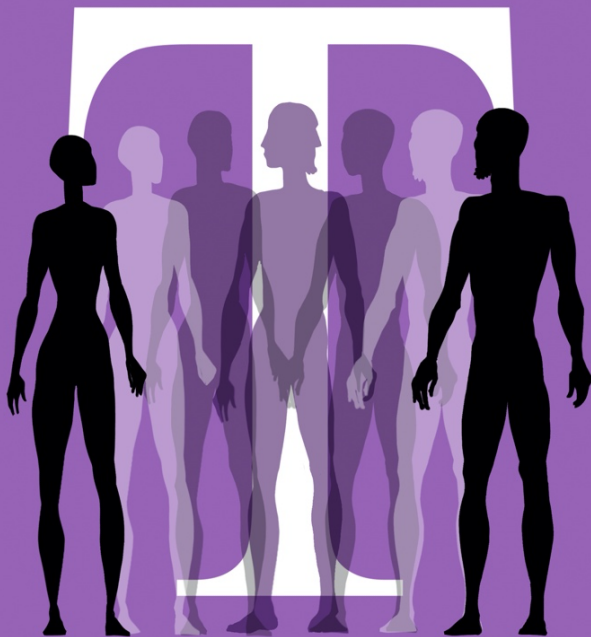


— LETTERS
on LIBERTY



THE TRANS IDEOLOGY TRAP

James Esses

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Welcome to *Letters on Liberty* from the Academy of Ideas. *Letters on Liberty* is a modest attempt to reinvigorate the public sphere and argue for a freer society.

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Since its foundation in 2000, the Academy of Ideas has hosted thousands of public debates, festivals, forums and salons where people from all walks of life come together to debate often-controversial topics and to challenge contemporary knee-jerk orthodoxies.

We always hold on to one defining principle:
free speech allowed.

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What are Letters on Liberty?

It's not always easy to defend freedom. Public life may have been locked down recently, but it has been in bad health for some time.

Open debate has been suffocated by today's censorious climate and there is little cultural support for freedom as a foundational value. What we need is rowdy, good-natured disagreement and people prepared to experiment with what freedom might mean today.

We stand on the shoulders of giants, but we shouldn't be complacent. We can't simply rely on the thinkers of the past to work out what liberty means today, and how to argue for it.

Drawing on the tradition of radical pamphlets from the seventeenth century onwards - designed to be argued over in the pub as much as parliament - *Letters on Liberty* promises to make you think twice. Each *Letter* stakes a claim for how to forge a freer society in the here and now.

We hope that, armed with these *Letters*, you take on the challenge of fighting for liberty.

Academy of Ideas team

THE TRANS IDEOLOGY TRAP

'We imagine a world where trans people everywhere are free to be themselves.'

This is a slogan from the charity Stonewall, as part of their 'Free To Be 2021-2025 Strategy'.ⁱ

The debate around sex, gender identity and trans has, from the outset, been centred around freedoms. Those in favour of gender ideology believe that people should have the freedom to identify however they like, regardless of what anyone else thinks. They say that people should be free to use whatever changing room they like, compete in whatever sporting competition they like, regardless of biology. They argue that children should be free to consent to irreversible and life-changing medication, regardless of the possibility of harm and regret.

This free-for-all approach to freedom might sound progressive and even attractive. However, I believe (along with an increasingly large proportion of the population) that, rather than promoting freedom, gender ideology actually hinders it. It forces many to conform to an ideology they do not believe in. It places people into rigid boxes from which they cannot escape. It encourages children to take decisions that

they may regret for the rest of their lives. And it detracts significantly from the rights and freedoms of others - particularly in terms of free speech. The imposition of 'compelled speech' - being forced to put pronouns in one's email signature, for example, is spreading throughout the corporate world. Likewise, the invention of new 'inclusive' terms and phrases like 'pregnant people' has created a climate of censorship in many workplaces and public organisations.

There are two underlying principles to understand all of this. The first, is that it is perfectly reasonable to believe that sex is binary and immutable - and to believe that those struggling with their gender identity deserve support, mental-health treatment and respect. These ideals are not mutually exclusive, although many try to paint them as such. The second, is that gender dysphoria - the debilitating mismatch between one's sex and one's identity - is a mental-health condition. In the UK, you must be diagnosed with gender dysphoria in order to transition - either medically or legally.

Understanding these two principles will help provide us with the framework for approaching the topic of gender identity.

Children's freedom has its limits

While our society often prizes freedom above all else, and has chosen to enshrine many of our freedoms in law, there must be exceptions in which it is inhibited - for example, the freedom to harm another. This is particularly relevant in relation to children. Given their inherent vulnerabilities, children are deserving of more protection and safeguarding under law from the state to prevent undue harm. Throughout history, the concept of liberty has been, rightly, only applied to mature adults - we have always prized the safety and wellbeing of our children over their absolute freedom. Children can tend to have dangerous desires - it's why we don't allow them the freedom to jump off high walls or cross roads when they want to.

We enshrine this protection in law. For example, children under the age of 11 cannot open their own bank account. Children under the age of 12 cannot purchase Christmas crackers. Children under the age of 13 cannot sign up to Facebook. Children under the age of 16 cannot own a pet, buy aerosol paint or consent to having sex. Children under the age of 18 cannot purchase scratch cards and they cannot get a tattoo. They cannot purchase cigarettes, or (with very limited exemptions) drink alcohol in licensed

premises. They cannot sit on a jury, and they cannot vote in a UK parliamentary election.

All of these age limitations were devised with the welfare of children at heart. Yet, when it comes to the principles of gender ideology, these ideals appear to evaporate. In the UK, children can be given experimental puberty blockers and cross-sex hormones - both of which may bring about irreversible changes to their bodies and cause physical and mental harm. The NHS website itself states that 'little is known about the long-term side effects of hormone or puberty blockers in children with gender dysphoria'. This is an understatement.

The banning of 'conversion therapy' is a good example of how an argument for freedom becomes twisted into coercion.

In fact, children can commence puberty blockers in advance of them even having started puberty. Anecdotally, some have reported that children as young as eight years old have been given this medication. Children as young as 17 can even be placed on the waiting list for sex-reassignment surgery, the most prominent of which is a double mastectomy. Internationally, children as young as 13 have been documented as having had this surgery.ⁱⁱ

Is this freedom for children worth defending, even if it is to the detriment of their wellbeing and safety?

Transitioning as free expression

It is often argued that affirming a young person to transition is the embodiment of freedom. And yet, this freedom interacts with, and oppresses, the freedoms of clinicians and parents to make rational decisions in the best interests of a child.

Gender dysphoria is the only mental-health condition where the proposed treatment is to automatically and unconditionally affirm the distressing thoughts that someone has inside their head.

This breaches some of the core ethical principles of medicine and therapy. First and foremost, it goes completely against the mantra set down under the Hippocratic Oath, which can be summarised as ‘first do no harm’. Secondly, it violates the core tenet of psychotherapy and counselling, which is to never enter the therapeutic space with a pre-determined outcome.

The banning of ‘conversion therapy’ is a good example of how an argument for freedom becomes

twisted into coercion. In numerous countries, these types of bans have had a chilling effect on therapy itself by criminalising, intentionally or unintentionally, basic exploratory therapy for children struggling with gender dysphoria. This infringes upon a therapist's own ethical freedoms to engage in proper exploration with their client.

In some jurisdictions - such as Victoria, Australia - the law states that a parent who does not allow their child to commence puberty blockers or cross-sex hormones may be committing the criminal offence of 'conversion therapy'.ⁱⁱⁱ It is difficult to think of a more outrageous example of abuse of a parent's freedom to decide what is best for their own child.

But perhaps most worrying of all is the desire to glamourise transitioning, a phenomenon which has become intertwined with celebrity culture.

By automatically affirming a child's feelings that they are indeed trapped in the wrong body (and that they should transition if they want to) we rob that child of the freedom to make an informed decision about what is in their best interests, both short term and long term. Furthermore, this affirmation prevents a clinician from looking at a child holistically - including identifying existing co-morbidities (such as autism or

other mental-health conditions), considering contributing factors (such as historic trauma or abuse) and exploring the full range of possible options and outcomes.

We know that the vast majority of children who commence puberty blockers will go on to take cross-sex hormones, emphasising the nature of the one-way system of medicalisation. There may be numerous damaging and irreversible changes brought about through cross-sex hormone treatment - including sterility and increased risk of heart attack. How can those who advocate for an affirmative approach towards children with gender dysphoria argue that it enhances their freedom, in light of this?

The vast majority of children with gender dysphoria will settle into their bodies if natural development is allowed to proceed, and exploratory therapy can be extremely effective in aiding this. This is the freedom we should offer to our children - the freedom to become comfortable with their bodies. Yet, gender ideology, ironically, denies them this.

Social contagion?

A little-known but important fact about the nature of contemporary gender ideology relates to how the make-up of people wanting to transition has changed. Studies have demonstrated a complete inversion in sex ratio of those presenting as 'trans'. In the 1960s, over 90 per cent were male, wishing to change to female. In 2018, over 80 per cent were female. In fact, there was hardly any scientific literature before 2012 on girls aged 11 to 21 having ever developed gender dysphoria at all.

Sex is binary. It is immutable. Human beings are a sexually dimorphic species. These are all irrefutable truths.

It is well documented that young people - particularly girls - can fall prey to forms of social contagion in relation to mental ill-health. Historically, this has been witnessed in self-harm and eating disorders.

Anecdotally, clinicians are hearing of more and more schools in which multiple students (particularly girls) within a single class are coming out as trans within weeks of one another. In one study, over 66 per cent

of young people questioning their gender belonged to a friendship group in which one or more of their friends had recently come out as trans.^{iv}

This should come as little surprise to us, when we consider the narrative that is pushed upon young people about gender ideology. We are told to embrace, and even celebrate, being trans. In its podcast, *She Said, They Said*, the children's charity Mermaids has told its young audience that if they come out as trans they can 'help humanity and make the world a better place'.^v Is this not undue pressure being placed on vulnerable young minds? In a blog page on Mermaids' website, discussing a residential weekend for children, one writer described the 'war raging' against trans people in the outside world.^{vi} Is this not in danger of feeding children a narrative that alienates them from wider society?

So much of the discourse surrounding gender ideology is about 'openness', but these organisations are certainly not spending their time telling these impressionable young minds about people who change their minds. De-transitioners are young people who have said they wished that adults had challenged them earlier in the process, and assisted them to understand their deeper psychological issues, rather than affirming them into a path of transitioning.

But perhaps most worrying of all is the desire to glamourise transitioning, a phenomenon which has become intertwined with celebrity culture. Adverts for breast binders on Amazon promise young girls that they can be ‘cool’ and ‘handsome’ if they use them. There is even a glorification of irreversible surgery.

The LGBT+ news outlet *Pink News* recently collaborated with social-media site Snapchat on a project entitled ‘Pure Trans Joy’.^{vii} This included releasing photographs and videos of young people posing with the scars they had been left with following a double mastectomy, alongside a narrative which described the ‘euphoria’ they felt following this surgery.

Call it peer pressure or social contagion, our unwillingness to question whether gender ideology in young people might be influenced by social trends, instead of a rational, free decision taken by an individual, is leading to serious consequences.

Irrefutable truths

Much of our everyday experience as human beings is subjective. However, there are also many objective and irrefutable truths that we must contend with.

Humanity flourishes by embracing truth and living in accordance with it. If someone goes about their life believing something that is objectively false, even if it causes some subjective personal satisfaction, can that person be described as objectively well-off?

Sex is binary. It is immutable. Human beings are a sexually dimorphic species. These are all irrefutable truths.

A fully functioning society must have boundaries and limitations.

In this way, gender dysphoria can be compared to body dysmorphia or anorexia - where a person has a fixed, false belief, despite clear evidence to the contrary. Continuing this analogy, sex-reassignment surgery cannot cure gender dysphoria, any more than liposuction cures anorexia.

We see this with other mental-health conditions. For example, Body Integrity Identity Disorder (BIID) is a condition in which someone identifies as a disabled person, even though they have a fully functioning body. They may even seek the surgical amputation of healthy limbs. However, unlike with gender dysphoria, most clinicians would shrink at performing such a

procedure, no matter how much the patient protests or pleads.

One of the most worrying things to emerge over recent months is the level of falsehoods being peddled to children in the one place that should be a sanctuary of knowledge and truth: school. Books exist for primary-school students suggesting that the doctor took a ‘guess’ at their sex when they were born, and that they may have made a ‘mistake’. Books like *Phoenix Goes to School* suggests to children as young as five years old that boys who like the colour pink or enjoy smelling flowers may actually be girls trapped in the wrong body. We’ve even witnessed the very literal re-writing of history, with some schools teaching children that Joan of Arc was ‘trans’ or ‘non-binary’, even though there is no historical evidence for this claim.

The irony is that through the success of this ideology, which cloaks itself in the language of freedom, truths and freedoms are being denied.

In some cases, we appear to have lost all sense of what is true or false. Listeners to the Mermaids’ podcast have previously been told that ‘there are men who have ovaries and woman who have prostates - it’s just fact’.^{viii}

When we teach our children that you can be whatever you want to be based purely on how you feel, regardless of whether it has any basis in reality, we risk chaos. I recently came across a video of a teenager on social media who said, with complete sincerity, that they now identify as ‘cake’, and that they want others to use ‘cake’ as their pronouns. The reason given by the teenager was that they felt ‘warm and fluffy on the inside and made up of many different layers’. On this basis, my gender identity should be a whiskey bottle, because I feel aged and give people a headache.

A fully functioning society must have boundaries and limitations. We don’t allow adults to self-identify as children for the purposes of attending a youth group or entering a child’s sporting competition. So why should we allow people to identify as whatever sex, gender or inanimate object they desire on the basis of gender identity? Surely objective truth and reality must count for something?

The irony is that through the success of this ideology, which cloaks itself in the language of freedom, truths and freedoms are being denied. Significant research has demonstrated the biological links between sexual orientation and gender identity. In fact, 75 per cent of boys who demonstrate gender nonconformity in childhood will end up coming out as gay or bisexual

during their lifetime.^{ix} By enabling children to ‘transition’ to the other sex so that they then become ‘straight’, could we be denying the freedom of young gay people to discover who they really are?

When freedoms clash

When considering one set of freedoms, we must always consider how they interact with others. For example, gender ideology significantly undermines a number of other crucial rights that exist in our society.

Take the issue of women’s rights and safety. If a biological male can ‘identify’ as a woman, and use spaces designed only for women because they are different to men (such as prisons, changing rooms and even domestic-abuse shelters), he is able to undermine the sanctity of those places. The importance of sex difference in certain areas of life is why our equality legislation allows for the same-sex provision of services.

Gender ideology likewise undermines the freedom to engage in fair sporting competitions. If biological males, with all of their in-built biological advantages, are entitled to compete against women, it may lead (as we have already witnessed on the global stage) to

unfair outcomes and even risks to safety and wellbeing.

Perhaps most importantly, the way in which gender ideology is pushed directly contravenes the fundamental rights of free speech. More and more we are seeing employees being pressured to include 'personal pronouns' in their email signatures, or online biographies, regardless of whether they believe in gender ideology or not.

Terms like 'bigot' and 'transphobe' get hurled at those who simply state that they believe in biological reality. Individuals have even lost their jobs, reputations and livelihoods as a result of asking questions about this new ideology. Maya Forstater's victory in a recent discrimination case set a precedent that gender-critical beliefs are protected under law, but it also demonstrated that employers are only too willing to clamp down on free speech. My own ongoing litigation against my university course provider for expulsion from my master's degree - after I raised concerns about the medicalisation of children - demonstrates that gender ideology utilises and is fuelled by a cancel-culture mentality.

In pursuit of the 'freedom of trans people to be themselves', we have undermined freedom. Rather than embracing people who are 'gender atypical', we

have regressed to old stereotypes and forced children into rigid 'identity' boxes with labels they may find difficult to escape from. Instead of embracing open debate, we have forced swathes of society to conform to an ideology they do not believe in.

We now find ourselves in a situation in which a child may not be able to buy a scratch card, but they are able to consent to highly potent, experimental treatment with no long-term data on the effects - all for a mental-health condition that can quite often resolve itself. As a result of all of this, we are at risk of robbing our children of one of the greatest freedoms of all: childhood. The ability to try things out, make mistakes and then move on throughout life unscathed.

When it comes to gender ideology, we cannot allow children the 'freedoms' to make choices that they cannot understand. Instead, we must argue for the pursuit of truth as a means of embracing freedom - so that in our adult lives, we can truly know the meaning of real freedom.

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James is suing his university course provider and therapeutic regulatory body for discrimination based on his beliefs, following expulsion from his masters' degree in psychotherapy after speaking out about the medicalisation of children.

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