Gender Analysis using the Lens of the Middle Way

Renee Astraea · Last edited: 26 July 2026, 18:51 WIB

The search for a single necessary and sufficient criterion presupposes that gender possesses an intrinsic nature that can be identified and isolated.

a. Devoid of Independent Existence

If gender possessed a single necessary and sufficient criterion, then that criterion would constitute the essence of gender. Membership in a gender category would ultimately depend upon the possession of some inherently defining property.

Whatever candidate criterion is proposed (e.g., chromosomes, reproductive anatomy, hormonal profile, social role, self-identification) or any other property can only be understood in relation to further conditions and concepts. The criterion itself is therefore empty of independent existence.

Since the proposed criterion is empty, it cannot serve as an ultimate foundation for gender. Thus, gender is empty of any single intrinsically determining characteristic.

b. Dependent Origination

A phenomenon exists only through its dependence upon causes, conditions, conceptual designation, and relations to other phenomena. Gender appears to arise dependently upon numerous factors, such as bodily characteristics, psychological experiences, social expectations, linguistic practices, historical developments, and legal and cultural institutions.

No single factor alone is sufficient to generate the category. Nor can any factor be isolated from the network of conditions that gives it meaning.

For example, if chromosomes are proposed as the ultimate criterion, one must explain what makes chromosomes themselves the relevant criterion. This explanation will appeal to further concepts, facts, or purposes. Those further grounds then become part of the determination. The supposedly ultimate criterion, therefore, depends upon something beyond itself and ceases to be ultimate.

Self-identification has significance only within linguistic and social frameworks that make such identification intelligible. Social roles depend upon historically contingent norms.
Therefore, gender is not grounded in one independent criterion but arises through a complex web of dependent relations.

c. Why Dependence Excludes Essence

An intrinsic essence would have to determine what a thing is independently of other factors. If the defining criterion of gender depended upon further conditions for its existence, intelligibility, or application, then it would not determine gender by its own nature.

Any proposed criterion is itself dependent upon causes, conceptual frameworks, linguistic practices, and relations to other phenomena. Because it depends upon what is other than itself, it cannot function as an intrinsically self-grounding essence.

Therefore, dependence and intrinsic essence are mutually exclusive. A criterion that depends upon conditions may function conventionally, but it cannot serve as the ultimate ground of gender membership.

d. Two Levels

At the structural level, no gender possesses an inherent essence, and no criterion can be established as the ultimate determinant of gender membership.

At the level of pragmatic utility, gender categories can still function meaningfully. People use them successfully in communication, social organisation, law, medicine, personal identity, and everyday life.

Consequently, my position is neither essentialism, which seeks an ultimate defining property, nor nihilism, which denies the reality of gender altogether. Rather, gender exists conventionally while lacking an ultimate essence.

The absence of an ultimate criterion does not prevent societies from employing practical criteria for specific purposes. Different contexts may legitimately prioritise different considerations. A medical context, a legal context, a sociological context, and a personal context may each employ different conventions without any of them constituting the ultimate essence of gender.

e. Conclusion

Gender categories track real patterns in bodies, psychology, and social life. These patterns provide the conditions under which designation occurs. However, no single pattern, nor any collection of patterns, constitutes an intrinsically existing essence of gender. The category is neither arbitrary nor essential. It is a conventionally valid designation applied to dependently arisen phenomena.

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