

# **On Gender Shifting and its Fixity through the Humean Bundle Theory of Self**

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## I. Introduction

Being 'born in the wrong body' has become an echo chamber of its own reduction in the LGBTQ+ community, exploited by people with homophobic agenda against gender shifting, dismissing it as a mere phase or pathologize it as a mental disorder ultimately simplifying and misinterpreting their innate sense of self for those struggling to comprehend it. According to the joint statement of UN and regional human rights experts (2016), the pathologization of LGBT adults and children, labeling them as mentally ill on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression has long been, and continues to be, one of the root causes of the human rights violations they face. It also reinforces harmful attitudes, stereotypes, and systemic barriers that prevent the full realization of their most basic rights. In support of this, Sheherezade (2017) notes that trans individuals have been pathologized through psycho-medical classifications and national laws for over four decades, leading to violations of international human rights across civil, political, economic, social, and cultural domains. This institutional framing began with the World Health Organization's (1975) ICD-9, where "*trans-sexualism*" was included under the chapter on "*mental disorders*," specifically in the section titled "*Neurotic Disorders, Personality Disorders and Other Nonpsychotic Mental Disorders*," and categorized as a "*Sexual Deviation and Disorder*." This was followed by the inclusion of "*Gender Identity Disorder*" in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) in 1980, after decades of psychiatric inquiry and speculation on trans identities. However, the persistent pathologization of gender nonconformity, rooted in homophobia, has significantly narrowed our understanding of gender identity, excluding it from discussions of what constitutes the self. This erasure has prompted further inquiry into whether gender is truly an internal aspect of identity or merely the result of complex and socially constructed frameworks. Such debates inevitably lead us to question how gender is situated within scientific discourse, particularly in relation to the self.

Recent studies highlight the deep interconnection between the body and the brain; however, there is still no scientific evidence of a fixed, innate "*gender center*" in the brain. According to Transgender Trend (2017), researchers have found no distinct or biologically predetermined brain region that determines gender at birth. Supporting this, Lombardo et al. (2013) disprove the hypothesis that specific genders can be traced to physical genetic markers revealing that gender shifting is not linked to any molecular mutation within key genes associated with sexual differentiation. Neuroscientific research continues to show that while sex-based differences in brain structures may exist, there is no such thing as a purely "*male*" or "*female*" brain. Rather, all children are born with the potential to develop a wide range of behaviors, interests, personalities, and talents that are not bound by their biological sex (Transgender Trend, 2017). In fact, children's brains are highly plastic—constantly shaped by their environment and social interactions. The notion that children possess an innate, pre-natal "*gender identity*" that is immune to environmental influence lacks credible scientific support. This suggests that gender is not something fixed at birth, but rather, a fluid and evolving construct—one that is continuously shaped by context, culture, and experience. Despite this, gender remains a deeply puzzling issue within the scientific community, often subjected to medical pathologization throughout history. Yet science, despite its empirical tools, has not sufficiently addressed the deeper philosophical questions: why and how do we shift gender within our minds? Can we truly say that gender is ever fixed if no biological marker confirms its innateness? This lingering uncertainty opens a space for philosophical inquiry—one that science alone cannot fill. In this context, the ideas of David Hume, a key figure in empiricist philosophy, offer a compelling framework for examining the nature of the self and how gender may shift within it. This paper explores the complexities of gender shifting and its fixity through David Hume's sense perception: impressions and ideas, relating it to the bundle theory of self. I focused on (1) the meaninglessness of gender as an idea, (2) how gender, like the self, is shaped by external, constantly shifting and overlapping impressions, and (3) how a core gender exists within us—one that cannot be fully known by others but is known to ourselves through associative memory challenging the notion that there is no fixed gender.

## II. A Treatise of Human Nature: *Perception*

David Hume was an empiricist who argued that any philosophical system must be grounded in observation and experience. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, his goal was to apply the scientific method to the study of human nature, specifically focusing on an empirical understanding of the mind. Hume wanted to explain how the mind works based on experience, much like Newton did in physics. He believed that everything in the mind—our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs—comes from experience, a concept he referred to as *perception*. For Hume, there are two types of perceptions: *impressions*, which are the strong, vivid experiences we get from our senses, and *ideas*, which are the fainter copies of those impressions, like memories or thoughts. This provided an understanding of Hume's view particularly on the self explaining that we are just impressions constantly changing, meaning, there is *no fixed self*. Instead, we are just a bundle of impressions tied together.

This concept can be applied to the understanding of gender. If there is no fixed self, we might ask whether there is such a thing as a fixed gender, or whether gender, like the self, having no impression or whatsoever is an insignificant abstract idea.

## III. Understanding Gender through David Hume's Lens

Currently, we use gender as an umbrella term that encompasses sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (SOGIE). For instance, my gender is *homosexual* (sexual orientation) / *cisgendered male* (gender identity) / *masculine* (gender expression). This framework helps us better understand gender, moving towards inclusivity and recognition—after all, we cannot advocate for basic rights and awareness without first understanding what we are discussing. Historically, gender was seen as binary: man and woman, black and white. Today, gender is increasingly accepted as a spectrum, as it should be. However, David Hume might not align with this perspective. As an empiricist, he argued that our knowledge is based on two kinds of perceptions: impressions and ideas. To study something, we must have a sensory impression of it, which includes both sensation and reflection. But when applied to gender, Hume's framework raises complex challenges, as gender may not fit into the observable, empirical mold he emphasizes.

*‘Accordingly, wherever any idea is ambiguous, he has always recourse to the impression, which must render it clear and precise. And when he suspects that any philosophical term has no idea annexed to it (as is too common) he always asks from what impression that idea is derived? And if no impression can be produced, he concludes that the term is altogether insignificant’* (The Philosopher's Handbook: Essential Readings from Plato to Kant, p. 513)

For Hume, even the concept of the mind is meaningless and insignificant because we have no direct experience of it. We lack both the sensation and reflection needed to substantiate its existence. This stance challenges the ideas of renowned philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and especially Descartes. Since we don't have direct experience of the mind, Hume argues there can be no 'self' either, as the self is traditionally seen as a combination of mind and body. Instead, he views the self as merely a collection of overlapping, ever-changing impressions shaped by our experiences and environment.

Returning to the concept of gender, we must ask: *does gender even exist in the first place?* Gender, as an idea, lacks a clear and precise definition. There is no direct impression that we can derive from it—we can't see, touch, or hear gender, and it doesn't exist tangibly in our reality. For David Hume, this would likely mean that gender not only doesn't exist but discussing it becomes insignificant.

#### IV. The Meaninglessness and Fluidity of Gender

While we may infer that, for David Hume, gender is meaningless and insignificant because we lack a direct impression of it, I believe he wouldn't want us to stop exploring our understanding of gender there. In this section, I will apply Hume's approach to understanding the self to my understanding of gender. Hume may have deemed talk about the self meaningless, but he still provided a definition: **the self is essentially a bundle of impressions**. We constantly experience new impressions, which leave faint ideas that shape how we view ourselves. Since these impressions are ever-changing, there is no 'fixed self'—just a collection of overlapping, tied-together impressions. I believe this same methodology can help us make sense of gender through Hume's lens.

Just like the self, gender exists as part of who we are, and it's more psychological and cultural than biological. That's why I believe Hume would argue that gender, like the self, is shaped by external, constantly shifting factors, what he would call direct impressions. Using Hume's lens, someone who identifies as gay today and then as straight or bisexual tomorrow, perhaps influenced by personal experiences, societal trends, and media, could be considered perfectly *normal*. This made me come to think that if David Hume were alive today, I think he'd love the term '*gender fluidity*,' because, much like how we describe gender, the self for him is also like fluid. There's no fixed self, just as there's no fixed gender because they are both ever-changing caused by impressions. The term '*gender fluidity*' refers to a shift in a person's gender expression, identity, or both over time. The change might be in expression, but not identity, or in identity, but not expression, or both expression and identity might change together (Katz-Wise, 2020). Fluidity in this sense means loving who you love, liking who you like, and expressing what you feel, without being confined by strict gender (SOGIE) labels. This raises the question: *do these [SOGIE] labels undermine the idea of gender fluidity?* Why do we need to label ourselves as homosexual, cisgender, or transgender when, at different points in our lives, there might always be a disconnect between how we feel and the label we use? I think Hume would argue that gender labels are problematic because they suggest a fixed identity contradicting the premise that there is no fixed gender because of ever-changing impressions. Nevertheless, I believe that these notions have their own set of challenges if applied to our modern understanding of gender and the fixity of it.

#### V. The Challenges of Normalizing 'No Fixed Gender'

Through David Hume's perspective, if having no fixed gender is seen as normal, this could create tension with those who firmly identify with a particular gender label. Some individuals feel strongly that their gender is stable and unchanging. For example, I have friends in the LGBTQIA+ community who confidently assert that they are 100% '*bading*' (gay). Does this mean that, despite someone's certainty about their gender, there is always a possibility it could change? A study by Bustos et al. (2021) found that among 7,928 transgender individuals who received gender-affirming surgeries, less than 1% reported regret (Hassan, n.d.). While this suggests that the vast majority of people do not feel the need to change their gender again, it also hints that for some, change remains possible. This contributes to the idea that there is no fixed gender, but it also raises questions for the majority of gender-affirming surgery (GAS) patients—was their decision truly a '*want*,' or was it influenced by external pressures and impressions they encountered?

Another concern is that normalizing 'no fixed gender' could be misused by conservatives to argue that gender is just a choice that can be changed at will. This could encourage efforts to reinforce 'cisgender' dominance, especially in religious contexts. For instance, consider conversion camps, which claim to "*cure*" or "*repair*" a person's attraction to the same sex or their gender identity yet these interventions, which promise to make someone heterosexual or "straight," have no scientific backing (Sreenivas, 2024). The idea that gender can be altered through external influences undermines the LGBTQIA+ community's fight against harmful practices like these. While there may be other issues tied

to this philosophical perspective, this paper attempts to highlight the potential dangers of interpreting normalized gender shifting through Hume's lens.

## VI. Gender is an Illusion

Now that I have already established that for Hume, there could be 'no fixed gender' why is it that most of us feel that we cling to a particular gender identity? After all, critics of this view might argue that Hume's bundle theory leads to a problematic incoherence: if there is no underlying substance or "thread" connecting the perceptions, what unifies them into a recognizable self at all? Similarly, when applied to gender, how can we claim a gender identity, even a shifting one, if there is no self to anchor it? This concern mirrors the common objection in gender debates, that without some form of stable identity, be it biological or psychological, gender becomes too fluid to have any meaningful coherence or social function. The self, he argues, is unified by the relations among its impressions—resemblance, causality, and especially memory. These principles allow us to group disparate perceptions under a single narrative, giving us the *illusion of continuity*. Similarly, gender identity can be seen not as a static truth but as a historical and psychological narrative that gains coherence through the filtering, organizing, and associating of one's diverse experiences. From this perspective, gender shifting is not a contradiction of identity but its very mechanism—how one comes to resonate with a certain gendered narrative through the accumulated impressions and introspective awareness of lived experience.

Hume denies a fixed, essential self, but he still acknowledges that through memory, resemblance, and causation, we construct a sense of unity over time. So, maybe gender works in a similar way. The idea of a "core gender" may not be something we're born fully aware of but something we grow into, it's rather an emergent identity shaped by shifting experiences and growing awareness. This leads to the idea that perhaps, over time, a person moves toward a unified gender identity, *not because it's fixed from the beginning, but because it becomes intelligible and stable in retrospect*. This is not against Hume; rather, it reflects a Humean developmentalism that an identity is not a starting point but a result of organizing perceptions over time. In this way, I suggest:

*Gender is not fixed in origin, but it may become fixed in meaning for a person as self-awareness and coherence consolidate through experience.*

This applies to Hume's associationist psychology. Just as the mind forms the illusion of personal identity through association, we might form a gender identity that eventually feels stable not because it is metaphysically fixed, but because it is psychologically resolved.

After all there's a challenge in the use of the LGBTQ+ community in using the word 'fixed' in gender. Hume would likely caution us here: what we take as "fixed" might just be a long-term pattern of impressions that feels unified due to memory and habit. He writes that personal identity is a "fiction" we create through the linking of related perceptions not because it exists independently, but because it functions effectively as if it does. So, Hume might not say there is a singular 'true gender' waiting to be found, but he might accept that **the illusion of a unified gender can arise just like the illusion of a unified self**. It's not that there is one fixed gender, but that one's gender narrative becomes coherent over time as certain impressions gain emotional, psychological, and social weight through repeated experience and introspection.

With this, I reconcile the idea of gender through Hume that:

1. **Gender is not metaphysically fixed** (there's no "true" gender essence in the way traditional essentialists might argue).

2. But **gender may become experientially stable for an individual**, much like Hume's "self"—through memory, continuity of impression, and personal resonance.

3. Thus, **shifting gender is not confusion; it's the process by which a person approaches a gender that feels meaningful**. This "core gender" is not universal or eternal; it's a psychological construction, deeply felt, though grounded in a fluid and impression-based system.

For Hume, even if the self is not fixed, it becomes coherent through associative patterns. Similarly, gender may not be essential, but it can become experientially centered, not as an objective truth, but as a subjective resolution of one's lived impressions.

## V. Conclusion

Gender is an incredibly complex subject, and this paper has only scratched the surface of how philosophy can be applied to its study. I argue that, like the self, we have no direct sensory impression of gender; thus, gender is a meaningless idea, failing the empiricist test of deriving from prior sense impressions. Secondly, Hume asserts that individuals are a bundle of ever-shifting perceptions in constant flux. By empiricist principles, we cannot claim knowledge of gender as a unified, permanent identity but only as a series of fragmented perceptions. This challenges the belief in a single, continuous gender identity throughout life, which Hume would dismiss as an illusion constructed through associative memory. Consequently, gender shifting is not an anomaly but an expected outcome of human experience. Lastly, I argue that gender shifting is not merely the result of constant change but an active process of filtering and reorganizing impressions into ideas forming a gender identity one resonates with as self-awareness deepens, ultimately pointing to a core gender. Therefore, it's not about being born in the wrong body, but rather a conversation of *'it took me a while to get here.'*

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