to fight

gender essentialism. Arguing that this project is a moral duty is monistic. It relies on a rule-based conception of ethics that lacks a sensitivity to the moral nuances of life under oppression, if not moral life more generally.[31]

I am proposing that we should have a pluralistic approach to fighting gender essentialism, both in gender-neutralizing English in cases where it is irrelevant, and using gender language in primarily, or only, subversive ways. Dembroff and Wodak's argument for a moral *duty* closes off the possibility for this kind of pluralism. My concern is that they have misdescribed the moral terrain by limiting themselves to discussion of duties. It is their focus on duties that leads them to ignore the moral value of gender-affirmation in the first-place (Dembroff and Wodak 2018, 382–84). Perhaps this is unfair *as a criticism of* Dembroff and Wodak, since their project is to determine what our duties are, but it is an important point all the same. As both Bettcher and María Lugones have discussed, marginalized people are navigating multiple contexts or "worlds" where interactions and meanings change (Lugones 2003; Bettcher 2009; 2013; 2019). Duty seems too rigid a concept precisely because it is contextless. Although duties can have exceptions, they are still meant (to some extent) to be universal: to mark out immoral actions that we ought to avoid. Duty is a blunt instrument in the moral philosopher's toolkit. Thinking not about what we have duty to do, but about how we should perceive one another, and how our actions follow from such perceptions is much better suited for the problems facing queer, trans, and nonbinary people. It allows for more negotiation between parties on how to be treated and allowance for not only removing oppressive language and practices but also subverting them.[32]

My argument then is not that it is morally problematic for people to engage in the project of gender-neutralizing English, or wrong for someone to avoid using gender-specific pronouns, but that it is not a project we all must engage in on pain of immorality. Many of us, especially those of us in certain contexts of oppression, may want to engage in other, subversive ways of using language given our own contexts and dispositions. Focusing on duties often obscures that morality is in part a question of how we as individuals should live our lives. Our world offers so many ways for us to engage in moral behaviors and activities, which creates a certain amount of space for us to engage in different kinds of moral and political action as they resonate with our own character and dispositions.

Murdoch's focus on the inner moral life of perception was largely because of their beliefs about how moral concepts shape our way of conceiving of moral issues. They write that among the moral philosopher's tasks is the attempt "to fill in a systematic explanatory background to our ordinary moral lives" in order to provide "rich and fertile conceptual schemes which help us to reflect upon and understand the nature of moral progress and moral failure" (Murdoch 1970, 43). Certainly, the concept of *duty* has some role in a rich and fertile conceptual scheme, but it is neither rich nor fertile all on its own. My arguments establish that we also need concepts like moral perception and attention to understand how to make moral progress in our treatment of trans peoples. It is not only in avoiding harm, but in uplifting trans people that we can fight marginalization. Moral perception and loving attention are particularly apt for understanding our moral lives in relation to trans people because of the concept's evolution from Murdoch's own inspiration in Simone Weil, to Frye's discussion of the Loving Eye, which Lugones developed in their plea for women to lovingly "world"-travel, which set the groundwork for Bettcher's development of first-person authority. In thinking about not only what moral duties we have to follow, but the morality of our perception, we are able to attend to trans people on their own terms. The social reality

of gender is much too rich and complex to make sense of with simplifying, binary metaphysical concepts; the moral reality of what we owe to trans people is also rich and complex and requires moral concepts, like attention, subversion, and resistance, to match.

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Notes

1 There is a growing discussion in trans and queer spaces about whether we should continue referring to one's pronouns as "preferred" pronouns. Here I opt to use "preferred" because I believe it is possible for someone to use pronouns other than one's preferred while still not misgendering them. Robin Dembroff and Daniel Wodak defend this position and although much of my article is critical of their arguments, I endorse this particular point (Dembroff and Wodak 2018).

2 Not all people who have genders outside of the binary self-identify as both "genderqueer" and "nonbinary"; many will identify with just one of the two labels with further, more specific gender identities like agender, genderfluid, and so on. However, throughout the article I will be using "genderqueer" and "nonbinary" interchangeably as the most general umbrella terms to capture all these various identities to make the prose less cumbersome.

3 These are just some examples that have come up when talking with trans people in communities I frequent. Another, specifically for genderqueer people who present androgynously, is to feel gender-affirmation when people get confused by their gender presentation. It is a regular point of discussion in genderqueer communities how people will sometimes go back and forth between "sir" and "ma'am" and how affirming it is.

4 Outside of moral philosophy, the harms of misgendering have been explored by social psychologist Kevin A. McLemore (McLemore 2015; 2018).

5 Gender-affirmation, as I'm discussing in this article, involves the ways we affirm one another in social settings. There is a related concept of gender-affirmative approaches to healthcare, which has been defended by Florence Ashley (Ashley 2019).

6 Dembroff and Wodak's own position on gender-affirmation is that there cannot be a moral duty to gender-affirm someone, and thus the harm of misgendering cannot be found in violating this duty (Dembroff and Wodak 2018). However, as I will discuss extensively in this article, there is more to morality than moral duties, and things can have moral value outside of what we have duties to do.

7 Throughout the article I will use gender-neutral pronouns for cisgender authors, and gender-specific pronouns for transgender authors as a demonstration of one potential way we can go about using gendered pronouns, contra Dembroff and Wodak 2018, which I will argue for in the final section of this article.

8 Murdoch referred to this as "moral vision." I have decided to broaden the metaphor for the sake of skirting the issue of reinforcing ableism that metaphors of *vision* often promote. At times I will quote Murdoch's own words where they use "vision" language without alteration, but my own discussion will be in terms of *perception*.

9 For other philosophers who have discussed the importance of moral perception for choice-making, see McDowell 1979; Nussbaum 1992; and Scanlon 1998, 157.

10 This way of conceiving of loving attention to people, by analogy to loving attention to movies, fleshes out a suggestion made by Susan Wolf (Wolf 2014).

11 That said, it is possible for a film to try to do something and fail. There are many sci-fi movies that aim to be deep and philosophical but end up being shallow and naïve. In seeing such a movie this way, though, you are still evaluating it on its own terms. The film has just failed to live up to its own ideals.

12 There is of course more going on here than just one's agential identity changing, but also practical matters of respecting one's wishes regarding who they're out to, but one's wishes, in such cases, often track their agential identity.

13 This is consistent with much of what Murdoch wrote about the relationship between the inner and outer moral realms, as they state that some "overt action[s] can release psychic energies which can be released no other way" (Murdoch 1970, 42).

14 One of the ways in which trans people, specifically trans women, are erased and marginalized is explored in Kapusta 2016.

15 www.reddit.com/r/transpositive

16 Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing this point to my attention.

17 Dembroff makes a similar point that, metaphysically speaking, trans people are a "critical gender kind" (Dembroff 2019). My concern here is less about trans people's metaphysical status, but more about the moral implications of being in this social position.

18 Thanks to attendees at the Trans Philosophy Project at SPEP for this insight.

19 See Patton 2000 for the way Black women under US slavery were degendered. This process is still felt and experienced now.

20 It is noteworthy that charges of being transgender/transsexual are used to masculinize the Williams sisters, which has implications for transphobia and the particularly precarious place that Black trans women find themselves in. Further development of these implications is beyond the scope of this article, since all I mean to do at this point is recognize that it is not only trans people who often suffer from cisnormativity. For a fuller discussion of the relationship between transness and Blackness, see Snorton 2017.

21 This point can perhaps be strengthened when considering that some trans and nonbinary people's preference is for multiple, differently gendered pronouns to be used in a single sentence for them, for example, "Elle's paper was quite good. She articulated his position clearly and gave good arguments for their thesis." Misgendering via pronoun usage is not possible with someone who has these preferences because their preference is for all pronouns. However, if this person were nonbinary and were referred to as a "woman" or a "man," or perhaps called "sir," this may count as misgendering and it would be for the reasons Dembroff and Wodak articulate and not because of the person's pronoun preference.

22 I am altering the language slightly by talking about the reinforcement of gender oppression, but ultimately, I believe I'm picking out the same problem that Dembroff and Wodak are with their language.

23 It is worth noting here that there are more exceptions to the general duty than they recognize here since some cis people, like Black women and disabled people, also experience a form of misgendering via *de*gendering (as I discussed in the previous section).

24 Note here that Dembroff and Wodak make a significantly weaker claim regarding gender-neutral language in general, stating that "we take our arguments to suggest that we should be *cautious* with gender-related language, avoiding such language where it is irrelevant; that is a departure from the status quo, wherein we label gender 'even when we don't have to'" (Dembroff and Wodak 2018, 399, authors' emphasis). It is only using gendered pronouns that they believe is immoral. This is worth noting because their view with regard to gender-related language is my view with regard to gendered pronouns.

25 Such cases would include those of nonculpable ignorance, or even (potentially) casual slip-ups that are quickly corrected.

26 It may be the case that Dembroff and Wodak are intending a different conception of duty in the second claim than in the first claim, but they do not specify this in the article. What appears to be a subtle difference in understanding what a "duty" is nevertheless is significant when considering how one ought to act toward trans people. If Dembroff and Wodak do intend this difference, then they may agree with much of what I have to argue, but there is still value drawing out the points I make in their ambiguity.

27 For example, consider how W. D. Ross argues that there are different kinds of moral duties: those duties that follow from general principles are *prima facie* duties (that which we have good reason to do) and final (all things considered) duties, which apply only in particular cases (Ross 1930, 16–47). The general principles Dembroff and Wodak are attempting to establish do not seem to be like Ross's *prima facie* duties, but duties that track the immoral—even if there may be exceptions. Thank you to Karl Martin Adam for bringing this point to my attention.

28 Dembroff and Wodak recognize this point in a later article, "How Much Gender is Too Much Gender?", arguing that though this position seems plausible, subversion could occur using the gendered language "woman/man" without using gendered pronouns (Dembroff and Wodak 2021). Thus, it is not necessary to use gendered pronouns. But the concern here, at least for me, is not whether it is *necessary* for subversion to use gendered pronouns, but whether it is *immoral* to use gendered pronouns. The ability to subvert gender essentialism without gendered pronouns should show that it is not.

29 This is the focus of Dembroff and Wodak 2021. Though many of their arguments in this article are similar to the ones in "He/She/They/Ze," they make their case without using the concept of "moral duty," and the arguments are much more convincing because of it. My arguments here, then, may not apply to their arguments in the more recent article, but I still have some reservations that will have to be saved for later, as they go beyond the scope of this current article.

30 In a *Scientific American* op-ed, Abigail Saguy, Juliet Williams, Dembroff, and Wodak state this as their goal explicitly: "Our proposed solution is to use gender-neutral pronouns as the default, with the long-term goal of using they/them pronouns for everyone" (Saguy et al. 2019). Note that this position is different from it being a moral *duty* to not use gendered pronouns for anyone. Part of my point is that in using the moral concept "duty," one is unable to state more subtle positions like the one they advocate for in their op-ed. Because of this op-ed and Dembroff and Wodak 2021, an ambiguity arises in their work about whether they believe using gender-neutral pronouns is a moral duty. My arguments here, then, can be taken to say we should *not* take their arguments as ones for a moral duty and instead as a strategy to deal with our current world.

31 My discussion of moralism is inspired by Serene Khader's arguments in *Decolonizing Universalism* (Khader 2018, 30–34); however, I am using it in a slightly different way here. Khader's primary point is that Western, missionary feminists often mistake political action as expressing solely moral judgments, instead of seeing how they are complicated, context-dependent choices made by people situated under specific axes of oppression. My point here is that Dembroff and Wodak are overstating the moral quality of a particular moral action, making it so that we understand morality as something less context dependent and more rule-based (Dembroff and Wodak 2018). In effect, a similar result occurs that Khader warns us about, that people's "ways of seeing rule out questions about strategy choice and costs of intervention in advance" (Khader 2018, 34).

32 I take this line of argument to be in the spirit of Annette Baier's arguments in "What Do Women Want in Moral Theory?" (Baier 1994). There could plausibly be a similar question: what do queer or trans people want in moral theory?

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