*Discussion paper*

**Is trans\* natural?**

The term „trans\*“ refers to a whole variety of sex/gender identities – for example transsexual, transgender, genderfluid, non-binary people and other. It is considered an umbrella term for various people that do not fit the traditional sex/gender division, and the asterisk in trans\* should indicate this variety, implying that there is more than just well-known categories like transsexuality.[[1]](#footnote-1) The term could be debated from many points of view, e.g. the question of sex (transsexuality) and gender (transgender) – meaning we first have to distinguish these two categories (sex as biologically determined and gender as socially shaped patterns of living/behaviour) to even be able to come up with the notion of transsexuality and transgender. This shows how the question whether “trans\* is natural” is actually very complex – trans entails a very broad spectrum od individuals whose exceptionality might lie in biology (e.g. intersex people – an umbrella term for people born with bodies that do not match the typical male/female dichotomy) but also culture (e.g. transgender people – people who have a gender identity that differs from sex assigned to them at their birth and who carry out the perennial question of how much is our gender identity actually determined by culture?)

I will focus more on the biological side of this complex issue as to me biological determinism represents a strong argument for a phenomena to be regarded as “natural” (as Hird similarly notes: “…nature is often invoked in discussions of morality in so far as natural behaviours are considered to be morally superior.”)[[2]](#footnote-2) Feminist discourse is often afraid of essentialist explanations and its arguments are frequently based rather on a social-constructivist view which tries to contradict that some characteristics are pregiven by nature and unchangeable (which is a position that might be used to justify some form of oppression as also pregiven and emerging from the biological differences.)[[3]](#footnote-3)

I would nevertheless like to take a similar position to what Hird introduces – I believe that nature is to be considered the best measure of “natural” (meaning “nonpathological, normal” – something that should be generally accepted and respected.) The problem here is, as Hird also discusses, the *cultural interpretation* of nature, by which I mean that all our knowledge about nature comes through some sort of observation, experimentation and subsequent analyzation. It is always us, people, who examine the nature to which we relate – of which we are! -, which means some distortion and interpretation most likely occurs (even inadvertently). This point of view is very close to Donna Haraway’s critique of “objective” science – a science that examines the world from “nowhere”, from a neutral standpoint, what she also calls “the god trick”. It is a position that is (arrogantly , maybe we could say) presumed in predominant western scientific discourse and Haraway criticizes this belief. However, Haraway’s point was not only to reveal how science is biased and cannot be objective, rather she wanted to bring the acknowledgment of variety of standpoints and their analysis[[4]](#footnote-4).

When we take this into account, we can re-examine our knowledge about nature and a new perspective might arise. Sometimes we will find out that what we regarded as “natural” was actually our interpretation of nature or otherwise. This is what Myra Hird shows in her paper where she explores an “evidence of trans in non-human animals”, not only refuting the notion of trans as purely cultural phenomena but also purely human phenomena. Hird discusses a remarkable diversity of sex and sexual behaviour amongst non-human species, including trans animals, bringing a useful information to consider in our idea of normality (e.g. monogamy, heterosexuality etc., forms not actually so “normal” and common in nature, as Hird explains.)[[5]](#footnote-5)

In her book *Sexing the body*, the author Anne Fausto-Sterling introduces even more radical thoughts about sex itself, which she believes is largely socially constructed (contradictory to the prevailing conception of sex as the biologically determined part of a human body.) She perceives human bodies as much more complex than we usually acknowledge, especially considering intersex people, who show us that sexual and gender identity creates rather a continuum than a dichotomy (any clear-cut distinction must therefore be imposed by culture.) Intersex people are quite a common phenomenon (Fausto-Sterling estimates the prevalence of intersex at 1,7 % of all births). Still, these people are often omitted by culture and treated disrespectfully (e.g. non-consensual surgeries are performed on them, often directly after birth, in an effort to “correct” their sex. They get no chance to express their needs or feelings about their identity and sexuality and often are not even told about their intersexuality later, which leaves them uninformed and confused about themselves.)[[6]](#footnote-6) Here, Fausto-Sterling shows how much harm can a belief that *only two sexes exist* (and that any deviation is wrong and we must “correct it”) cause. It also shows us that even if some phenomenon exists “naturally” (we cannot deny the existence of intersex people), it does not mean that culture and its interpretation of the phenomenon cannot still play an important role.

Therefore, my standpoint is that even though the question whether “trans\* is natural” is interesting and definitely worth examining, we should always have in mind something more crucial – the consequences that this debate has on lives of human (or non-human) beings. I believe that our main concern should be the quality of trans beings’ lives and perceiving these people (or animals) as “abnormalities” and deviations from some “normal” nature is definitely not the right way to go. I believe that their lives matter more than arguments and opinions in a long-lasting academic debate, which is why I do not think we have a right to label them (existing, living, breathing beings) as “unnatural” and “abnormal” no matter what viewpoint we take.

1. Conrad, J.-N., & Jenna-Nichole. (2019, April 18). so, what's with the asterisk? Retrieved from https://queer-voices.com/so-whats-with-the-asterisk/. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Myra Hird (2004). „Sex diversity in non-human animals“ in *Sex, Gender and Science*, p. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Phillips, Anne (2010). „What’s Wrong with Essentialism?" *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 11, č. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thompson, C. M. (2015). Situated Knowledge, Feminist and Science and Technology Studies Perspectives. International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Myra Hird (2004). „Sex diversity in non-human animals“ in *Sex, Gender and Science*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Fausto-Sterling, A. (2008). *Sexing the Body*. New York: Basic Books. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)