

The 'Non' in Nonbinary: Bringing Later Wittgensteinian Tools to Trans

Philosophy

Emery Carlson

Department of Philosophy

University of Minnesota – Twin Cities

5/13/25

Submitted under the supervision of Philip Bold, PhD to the University Honors Program at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts, *summa cum laude* in Philosophy.

Abstract

In this essay I discuss a problem with the contemporary usage of the term ‘nonbinary’ as it is posed by Kadji Amin, a queer and transgender studies scholar, in his essay *We Are All Nonbinary: A Brief History of Accidents*. The problem is essentially that, if ‘nonbinary’ is used exclusively as an opposite to ‘binary’, which is an idealized category that does not correspond to an actual social category to begin with, then everyone is nonbinary in the sense that nobody entirely fits the ideal of binary presentation or identity. The question then becomes how we retain the resistant, non-normative force of the term ‘nonbinary’ without simply posing it as an opposite to the fictive category ‘binary’.

I address this question using methods from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, especially his critique of what is often referred to as the “Augustinian picture” of language whereby the meaning of a word is the object to which it refers. In order to apply Wittgenstein’s critique to the case at hand, I link the problem posed by Amin with the Augustinian picture insofar as this problem is predicated on the assumption that ‘nonbinary’ is used to refer to a particular gender identity (or lack thereof). Finally, I situate the aims of this essay in terms of Talia Mae Bettcher’s conception of trans philosophy and the role that philosophy can play in providing illumination in the face of what she refers to as the “WTF” questions (for example, “why do people want to kill us?” (Bettcher 2019)) that pervade the everyday lives of trans and nonbinary people.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, to Philip Bold for introducing me to Wittgenstein and for his invaluable mentorship throughout and beyond this project; to Tamara Fakhoury, who encouraged me to pursue a deeply personal topic and whose course on feminist theory introduced me to some of the sources for this essay; to Roy Cook for introducing me to research in philosophy and for all the trust he has shown in me as a research collaborator; to Eli Mehlhaff for all of the conversations that we have had (philosophical or otherwise) that have helped me to clarify what philosophy means and has done for me; and finally, to Ava Jax, without whom this project would not be.

I: Introduction

As the term ‘nonbinary’ becomes increasingly prevalent in contemporary culture, its meaning remains the subject of intense, often vitriolic debate. Such debates around what it means to be nonbinary tend to define it in terms of what it is not, that is, as an umbrella term for gender¹ identities falling “beyond the binary”, which is generally taken to mean neither female nor male. However, defining and using the term ‘nonbinary’ purely negatively (‘negatively’ because the term is often defined in terms of what it is not), as it is above, undermines the purpose of the term itself. If ‘nonbinary’ is meant, at least in part, to capture gendered experiences and presentations which are non-normative but do not necessarily correspond to a desire to transition to the opposite sex, purely negative formulations like those above set the expectation that those identifying as nonbinary present themselves in such a way that would evade binary gender categorization entirely. This, however, is all but impossible because the predominant criteria by which gender is categorized in the first place are still based on a binary model of (exclusively) female and male. On the other hand, the purely negative formulation also allows one to claim that everyone is nonbinary if we accept the highly plausible claim that nobody is entirely binary in either their gender presentation or identity. But this, again, undermines the purpose of the term. The question then becomes how we can use and understand the

¹ Though I will only explicitly reference gender identity in this essay, I acknowledge the interwovenness of gender and sexuality. My focus on gender is not meant to imply that gender and sexuality can be separated, but stems from the fact that, in practice, the term ‘nonbinary’ is generally understood as a gender identity label. A detailed discussion of the relationship between nonbinary identities and sexuality is beyond the scope of this essay.

term ‘nonbinary’ in ways that do not define the term solely in terms of what it is not and recognize the multiplicity of its uses, yet retain its resistance to the gender binary, that is, its non-normative status.

In this essay I will utilize certain methods and tools from the later Wittgenstein to address the question posed above. In Wittgensteinian terms, the purely negative understanding discussed above is a ‘picture’ suggested by the grammatical feature of the prefix ‘non’ in ‘nonbinary’, the ‘picture’ being that ‘nonbinary’ means simply “not binary”. Also in Wittgensteinian terms, if we want to understand what a given word means we must look, not to definitions, but to how it is used in practice. Thus, the primary concern of this essay will be to marshal (later) Wittgensteinian resources in order to clarify the usage of the term ‘nonbinary’ and undermine the picture which poses it as a purely negative social category defined by its opposition to ‘binary’ also as a social category. This will not, however, amount to offering any counter-definition, but will proceed via a further investigation into the problems sketched above that are associated with the ‘non’ in ‘nonbinary’ and a description of certain uses of the term in order to undermine the pictures which give rise to such problems. For the framing of the problems I will turn to work by a contemporary queer and transgender studies scholar, Kadi Amin, on the historical context for the emergence of the term ‘nonbinary’. I will also draw from Talia Mae Bettcher’s work on trans philosophy in order to clarify the Wittgensteinian methodology adopted here and the important distinction between dispelling a ‘picture’ and critiquing a particular definition.

Before turning to the primary purpose of the essay, in section II I will outline the relevant aspects from Amin and Bettcher’s work to my project. In order to motivate the problems associated with defining and using ‘nonbinary’ exclusively as the opposite to ‘binary’ as a social category, I will draw from Amin’s account of what he calls the “history of accidents” through which the term

‘nonbinary’ has come to prominence. Amin traces the history of terms such as homosexual, transgender, and nonbinary coming to be only through opposition to, and the creation of, an idealized, normative opposite (heterosexual, cisgender, and binary respectively). It is in this process where Amin locates the implications outlined above with using the term ‘nonbinary’ purely as an opposite to ‘binary’. In particular, Amin sees the implications of using ‘nonbinary’ as an opposite to ‘binary’ in conjunction with a (particularly Western) trend towards an individualized notion of self-identification over the more social process of transition.

From Bettcher I take the notion of “ground-bound” philosophy and reframe the thesis of this essay as a contribution to the sort of philosophy which Bettcher describes as providing illumination to the perplexity that pervades (and is imposed upon) the everyday lives of trans and nonbinary people. Bettcher contrasts “ground-bound” philosophy with the sort of philosophy which creates perplexity by questioning the underlying assumptions of ‘everyday life’, whereas ground-bound philosophy starts with the perplexity and seeks to provide illumination in the face of it. Bettcher’s philosophy will help to clarify a distinction operative throughout this essay between clarifying concepts for the sake of theoretical accuracy, and clarifying concepts (dispelling pictures) in order to alleviate the perplexities inherent to being trans or nonbinary in the contemporary moment. That is, that the goal of diagnosing the problems associated with the ‘non’ in ‘nonbinary’ is not simply to provide a more accurate definition of the term (which is not to say that such efforts are valueless), but to recognize that the way such terms are used and understood in popular culture have direct implications on the lives of people who identify as such.

In Section III I will apply Wittgensteinian methods to the problems raised by Amin, as well as draw out some assumptions present within his work. Heeding Wittgenstein's imposition to look at actual uses of terms whose meaning we wish to investigate or clarify, I have gathered testimonials from several gender nonconforming individuals and asked them whether and how they use the term 'nonbinary'. The testimonials are not meant to be taken representatively and are not meant as empirical evidence towards a theory of nonbinary identity, rather, they are meant to be indicative of certain uses of the term which undermine the assumption that it is necessarily wrapped up in the production of an idealized opposite category, or that its force as a form of resistance to the gender binary stems exclusively from this opposition. I will examine the testimonials with two broad questions in mind: first, whether the term is being used as an opposite to a different category and, if it is, how so. Second, whether 'nonbinary' is being used to refer to a particular identity, experience, or state of being, or whether there are uses that are not so directly referential. These questions are motivated by a central purpose of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (henceforth abbreviated as the *PI*), that of interrogating the notion that words having meaning through the objects to which they refer, and my examination of the testimonials will be interwoven with Wittgenstein's critique of this 'Augustinian' picture of language and meaning.

In Section IV I will return to Bettcher's trans philosophy and clarify the connection between the Wittgensteinian methodology I utilize in section III and Bettcher's conception of 'ground-bound' philosophy. I will address the distinction between the methodology required, in Wittgenstein's view, to dispel a certain misleading picture of the way language functions, and critiquing a particular definition or theory of what it means to be nonbinary. In section II I will reframe my thesis as a contribution of

Wittgensteinian methods to the aims that Bettcher outlines for trans philosophy, but this move is not entirely uncontroversial, and it is in this final section (IV) that I will address the reasons why the Wittgensteinian methods utilized in section III can contribute to the aims of trans philosophy as outlined by Bettcher. Thus, this section will also demonstrate why a Wittgensteinian methodology, in particular, is relevant to my purposes in section III.

II: Primer on Amin and Bettcher

In his essay *We Are All Nonbinary: A Brief History of Accidents*, Kadji Amin draws on the history of the homo/heterosexuality and cis/transgender binaries to examine the harms associated with an overemphasis on individualized identity over the more socially engaged notion of transition in Western theorizations of gender-sexuality² nonconformity. According to Amin, the term ‘nonbinary’ is a product of the failure of the cis/trans binary to capture those who do not identify either as women or as men. Amin traces the emergence of the term ‘nonbinary’ to a broader tendency in theories of gender identity to favor “divergence” over “convergence” models, that is, a tendency to respond to inadequacies and lacunae in prevailing theories by expanding the relevant terminology to accommodate identities neglected by such theories. Thus, Amin frames the emergence of nonbinary identification as a result of pushback against the cis/trans binary. However, Amin also points out that a new binary is again created between nonbinary and binary where, as with cisgender and heterosexual, the corresponding normative term, ‘binary’, is a fictive and idealized category, that is, one which does not correspond to an actual social category. According to Amin, this is a problem because, with binary

² The hyphenated term is Amin’s, which he uses to acknowledge the interwovenness of gender and sexuality.

being an idealized category produced out of the emergence of nonbinary identities, “*no one is binary*, neither the ‘binary trans people’ commonly opposed to nonbinary people, nor the ‘binary cis people,’ who would never choose this term to describe themselves or their relationship to gender” (Amin 2022, 114). If no one is binary, then those who would identify themselves as nonbinary are again left in the lurch without a way of defining themselves as a group in order to promote advocacy.

Amin’s diagnosis of this problem, which, for him is particular to nonbinary, points to an overemphasis on individual identity, as opposed to social transition, as the primary mode of communicating that one is nonbinary: “all that is required to be nonbinary is to identify as such” (Amin 2022, 115). As Amin puts it, “contemporary nonbinary discourse holds firmly that nonbinary might ‘look’ any number of ways and need not find external expression in choice of dress, hairstyle, pronouns, or any other social marker of gender” (*ibid*, 114). Such an emphasis on identity entails, according to Amin, that nonbinary identity appeals only to a mysterious and private inner reality of which only oneself can have any knowledge. This is a problem insofar as it negates the social functions of the term itself. If the term is meant to capture a certain way of resisting the gender binary and to be itself nonnormative, then such an appeal to a purely subjective state makes this resistance impossible in all but its most individualized form. Amin also argues that this emphasis on individual identity opens the door for nonbinary identity to become little more than a certain perspective towards the prevailing gender binary that anyone can adopt and discard as they please and as it becomes ‘radical’ and thus, in certain circles, fashionable to do so. This, however, completely disregards the gendered experiences that the term was initially intended to capture, which cannot be reduced to a certain attitude or perspective towards the gender binary. This is Amin’s framing of the problem he sees with contemporary uses of

the term ‘nonbinary’, a problem which I associate with the ‘non’ in ‘nonbinary’ since Amin frames the problem in terms of a binary evident in contemporary usage between ‘nonbinary’ and ‘binary’.

Amin’s focus is on the historical emergence of the term nonbinary and the consequences of this history on its contemporary usage(s). While I will ultimately address the same issues that Amin raises, my focus is on the prefix ‘non’ in ‘nonbinary’ and the erroneous pictures (in Wittgenstein’s sense) to which it gives rise, which mirror Amin’s concerns with an overemphasis on identity-based theorizing. The difference is mainly in framing. Where Amin is concerned with the historical emergence of the term, I will reframe the problems which Amin raises in Wittgensteinian terms: that the word ‘nonbinary’, simply because it contains the prefix ‘non’, suggests a certain picture of a clear delineation between binary and *non*binary. In this case, ‘binary’ is a fictive opposite (in Amin’s terms) because it is a part of the picture suggested by the grammar of the word ‘nonbinary’ rather than being another, and opposite, social category. Thus, it is the prefix ‘non’ which makes the oppositional status of the term ‘nonbinary’ even more stark than that of terms like homosexual and transgender, which have produced, as Amin points out, their own fictive and idealized opposites yet do not grammatically implicate those opposites in the way that nonbinary does.

So far I am in agreement with Amin that an overemphasis on identity leads to the problem of the fictive and idealized opposite, binary, which is not a genuine social category, meaning that if all it means to be nonbinary is not to be binary, then everyone is nonbinary and the term loses its significance. But Amin does not simply pose this formulation as a potential problem—as a misconception that one might have, or even a common misconception about what it means to be nonbinary—but as the prevailing usage of the term (cf. the quote from page 114 above). The problem

which Amin raises can be posed two different ways: one, as a matter of theoretical inadequacy, that our definition of the term ‘nonbinary’ as someone who neither identifies as a woman nor a man is both inaccurate and has unintended negative consequences in practice, and the other as a diagnosis of a social problem where nonbinary discourse itself is at least partly responsible for the problems associated with creating ‘binary’ as its fictive opposite. Amin himself, however, firmly takes the latter stance by saying that “we trans people invented the fantasy of cisgender as the opposite to the extreme gendered and sexed discomfort we have experienced. We are the ones responsible for the idealization of cisgender, and it falls partly to us to undo it” (*ibid*, 114). But, in taking this stance Amin makes certain assumptions about the ways in which the term ‘nonbinary’ actually gets used. The history of the term is one thing, and I do not contest Amin’s claims about how the term came to prominence, but this history does not determine how it gets used in perpetuity.

Amin does offer some anecdotal evidence for the problem which he raises, citing a few disparate instances of individuals identifying themselves as nonbinary for reasons which have more to do with the beliefs of the individual in question than their actual gendered experience (115). But this evidence is highly selective and does not, nor does Amin intend it to, substantiate his claims—they are merely illustrative cases. Rather, Amin simply asserts that, in the contemporary moment, “all that is required to be nonbinary is to identify as such” (*ibid*). He goes on to say that “one of the most popular current explanations of nonbinary identity is that it is not, in fact, an additional gender but rather a perspective or a belief— a choice to see gender as a spectrum or as limitless rather than as a binary” (115). In these two quotes Amin implies that nonbinary identity has become, in its contemporary

usage, little more than an ideological position incapable of capturing the actual experiences that it was intended to capture.

Amin makes certain claims about how the term nonbinary currently gets used (which are still relevant given that the essay in question is from 2022) and the consequences of these uses both for those using the term and for theories of gender more generally. I contend that these claims (which Amin does not support using direct sociological evidence – aside from the sheer prevalence of nonbinary identity in contemporary discourse) rest on certain assumptions about the use of language which mirror a key ‘picture’ or assumption about language that Wittgenstein sought to dispel in the *PI*, namely, that the meaning of a word is always the object to which it refers. More specifically, the two key assumptions which Amin makes are that ‘nonbinary’ is primarily used as a gender identifier, that is, that its primary function is to refer to or name a particular experience (or set of experiences) with gender, and that it is used primarily in contrast with a fictive opposite, namely ‘binary’. The first assumption can be seen in Amin’s focus on nonbinary (from the perspective of what he takes to be its contemporary usage) as a particular and highly subjective identity in contrast to a socially relevant category. The second assumption comes from the fact that Amin sees the usage of the term ‘nonbinary’ as inherently opposed, again in contemporary usage, to the fictive category of ‘binary’.

To reiterate, I do not contest the historical aspect of Amin’s claim: that the term ‘nonbinary’ emerged as a response to the failures of the cis/trans binary to capture the variety of gendered experience and that it did so along the pattern of opposition to a fictive, idealized opposite. But this only accounts for the emergence of the term, and does not determine its ongoing use. Because Amin

does not support his claims about contemporary usage with direct sociological evidence, they rest on certain assumptions about the term itself in conjunction with its historical emergence.

By pointing out these assumptions I am also not saying that the concerns which Amin raises are not pertinent. As theoretical concerns, I agree that these are issues which need to be addressed if we are to have an accurate and useful theory of what it means to be nonbinary. I also concede that such theoretical projects have practical significance insofar as they can empower trans and nonbinary individuals with the language to articulate their experiences. The problem is that Amin extrapolates from theoretical to social problems without further justification, simply asserting, for example, that “today, ‘gender identity’ references a core selfhood that requires no expression, no embodiment, and no commonality—in the case of some of the microidentities spreading on the internet—with genders as they are lived by others in the world” (Amin 2022, 116). His evidence for this is, presumably, the history of the emergence of the term as he traces it, and the growing acceptance of the fact that no explicit external expression, or transition, is required to be nonbinary. I contend that a Wittgensteinian examination of the assumptions which I have highlighted in Amin’s work addresses this problem by turning our attention to language as a social practice rather than as a vehicle for static meanings. Amin might be right in saying that all that is required to be nonbinary is to identify as such, but, under a Wittgensteinian lens, “identifying as such” is not so simple as using emergent terminologies to refer to a state of being or set of experiences. Insofar as “identifying as such” is a use of language, it is embedded in a social practice and does require a certain level of commonality, embodiment, and expression.

I will not, however, argue that simply using the term ‘nonbinary’ to refer to one’s gender is all that is required for social transition, but I will contest the sharp distinction which Amin draws

between identification and social transition using Wittgensteinian methods. Wittgenstein's critique of the picture of language under which the meaning of a word is always its referent gives support to the notion that "identifying as such" is not so neatly distinguishable from the notion of social transition with which Amin contrasts it. Of course, there will be bad actors and folks who use the term 'nonbinary' in a superficial manner only to ridicule it, but these are extreme cases and do not validate Amin's much broader claim that, in general, nonbinary identity today requires only identification and no actual social transition. As a final caveat, I will not present any empirical, sociological evidence which would contest Amin's claims, but rather will examine, through a Wittgensteinian lens, the assumptions about the use of language more generally which allow him to make those claims. The primary purpose of the next section will not be to provide a comprehensive critique of Amin's views, but to describe and clarify the usage of the term 'nonbinary' since the assumptions which Amin makes are not specific to him and are examples, again, of the pictures suggested by the 'non' in 'nonbinary'.

Before making these arguments, however, I will introduce the aspects of Talia Mae Bettcher's theorizations of trans philosophy that are relevant to my aims here, and which will situate the present essay in a wider social and philosophical context. In her essay *What is Trans Philosophy*, Talia Mae Bettcher addresses the question of what it means to theorize about trans identities from a place of lived experience. I have turned to her conception of trans philosophy so as to clarify and contextualize the thesis of this essay. The purpose of this essay is to clarify the use of the term 'nonbinary' by addressing a certain picture of what it means that is strongly suggested by the prefix 'non' (that it stands in opposition to 'binary' as another, if fictive, social category), and I do not want this to be a merely a matter of theoretical accuracy, but to be grounded in an attempt to address the perplexities present in

the lives of trans and nonbinary people. The problems which I raise (through Amin) around the ‘non’ in ‘nonbinary’ are not simply problems because they indicate gaps in our definition, but directly contribute to the erasure of nonbinary people. As I pointed out above, if the prevailing understanding of what it means to be nonbinary is that it refers to someone who identifies as neither a man nor a woman, this enforces an expectation that nonbinary individuals completely evade binary categorization in their presentation. This, however, is functionally impossible given the dominant, binary conception of how gendered presentation is understood in the first place. Either that or, as Amin points out, the term ‘nonbinary’ loses all of its significance because nobody entirely fits the ideal of ‘binary’ in either their gender presentation or identification and thus, in a sense, everybody is nonbinary. Bettcher’s notion of ‘ground-bound’ philosophy, that is, philosophy which seeks to address and illuminate lived perplexity rather than simply create perplexity by critiquing the assumptions inherent in everyday life, helps to clarify the distinction at hand.

Bettcher begins by interrogating a prevailing notion of what it means to do philosophy: that philosophy is defined by unfettered criticism and that its primary role is to interrogate the assumptions present in our everyday lives. In order to characterize the dichotomy between the ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ modes of philosophy, Bettcher cites Graham Priest when he says that “Philosophy is precisely that intellectual inquiry in which anything is open to critical challenge and scrutiny” (Priest 2006, 202). This does not mean, however, that for Priest philosophy is always and only critical, just that it’s ‘negative’ or critical functions are primary:

“According to Priest, philosophy has both a negative and positive side. The negative side (the side that critiques other theories, the side that asks penetrating, relentless questions) is primary.

The positive side (the side that provides theory, answers questions), though important, is secondary and subservient to the former: One of the main values of a positive theory is precisely that it gives added heft to one's critique of contending theories" (Bettcher 2019, 650).

According to Bettcher, this approach to philosophy that Priest endorses, which she refers to as "pristine philosophy", is characterized by an attempt to challenge the supposed coherence of common-sense reality by asking relentless and fundamental questions about, for example, how we can even come to know what constitutes 'reality' in the first place. However, Bettcher critiques this 'pristine' mode of philosophy by saying that:

"What I want to suggest, however, is that this conception of philosophy rests on a highly controversial assumption: . . . that all appeared well and good before philosophy arrived on the scene: Our common sense, our everyday understanding of the world was, if superficial, happily undisturbed. In other words, this is to assume a close fit between individuals and their 'everyday'" (Bettcher 2019, 651).

She proposes that this view (which is assumed by 'pristine' philosophy) does not hold true of the experiences of trans and nonbinary people (which can also be said of anyone whose experiences are not acknowledged by dominant ideologies) given the distortions, perplexity, and hostility which pervade the everyday lives of individuals in those communities. That, for trans and nonbinary people, the purpose of philosophy cannot simply be to expose the prejudices of undisturbed common sense, but it must also address the perplexities inherent to being a trans or nonbinary person in the world. As Bettcher puts it, "if philosophy is going to give us anything at all, it had better be answers or at least some partial, provisional illumination" (*ibid*, 651). This inherent perplexity and distortion constitutes

what Bettcher calls “the WTF” because of the existential and visceral nature of the questions it raises, for example, “why do people want to kill us?” (651). The question itself may not be a philosophical one, but, in Bettcher’s view, philosophy of a particular sort has a role to play in helping us to answer it.

For Bettcher,

“philosophy is uniquely positioned to address WTF (*sic*) rather than, say, sociology or psychology or anthropology—precisely because the WTF is so all-embracing, so personal, indeed, existential in nature. Or, in other words, I think the attempt to provide illumination in response to these WTF questions is necessarily philosophical” (652).

In contrast to the ‘pristine’ conception of philosophy, which creates perplexity where there wasn’t any to begin with, the sort of philosophy which provides illumination in response to such perplexity and WTF questions constitutes what Bettcher calls “ground-bound” philosophy. It is in the context of such ground-bound philosophy that I wish to investigate and clarify the usage of the term ‘nonbinary’. That is, I want to investigate the usages of ‘nonbinary’ as a response, not to the merely conceptual question: “what does it mean to be nonbinary?”, but to the WTF questions faced by those of us who identify ourselves as such. The WTF question which I will directly address in what follows is similar to an example that Bettcher gives of a WTF question (if only implicitly): “As a trans woman, I do want to know how it is that I am a woman in this world that denies this” (654). The WTF question I want to address, then, is: “what does it mean to say that one is nonbinary in a world that denies this possibility in the first place?”. As opposed to the merely conceptual question posed above, this question directly implicates the social factors that make the question of what it means to be nonbinary in today’s world a WTF question for those who identify as such.

Thus, I will reformulate my thesis in terms of Bettcher's notion of trans philosophy as an effort to provide illumination in the face of WTF questions, and in particular, what it means to say that one is nonbinary in a world that denies this possibility. The purpose remains the same, to clarify the usage of the term 'nonbinary' using Wittgensteinian methods, but now it is contextualized within a larger philosophical project and can be reframed as an effort to bring Wittgenstein methods to trans philosophy. Neither purpose subsumes the other, but they coincide. By using Wittgensteinian methods to address the problems associated with the 'non' in 'nonbinary' and because I have now situated my project within the larger project of trans philosophy, this can be viewed, simultaneously, as an effort to bring Wittgensteinian tools to trans philosophy³.

III: The 'Non' in Nonbinary

In this section I will use the Wittgensteinian methodology of mobilizing descriptions of actual usages of language (through the testimonials that I gathered) in order to undermine a certain picture of the meaning of 'nonbinary', in this case represented by the assumptions which I highlighted as being present in Amin's account of the problems with contemporary usage of the term 'nonbinary'. I will argue that these assumptions and the picture of language which they constitute are suggested to us by the negative prefix in the word 'nonbinary', but do not necessarily figure in actual uses as Amin claims,

³ I would like to acknowledge that, by drawing from Bettcher's work on trans philosophy in an essay concerned with nonbinary identities, I am not attempting to insinuate that all nonbinary individuals also identify as trans (though some do). I contend that what Bettcher has to say about the purposes of trans philosophy is also relevant to my project given that the WTF questions which Bettcher alludes to as pervading the everyday lives of trans people are relevant also to the experiences of nonbinary individuals. The exact questions may not be the same, but their force as distortive, hostile, and ubiquitous is a common feature.

without substantial evidence beyond historical precedent, that they do. The primary target of this critique, however, is not Amin's overall argument but the assumptions themselves which, I contend, are not specific to Amin's work and are constitutive of a more general picture that is suggested by the 'non' in 'nonbinary' – namely, that nonbinary is simply whatever is not binary, thereby inherently referring to another social category against which it stands in opposition. As stated earlier, I will not argue that the concerns which Amin presents are invalid – on the contrary, I have noted how they have profound consequences in the lives of trans and nonbinary people – but my aim is to show that they are not inherent in the usage of the term 'nonbinary' as Amin assumes that they are. In other words, the concerns which Amin raises are genuine problems with a certain definition of what it means to be nonbinary, however, as stated in section II, I contend that Amin has extrapolated from theoretical concerns to practical ones with little further justification. His arguments about the emergence of the term 'nonbinary' are compelling, but they are not sufficient to claim that this is how the term is still used now.

In addressing the assumptions present in Amin's work, I will examine the testimonials that I have gathered to offer a descriptive account of the how the term 'nonbinary' can be used (I do not claim that these testimonials are in any way representative, merely that they are illustrative of the variety of uses for the term 'nonbinary'). I will approach the testimonials through the lens of two primary questions: first, whether the term 'nonbinary' is being used to mean something like “not binary” and, if so, what this means in context. Second, whether the term is being used to refer to a particular identity, experience, or state of being, or whether there are uses that are not so directly referential. These will again come to bear on the 'picture' suggested by the 'non' in 'nonbinary', but

only insofar as the testimonials provide descriptions of how the term ‘nonbinary’ can be used. In Wittgenstein’s terminology, we do not alleviate philosophical problems (pictures), such as those posed by the ‘non’ in ‘nonbinary’, by providing explanations, but by describing actual uses (*PI* 109⁴). The goal is not to show that the term ‘nonbinary’ is never used in the ways that Amin assumes that it is, but that it is not exclusively used in those ways. I will begin by presenting certain salient quotes from the testimonials, then remarking on key features within them through the lens of the two questions outlined above.

“If someone were to ask me point-black (*sic*) what my gender identity is, I would probably (and I have, the few times this situation has happened) respond ‘non-binary.’ But I don’t feel a super strong connection to that word as a label for myself. I think this is mostly because I don’t feel like I know a ton about my own gender identity.” (K)

“I think part of it also is that I see any label I use to describe my gender identity as being more for others than for myself. I know myself, and I wouldn’t put a label on my identity if life were just me alone in the woods. [...] But primarily I feel that I use ‘non-binary’ more as a signifier to others of how to treat me and consider me. Since I get misgendered so often anyway, I’m not particularly concerned with having a label that feels like an incredibly accurate representation of who I truly am and how I feel.” (K)

From the first quote, the feature to which I want to draw attention is a use of the term ‘nonbinary’ that is neither as an opposite to another social category, nor primarily as a name for a

⁴ I have cited passages from the *PI* based on the numbering system within that text, not page numbers.

particular gender identity. Rather than trying to convey a complete transcendence of some opposite category, whether that be binary or cisgender, what this response suggests is that the term ‘nonbinary’ can be used to recognize the uncertainty and instability of gender identity categorization in the first place. Such uses also do not refer either to a particular gender identity, nor to a perspective (as Amin poses as the alternative). It is not that ‘nonbinary’ refers to the uncertainty around one’s own gender identity, it is simply reflective of it. This notion is made more precise in the second quote in the idea of using a label like ‘nonbinary’ more for external than internal reasons. Rather than trying to convey some internal content, which is reflective of Amin’s assumption that ‘nonbinary’ is used to reference a particular identity that is inherently individual and internal as opposed to social and external, the term can be used to signal how one wants to be treated. That is, in these responses we have an example of the use of ‘nonbinary’ that is primarily social as opposed to individual. It is also worth noting that this phenomenon is not peculiar to gender nonconformity. The ways in which we use the terms “man” and “woman” also signal to others how to treat us (though these may not, and often do not, align with how we actually want to be treated because of structural gender oppression). With this last point I want to make a detour through Wittgensteinian philosophy via his critique of what is often called ‘the Augustinian picture of language’, that is, the notion that words get their meaning by naming objects.

The contrast between K’s responses above and Amin’s assumption that ‘nonbinary’ is used to name a certain identity (again, whether that be a gender or a perspective) is paralleled in the opening remarks of the *Philosophical Investigations* where Wittgenstein examines Augustine’s philosophy of language:

“These words [from Augustine that is], it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the essence of human language. It is this: the words in language name objects – sentences are combinations of such names. . . . Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.” (*PI* 1)

Wittgenstein challenges this picture presented by Augustine, which is a central target of the whole *Philosophical Investigations*, not via a direct counter-argument, but by presenting us with examples which challenge the assumption that the essence of language is referential (as it is in Augustine’s picture). The most famous example also comes from the first passage in the *PI*: someone is sent to the store with a slip of paper with “five red apples” printed on it. Wittgenstein presents us with the strange image of the shopkeeper who, upon being presented with the slip, proceeds to go word-by-word and match each to some object—as suggested by the Augustinian picture. But then Wittgenstein voices the following questions:

“But how does [the shopkeeper] know where and how he is to look up the word ‘red’ and what he is to do with the word ‘five’? – Well, I assume that he *acts* as I have described. Explanations come to an end somewhere. – But what is the meaning of the word ‘five’? – No such thing was in question here, only how the word ‘five’ is used.” (*ibid*)

While this passage does not directly contradict the Augustinian picture, what is implied is that the shopkeeper uses the word ‘five’ without recourse to an object to which it might refer. We can imagine the shopkeeper consulting a chart to match the word ‘red’ to a color, but how does he know to consult this particular chart? Such questions could continue *ad infinitum*: suppose there is some further mechanism which allows him to know which chart to use, in which case we could ask how he

knows to use this particular mechanism, and so on. Hence, ‘explanations come to an end somewhere.’

The word ‘five’ is used in this situation, but its meaning, when conceived as the object to which the word refers, is not relevant in this case. The point is not to show that we do not ever use words to refer to particular objects (of all the words in the example ‘apple’ is the most obviously referential—it tells the shopkeeper what sort of thing to grab), but to question the assumption that this is the fundamental operation of language.

What is somewhat difficult about these passages is that no clear alternative to the Augustinian picture is presented, nor does Wittgenstein explicitly say that the question in the second passage is meant to challenge the Augustinian picture. We are left, instead, with the assertion that “explanations come to an end somewhere” and that words can be used in ways that do not involve a ‘meaning’ separate from their use – ‘I assume he *acts* as I have described.’ Here is the connection back to K’s responses above. The point is not that ‘nonbinary’ is never used in the way that Amin suggests, that is, as a subjective identifier directly opposed to whatever one takes ‘binary’ to mean. Simply that it has other uses as well, and some of these do not involve any kind of revelation of some interior content or meaning. To use the word ‘nonbinary’ in order to signal to others how one wants to be treated is like the shopkeeper example in that one presents the shopkeeper with the words ‘five red apples’ for a particular purpose – to obtain the apples – but this purpose does require the shopkeeper to consult the meaning of each word in ‘five red apples’. Likewise, if someone tells me that they are nonbinary, I do not need to know exactly what this means for this particular person in order to recognize, for example, that I should use gender neutral language when talking to them. Furthermore, and contrary to Amin’s assumption that identification (as nonbinary or regarding gender identity in general) is “a personal,

felt, and thereby highly phantasmic and labile relation to [categories of gender-sexuality]” (Amin 2022, 115), K’s usage of ‘nonbinary’ is fundamentally social insofar as they say that they wouldn’t put a label on their gender identity outside of the broader social context – that it is the social context which necessitates a label in the first place.

One might still protest that there is something strange going on: how does someone else know how to respond to my use of ‘nonbinary’ if not by knowing the meaning of the word? This question hinges on the word ‘meaning’. If by ‘meaning’ we mean what Augustine does, that is, the object to which the word refers, then K’s response makes clear that we do not need to know this kind of ‘meaning’ in order to respond, since there may not be any particular referent in the first place. If by ‘meaning’ we simply mean that we know, roughly and based on experience, how the word is used, then of course we must know the meaning of ‘nonbinary’ if we are to respond. But in the second case the Augustinian picture of language was irrelevant, only how the word was used. When we look at the context of the use, the mysteriousness is revealed to stem not from the situation, but from our assumptions about language: “For our forms of expression, which send us in pursuit of chimeras, prevent us in all sorts of ways from seeing that nothing extraordinary is involved” (*PI* 94).

Now I want to turn to a case where ‘nonbinary’ is explicitly used in an oppositional manner, but ask whether such uses raise the problems which Amin presents. Once again, I will first lay out a few quotes from a different response.

“The term non-binary to me is less-so a definition of my identity, and more-so an acknowledgment of the role that gender plays in social structures. Using the term feels like a

rejection of those structures . . . I neither feel like a man nor woman, just as much as I neither feel like a combination nor an absence of the two.” (:⊕:)

“ I use non-binary because I do not feel I fit the gender binary, but outside of a binary view of gender I feel no term would really apply.” (:⊕:)

“If I were to describe how I feel about my ‘gender’ without using gender-based labels, I would probably do so in the form of soundscapes and interpolated images of nature.” (:⊕:)

In the first quote there is an important distinction between using the term ‘nonbinary’ to communicate a resistance to the socially contingent structures of the gender binary, and using it to negate an opposite gender identity, namely ‘binary’. This response is compatible with Amin’s point that ‘binary’, like ‘cisgender’, is not a social identity. The gender binary is a set of social constructions which serves to create and enforce gendered norms, but this is a set of contingent social factors, not a particular social category with which one may or may not identify. :⊕:’s response explicitly captures this last point in that they say that their use of ‘nonbinary’ is not primarily a means of defining their identity. Yet, turning to the second part of the first quote, and in contrast to the first set of responses, here there is an explicit opposition to particular, binary gender categories. But this neither implies that the term ‘nonbinary’ is defined by this opposition, nor does it imply, as Amin suggests, that what is being opposed is some ideal category. Rather, what is opposed are the received notions of what it means to be a woman or a man – not their idealized versions, but the prevailing uses and understandings of the associated terms. One could argue that the prevailing uses are already idealized

(and I would agree with this) but idealized as they may be, they are, unlike ‘binary’ or ‘cisgender’, actual social categories. My point is that, while the term ‘nonbinary’ is being used, in :⊕:’s responses, in opposition to something, this something is not a fictive opposite category, but socially contingent structures. By contrast, Amin suggests that, in the act of defining what it means to be trans or nonbinary, the categories of cisgender and binary have been created and idealized, and thus any use of these terms must always be understood in relation to their corresponding fictive opposites.

As Wittgenstein says regarding the role of negation in natural language, “negating, one might say, is a gesture of exclusion, of rejection. But we use such a gesture in a great variety of cases!” (*PI* 550). There is the case where ‘nonbinary’ refers to a certain concept or category that is simply the opposite, or negation, of another concept picked out by the term ‘binary’, and there is the case where ‘nonbinary’ is a rejection of prevailing norms and dominant ideologies around gender. Both are instances of ‘negation’ in a certain sense, but constitute different uses of the term ‘nonbinary’ and different modes of negating. One way to characterize the difference between the two uses is that, in former case, ‘nonbinary’ is simply what we get when we negate or exclude whatever falls under the concept ‘binary’, whereas in the latter case the ‘negation’ involved is not of a particular concept, but, as Wittgenstein puts it, a “gesture of rejection” towards certain normative views of gender. Thus, the prefix ‘non’ in ‘nonbinary’ might indeed signal a negation of sorts, but, as Wittgenstein points out, what it means or what we are doing when we negate something is not immediately clear: “It is as if the negation sign [e.g. the prefix ‘non’] prompted us to do something. But what? That is not said. It is as if it only needed to be hinted at; as if we already knew” (*PI* 549). Under the Wittgensteinian conception, if we want to know what a term like ‘nonbinary’ means in virtue of its negative prefix, we cannot

simply assume that the negation here is the same as in other cases, but, as always with the later Wittgenstein, we must look to particular uses of the term. What emerges when we do so is not one singular mode of negating or rejecting the gender binary through the use of the term ‘nonbinary’, but at least two different ways of understanding the negation implicit in its prefix.

Returning to :⊕:’s responses and as in K’s responses above, here we again have the notion that no term would apply outside of the prevailing, binary understanding of gender. That is, that in both cases the use of the term ‘nonbinary’ is a response to the prevailing forces of gender oppression, rather than an individual, asocial act of self-identification. This highlights the inherently social function of the term ‘nonbinary’ in both K and :⊕:’s responses, that it does not simply name an inner truth independent of broader social context.

Finally, I want to draw attention to the third quote from :⊕:’s responses in connection with Amin’s distinction between transition and identification. This last quote makes clear that words, and by extension the act of identifying oneself with a particular label, are not the sole medium of gender expression. This observation is relevant to another prominent concern of Amin’s:

“If trans people used the discourse of self-identification to ensure that our choices to transition—medically or socially—were respected, nonbinary discourse has used it to eliminate the necessity of transition altogether. Contemporary nonbinary discourse holds firmly that nonbinary might “look” any number of ways and need not find external expression in choice of dress, hairstyle, pronouns, or any other social marker of gender.” (*ibid*, 114)

Amin leaves out the act of adopting a label such as nonbinary, or, as the last quote above suggests, non-linguistic means of non-normative gender expression, from both the concept of

transition, and from the “external expression” of one’s gender (or lack thereof). Amin does not include the use of a term like ‘nonbinary’ as a social marker of gender since he assumes that, in its prevailing usage, it can only name an individualized, subjective state. Of course, the mere adoption of a label might be superficial, may not always be sincere, and does not on its own encompass the full breadth of what social transition entails. But Amin does not just imply that using a term like ‘nonbinary’ to describe oneself (which he equates with identification) does not, on its own, constitute social transition, instead he posits identification and transition as fundamentally separate. The assumptions present in Amin’s work imply that the act of adopting and using a term like ‘nonbinary’ can somehow be isolated from other aspects of what it means to transition, that it can ever simply be a matter of labelling: “What is socially relevant is transition—a shift in social gender categories, whatever they may be—not identification—a personal, felt, and thereby highly phantasmic and labile relation to these categories” (*ibid*, 115). What both of the above responses demonstrate, by contrast, is that the boundary between identification and transition is not as sharp as Amin makes it in the previous quote.

In both of the above responses the use of the term ‘nonbinary’ does correspond to a shift in social gender categories—or at least in one’s relation to them. In K’s responses the use of the term ‘nonbinary’ corresponds not to a particular social category itself, but a relationship to social gender categories and the behavioral conventions embedded within them. In :⊕:’s responses there is an explicit resistance to, and corresponding shift in, existing social gender categories, and that using the term ‘nonbinary’ is part of this resistance. In neither case are the uses of ‘nonbinary’ merely personal or individual, with both responses emphasizing the idea that using the term ‘nonbinary’ is not simply a way to define one’s gender identity. Amin assumes that self-identification is necessarily asocial at the

outset, yet both of the testimonials I have presented here exemplify that self-identification can still be socially motivated, that the adoption of a label can serve explicitly social functions regardless of the particular meaning(s) that it has for an individual regarding their own gender identity. The upshot is that one does not need to define, or ever fully understand, one's gender identity in order to use the term 'nonbinary' in personally and socially meaningful ways.

The explicitly social function of the term 'nonbinary' is one common element between the two responses quoted above. Another common thread between the two is the use of 'nonbinary' as a recognition of the incompleteness and uncertainty around knowledge of one's own gender and gendered experiences. The point is that complete knowledge or a definition of one's gender is not a necessary component either of gender expression, nor to communicating about or expressing one's own identity or gender identity in general. Yet this does not mean that terms like 'nonbinary' do not serve certain concrete purposes, even if they do not contribute to the project of accurately representing one's gender identity, which, as has been established, need not be the sole purpose of a term like 'nonbinary'. So there are important similarities in the uses of the term 'nonbinary' between the two testimonials I have presented here. Given what I have said about the social functions of the use of a term like 'nonbinary' and the role of using such terminology in social transition, these similarities also undermine Amin's claim that "today, 'gender identity' references a core selfhood that requires no expression, no embodiment, and no commonality" (*ibid*, 116). Yet there are also important differences between the ways in which K describes their use of the term 'nonbinary' and the ways that :⊕: does. For example, K does not explicitly mention using the term to signify, or simply as a part of, resistance to normative social structures around gender.

I highlight these differences in connection without another key Wittgensteinian insight—the notion of ‘family-resemblances’. This expression emerges from a discussion of essentialism and whether there is an essence to the ways in which we use words, as Augustine (and Wittgenstein himself in his earlier work) posited that there was. On this score Wittgenstein says that: “these phenomena have no one thing in common in virtue of which we use the same word for all – but there are many different kinds of *affinity* between them” and that “I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than ‘family resemblances’” (*PI* 65, 67). I mentioned at the outset that I sought to undermine a certain picture suggested by the grammar of the word ‘nonbinary’, but retain its resistant force. To account for the variety of ways that the term gets used by simply saying that everyone uses the term according to their own subjective meaning is not enough – the term then loses its capacity to resist the normative structures of gender to which it is opposed.

There are affinities and differences between the many uses of the term ‘nonbinary’, at least as many as there are between those who use it, but as long as the notion persists that ‘gender’ corresponds to one’s status as either a woman or a man, such uses will be non-normative. This does not mean, however, that the essential meaning of the word ‘nonbinary’ is this non-normativity, that to be ‘nonbinary’ is to be not ‘binary’, which presents problems highlighted by Amin. My examination of these testimonials has aimed to show that we can retain the resistant force of the term ‘nonbinary’ while avoiding the trap of essentializing this same resistance to the norm as its sole and primary function. Part of this effort comes in recognizing both the similarities and the differences between individual uses of the term. To borrow a Wittgensteinian metaphor: “the strength of the thread resides not in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many

fibres” (*PI* 67). What Wittgenstein refers to as the ‘strength of the thread’ can be likened to the utility of the term ‘nonbinary’ in social practice, both in its capacity to capture and articulate gendered experiences falling outside of a binary conception of gender, and its capacity to organize a resistance to the social factors which enforce the gender binary. This strength thus derives not from any essential meaning of ‘nonbinary’, but precisely in the variety of its uses in socio-linguistic practice.

To conclude this section, I will note that a key aspect of Amin’s concerns is what he sees as an overemphasis on identity-based language around gender which negates the need for any kind of transition, especially in the case of nonbinary identity. What we see, however, when we look at actual uses of the term ‘nonbinary’, is that the term need not refer to a particular gender identity (need not refer to anything at all, in fact) and can instead serve explicitly social, externally focused aims. I share Amin’s concerns around centering identity-based language at the expense of all else. If all we are doing when we use, for example, the term ‘nonbinary’, is pointing to some essentially private and subjective reality, then we cannot effectively communicate with one another. This is also a prominent concern in the *PI*: the question of how we can communicate with one another if our words do not have an essential meaning, but only a dense network of similarities and differences. The Wittgensteinian answer is that our words acquire meaning in life through their use, not the other way around. As the above testimonials show, the term ‘nonbinary’ does not simply name an individual, subjective identity, but serves a variety of purposes, many of them explicitly social and externally focused. To reiterate, I have focused on Amin not because I think his concerns are invalid, but because many of his concerns exemplify assumptions about language which are not always reflected in contemporary uses of the term ‘nonbinary’, as Amin assumes that they are. Furthermore, these assumptions resemble those which

Wittgenstein addresses and challenges in the *Philosophical Investigations*, which is why I have found a Wittgensteinian critique to be useful in my response to the assumptions present in Amin's work.

This section has focused on clarifying the usage of the term 'nonbinary' and undermining the picture suggested by its negative prefix. The next section will return to the reframed version of the thesis of this essay presented in section II. I will return to Bettcher's definition of trans philosophy and discuss why what I have done here constitutes bringing Wittgensteinian tools to it and address a counterargument which says that what I have done here does not qualify as the sort of 'illumination' which Bettcher emphasizes. It may seem like all that I have done here is critique a particular definition of what it means to be 'nonbinary' without directly addressing the WTF questions to which Bettcher Bettcher draws attention. In the next and final section I will argue that what I have done here is not simply a matter of definitional critique.

IV: Wittgensteinian Methods and Trans Philosophy

As stated in section II, I situate my efforts to clarify the usage of the term 'nonbinary' and undermine a picture of its meaning as an essentially negative term defined by its opposition to 'binary' within Bettcher's definition of trans philosophy and what she calls 'ground-bound' philosophy. As I mentioned in conjunction with Amin's framing of the problems associated with contemporary usage of the term 'nonbinary', there are two ways we might interpret such concerns: the first is primarily theoretical and takes the problems as stemming from inadequacies in our definition of what it means

to be nonbinary; the second sees the problems as stemming from the usage itself (which is the stance that Amin takes). In the previous section I emphasized that the primary target of my critique was not any particular view which Amin espouses, but the underlying assumptions about how the term ‘nonbinary’ actually gets used which contribute to the problems which Amin raises. The problems which this essay attempts to address are closely tied to those which Amin raises but, unlike Amin, I do not see these problems as being inherent in the contemporary usage of the term ‘nonbinary’, but rather as stemming from a picture that is suggested by the negative prefix in the term. The point that I want to clarify in this final section is the difference between undermining such a picture and critiquing a particular definition, as well as to elaborate on the connection between the aims of this essay and Bettcher’s notion of ground-bound trans philosophy.

The reason Amin’s work was so crucial in framing the primary problem that this essay attempts to address is that the issues he raises are with the usage of language, not simply the definitions of terms. This is because Amin’s approach is primarily historical and concerned with the emergence of the term itself, not any particular theorization of what it means to be ‘nonbinary’. In effect, then, the problems that Amin presents fall under Bettcher’s characterization of “the WTF” – the everyday realities of trans and nonbinary people that are shot through with perplexity and WTF questions. I contend, as mentioned in section II, that the question “what does it mean to say that one is nonbinary in a world that denies this possibility?” is a WTF question partially because of the problems which Amin presents. In the case where everybody is nonbinary since nobody is truly binary, the existence and gendered experiences of those who explicitly identify themselves as nonbinary are under threat of erasure since the term ‘nonbinary’ no longer has any relation to particular, non-normative, experiences

with gender. If, on the other hand, ‘nonbinary’ is taken to mean “neither a woman nor a man”, this might hold true for some, but there also remains the question of how one presents oneself as neither a woman nor a man in a world that (generally speaking) only recognizes people as either women or men – not that I believe this in any way to be impossible, but to again highlight the perplexity inherent in existing as nonbinary in today’s world. In order to illuminate the WTF question at stake here, I have endeavored, in the previous section, to show that there are ways of using and understanding the term ‘nonbinary’ which do not require that it correspond to a particular identity, nor one that is defined by its contrast to other fictive (and normative) identities.

In her work on trans philosophy, Bettcher distinguishes between two broad characterizations of the primary function of philosophy: one negative, which critiques existing theories, assumptions, and exposes the flaws in ‘common sense’, and the other positive, which constructs theories and answers longstanding (ethical, existential, political, aesthetic etc.) questions. She cites how the former is sometimes taken to be the primary function of philosophy, with the latter being subservient to it (under what she calls the ‘pristine’ conception of philosophy), but points out how this model is not helpful in the face of “the WTF”: “we [trans people] did not need philosophy to uncover [life’s] perplexity. It was already there. If philosophy is to give us anything at all it had better be answers or at least some partial, provisional illumination” (Bettcher 2019, 651). That is, that the primary function of trans philosophy should, in Bettcher’s eyes, be the positive one that constructs theories and answers questions. This is not to say that Bettcher sees the negative function of philosophy as irrelevant, just that it should be in service of the positive function rather than the other way around. This is where Bettcher’s notion of ‘ground-bound’ philosophy comes in: “The key thing is that for what I’ll call

‘ground-bound’ philosophy, perplexity isn’t philosophical because it is exposed through philosophical critique but, rather, because it cries out for philosophical illumination” (652). It may seem like the aims of the present essay fall under Bettcher’s characterization of the negative functions of philosophy in that I am critiquing certain assumptions present in a particular way of using and understanding the term ‘nonbinary’. I contend that the Wittgensteinian methods which I used in the previous section are capable of providing philosophical illumination, not just philosophical critique.

I have emphasized already how the problems which I am addressing are rooted in linguistic practices rather than theoretical inadequacies. I will now turn to the difference between critiquing a definition and undermining a suggestive ‘picture’ of the functions of language through an examination of certain key passages in the *PI* regarding methodology. To get a sense of the force of the term ‘picture’ as Wittgenstein uses it in the *PI*: “A *picture* held us captive. And we couldn’t get outside of it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed only to repeat it to us inexorably” (*PI* 115). What I want to draw from this passage is that a ‘picture’ is more than just a definition of a particular term. A definition can be quickly rejected or reformulated, whereas Wittgenstein characterizes a picture as something more enduring, something embedded within our usage of language and thus not so easily cast aside. Certain definitions might become entrenched, and thus might contribute to the formation of ‘pictures’ in this sense, but the point is that critiquing a definition and undermining a certain picture require different methodologies. Further, a picture is not simply a matter of the meanings of our words in the abstract, but is a social phenomenon: “it lay in our language”. Thus, a ‘picture’, in Wittgenstein’s sense, is not simply a reflection of a particular individual’s idiosyncratic usage of language, but something common, something deeply embedded in the linguistic practices of a culture (or a particular subset of a culture,

as in the case of academic philosophy). Regarding methodology and in order for philosophy to be able to undermine the pictures which hold us captive, “all *explanation* must disappear, and description alone must take its place” (*PI* 109).

This is the method I endeavored to follow in the preceding section. From the testimonials I pointed out a variety of uses to which ‘nonbinary’ can be put that undermine the ‘picture’ constituted by the assumptions I drew from Amin’s work, which are themselves reinforced by the ‘non’ in ‘nonbinary’. As I noted previously, the testimonials are not meant to be representative of “the” contemporary use of the term ‘nonbinary’ (as if there were a single, prevailing use), but this limitation is recognized in Wittgenstein’s method as well: “A main source of our failure to understand is that we don’t have *an overview* of the use of our words” (*PI* 122). But we don’t need such an overview in order to begin the task of dispelling pictures and the ‘philosophical problems’ to which they give rise—that is, problems which arise in philosophy but are disconnected from actual, contextualized uses of language: “When philosophers use a word – ‘knowledge’, ‘being’, ‘object’ . . . and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used this way in the language in which it is at home?” (*PI* 116). Similarly, Amin bases his concerns not on a certain problematic definition of the word ‘nonbinary’, but on what he sees as its prevailing uses, and in doing so he makes certain assumptions about the limitation of how the term can be used based on the historical context of its emergence. Rather than provide sociological evidence to make a definite claim about how the term is used, I have pointed to examples which highlight how it can be used in ways that transgress the implicit limits which Amin’s assumptions put on it.

Thus, in terms of Bettcher's project, I have sought to use philosophical resources from the later Wittgenstein in order to alleviate some of the perplexity inherent in asking "what does it mean to say that one is nonbinary in a world that denies this possibility?" My aim does not simply fall into the negative characterization of the purpose of philosophy since the point of the critique in the previous section was not to raise new questions, but to shed illumination on the WTF questions associated with being nonbinary. One glaring difference remains, however, between my aims in the previous section and Bettcher's characterization of the positive function of philosophy: I have not provided any new theory or a definitive answer to what it means to be nonbinary. How, then, does the methodology I have undertaken here qualify as the sort of positive philosophy which Bettcher describes? Even though I have not given a general answer (theory) to the question of what it means to be nonbinary, this does not mean that the question is simply left unanswered. Instead, a Wittgensteinian approach to the question of what it means to be nonbinary is to look to the actual usage of the term, and not merely through the lens of statistics and trends, but in individual cases with all their complexities, uncertainties, and even contradictions. What matters is not that a consistent and universal essence to the meaning of 'nonbinary' emerges out of the aggregate of its many uses, but that we recognize its meaning as inseparable from its usage – not in some generalized sense, but in its particularities: "As if the meaning [of a word] were an aura the word brings along with it and retains in every kind of use" (*PI* 117). The strength of the thread comes in the overlapping of many fibres. It is worth reiterating that this also does not mean that there aren't recognizable similarities between different uses, that the meaning of the term is purely a matter of subjective caprice. Thus, the Wittgensteinian approach

undertaken here is fundamentally descriptive, which is to say, a matter of positively answering the question of what it means to be nonbinary by describing its uses.

Similarly, the positive effort of theorizing which Bettcher sees as central to trans philosophy is distinct from the sort of theorizing which seeks the essential meanings of our words, since the former must still be ground-bound in the sense that it is attendant on lived experience. Even as she speaks of the WTF questions which pervade the everyday lives of trans and nonbinary people, she emphasizes the point that there is no such thing as *the* everyday, but many ‘everydays’. In order to do ground-bound philosophy, we must learn to recognize and traverse through everydays that are not our own, or that are not initially familiar to us:

“Although imperfect, such world-traveling is imperative to any ground-bound philosophy—it works to render ever more complex one’s starting point, one’s life experience, one’s fluency in multiple everydays. In this way, how one lives one’s life, with whom one develops bonds of sociality and intimacy, becomes an integral component of philosophical methodology” (*ibid*, 658).

“World-traveling” is a term that Bettcher borrows from María Lugones⁵, but in this context it refers to the movement between different ‘everydays’, between different ways of communicating, perceiving, knowing, expressing oneself, in short, different ways of living, that is so central to Bettcher’s conception of ground-bound philosophy. There is much in common between the importance Wittgenstein gives to looking to actual uses of language in order to dispel philosophical perplexity and

⁵ For Lugones’ original account of what she calls “world”-traveling, see (Lugones 1987). Bettcher also cites (Lugones 2003) as the direct source for her own usage of the term.

that which Bettcher gives to “world-traveling” in the sense described above. In both cases, the work of philosophy is not to uncover the hidden mechanisms governing our lives, but encounter and immerse oneself in life’s immeasurable complexities – that philosophy is inherently personal. Wittgenstein’s descriptive conception of the function of philosophy can serve the purpose of world-traveling by forcing us to encounter language in a variety of different contexts. In Wittgenstein’s framework we gain a better understanding of the meaning of our words not by formulating ever more precise definitions or explanations, but by expanding our descriptive capabilities, which, in turn, requires us to step out of our own, habitual ‘everyday’: “The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity” (*PI* 129). Thus, Wittgenstein’s method of dispelling philosophical problems (and the pictures embedded in our uses of language which give rise to them) can contribute to the positive (theory building and question answering) functions of Bettcher’s ground-bound philosophy because of the resonances between Wittgenstein’s method of describing uses of language and Bettcher’s notion of traversing multiple ‘everydays’.

Such resonances form the basis for my recasting the aims of this essay as an attempt to bring (explicitly) Wittgensteinian tools to trans philosophy. Situating the goal of clarifying the usage of the term ‘nonbinary’ within the broader context of trans and ground-bound philosophy clarifies the methodology I have adopted here and also makes explicit the resonances between the later Wittgensteinian methodology for dispelling philosophical problems and Bettcher’s notion of illumination in “the WTF”. However, my claim is not that Bettcher’s approach is Wittgensteinian, but that Wittgensteinian methods can contribute to the aims that Bettcher outlines for trans and ground-bound philosophy. The central purpose of this essay is still to clarify the usage of the term

‘nonbinary’ and undermine the picture of such usages as essentially in opposition to whatever is meant by ‘binary’ – nothing I have said in this section has changed that. However, in this final section I have endeavored to show how the Wittgensteinian methodology with which I approached this aim can also be understood in terms of Bettcher’s notion of illumination of “the WTF”.

V: Conclusion

In this essay, I have sought to clarify the meaning and usage of the term ‘nonbinary’ and to address the problems, raised by Kadji Amin, with using the term merely as the opposite to ‘binary’. I have highlighted how these problems are embedded in the everyday lives of those of us who identify as nonbinary, and thus reframed the purpose of this essay in terms of Talia Mae Bettcher’s notion of ‘ground-bound’ philosophy and its capacity to provide illumination to the ‘WTF’ questions, as Bettcher refers to them, that pervade the everyday realities of trans and nonbinary people. I argued that, given the problems which Amin raises, the very question of what it means to be nonbinary is one such WTF question. In order to address this question I drew out certain assumptions from Amin’s work which allow him to extrapolate the problems that he raises and connected these to a central target of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*: Augustine’s conception of the meaning of a word being the object which it names. In section III I critiqued these assumptions using the Wittgensteinian methodology of describing actual uses of language in order to dispel a pervasive and misleading ‘picture’: in this case, the picture of the usage of ‘nonbinary’ as essentially in contrast to the fictive ‘binary’. Finally, in section IV I clarified the connection between the Wittgensteinian methods

mobilized in section III and Bettcher's conception of ground-bound philosophy in order to situate the aims of this essay in a wider social and philosophical context.

In section IV I also highlighted certain resonances between Bettcher's conception of ground-bound philosophy and Wittgenstein's descriptive method of philosophy aimed at dispelling so-called 'philosophical problems'. This might seem to suggest that I view the problems raised by Amin merely as examples of philosophical problems that are disconnected from actual linguistic practice. I would like to reiterate, however, that my contention is not that the problems raised by Amin are 'merely philosophical' in Wittgenstein's sense, but that they are not inherent to our use of the term 'nonbinary'. In this way, the Wittgensteinian notion of meaning as constituted in use is empowering in the sense that it is precisely those of us who use the term 'nonbinary', whether to refer to ourselves or others (but especially those of us who use it as gender identity label), who give the term its meaning. Thus, it is possible, as Amin suggests, that our usage of the term 'nonbinary' can contribute to the idealization of 'binary' and the harms that this entails, but it is also possible for us to use the term in ways that avoid such idealization while retaining its resistance to normative conceptions of gender. The uses of the term 'nonbinary' are many and, to reference the Wittgensteinian metaphor once again, this variety can be a source of strength just as it can also lead to perplexity.

For Wittgenstein, "the real discovery is that one that enables me to break off philosophizing when I want to. – The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question" (*PI* 133). It is my hope that the discoveries which, for Wittgenstein, brought philosophy peace can also help to bring peace to the lives of nonbinary individuals exhausted by demands that we justify our existence and define, once and for all, what it means to be nonbinary,

rather than leaving the question open to loving curiosity and our capacity to traverse a multiplicity of 'everydays'.

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