

Jul 7, 2023

8 min read

Jay W. Richards, PhD
[@DrJayRichards](#)

Director, DeVos Center for Life, Religion, and Family

Jay W. Richards, PhD, is Director of the DeVos Center for Life, Religion, and Family and the William E. Simon Senior Research Fellow.



Protesters display LGBTQ+ flags at City Hall on June 24, 2023 in Hamtramck, Michigan.

Bill Pugliano / Getty Images

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Gender ideology is the source of the belief that children can be

1 **born in the wrong body.**

2 **One can't really define gender ideology without invoking some of the terms it has already inserted into our language—terms that also cry out for definition.**

3 **The plain truth: Gender ideology does not accommodate the reality of sex—the reproductive strategy of mammals including human beings.**

Recently, I received separate inquiries from reporters working on stories about the use of the term “gender ideology.” What do I think it means? What is its origin?

The requests, though they came from different reporters, were identical. This seemed suspicious. After all, these journalists showed no interest in explaining or analyzing the ideology that has passed through our culture faster than a viral particle through a loose-fitting surgical mask. They wanted to know, rather, whence this nasty right-wing slur, “gender ideology,” came.

This seems to be part of a larger media campaign to discredit this and related terms. For instance, the new [AP style guide](#) advises, “Do not use the term transgenderism, which frames transgender identity as an ideology.”

The Wikipedians are also [doing their part](#). Something called the “anti-gender movement,” [the website explains](#), “is an international movement which opposes what it refers to as ‘gender ideology,’ ‘gender theory,’ or ‘genderism.’ The concepts cover a variety of issues and have no coherent definition.”

The giant online encyclopedia even quotes some European academics who claim

“include right-wingers and the far right, right-wing populists, conservatives, and Christian fundamentalists.”

>>> [The Uprising: Families Clash With Schools Over LGBTQ Propaganda](#)

The charge is not so much that the term gender ideology is unfair or inaccurate—which the AP suggests—but rather, that it doesn’t refer to anything at all.

Yet clearly such an ideology exists and can be named. If thousands of people use a term to refer to the same set of related facts out in the world, then it both means something to them and has a referent. This is true no matter where the term [originated](#), even if it’s hard for a random person on Twitter to formulate a tight definition on command.

Anyone following politics in recent years already has some idea what “gender ideology” means and what it refers to. It gave us the [Gender Unicorn](#). It inspires every new letter and symbol added to LBG in the Pride Month [alphabet](#). It coaxes school districts to allow males who “identify as” females to compete in girls’ sports and use their bathrooms. It hypnotizes the media into pretending the man who won the decathlon in the 1976 Olympics is a woman.

Gender ideology is the source of the belief that children can be born in the wrong body. It leads Californians to think that if a young girl feels anguish over her body, the doctors should not help her adjust to her body but should change her body and her surroundings—name, bathroom, pronouns—to conform to her “gender identity.” It fuels the spread of concepts like “gender identity”—including the many new supposed identities such as non-binary and pansexual—and the telling phrase “sex assigned at birth.” It inspires opaque proclamations like “transwomen are women.”

It prompts the State Department under Joe Biden to fly the [progress flag](#) during Pride Month. It led Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson to [answer](#) “I can’t.... I’m not a biologist” when she was asked “What is a woman?” during her Senate confirmation hearing to the U.S. Supreme Court.

The ubiquity of gender ideology is why the [Babylon Bee headline](#), “Bigoted Gender

You know tacitly what gender ideology refers to. It's ludicrous to pretend that these ideas have no nameable source.

Still, defining an ideology is much harder than pointing to its effects. That's why critics of gender ideology often come up short when challenged to do so. They might say, for instance, that it claims that people can change or choose their sex or gender at will. But that's not what its adherents claim.

Any good definition of a term should make explicit what its users already tacitly understand and refer to. It should also reveal the thing itself. In this case, it should capture the view of gender ideology's champions who would much rather it continue to work its magic in the shadows, than be named—and so examined—under the glaring light of reason.

Gender ideology is even harder to define than most terms because it refers to a protean postmodern confection. If you try to collect all the claims of its adherents over the years into a single long conjunctive proposition, as [Ryan Anderson did in 2018](#), it looks downright incoherent.

It is child's play to point to its effects, but the thing itself is shrouded in obscurity and equivocation. Its proponents play a constant game of [Motte and Bailey](#) with the public, redefining familiar words and creating new variations of those words that only make sense within their own paradigm. As a result, one can't really define gender ideology without invoking some of the terms it has already inserted into our language—terms that also cry out for definition.

Nevertheless, it can be done—so long as we focus on its current incarnation. Recently, “gender-critical” physician Jeremy Shaw queried the Twitterverse for just such a definition. I [sent](#) one back without much thought—as one does on Twitter. It read:

Gender ideology is the theory that the [sex binary](#) doesn't capture the complexity of the human species, and that human individuals are properly described in terms of an “internal sense of gender” called “gender identity” that may be incongruent with their “sex assigned at birth.”

Gender ideology is certainly more than that. But it is at least that.

On reflection, I'd replace "theory" with the less highfalutin "view." Like all definitions, this one contains terms that are not themselves defined. It also contains terms that are artifacts of the ideology, such as "gender identity" and "sex assigned at birth."

According to [Google's](#) dictionary function, "gender identity" is "a person's innate sense of gender." The term, we're told, is "chiefly used in contexts where it is contrasted with the sex registered for them at birth." So, we're supposed to understand each of these terms in light of the other.

This circular definition of gender identity is the standard. The word "gender" appears in both the definition and the term being defined—in both the [explanans](#) and the [explanandum](#).

Despite this deficiency, we can get a better sense of gender ideology by focusing on its use of "gender" and "sex." To most outsiders, "gender" might look like a synonym for "sex"—as it has been [for centuries](#). Presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy, for instance, recently [tweeted](#) ten "truths," among them, "2. There are two genders." It would have been better if he'd said, "There are [only] two sexes"—which is clearly what he meant.

Why does this matter? Because gender ideologues tend to use "gender" as a shorthand for "gender identity"—as in the euphemism "[gender affirming care](#)" in medicine. Such "care" affirms the presumed gender identity of the patient, even if that means destroying the patient's primary and secondary sex organs. In such a lexicon, "There are two genders" could mean "There are two gender identities," which I doubt anyone would bother to defend. Gender ideologues, for their part, admit no limiting principle to the number of gender identities. And their critics should just say, "There are only two sexes."

>>> [State Department Pushes "Conversion Therapy"](#)

Rather than denying the reality of sex outright, though, gender ideologues employ the now-ubiquitous substitute, "sex assigned [or registered] at birth." They thus

human beings—and posit, instead, a mere social construct. It's no wonder normal people are confused.

As bizarre as this is to those still in command of their senses, this gender lexicon is already so advanced that if you google, “What is the sex binary?” it will [redirect, or rather misdirect](#), you to pages trying to debunk the “gender binary.” Google is clearly doing its part to advance the cause of gender ideology—though, according to recent polls, [fewer and fewer people](#) seem to buy it.

Why do gender ideologues play such verbal shell games? Why pretend their view cannot be defined? It's surely because they want it to be seen as a simple deliverance of science and sweet reason, rather than a dogma so outlandish that almost no one would accept it if it were explained precisely and without the threat of social opprobrium.

The plain truth: Gender ideology does not accommodate the reality of sex—the reproductive strategy of mammals including human beings. Sex, in this reckoning, is not an objective truth about men and women. We are not male or female by virtue of our body structure or the fact that our bodies are oriented around the production of sperm or eggs. Human beings, are, in essence, [psychological selves](#) with internal senses of gender—like disembodied gendered souls. These “gender identities” are independent of, and can be incongruent with, the bodies that God gave us and that medicine has come to associate with “male” and female.” These “sex” categories are mere conventions, says the gender ideologue, not facts.

For obvious reasons, gender acolytes rarely speak so bluntly. But don't be fooled. When you see these confusing terms deployed to explain away what you know to be true, you can be quite sure you're not dealing with sound science or sound philosophy, but with an [incoherent](#) kludge of concepts that we may rightly call gender ideology.

I hope this clears things up for those curious journalists who seem to be perplexed by the term.

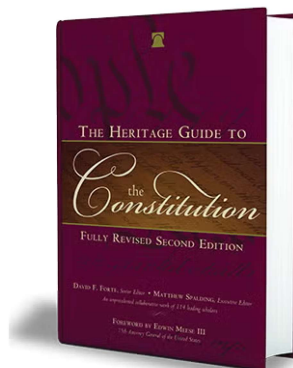
This piece originally appeared in The American Conservative

Heritage Offers



Activate Your 2025 Membership

By activating your membership you'll become part of a committed group of fellow patriots who stand for America's Founding principles.



The Heritage Guide to the Constitution

Receive a clause-by-clause analysis of the Constitution with input from more than 100 scholars and legal experts.