

# *Gender Pronouns and Jordan B. Peterson*

Stephen Hicks interviewed by Mark Michael Lewis

(Excerpt from "[Postmodernism and Making Work Beautiful](#)")

**Mark Michael Lewis:** I'm not sure if you're familiar with what's going on with Jordan Peterson. I imagine since you're from Toronto you might be familiar with it.

**Stephen Hicks:** Yes, I think highly of the stance that he is taking. That's a complicated set of issues in one sense. The local debate there is over pronouns. We've been having arguments about pronouns—*his, her, their*, and so on—for a couple of generations now. And part of this is a matter of how in language—with language evolving—do we take people's quest for personal identity seriously. We want people to explore and become themselves. For a long time it's been a matter of some sensitivity to make sure that the pronouns we're using are not presupposing that there is only one gender and that we're being inclusive and, when appropriate, we're using *his, her*, or whatever.

**Lewis:** *Ze or hir?*

**Hicks:** That's the more recent variation on that. And it's part of the package of civility to respect people's claims about how they would like to be referred to. I think back to kids. Suppose your name is James, but when you were a kid you were called by your parents Jimmy. So for ten or twelve years they've been calling you Jimmy. But now you've become a teenager and you don't really feel like a Jimmy anymore—that sounds too childlike—so you want to be Jim or James. We have to say, All right, now we have to change our habit and respect his desire to be called this other name. Or people might, more dramatically, say I don't really like my given name and I'd rather be called by my middle name. We're sensitive to that, and that all seems very fine and healthy.

But of course it should be done civilly. Demanding that people call you by your preferred name is already a retreat from civility, and that should be a two-way street. You also have to respect the other person's context and what kind of linguistic framework that they are operating within.

This may be a bit of a dig here, but I always think, for example, of many religious leaders or old-fashioned aristocrats who give themselves very exalted names. You have to refer to them as *Your Worship, Your Highness, Your Exaltedness*, or so on. And so demanding that other people buy into your linguistic framework and saying to them, You have to call me *Your Exaltedness* is a little presumptuous with respect to the other person's framework. There should be a civil give-and-take, and people should be able to work out something that respects both parties' interests.

So I think what Professor Peterson is doing well is saying that, Of course, I'm open to calling people by their preferred pronouns, but that should be a request rather than a demand, and it should be something that comes out of a discussion with the person and not an immediate presumption that a person is evil and wicked for not automatically adopting your preferred linguistic framework.

And on issues where there is controversy—like people’s gender identities and all of the biology and psychology and politics that’s wrapped up in that—that you can’t simply demand that your preferred psychological, biological, and political framework be the only one allowed in the conversation, and that you’re going to use linguistic power-plays to shut up the other perspectives. Those are the things we need to argue about in a free-speech, civil environment and not make demands. So I applaud him for pushing on those points.

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[**Source:** Stephen Hicks and Mark Michael Lewis, “[Postmodernism and Making Work Beautiful](#).” Interview conducted November 2016 and published at YouTube in December 2016.]