

The Questions, Part I

What do you mean when you say you're not a man or a woman?

I am not a man, and I am not a woman. Neither of these words describes me. My gender is not black nor white; my gender is perhaps gray, or perhaps purple, or green or yellow or rainbow or polka-dot or clear.

(Though I must admit, I don't even think of "man" and "woman" as black and white - they're not exact opposites, they have some things in common. I think of it more like: man is green, and woman is orange. And me? I'm purple - some of both, but really, something else entirely.)

But you're either male, or you're female! You were born that way!

It's not quite that simple. In fact, what we call "male" and "female" are not quite that simple, either. It's kind of hard to explain, but I've made a metaphor to try. On the next page, I will introduce something I call:

**The Great Big

Marvelous @
Gender Machine**



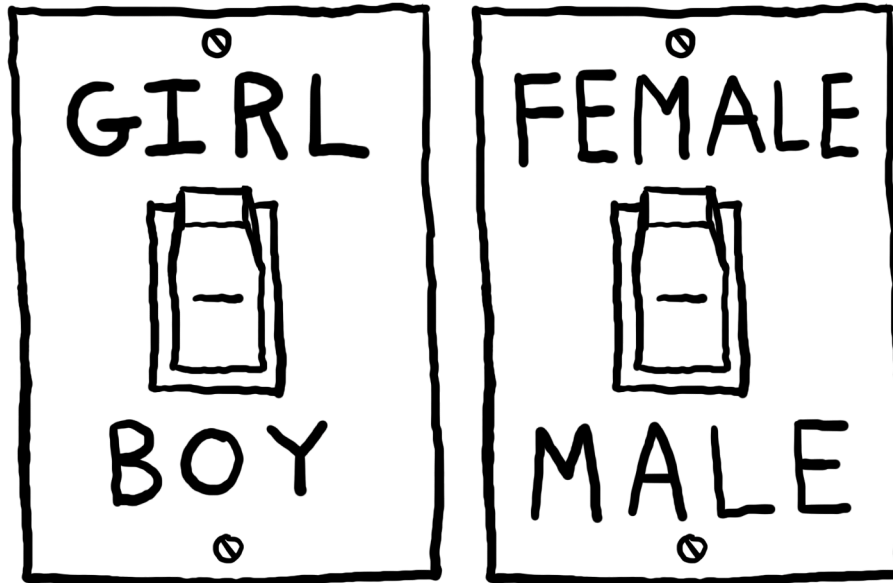
This is how many people still think about gender. You're a girl, or you're a boy, and that's that, clear as day.

But practically, how DO we know if someone is a girl or a boy? When we meet someone new, do we check their medical records? Do we ask to see their body parts?

No. We pick up on social cues, such as hair, body language and clothing, which are completely unaffiliated with our biology.

gender

sex



So, gender is social and sex is biological. In almost every college class I've taken about gender, this is where we start on the very first day. It's an important separation, but it unfortunately can lead people to believe that one is "real" and one is "imaginary".

I'll get back to that thought when I talk more about sex.

It also might lead us to the conclusion that this is all we need to know about the topic - gender is one way and sex is another way, and if they "match up", you're CISgender, and if they don't "match up", you're TRANSgender.

But experience tells us it's not that simple.



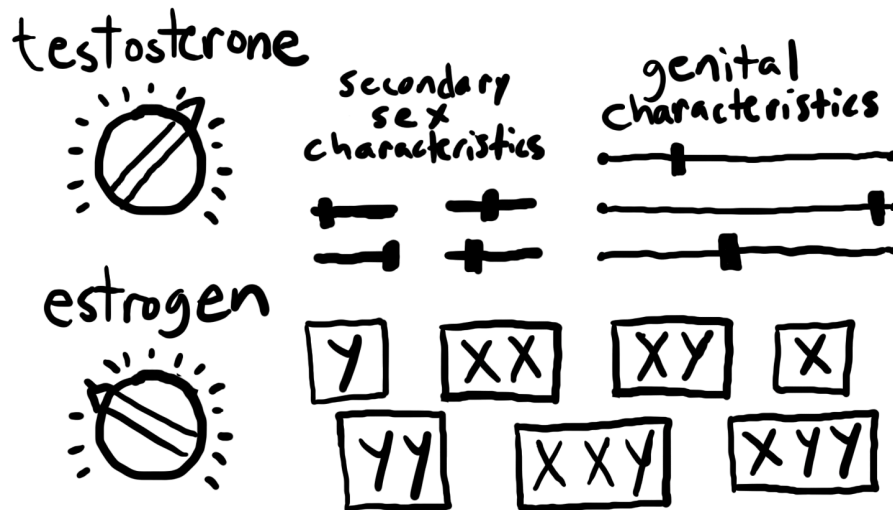
If you've ever heard the term "gender spectrum", it is most likely referring to something like this. Here, we understand that gender is not just black and white, but that there are many shades of gray between "boy" and "girl". Very few people, cis or trans*, act one hundred percent in ways we think of as girl-like or boy-like all the time. However, even this is an incomplete picture.

But first let's look at how this spectrum model applies to sex.



You have probably heard the term "hermaphrodite", which is considered outdated and dehumanizing today. "Hermaphrodite" also implies that a person is completely in the middle of male and female, when often, intersex people have one or two characteristics of the sex opposite of the sex which their parents and/or doctors assigned to them at birth.

Which requires that we complicate this further.



This is what the “controls” for sex might actually look like. And considering that I’m not a biologist, or intersex myself, I’ve probably left a lot of things out. There are many more chromosome combinations than this, and there are many ways that individual bodies react to estrogen, testosterone and other hormones that would make up a number of other switches and dials. Often, a number of variables (chromosomes, hormones, internal reproductive organs, external genitalia, physical characteristics) line up in a way that makes one appear as what we think of as “male” or “female”. Sometimes, they do not. Just because one is OFTEN and the other is SOMETIMES, doesn’t mean that one is NORMAL and the other is ABNORMAL. Intersex people aren’t unnatural - obviously, nature made them that way. And their bodies deserve the same respect as any other.

There is a LOT that goes into what we consider a male, female or intersex body. In fact, this complexity seems to imply that all people are, in some ways, intersex, or perhaps that it’s silly to lump people into three simple groups based on such an array of variables.

Notice when I took away the one simplified male-intersex-female slider, I did not label the individual biological constructs as “male” and “female” - male hormones, female chromosomes, male genitalia, etc. - because calling these biological constructs “male” and “female” is a social construct. People have told me, “I understand you’re not a girl, but you’re still female because of biology”. I and many others reject this idea. Our biological differences are relevant to our health and our reproduction, but there is no real reason to think of some bodies as gendered, just as being in varying combinations on this dashboard. Author & artist Kate Bornstein, for example, doesn’t call our biology “sex”, she names it “biological gender”, because she feels calling it “sex” makes it seem “real” whereas “gender” is “fake”.

So, I’ve explained, to the best of my ability, why the way we normally think about sex isn’t necessarily “real”. Let’s move on to why gender isn’t necessarily “fake”.