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# A Response to Howard Schaap . . . And a Response to the Response

By [Tony Jelsma](#) January 17, 2022

*Editor's Note: On December 27, 2021, we ran an essay entitled "Reformed and Always . . . Deconstructing" by Howard Schaap. That essay included Schaap's review of Carl Trueman's book The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self. We received a thoughtful response from Tony Jelsma, Schaap's colleague at Dordt University, which is below. Following Tony Jelsma's response there is another response, from Steve Mathonnet-VanderWell, to Jelsma, Trueman, and Schaap.*

## A Response to Howard Schaap

It was with interest that I read Howard Schaap's [review](#) of Carl Trueman's *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. Having a personal interest in gender dysphoria, I am also trying to understand what is behind the recent dramatic rise in the incidence of gender dysphoria and the number of trans people, so Trueman's book was high on my list. One possible (and partial) explanation for this rise is the increasing cultural acceptance of people who question their gender and transition to the opposite sex. As a biologist however, my focus is more whether there is a biological basis for gender (as opposed to sex) and whether biological factors play a role in this increase. Having looked into this topic in depth, I [found](#) scant evidence for a biological basis for gender. I suspect that the causes of gender dysphoria are many, and therefore I caution against painting with a broad brush when addressing this topic. Like Schaap, I deplore the preaching to the choir that I often see when people address the topic of gender without having done due diligence to understand those who experience gender dysphoria. However, preaching to the choir goes both ways, and the enthusiastic acceptance of the LGBT movement in our culture also deserves scrutiny, and that is the target of Trueman's book.

Schaap's focus in this review is the "worldviewism" that he sees in Trueman's book, one that defends THE Christian worldview against issues that come up in our culture. Sadly, such worldviewism often celebrates being countercultural as a matter of principle, rather than carefully weighing the facts. The antivax movement that Schaap describes, and which has infected (pun intended) too many Reformed churches, is one such example. But sometimes the church is forced to be countercultural because the culture has departed from Christian principles. Schaap suggested that academics mainly do not love Trueman's book. That may be his experience but perhaps it depends on the choir in which one is singing. Is he referring to Christian academics? Having participated in a

discussion of this book at my Christian institution, I see people holding both positions. It might depend on the worldview one has when approaching this topic in the first place.

I do not have the historical or philosophical expertise to judge the validity of Trueman's joining the dots from Rousseau through Darwin, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud to the present day but I suspect many other factors are involved. I'm also sure that the "good old days" before Rousseau that are implied by Trueman weren't all that good either, but for different reasons. A book that has an obvious agenda like this one has, may dispense with nuance to make a point. But I would argue that Schaap's review suffers from a similar lack of nuance. He feels that Darwin has been unjustly maligned. True, biologists like me will not view Darwin in the same way that Trueman does, but we're talking about the *philosophical* impact that Darwin had, not his science. Darwin's target was natural theology, which he tried to replace with a random, unguided evolutionary sequence. I agree that Darwinian evolution is not unchristian *per se*, and it can readily be accommodated with an understanding of God's providential care in bringing the world to its present form, but Darwin's philosophical implications were clear; witness Richard Dawkins' famous line that Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist.

In the same way, Trueman's decrying a culture that celebrates one's ability to determine one's own identity, including gender, is not the same as dismissing believers who genuinely suffer from gender dysphoria or same-sex attraction because they believe acting on those inclinations is not God's intention for them. And that brings me to my biggest concern about Schaap's review, which is the suggestion that being Reformed is about deconstructing everything. I would argue that being Reformed does not mean deconstructing for its own sake; it means examining our assumptions and misconceptions, to get closer to what God would have us be and do. Schaap asks, "The bigger question... is how will we let the book of nature relate to the book of scripture?" As one who has [thought](#) about this question for decades, I can agree that this is an important question but I would say even more important is how we can view our culture and our own actions from the spectacles of Scripture. Is our culture's endorsement of the LGBT agenda a case of the book of nature being a corrective to our interpretation of Scripture? I would disagree. Being Reformed means upholding *Sola Scriptura*, using biblical principles to test the spirits of the age (1 John 4:1). It also means confessing that we are sinners who often get it wrong, making us repent and return. I believe the church has often got it wrong in its treatment of people with gender dysphoria or same-sex attraction, but repenting from that does not mean we must embrace unbiblical practices.

Trueman's book is not without its flaws. However, as a cultural critique, it does help me understand the worldview challenges that my students experience and empathize with

them. It's also incumbent upon me as a Reformed Christian to study issues like this one, including being challenged and corrected by unbelievers who, by common grace, can teach me things I need to learn, so that I can be better equipped to guide my students and prepare them for the challenges they will face in this world. This I need to do again and again and again.

## A Response to Tony Jelsma

I found Tony Jelsma's response to Howard Schaap to be humble, curious, thoughtful, and fair—a model of conversation and mutuality. And prior to Jelsma, Howard Schaap's essay *Reformed and Always...Deconstructing* was insightful without invective. I commend and thank them both. I hope my response to Jelsma will continue their admirable tone.

I have some concerns about Jelsma's work, but perhaps even more with Carl Trueman's book *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. (Schaap's review of which initiated this conversation.)

Jelsma is a biologist. By and large, I will defer to him on matters scientific. As a non-scientist, I found his article on gender dysphoria to be impressive. Still, when he says the scientific evidence for gender dysphoria is "scant," I have heard and read otherwise—or at least that the evidence is not as scant as Jelsma concludes. Moreover, in saying the evidence is scant, I fear Jelsma too easily sounds as if he's concluding that somehow then, gender dysphoria isn't real. While perhaps unintentional, his words also lend credence to the perspective that "science" is the ultimate arbiter of all things. This view holds that if science can't find it, then it must not be the case.

To be clear, Jelsma does not say this, and as a scientist it shouldn't be surprising that he wants to explore the issue scientifically. But as Christians, while grateful for science, don't we affirm that there is scant scientific evidence for many significant things? Not everything can be measured and tested and verified by science. Even if the scientific evidence for gender dysphoria is scant (and I'm not fully convinced that it is) that doesn't mean that gender dysphoria is not real or is some sort of psychosis.

Jelsma points to the Reformed shibboleth *sola scriptura*. I too affirm *sola scriptura*. However, reading scripture wisely and well is as complex as looking at gender dysphoria from a biological perspective—probably even more so.

I recognize that many faithful readers of scripture do not reach the same conclusions as I do about affirming LGBTQ persons. But conversely, no serious reader of scripture can come to any easy and unequivocal conclusion that “the Bible is clear on this matter.” Nor is it as simple as merely looking at Leviticus, Romans 1, and a few other passages. Instead, there are all sorts of arcs and themes throughout the Bible that speak into the discussion.

Jelsma nowhere says that the “Bible is clear” on the matter of LGBTQ affirmation and inclusion. But I become uneasy when he writes, “Being Reformed means upholding *Sola Scriptura*, using biblical principles to test the spirits of the age...I believe the church has often got it wrong in its treatment of people with gender dysphoria or same-sex attraction, but repenting from that does not mean we must embrace unbiblical practices.” I read that to mean that Jelsma believes that affirming LGBTQ people is to “embrace unbiblical practices.” He may well reach that conclusion, but I would urge him—as math teachers used to write on my homework—to “show your work.” I’m left to wonder if his reading of scripture regarding LGBTQ persons is sufficiently complex.

Finally (and here I may be responding more to Trueman and his allies than to Jelsma himself), I am extremely dismayed when Christians criticize and cramp the efforts of persons—LGBTQ and others—to discover and live their best and truest selves as indulging in “individual expressivism.” Years ago I remember reading that hyphenated surnames for married couples were a dangerous manifestation of something akin to “individual expressivism”—overwrought freedom, dissolute self-expression, the erosion of God-given standards. Some other time, I’ll tell the story of my hyphenated name.

Actually, I can travel a long way with those who question the Enlightenment’s individualism and other tenets. But it is benighted, cruel, and beyond patronizing for those with freedom and the ability to express themselves to denounce those who seek something similar. Basically it is saying we know who you are, your place and your role in God’s world—and by the way, that place is fixed and static.

It isn’t hard to imagine first-century critics deriding Samaritans who wanted to be healed by Jesus as prime examples of this individual expressivism—not knowing their place. Tax collectors who hoped they could be friends of Jesus, or sex workers who wanted to understand themselves as children of God, they too, must be wildly overreaching their position. Later, it was Gentiles who wanted to be baptized who must have been examples of “individual expressivism.” Enslaved persons who wanted emancipation, women who wanted work outside the home—they also must be expressing this wanton and misguided desire to be other than who they were intended to be.

Isn't it sadly predictable that today it must be LGBTQ persons who are condemned as living this individual expressivism? Behind all of this, I think I catch a whiff of the mouldering assumption that the "homosexual lifestyle," is always libertine and licentious. I've often said my observation is that the "homosexual lifestyle" more typically includes grocery shopping, tending to the cats, and remembering when the car's oil needs to be changed.

If we are truly looking for examples of individual expressivism, or freedom run amok, I would suggest that we might better explore those of us with 200 channels and five streaming services on our TV, closets full of consumer goods, and thousands of rounds of ammunition in our basement—or maybe better yet, billionaires funding their private space travel.