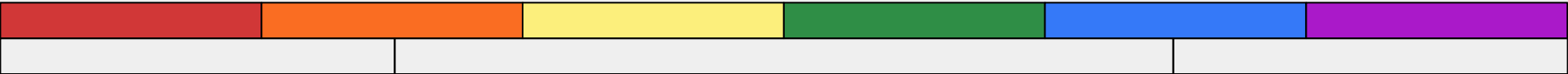


Is Personal Identity Necessarily a Fixed Position?

A presentation about gender & sexual identity by Kai Collins





A quick Introduction

The question of Who am I? Is one that we have all found ourselves asking. How do I know who I am? What makes me, me? This question is **vital** to our human understanding & gives meaning behind our identities, but how do we know who we are, how do we relate to ourselves?

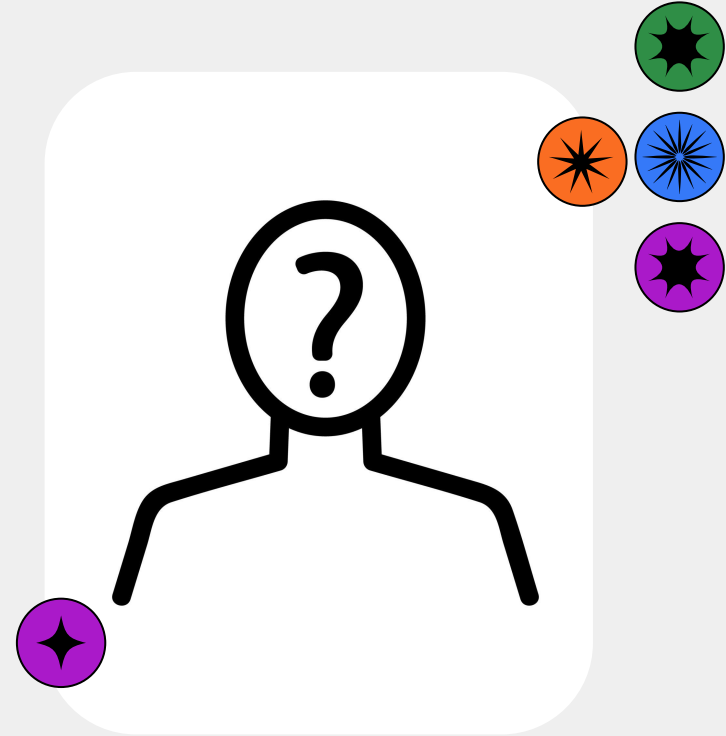
This presentation will explore this via the themes of gender & sexual identity, with the aim to determine & analyze how we relate to our body, the impacts that gender & sexuality can have upon our identity & prove that identity isn't necessarily a fixed position.

How does this relate to my subject of study?

The topic of gender & sexual identity links closely & plays a major factor in the metaphysical debates surrounding personal identity. This links closely to my subject of study which is **Religion, Philosophy & Ethics**, as metaphysics is a core branch of philosophy.

Small disclaimer:

This presentation may argue heavily in favour of our identity always changing & how we relate to our identity via the mind instead of the body. However, arguments for **other perspectives** will still be explored.



	Inclusion				

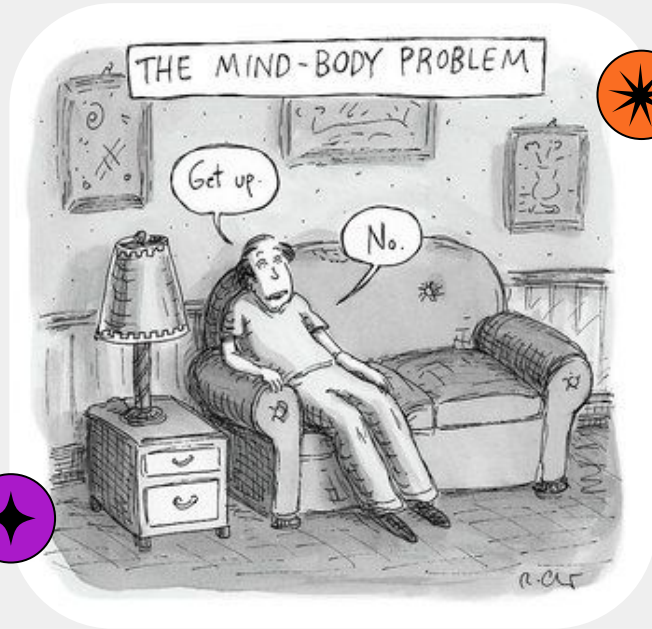
What is personal identity?

Personal identity is often interpreted as **how we or others see ourselves** . Which seems a simple enough answer, a justified one even. But what, if you were asked the question 'How do you **relate** to your identity? Is it through your **mind** or your **body**?' How would you answer?

This is a popular debate amongst scholars & academics alike, both in the topic of **metaphysics** & the **philosophy of mind** . Many of who were asking the same questions 'How do we relate to our identity?' & 'Is it a fixed position?', but all of them seemed to come up with different answers to explain our identity.

To get into the depths of how we relate to our identity a thought experiment was created, most famously put forth by Bernard Williams, known as the '**body-swap case**' that follows the lines of; Imagine your mind was removed from your body & placed into a new one. Would you still **remain** in your original body? Or would you **move** to the new one with your mind?

This is where the mind vs body debate begins.





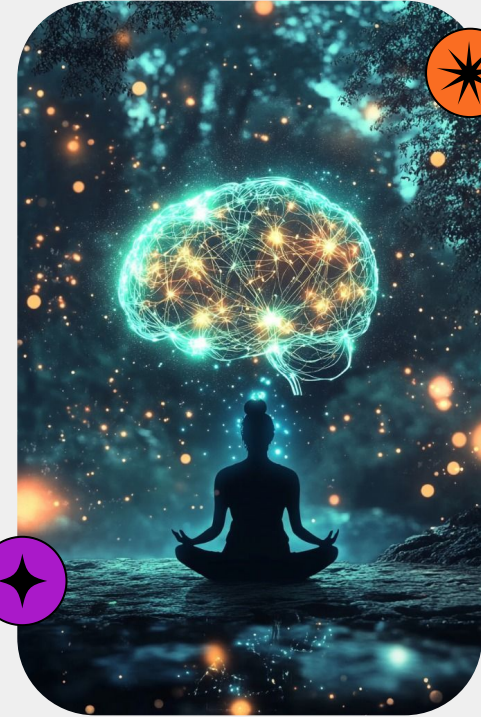
The Argument of the Mind (Psychological)

Some believe that identity is of the mind, it is our **thoughts**, our **memories** & our **experiences**, that shape who we are & what makes up our identity. So in the case of the thought experiment we would go to the new body with our mind.

This approach would serve **in favour** of identity not being a fixed position as the state of the mind is ever changing.

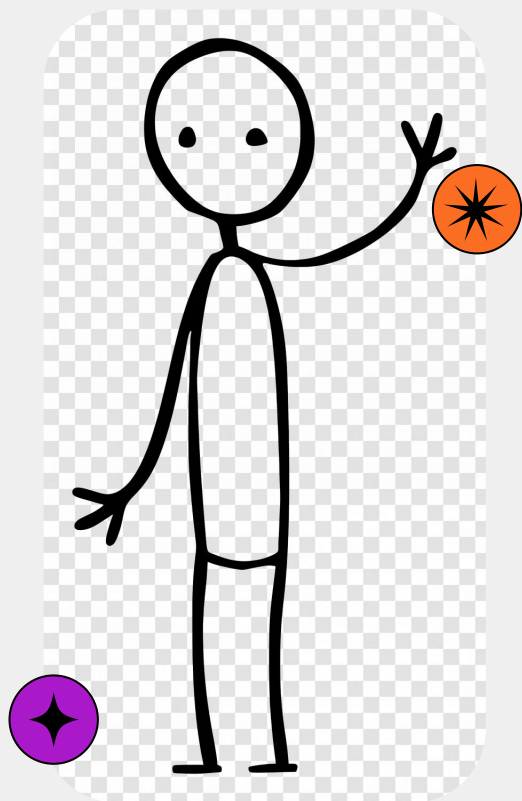
Philosophers who may agree with this:

- John Locke:
 - *'For since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and 'tis that that makes everyone to be what he calls self; and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things; in this alone consists **personal identity**'* (Locke, 1997, p.302)
- Rene Descartes:
 - *'even bodies are not strictly perceived by the senses or the faculty of imagination but by intellect alone, and that the perception derives not from being touched or seen but from their being of understood.'* (Descartes 1996, p.22)





The Argument of the Body (Physical)



Others believe that we relate to our identity through our **bodies**, psychological truths **don't matter**, it is the physical that is important. Thus making followers of this approach prone to believe that we would **remain** in our body whilst the mind moves on.

This approach often means that identity **is a fixed position or substance** (but this does not apply in all cases).

Philosophers who may agree with this:

→ Thomas Hobbes:

- ◆ *'there is no conception in a man's mind which hath not at first, totally or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of sense.'* (Hobbes, 2015, p.30)

→ Eric T Olson

- ◆ *'persist by virtue of psychological continuity, and who, according to me, are human animals whose persistence conditions have nothing to do with psychology.'* (Olson, 1999, p.125)



What are the problems?



Mind



- **Hard to define the mind** - it is in a constant state of change.
 - Opinions about the mind's definition are also subjective; some view the mind (in regards to identity) as characteristics, personality or even continuity.
- **Too many selves argument** - if identity is in the mind then you are in a constant state of change as time goes on.
- **Personalities change.**
- **Subject to memory continuity** - memory is unreliable.
- **Can underestimate biology's factor in our identity.**
- **Can separate identity from material reality.**
- **Difficult to verify objectively** - we cannot observe internal identity.



Body



- **Too simple** - the body is insufficient to capture identity despite providing an example of identity being a fixed position.
- **Too few selves argument** - You would have to ignore what seems most like you, such as your memories.
- **Bodies change over time** - cells replace as you age - your cells are completely different to what they were ten years ago.
- **Reduces identity to just purely biology.**
- **Doesn't explain variation successfully** - displays of gender & sexuality vary historically & culturally.
- **Can reinforce set categories** - such as male & female, hence overlooking gender non-conforming or fluid identities.
- **Mind & body disconnect cases** - e.g, Gender dysphoria can cause mental identity & bodily characteristics to not align.



How do Gender & Sexuality slot in?

Gender & Sexuality can serve as **real life examples** that can both support or counter the arguments on both sides of the mind vs body debate.

But how do gender & sexuality factor into identity?

- Sense of **belonging** & Self **understanding**
 - Can give a sense of belonging, allows LGBTQIA+ individuals to feel like a part of a **community** and help them feel safe in their identities.
 - Can also cause an individual to feel euphoria & flourish in themselves instead of having to act as something or someone that **they are not** .
- Self **growth** over time
 - By being allowed to discover & understand your own sexual & gender identity, an individual will be able to grow in themselves, find who they really are & what identity **best fits them** .
- Values & Expression
 - This journey of growth will often help an individual to create **core values** , ones which will add to their identity & expression, often leading them to find their true selves.

But before Gender & Sexuality can be used as an argument to either support the body or the mind, we have to determine the **definitions** & what aspects will be used.





Gender is often confused with sex, but the two have **different** meanings. Sex is what an individual is born as, what gender you were assigned at birth. Whereas gender is a **social construct**, referring to how an individual feels within themselves, this feeling of gender may go against, align or even mix between an individual's sex.

There are many types of gender, as gender is a spectrum. For this presentation the main focus will be placed upon **transgender** individuals.

What does transgender mean?

Transgender is an umbrella term used to describe those whose gender **does not match their sex assigned at birth**. For instance a trans man, was assigned female at birth (AFAB) or a trans woman was assigned male at birth (AMAB). This umbrella term also holds place for non binary (an individual who **does not experience** gender within the binary) & genderfluid (an individual whose gender **shifts** between or outside of society's idea of gender).

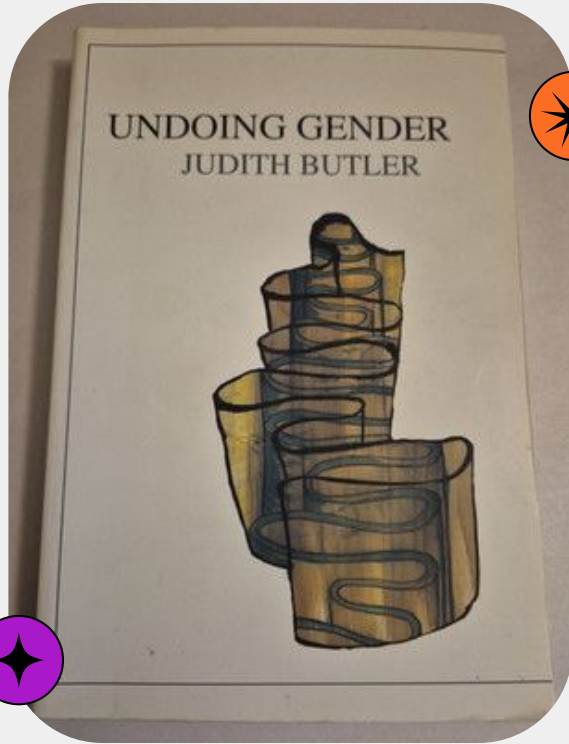
The aspects this presentation will look into:

- Closeted & repressed gender identity.
- Gender Dysphoria.
- Existence of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals.

What is Gender?



Judith Butler - Undoing Gender (2004)



Who is Judith Butler?

- An American Philosopher & Gender Theorist
- Famous for their influential book 'Gender Trouble'

What are their key ideas about Gender?

- Gender is performative
- Gender & identity are **shaped** by societal norms
- Social systems tend to exclude people whose identities **don't align** with dominant societal norms.

What do they say about transgender individuals?

In their book 'Undoing Gender' Butler mentions:

- Disagrees that there is only one singular way or 'natural' way to experience gender & that transgender individuals **challenge** these arguments.
- Society should **expand** understanding of what counts to a valid human life rather than following social norms that exclude those who don't fit in.
- Gender and the definitions are **not fixed**; *'Terms of gender designation are thus never settled once and for all but are constantly in the process of being remade.'* (Butler, 2004, p.10).





What is sexuality?

What sexuality is, is **hard to define** but it is often categorised as one of four things: desire, activity, identity or experience.

For the purposes of this presentation we will refer to sexuality as an **identity**; How someone describes their sense of self as a sexual being. This is the way a person describes or understands their **own** romantic or sexual attraction or even in some sexualities the absence of attraction.

Some examples of sexuality:

- **Heterosexual** (Straight) - An attraction to a **different** gender.
- **Homosexual** (Gay or Lesbian) - An attraction to the **same** gender.
- **Bisexual** - An attraction to **more** than one gender.
- **Pansexual** - An attraction **regardless** of gender.
- **Asexual** - Little or **no** sexual attraction.

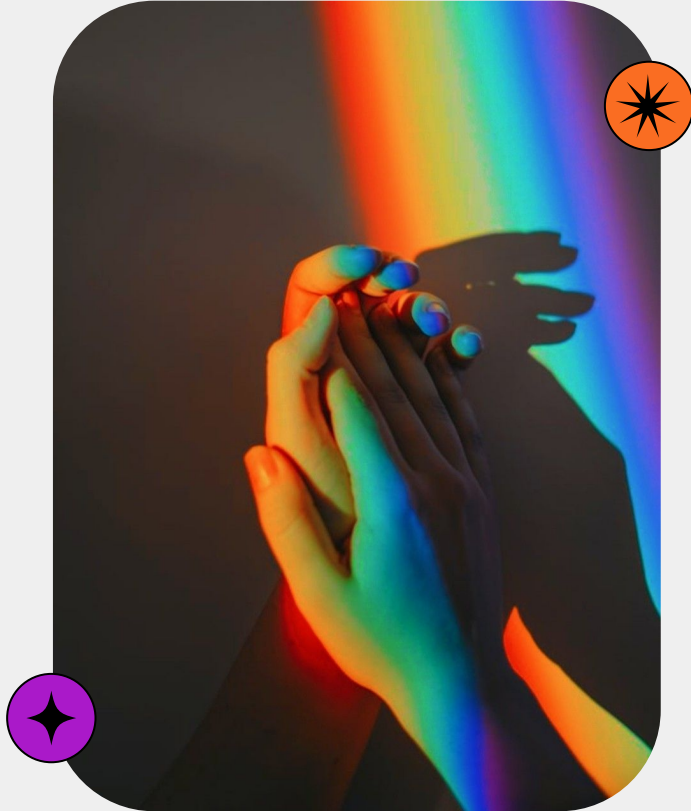
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What is Sexuality?



Queer Theory



What is it?

Queer theory studies how societies think about identity, gender, sexuality & normality. It emerged in the late 20th century from a combination of **LGBTQ+** Studies, **feminist** theory, **poststructuralism** & the works of renowned theorists such as Judith **Butler**, Michel **Foucault** & Eve Kosofsky **Sedgwick**.

What is said about sexuality?

Queer theory studies sexuality as being **shaped** by language, culture, power & history rather than simply fixed identities & biology. Society defines & regulates sexuality & gender, which challenges the idea that categories societies use are defined as **natural**, fixed or universally normal.

The foundations of this idea was heavily influenced by Michel Foucault's ideas about how sexuality has and still is historically constructed to be **tied** to systems of social control. Which all links to the **institutional power**, **societal norms** & the systems are created by those in positions of power, which societies are **expected** to follow & often do so blindly.

'Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries to gradually uncover' (Foucault, 2020, p.105)



Gender & Sexuality Vs the Body

(An argument for the mind)



The existence of transgender individuals or those who don't identify with their sex assigned at birth, can stand as a pretty powerful & compelling argument **against** the idea that the relation to our identity is purely physical & is entirely determined upon our body & biology. As those who do not identify with their sex assigned at birth, internal identity **does not match** with the gender identity that their body presents outwardly.

Gender Dysphoria:

Gender dysphoria is a condition that many transgender people face, it is the '*sense of unease that a person may have because of a mismatch between their biological sex and their gender identity.*' (NHS, 2020). Gender dysphoria can cause a **disconnect** between the mind & body, in cases of transgender individuals it is often when how they see themselves in their mind does not match their body. This sense of unease can be triggered by the **simplest** of things such as, clothes or sending voice recordings. This disconnect however can be **eased** with transitioning, either through small, social changes or surgery, but for most trans people the dysphoria never leaves even if they are presenting as cisgendered. This disconnect implies that the relation to identity **must** be of the mind as if it were the body alone, it simply **would not affect** one's identity.

Whilst the existence of transgender people and diagnoses of gender dysphoria doesn't necessarily **prove** that the relation to identity is purely psychological, it certainly does act as **evidence** of support.



The Far Right approach:

One way that specifically gender identity can be argued against the mind is via the perspective of the **Far Right**. For individuals whose beliefs align with the likes of far right political parties, such as MAGA, then the argument would be simple. Gender would not affect identity being that of the body, as those who identify as anything other than their sex assigned at birth as either **mentally ill**, or **mistaken**. If this is the case, then their gender identity would have no standing in the mind vs body debate as it is simply **not real**.

Does this approach work?

This argument is definitely **weaker** than the argument using the existence of transgender individuals as an argument for the mind, as this approach relies on subjectivity & has little to **no evidence**, 'The Department of Health and Human Services issued a proposed rule clarifying that gender dysphoria is not a disability under key federal laws, including the Americans with Disabilities Act'. (The White House, 2026). Whereas the argument of the existence of transgender individuals has scientific evidence, as it is considered diagnosable (gender dysphoria). This 'Far right' argument relies heavily on the influence of systems of & societal power, how one person can sway and lead a society in inequality and marginalisation just through being able to hold a position of power, one in which allows them to **spread misinformation** such as the idea of transgender identity not being real.

Butler said 'To be called unreal, and to have that call, as it were, institutionalized as a form of differential treatment, is to become the other against whom (or against which) the human is made.' (Butler, 2004, p.30). Hence, they would likely agree that this approach is nothing more than a **misuse of political power** aimed to target those who **do not fit** into society's idea of gender.

Gender & Sexuality VS the Mind (An argument for the body)





Being Closeted - The Hidden Identity

(An argument for the mind)



The final way that gender & sexuality can be used as an argument against identity being a fixed position is the internal battle that those who are **not 'out'** to the public eye.

Emotional Effects & Authenticity:

Having to keep a part of yourself hidden, & in turn having to live as something you are not can build **emotional pressure**, often created from a source of fear, can cause isolation, feelings of guilt and distrust to others. This inability to make connections with others and speak openly about themselves will cause their connection with their identity to become **fragmented**, losing themselves in the false identity that they often feel forced to **mask** with, thus they are living inauthentically.

'The gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people. But for many gay people it is still the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence' (Sedgwick, 2008, p.68)

This 'split' can serve as an argument against the idea that personal identity is just purely physical, as if our identity was just of the body, than the effects of being closeted on the mind **would not impact or fragment** how we view ourselves.

	Inclusion				



Does this prove that Personal identity isn't a necessarily fixed position?

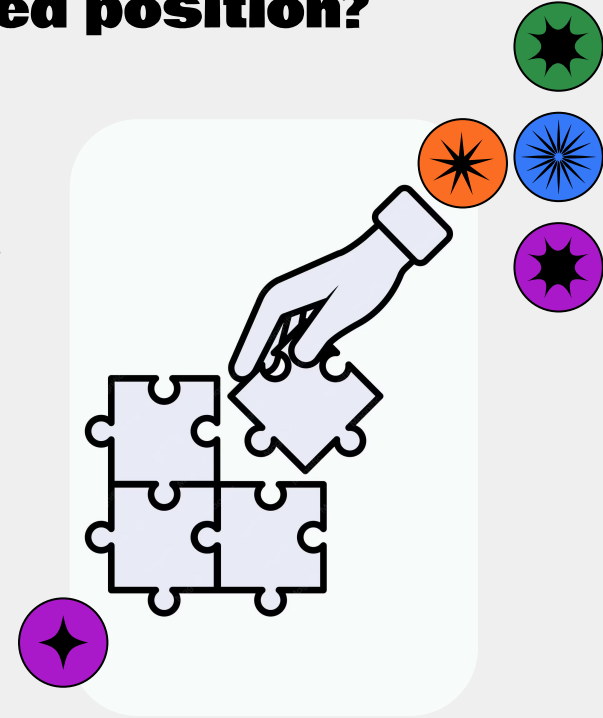
In short, the answer is **yes**, gender & sexuality serve as compelling arguments, that argue in favour of identity not being a necessarily fixed position.

But what about the mind vs body debate?

Gender & Sexuality can be used to argue heavily in favour of the mind, as the existence of transgender individuals & closeted identities, are in the psychological and have **little to no influence from the body**. Whereas using Gender & Sexuality to argue in favour of the body is a lot harder & often presents a **weaker** argument that relies on subjectivity, political power & societal norms.

An alternative:

However what gender & sexuality can also support is an almost alternative to the mind vs body debate, where our identity is actually a **mixture of both**, meaning there is a deep rooted connection between the mind & body. This could be supported by transgender individuals as the **gender dysphoria** that they often feel is associated with their body, which implies that their dysphoria isn't solely the mind but is affected by or influenced by the body. One philosopher who might agree with this alternative is **Williams** who famously came up with the 'body-swap case' which was mentioned at the beginning of this presentation.



	Inclusion				



To Conclude...



This presentation has aimed to answer the question 'Is Personal Identity necessarily a fixed position?' from the perspective of gender & sexual identity.

Key points of this presentation (a summary):

- **Society often defines** gender & sexuality.
 - Institutional power often **influences** the definitions & making LGBTQ+ identities stand out as they don't often fit the social 'norms'.
- The existence of transgender individuals is evidence of the relation to identity being psychological, due to gender dysphoria causing a **disconnect** between the mind & body in most cases of trans individuals.
- The Far Right could argue that this evidence of transgender individuals would not hold up as transgender people **do not exist** in their minds or are mentally ill - transgender identity would not affect the relation as it is **not real**.
- Closeted identities can serve as examples of the relation being of the mind as having to use two or more different identities while hiding the true one can cause **fragments** in identities, which can cause an individual to **lose sight** of the real one.
- An **alternative** proposal - there could be a **closer connection** between the body & mind, meaning that the relation could be a **mixture** of both rather than one or the other.

To conclude, Gender & Sexual identity can serve as **evidence** to support that identity is not necessarily a fixed position and **can** change over time, as well that identity is **either a relation of the mind or a mixture of the mind & body**.



	Love				



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