TALK ABOUT SEX

A Multidisciplinary Discussion

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Authenticity and Trans Identity

Philosophers have long debated what makes someone who she is and how we know that a person remains the same person over time. Is the person I was yesterday the same as the person I am today? Do I have a "true" identity? How can I know if I am being authentic? These metaphysical questions, belonging to what is called the philosophy of personal identity, are mirrored in a set of feminist, poststructuralist and queer discourses about sex and gender. What does it mean to say that one "is" a man or a woman? If identity markers such as sexual orientation and gender identity are proper to oneself, how are we to account for the obvious influences of culture and upbringing on these facets of identity?

While approaches to these questions differ, some assumptions have become common in all corners of academia. Chief among them is the rejection of claims that seem to hinge on essentialism. Diana Fuss notes of the term "essentialism" that "few other words in the vocabulary of contemporary critical theory are so persistently malign, so little interrogated, and so predictably summoned as a term of infallible critique" (1989: xi). Speaking of identity as though it were fixed, predetermined or extricable from social factors tends to raise suspicion if not scorn among philosophers and non-philosophers alike. This is never truer than when discussing sex and gender. Thanks to feminist and queer theory, we have begun to dislodge the oppressive binaries that dictate the meaning of sex and gender, replacing them with more fluid concepts that liberate bodies and identities from rigid categorical assignments.

The concept of authenticity seems at first blush to be incompatible with the enlightened view of sex/gender identity that dominates contemporary literature. Authenticity is a condition of fidelity to an inner truth, a core substrate that is often cashed out as "the real self" or one's "essence." Since gender and, to a lesser extent, sex are now frequently recognized as evolving through personal and cultural relationships, the suggestion that
Moreover, women.9 “authentic” not feminist are and they that festivals on women’s circles such as MTFs, single-sex from particularly as instance, for identity trans (male-to-female sexual) is an instance, as trans occurs. This is sometimes in ways two identities which are or can do about them. If a woman, avers she is a woman.7 Iam the best to interpret them charitably and faithfully. I want my theory to square with what trans people say about themselves as well as with philosophical intuition and feminist principles.6 I follow Talia Mae Bettcher’s notion of first-person authority, according to which trans people have ethical, if not epistemic, authority regarding their own identity. Thus, anyone can philosophize about the categories of men, women and so on, disputing the criteria for inclusion in each, but trans persons’ avowals about their own identities are authoritative for themselves. If a trans person avers that she is a woman, then she is a woman.7

I also want to delimit the type of authenticity I am talking about so as to steer clear of interpretations that misrepresent, pathologize or do violence to trans persons. There are at least two ways in which this occurs. First, authenticity is sometimes invoked in discussions of trans identity as an attempt to assess whether, for instance, an MTF (male-to-female transsexual) is “really” a woman.8 Trans people, particularly MTFs, have been excluded from single-sex gatherings such as women’s festivals and feminist circles on the basis that they are not “authentic” men or women.9 Moreover,
some people refuse to treat trans people according to their identified sex/gender because of an insistence that a trans person cannot authentically embody the sex/gender that "born" men and women enjoy and therefore deserve none of the respect and privilege associated with them.10

Second, it has become diagnostic practice among psychiatrists to determine whether a candidate for sex reassignment is a "true," that is, an authentic, transsexual. "True" transsexuals are identified by criteria stipulated in the DSM-IV. Because psychiatrists are the gatekeepers to sex reassignment surgery, those who are not deemed "true" transsexuals are often denied the transitional therapies and procedures they seek.11 They are therefore regarded as neither authentic transsexuals, nor as authentic men and women.

These are all misappropriations of the authenticity question as I see it. When I speak of authenticity I am referring to an inherently first-person description of selfhood that takes as its referent only the self in question, not intersubjective opinion or social categories. Hence, whether a trans person is authentic is a question of his/her/hir relation to his/her/hir self, not a relation to other people. I hope to investigate this relationship based on our intuitions about authenticity and by doing justice to trans persons' self-description.

Authenticity

Authenticity in personal identity is a relation of the self to itself. It is to be distinguished from such conditions as sincerity and insincerity, which are relations of the self to others.13 If I am being authentic, I am living in accordance with some metaphysical truth about myself. No one else can tell, on the basis of my behaviour alone, whether I am being authentic. Although my possibilities for being and the vocabulary I use to describe myself are shaped by external forces, the condition of authenticity is irreducibly internal. There is always a self that exceeds what I am given by others and what others see of me. However, the very possibility of authenticity implies that there are different ways of being myself, some of them qualitatively better, or truer, than others. If it were not somehow possible to be "inauthentic"—to be untrue to oneself—we would not make a point of identifying and lauding the condition of authenticity.

If authenticity can be ascribed to individuals at all, it must have something to do with that person's behaviour, understood broadly to include certain acts of thought and deliberation, for authenticity is a way of being. The activity of being is authentic if it matches up with the person's ontological status—who she is. However, judging authenticity on the basis of behaviour alone is inadequate. Two people may undertake the same activity for completely different reasons, and by hypothesis one could be authentic.
while the other is not. For example, two biological females could dress as men, but one of them might feel she is donning a costume in order to gain access to men-only spaces while the other might feel that she is, in fact, a man. The evidence of authenticity is not in the action that was undertaken but in the relationship between the action and some further fact about the person's "true self."

Authenticity has often been imagined as a state of alignment or integrity wherein the internal and external aspects of oneself are consistent with one another. One who advocates a certain type of conduct and then undertakes another will be called a hypocrite; one who is internally most disposed to one type of conduct but undertakes another will be called inauthentic. Inauthenticity is a disregard for, or violation of, some inner truth, which does not necessarily manifest itself as inconsistency to others. Sartre therefore imagines "bad faith" (his term for inauthenticity) as lying to oneself. Unlike lying to others, however, authenticity is not a moral concept, because the consistency at issue is not between behaviour and any ethical principles but between one's behaviour and some fact about who one really is. It speaks to the assumption of true identity, which may or may not conform to normative rules. Nonetheless, authenticity itself is regarded as valuable almost without exception. Hence authenticity is a metaphysical designation that is deployed with ethical intent.

I want to propose five components of authenticity and show why they are usually very difficult to meet. I will then argue that the experiences of trans persons seem, exceptionally, quite congruent with all aspects of authenticity. I choose the term "components" rather than the more familiar "criteria" in order to avoid suggesting that these are necessary and sufficient conditions for authenticity. This is merely a working account that will allow us to investigate specific applications more productively.

The first component of authenticity has to do with its essentialist structure. Without being able to point to an entity or set of properties that instantiate the "true self," it is nonsensical to speak of a convergence between one's authentic self and one's way of being. In order to apply the term "authentic" to a person, it will have to be obvious in some sense what this person's "essence" is. In other words, what exactly is the person being true to when she is being "true to herself," and how do we know the truth in question is actually constitutive of the person's "real" identity? This component is notoriously thorny, not only because of the usual skepticism with which essentialist claims are greeted, but specifically because of the complexity of selfhood that it seems to treat so reductively. What does it mean to identify something as "essential" to oneself? In almost all circumstances, it is possible in principle to imagine that element away without ceasing to be oneself. For instance, a person with strong lifelong political convictions may feel that acting in accordance with those convictions is authentic; but is it not possible to imagine that person having been
raised in a slightly different political milieu, having developed alternative convictions? At what point would we say, stripping away elements of our identity, that we would cease to be ourselves? It is difficult to imagine any criteria for consistently separating what is "essential" to us from what is "inessential," even from a first-person perspective. Just as critics surmise, identity is not the kind of thing that can be neatly pinned down. Essential properties ought to be contrasted with things that are a part of, but not central to, our identity; and yet we find no such clear division through introspection.

Second, the identity revealed in the first component should have sufficient endurance to characterize the individual over a protracted period of time. We do not use authenticity, or at least do not use it robustly, to refer to isolated events or actions. Authenticity tracks something like character, which Paul Ricoeur defines as "the set of distinctive marks which permit the re-identification of a human individual as being the same" (1992: 119). If it weren't for character (or some understanding of enduring identity), we would have no basis on which to judge the authenticity of individual actions. However, even character can be misleading as a basis for judgments of authenticity. First, the fact that we act habitually in a certain way does not prove that this behaviour is true to a real self; we may be habitually inauthentic. Second, even if habit is assumed to be authentic, habits change. Consider the example just mentioned of a person with strong political convictions. Is it not possible that some profound life-changing event could alter her perspective enough to call some of the convictions into question? If that were to happen, which set of convictions would we call authentic—the one that lasted longer, or the one that incorporated a new perspective? If we are ambivalent about this scenario, it is because the duration of a personal characteristic does not overlap perfectly with its authenticity. So while we expect the true self to be enduring (if not permanent), not all enduring properties are necessarily authentic.

Third, as a logical outcome of the first two components, whatever content we choose to subsume under the moniker "authenticity," there should be some different content that we can understand as "inauthenticity." This task is not just semantic but also challenging and metaphysical. For the same individual who can be designated as "authentic" must also be able, by some other behaviour, to be designated as "inauthentic," while still being the same individual. As Heidegger suggests, authenticity and inauthenticity are different modes of being available to the same instance of being (Dasein), distinguished not by the possibilities available to a different person altogether but by the choices a person makes within her own set of possibilities.18 There is a temptation to identify whatever we do in fact choose as authentic by virtue of the fact that we chose it. But this is just to reduce the concept of authenticity to triviality: we would always be de facto authentic. There must be some way of understanding possibilities as
authentic or inauthentic prior to our choosing between them. If authenticity is a real possibility, we must be capable of going against ourselves. For most people, there are very few situations in which it is possible to say that we've truly violated something essential to ourselves. Almost every action can be interpreted as somehow consistent with who we really are, even if it is not fully so.

Fourth, authenticity should be juxtaposed with conformity. This is not to say that authenticity is synonymous with non-conformity, but rather that the motive for the authentic person's behaviour should issue from within herself, irrespective of what the majority in her environment consider appropriate to do. Hence if an authentic person happens to behave in a way that converges with the behaviour of others, this is not due to conformity but to coincidence. The authentic person "does her own thing," irrespective of what others are doing. In practice, of course, it is very difficult to separate the various influences on our behaviour and choices, which no doubt emanate from sources both internal and external. However, authenticity as an ideal presupposes the possibility of at least aspiring to autonomous choices that are immune to forces such as peer pressure. This would be most clearly seen in an instance where authenticity pits an individual against the habits or expectations of her peers. The authentic person sticks to her guns, often despite costly consequences for doing so. But she sticks out of a genuine conviction that forms part of her identity—not out of contrariness or a desire to be different. Still, distinguishing between these subtle motivations usually requires an interpretive leap, even from the standpoint of the person in question. It is often hard to know for certain why we conform or decline to conform to social norms.

Finally, as I indicated earlier, authenticity carries normative import even though it need not refer to further virtues, and by understanding how authenticity applies to a particular person we should simultaneously glean the value, for this person, of inhabiting this condition. This is less obvious than it may seem. Because authenticity implies convergence with the true self, rather than convergence with a set of moral norms, there is no a priori reason to think that being authentic makes for a "better" person, or one whose life has more value. (Consider the example of the authentic villain.) Moreover, for some people, being authentic may be profoundly difficult, even uncomfortable, not to mention socially costly. The successful banker who hates his job and harbours private artistic aspirations may yet find it more comfortable to persist in his "inauthentic" existence, complete with the material amenities and social connections that come along with it, than to actualize his potential for authenticity. It may indeed be difficult to convince him of the higher value of his more authentic alternative.
The Authenticity of Sex/Gender Transition

I have been arguing thus far that the concept of authenticity is resistant to application to most people, most of the time. Our identities are simply too layered, too fluid and too contingent to admit of judgements as essentialist, as the attribute "authentic" would suggest. I want to now suggest that sex/gender identity may be an exception to this trend, at least for trans people. On all five components of authenticity, the experiences of trans people suggest a workable application of authenticity to human lives which in turn may be able to tell us something more general about sex and gender. I take the recognition of one's trans identity as the locus of authenticity and the transition to one's felt sex/gender, through any combination of hormones, surgery or aesthetics, to be the pinnacle of the authentic behaviour.

On the first component, the recurring formulations of essentialist language found in trans narratives fulfill the need to isolate a true self. The true self expressed in authentic behaviour is clear: it is the man or woman (or other) that the trans person is on the inside. Lesley Carter writes: "I firmly believe that I was born a woman but lived in uncomfortable denial for many years" (qtd. in Overall 2009: 14). Alaina Hardie intones: "I've known all my life that I am a girl" (2006: 122). Jamison Green states: "I am a man, and I am a man who lived for 40 years in a female body" (2006: 503). From the opening line of Jan Morris's pathbreaking Conundrum (1997 [1974]) to contemporary discourse, trans autobiographies are replete with such declarations. Moreover, the power of the felt sex/gender identity among trans people is evident in their desperate, sometime reckless, determination to make it a material reality.

Importantly, this is even true for trans people who do not see themselves as "simply" men or women. For example, Kate Bornstein, who sees herself as a "transsexual lesbian" (1994: 3) who is "neither male nor female" (1994: 4) still knew clearly that she had to change her assigned sex/gender. Prior to transition, she wrote, "I didn't feel like I was a man. Ever. I was being a man, but I never felt like I was" (1994: 41). Bobby Noble describes himself as "a guy who is half-lesbian" and arrived at his current embodiment in part through a bilateral mastectomy but no bottom surgery (2006: 98). The essentialism of sex/gender identity for trans persons does not reinforce or cement a male-female binary, because the identities of trans persons are as diverse as they are authentic. Even intersexed people and cross-dressers have used essentialist language to describe their identities. The group I loosely define as "trans" is joined, by their adherence to particular models of sex or gender, but by their first-person insistence on having a core sex/gender identity, which happens to differ from the one they were assigned at birth. Jamison Green helpfully summarizes: "Academics are afraid of being called 'essentialists,' but I am not afraid of saying that ... I am motivated to express both the core and essence of my being-ness and
I will stand by the truth of my experience and the logic of my analysis" (2006: 506). All of these statements confirm the all-important distinction between internal and external on which authenticity depends. Despite overwhelming, oppressive insistence from the outside world that they have a certain sex/gender identity, trans people retain what Jay Prosser calls “corporeal interiority,” a first-person conviction of identity that (usually) precedes and survives external designations (2006: 271).

In terms of the second component of authenticity, endurance, the experiences of trans people also seem to follow the conceptual structure. The condition of identifying with a sex/gender identity other than what one was assigned at birth appears to be lifelong and remarkably resilient in most trans people. This is attested to not only by the reports of its persistence among trans people but also by the abject failure of all attempts to disrupt it. Trans people have been subjected to psychiatric coercion intended to disabuse them of their identities, involuntary treatment with “homosexual” hormones to strengthen the presentation of their assigned sex and countless other degrading practices (Rubin 2006). But as Scott-Dixon notes, “gender identity ... has proven resistant to any intervention” (2006: 18). Jan Morris concurs: “It is a passionate, lifelong, ineradicable conviction, and no true transsexual has ever been disabused of it” (1997 [1974]: 15). Trans people also sometimes subject themselves to gender-normative environments where they expect or hope that a cissexual/cisgender identity will emerge, but to no avail. In one study, two MTFs “worked in very masculine spaces in an attempt to destroy their private feminine self, but they experienced this as foreign and failed in it” (McLachlan 2010: 34). Not only is sex/gender identity for trans people enduring, therefore, but it can also be distinguished from almost all other aspects of identity, which are susceptible eventually to some form of influence.16

The preceding comments suggest that trans identity is so fixed that one has no choice but to heed it. This suggestion raises the worry that being trans is not susceptible to authenticity at all because it functions as a determined fact, not a possibility of being that can be chosen from among other possibilities. I have argued that in order for authenticity to be possible there must be some way in which the same individual could be inauthentic, so it is important not to define inauthentic trans identity out of existence. In fact, on the third component I described, there is also a clear standard of inauthenticity for trans people—perhaps clearer than any analogy we can think of. For while the identity as trans may be “discovered” as an unchosen fact, there are always different possible ways of responding to it. If living in one’s self-identified sex/gender is the ultimate act of authenticity, then all forms of denial, hiding or simply being unable to live in the desired sex/gender count as forms of inauthenticity. Indeed, trans people often use the language of inauthenticity to describe their experience of their sex/gender prior to transition. For example, Jan Morris claims she
"was living a falsehood" (1997 [1974]: 18) and calls her existence prior to transition one of "ambiguity or disguise" (137). Such metaphors of lying and pretending are frequently invoked in trans narratives.

In designating as inauthentic all of the trans people who still live uncomfortably in their assigned sex/gender, or who are not "out" as trans people, I hope it will be understood that I am not passing any judgement on them. Not only is inauthenticity in this case not a moral failing, but authenticity may be materially or socially impossible. The exorbitant costs of surgery in many jurisdictions, as well as the need for medical approval and social support, keep transition tragically out of reach for many trans people. Many trans people agree that this scenario results in their living an inauthentic life. Here, authenticity and inauthenticity are metaphysical possibilities based on the identity of the true self, but whether they can be actualized is often a matter of chance.

The fourth component is non-conformity, and it should be clear that trans people typically stand out as among the least conformist people in a culture in which genitalia are thought to be destiny. However, while I previously noted the general difficulty of attributing non-conformist behaviour to authenticity, this line is intuitively drawn in the case of trans people, especially those seeking sex reassignment surgery (SRS). It is virtually inconceivable that one would choose to face the discrimination, ridicule, alienation and sometimes violence that are visited upon trans people, not to mention the considerable pain and risks of SRS, if one were not fuelled by a pressing need for reconciliation within the self. The non-conformity is thus informative about who trans people really are.

Finally, the value of authenticity for trans people is self-evident. Inauthenticity for them entails an existence that is at best uncomfortable and at worst torturous. Pre-transition trans people describe the psychological discomfort of living out of joint: the feeling that "some parts of their anatomical body ... are like foreign objects attached to the body" (McLachlan 2010: 44), the feeling of being unrecognized, misclassified, living a pretense, lacking genuine peers and other forms of dissatisfaction. One piece of evidence for the intolerability of being an "inauthentic" trans person is the high rate of suicide and attempted suicide among trans people. Scientific studies across North America have found attempted suicide rates among trans people to be between 16 per cent and 47 per cent (Ramsay 2012). The behaviour that I have described as authentic—transitioning and leading one's life in one's felt sex/gender—tends to come as a relief, in spite of the significant obstacles that precede and accompany it. Regret rates for post-operative transsexuals are vanishingly small, and when persistent regret exists, it is often attributed to dissatisfaction with the surgical outcomes or lack of familial support. Hence, in understanding authenticity with respect to sex/gender identity for trans people, we also capture its intuitive value, without maligning those trans people who have not yet achieved authentic existence.
Essentialism Reconsidered

My analysis suggests that behaviour of trans people with respect to their sex/gender identity is one of very few elements of human existence that admits of judgements of authenticity. What can we learn from this perhaps paradigmatic case about sex and gender more generally? What does this conclusion mean for contemporary critical theory and its suspicion regarding essentialism?

Although “essentialism” raises red flags to many, it is not a monolithic concept. It should be clear by now that the essentialism I am interested in is not the primitive gender essentialism or radical feminist essentialism according to which all women “are” a certain way and the sexes are binary, polar and rigid. The fact that some trans people have been accused of buying into and indeed lending great support to, such an essentialism is interesting but not detrimental to my argument. Rather, the kind of essentialism at stake in my analysis of authenticity is an always-individual engagement with the question, “Who am I?” In light of the fact that I am always changing in some ways, and that I am subjected to countless influences beyond my choosing, is it ever possible to say, at least with respect to some parts of myself, that I have a “true” identity? I submit that the narratives of many trans people confirm this is so. But what is it about sex/gender identity, and what is it about the experiences of trans people in particular, that seem to crystallize this experience of authenticity?

One possibility is that the experiences of trans people vindicate essentialism in the realm of sex and gender identity overall. Perhaps cis individuals also have a powerful sense of sex/gender identity, but because we are in conformity with social expectations, we are rarely if ever forced to examine and assert our identities. Consider how the average man or woman would react if asked to imagine him/herself as a different sex/gender. Most would flatly deny that they could exist authentically other than in the sex/gender with which they are already comfortable. Anthony Appiah argues that “we standardly hold it open to someone to believe that the replacement of the characteristic morphology of their sex with a (facsimile) of that of the other (major) one would produce someone other than themselves, a new ethical person” (1997: 78). That is, although we could imagine ourselves being different in many ways without being a whole new person (that is, without being essentially different), we could not imagine ourselves being a different sex without changing something essential about ourselves. Living as the sex/gender that we were assigned at birth, then, might be as authentic for cis people as living in a different sex/gender might be for trans people. This assertion of authenticity goes unnoticed, however, because cis people are not confronted with life in the “wrong” sex/gender as trans people are. The pathologization of transsexuality makes out trans people, rather than their sex/gender assignment, to be abnormal, when in fact all people might reac...
the same way if they were assigned a sex/gender that was at odds with their felt identity.

This thesis needs to be nuanced, however, to account for the fact that some people deny the existence of a stable sex/gender identity and experiment to varying degrees with their gender roles and presentation. They try on different sex/gender attributes; they flout conventions of masculinity or femininity while still identifying as men or women; they may alter their bodies in non-permanent ways to temporarily experience different forms of embodiment. To account for such phenomena, it is tempting to say that although sex/gender may be essentialist for most people, it is existentialist or poststructuralist for others.

But we need not abandon essentialism just yet. For even if sex/gender is characterized by development and to some degree even performance, the movement is itself a reflection of what the individual holds to be most essential about his/her identity. Experimentation can be a search for what feels most “right.” Playing with gender can also be political, strategic or just “fun.” In all these cases, something essential about the individual is being expressed when the behaviour is freely chosen, and we would say that something essential is silenced if the behaviour is forced or imputed to the individual without consent. Even a person who dresses in the manner associated with his sex some of the time but feels equally comfortable cross-dressing (such as Miqiq Alicia Gilbert or RuPaul) can be authentic with respect to that very flexibility. If they were denied or failed to actualize one of these urges, it would be appropriate to call theminautheetic. Even if sex/gender identity is essential, it admits of infinite variation, including variation within a particular self.

Sex/gender identity, then, is something attached to our selves, something to which we can be either authentic or inauthentic depending on the possibilities available to us in our cultural landscape. It is as the actualization of our core sex/gender identities in our particular environment that we can make sense of experimentation, transition and ambiguity. Having a core gender identity does not mean that we would dress or behave precisely the same way had we been born into a different culture (or time period), but it does mean that we would still respond to our environment on the basis of an inner sense of identity and feel a discomfiting misalignment if that identity were repressed. Those who exemplify the classic trans narrative—a biological male who feels she is really a woman, or a biological female who is really a man—bring this experience into stark focus.

Essentialism may be salvageable, therefore, in this regard: sex/gender identity can be essential without the possibilities for sex/gender categories or expression being in any way confined. The inner identity against which the authenticity of one’s behaviour is judged depends only on one’s felt sense of manhood or womanhood. It is not a test to live up to some imposed concept of masculinity or femininity. Some people’s sex/gender identity
announces itself forcefully and unmistakably; this appears to be the case for most trans people, probably because of the painful contrast between the felt identity and the assigned one. For others, the identity may be more muted, or may require a variety of experiences in order to come out. For some people, the simple designation "man" or "woman" suffices; for others, more inventive terms and fluid categories are necessary. But I suspect one would be hard-pressed to find a person, trans or otherwise, for whom sex/gender identity is not a matter essential to his/her/hir sense of self. Because of this, sex/gender identity admits of authenticity, and essentialism can be reclaimed from the clutches of binary thinking.

Anticipating Some Objections

Before concluding I want to pre-emptively address several concerns with my argument that have either been put to me explicitly or that can be found in the literature.

The first concern regards the picture I have presented of trans identity, and especially of the sex/gender transition, as a fairly simplistic phenomenon. Flouting the anti-essentialism that has become de rigueur among feminists, my application of authenticity to trans identity is an example of what Christine Overall has called the "masquerade hypothesis" or the "gender within theory," according to which "the 'true' person is hidden under a mask of the wrong sex and hence is revealed via the process of transitioning" (2009: 14). Elsewhere she characterizes this theory as actually involving two separate people, a kind of nested "person inside a person" (2009: 24). Overall articulates a number of concerns with this theory and offers an alternative account of sex/gender transition, which describes it as analogous to other "life-changing aspirations" (Overall 2009: 24). While a thorough response to Overall's insightful and stimulating article would require more space than I have here, I want to address the key aspects of her analysis and show why my account still holds.

Overall’s first reaction to the “gender within” theory is the familiar concern that ‘gender is permanent and reified, at least for some individuals’ and that this might have ‘frightening’ implications for others (2009: 15). As a feminist I respect this concern, which is the crux of some of the historical animosity between feminist and trans advocacy. For if sex/gender is determined and immutable, what options do most people have for liberation from oppressive norms? The problem with this line of argument is that it seeks to undermine some people’s lived experience for the sake of protecting that of others. Feminists should work toward a society in which one person’s experience of sex/gender need not negate or imperil the freedom of another person to experience sex/gender differently. As Overall acknowledges, “the fact that the idea of gender underlying this theory is
frightening for some people, and that it could have dangerous political implications, does not show that it is false" (2009: 15).

Moreover, I am not suggesting that sex/gender can be "determined" by anyone other than the self in question. Gender essentialism, the view that men and women have unique and immutable qualities, is not the same as the essentialism of authenticity, which consults a person's own understanding of what is unique and immutable about her. The fact that gender essentialism is frightening to some people is merely further evidence that individual sex/gender identity is something that we are willing to fiercely protect. Indeed, I take Overall to be corroborating this fact through her extensive work in feminist philosophy and explanation that she counts herself "a member of the social grouping 'women'" (2009: 15). She asserts herself as a woman while claiming the right to define womanhood for herself—precisely the kind of positive control over sex/gender identity that we must extend to trans people.

The second category of concerns Overall raises with the masquerade hypothesis derives from philosophical critiques of so-called "Cartesian dualism," or the view that persons are divided into mind and body or other disparate substances. These critiques depend on taking assertions such as "I am a man trapped in a woman's body" quite literally. For example, Overall asks "how a nonmaterial woman entity [could] develop inside a material male body, or how a nonmaterial man entity could develop inside a material female body... There appears to be no way that a gendered nonmaterial subject that fails to cohere with their sex could develop" (2009: 16). I think these are the wrong questions to be asking. Focusing on the mysterious aetiology of trans identity as biological or metaphysical proof of incoherency implies that other aspects of identity come to us through an unproblematic, transparent process. Instead of endorsing the "gender within theory," Overall likens sex/gender transition to other roles to which we aspire, such as being a musician or a parent; this is supposed to be more philosophically palatable than the notion of a man being trapped inside a woman (2009: 23). But how is it any less obscure why some individuals feel a calling to become a musician? Is the stumbling block with trans identity that it concerns a physiological change, a "nonmaterial" sense of who one is or should be materially?

I submit that this is an irrelevant difference on which to hang the implausibility of sex/gender essentialism. For if we are unable to explain how we come to have a sense of identity that is nonmaterial, why should we expect to be able to explain our having a sense of identity that is material? The imagery of a (nonmaterial) person of one sex trapped inside the (material) body of a person of another sex is only metaphorical. Overall notes that "many trans persons may indeed harbour what I suggest is an aspiration to be a woman or a man, in defiance of how their body ostensibly reads, that is virtually lifelong," thus giving due recognition to
the prevalent metaphor (2009: 24). But she continues: “The existence of a longstanding or even lifelong aspiration for transition does not imply that there is a person of a different sex/gender inside the individual” (24). This retort seems to be directed at a straw man. We can reject the caricature of a literal person-within-a-person without dismissing trans people’s earnest assertions that they have a core sex/gender identity.

Overall’s alternative to the “masquerade” account raises further questions. She describes sex/gender transition as involving “choice (or rather, a series of choices)” (2009: 18) and sex/gender identity as based on “a series of interpretations” (21). On my reading of trans narratives, these definitions seem to gloss over the crucial point that trans people already are the men, women or otherwise identified people that transition enables them to inhabit. Just as the concept of authenticity suggests, the transition to the desired sex/gender is often described in terms of bringing the self into alignment with itself rather than as a change of self. Morris says of her transition, “I was mending a discrepancy, smoothing an incongruity” (1997 [1974]: 113). Carol Riddell explains: “we do not seek to change sex, but to modify a biological anomaly, so that genuine human existence as the women or men we are already is possible” (2006: 155). One researcher concluded that “transgender people do not see transitioning as a choice they make, but rather as a necessity” (McLachlan 2010: 64) and that some trans people don’t even want, ceteris paribus, to be the men or women they are turning into, but feel it is inevitable.37 Speaking of such an experience as an “aspiration” on par with a career change strikes me as inaccurate. On the one hand, it is much more than the other life changes most people undergo: it affects everything about the person and can even change the way they are read as human beings. At the same time, it is not, properly, a change of identity—it is an adjustment to that which signifies identity, in order that the felt identity may be represented more coherently. Admittedly, it is unclear whether Overall is considering sex/gender transition a change of identity or merely a change in lifestyle. I agree, of course, that it is a change of some kind. The explanation of authenticity functions because, while the identity does not change, one’s ability to live in conformity with it does.

Like me, Overall is a cis-identified, feminist, female philosopher who wants to theorize trans identity in a way that respects trans persons’ experiences. She also speaks about sex/gender transition in terms of authenticity.38 Yet whereas she views the “masquerade” account as reviving gender confounds that feminists have spent decades dismantling and posing insurmountable philosophical problems, I think it can be explained in a way that celebrates gender diversity and makes at least as much philosophical sense as competing accounts. Moreover, based on what I have read and heard about trans people’s self-understanding, I believe the masquerade hypothesis is more consistent with their self-described experiences.
But what if my evidence is flawed? Although I have endeavoured to read broadly about different trans persons' experiences, it is not necessarily fair to conclude that the prevailing narrative unearthed in these accounts, which reinforces essentialist assumptions, is in fact accurate or representative of most trans people. This suspicion arises from the fact that trans identities and experiences are frequently stereotyped according to medical assumptions and tailored to meet the expectations of those with the authority to enable sex reassignment. The requirements of the DSM-IV for the diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder, which remains a prerequisite for sex reassignment surgery, dictate that the trans person have a “longstanding” and “persistent” experience of “identification with another gender.” Essentialist narratives of the type I have described are the gold standard for achieving recognition from the medical community. This means, first, that variant trans experiences are less likely to be heard and validated and, second, that those trans stories that form the apparent majority have a pressing instrumental reason for following a certain format, which may cast doubt on the authenticity (in the usual sense) of their accounts.

To address the first issue, it is incumbent on everyone who publishes and otherwise gives voice to trans persons' stories to actively seek out and represent the diversity in this group, and it is incumbent on researchers such as myself to expose ourselves to texts and media that may diverge from the mainstream mythology. This can be difficult, especially for those who stand outside trans communities, but it is being made easier by the Internet and growing attention to trans issues in academic and non-academic discourses. What would it mean for my account if it were, in fact, the case that many trans experiences defy the components for authenticity I have laid out? This might indicate that my hypothesis is not as general as I would like, but it would not vitiate my main argument. For by learning from those trans people whose narratives reinforce an essentialist understanding of identity, we still have a valid example of lived experience that conforms with the metaphysics of authenticity, offering an important perspective for philosophers and a persuasive explanation of colloquial assessments of authenticity.

The second concern is more epistemologically intractable. How do we know that a trans woman, for instance, who claims that she has always been female, is reporting her experience truthfully to others—or even herself? Arguably, no speech act is immune to this type of worry. I am reluctant to conclude from this that only a hyper-skeptical interpretation of trans narratives is therefore valid. Indeed, as a cis person, to take trans self-descriptions at anything other than face value would be indefensibly presumptuous. I am not entitled to suppose from the fact that essentialist accounts are strategically useful in our current medical establishment that they are less likely to be true. Moreover, the strong essentialist tendencies in trans narratives do not only emerge where access to SRS or other forms
of medical support are at stake. Theoretical discussions, autobiographies, qualitative studies conducted by trans-positive researchers and many other types of texts reproduce the same broad pattern in trans narratives. This does not guarantee that everyone's experiences are relayed without any distortion or pressure to conform to a general construction of trans identity, nor does it deny the existence of outliers whose stories defy the trend. It does, however, lend considerable credibility to the overall picture I have presented.

It may be objected that, even if a trans person's sex/gender identity appears at a very young age and proves extremely resilient, it is inaccurate to speak of it as "essential," which implies the possibility of a pre-cultural, "natural" concept of sex/gender that is coded in the human brain prior to contact with others. On the contrary, gender and even sex are now widely accepted (among progressive scholars) as constructs that condition individuals' relationships to their own anatomy. To assert that a child with male morphology could actually be a girl irrespective of what the child is taught about boyhood and girlhood reprises one of the maligned forms of essentialism—the view that "male" and "female" are somehow transcendent, immutable categories that can be accessed without mediation.

While I am not certain that we ought to regard the possibility of an inborn sex/gender identity, or "brain sex," with such suspicion, it is important to acknowledge that when trans people describe themselves, they are not speaking in a vacuum. I do not deny that labels such as "man" and "woman" (or even "transman" and "transwoman") are the cultural backdrop against which sex/gender identities are articulated, especially by adults. One does not emerge from the womb identifying as a "woman" and holding firm views about the length of skirt it is appropriate to wear. But the sense of who one is within such a paradigm must derive from something individual. There must be a kernel of identity that determines how a person responds to the myriad influences he/she/sie will be exposed to in a lifetime. Otherwise, everything about sex/gender identity would be explicable purely in terms of one's exposure to cultural signs. Further, such an assumption would invite a regress: for where could our cultural signs have come from if there were no felt sex/gender identity prior to culture? When I say that it is coherent for a male-bodied person to feel she is "essentially" a woman, therefore, I mean that there is something proper to her that results, via processes still unknown, in her having the identity that is culturally associated with womanhood. The fact that the language and accoutrements used to express the identity are products of a cultural interaction does not disprove that there is a true identity at stake.

I will end by considering a more philosophical objection. I have argued that authenticity, being a relation between how one lives and some fact about one's identity, is by definition inscrutable to others. It may well be asked what gives me the authority to declare that another person, let alone
a whole group of people (let alone a whole group of people to which I do not belong) is authentic. I reply unequivocally that I have no such authority. The presumptive authenticity of trans people—and, if my analysis is correct, of almost everybody—with respect to their sex/gender identity depends on metaphysical facts to which we may never have unadulterated access. However, the sex/gender identity of trans people is a striking candidate for authenticity because it seems to negotiate the philosophical challenges of personal identity while ringing true to people’s lived experiences. Listening to trans people can enrich philosophers’ understanding of personal identity and challenge the dogmatic anti-essentialism that has come to characterize feminist and critical discourse.

Notes
1. For a few influential contributions of the last several decades, see Williams (1976), Parfit (1984) and Ricoeur (1992).
2. For the most influential recent formulation of feminist anti-essentialism, see Butler (1993, 1999).
3. I will use the term “sex/gender” throughout the paper instead of choosing between “sex” and “gender.” While “sex” is usually taken to refer to biological characteristics and “gender” to social ones, in the case of trans people the lines are easily blurred. Some trans people feel that they are in the “wrong” body and happily take on the gender attributes normally associated with the body they feel they ought to have, while other trans people seek various combinations of changes to their sex and/or gender. Since there is so much diversity in the types of transition and identity in the trans community, I use the shorthand “sex/gender” to include all possibilities.
4. Throughout this paper I will use “trans” to refer to anyone who has undergone or who aspires to undergo a sex/gender transition, whether surgical or otherwise. Many of these people identify themselves as “transgender,” “transsexual” or “genderqueer.” However, I also want to include, with all due respect, those individuals who have undergone a sex/gender transition and now see themselves as “simply” “men” or “women,” not as trans at all. While I respect their right to identify as they see fit, this more expansive use of “trans” will allow me to discuss similarities between a variety of people. I use “transsexual” on occasion to refer specifically to those who seek a diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder in order to obtain medical approval for sex reassignment surgery. Intersexed people and cross-dressers will also be mentioned in the discussion to follow.
5. “Cisgender” is a synonym for “non-trans,” meaning someone whose sex/gender is on the “same side” (the term is borrowed from chemistry). I include “cissexual” to parallel my use of “sex/gender” throughout (see note 4) but also condense the whole designation to “cis,” the way I use “trans” as an independent term.
6. Feminism and trans activism have a tortured relationship (Whittle 2006; Scott-Dixon 2006), and in attempting to reconcile them I am not glossing over their differences. When I say that I want my theory to square with feminist principles, I mean that I want my account of trans identity to leave room for the advocacy of women's rights as such, and for my feminism to leave room for (indeed, require) advocacy for the rights of differently bodied and gendered people.

7. See Bettcher (2009).

8. Krista Scott-Dixon notes that "Trans people often require people in authority ... and/or a set of legal and regulatory documents ... to vouch for their authenticity" (2006: 19). This is an appropriate use of authenticity but not the self-reflexive one I am interested in. Thattrans people require evidence of their legal or medical authenticity is merely a marker of the suspicion with which others sometimes regard their self-identified sex/gender.


10. Talia Mae Bettcher argues that violence against trans people is rooted not in homophobia or even fear of gender non-conformity per se, but rather in the "basic denial of authenticity" of trans people (2006: 204). Trans people who attempt to "pass" are regarded as "deceivers," as "people trying to pass [them] selves off as something [they] are not" (2006: 204). It is this perceived "inauthenticity" that is being "punished" in transphobic violence.

11. Complicating for my account is the fact that this very situation—the expectations of psychiatrists based on a fiction of a "true" transsexual—shapes the narratives that trans people tell others about their identities and possibly even what they tell themselves. I thank Rachel McKinnon for pointing this out to me and attempt to address the concern more fully in the final section of this chapter.

12. "Hir" is the possessive of a third gender pronoun that can be used to describe individuals who are not comfortable with either male or female pronouns. Some, but by no means all, trans people at some point prefer these labels.

13. For an argument to this effect, see Bialystok (2011).

14. I do not assume that all action is either authentic or inauthentic. In fact, the vast majority of action is probably neither.

15. "We shall willingly grant that bad faith is a lie to oneself, on condition that we distinguish the lie to oneself from lying in general" (Sartre 1984 [1943]: 87). The caveat "on condition" ends up performing a lot of work in Sartre's analysis, as a lie to oneself becomes strictly impossible within the total translucency of consciousness.

16. In Sartre's case, the identity revealed in authenticity is not a unique character or core essence but rather the state of radical freedom that is inseparable from being-for-itself.
accounts of authenticity deny this, locating authenticity instead in a convergence between one's self and external norms or virtues. See Taylor (1991) and Guignon (2008).


19. Sex/gender transition has been described in terms of authenticity elsewhere as well. See, e.g., Heyes (2009: 136); Meyerowitz (2006: 363); McLachlan (2010: 49).

20. Transition is, of course, a process, often years in the making, and for some people never complete. The implication is that authenticity is not achieved in a single event but evolves, stepwise, along with sex/gender transition.

21. It is important to note that my argument is not contingent on the kind or scope of transition made. I know of one MTF who changed nothing but her name and preferred pronoun upon transitioning. As long as there is a moment when the trans person asks the world to identify him/her/hir as a different sex/gender than what he/she/she previously was, there is an opportunity for authenticity.


23. For examples of the lengths that trans people have gone to in a bid to actualize their felt sex/gender, see Meyerowitz (2006).

24. For example, Gigi Raven Wilbur says, "I am who I am, even if there is no name for me. I know who and what I am" (2006: 70). See also Chase (2006).


26. The likelihood of sex/gender identity being influenced seems to depend on the age at which intervention begins. The controversial view espoused by psychologists such as Ken Zucker and John Money holds that a child can avoid transsexualism and come to identify with his/her assigned sex/gender identity through appropriate intervention at a young age. See Zucker and Bradley (1995).

27. Even if trans people, after transitioning, seem to conform to the most stereotypical caricatures of their new sex/gender, even to the point of mocking women (as charged by some feminists—see Garber [1992] and Raymond [1979]), this does not show that their transition itself (their becoming authentic) was a form of conformity. What is conformist in our society is to accept and act out the sex/gender one was assigned at birth regardless of felt identity, not to undergo life-changing procedures to conform to one's associations with a different sex/gender.

28. Presumably these suicide attempts mostly occur before full transition (or "passing") is possible. Of course, for anyone recognized as trans or gender non-conforming, even prior to transition, there is an exceptionally high risk of violence and persecution, which could also contribute to suicide attempts.
29. "Persistent regret among post-operative transsexuals has been studied since the early 1960s. The most comprehensive meta-review done to date analyzed 74 follow-up studies and 8 reviews of outcome studies published between 1961 and 1991 (1000-1600 MTF and 400-550 FTM patients). The authors concluded that in this 30 year period, <1% of female-to-males (FTMs) and 1-1.5% of male-to-females (MTFs) experienced persistent regret following SRS. Studies published since 1991 have reported a decrease in the incidence of regret for both MTFs and FTMsthatt is likely due to improved quality of psychological and surgical care for individuals undergoing sex reassignment" (Bowman and Goldberg 2006: 4).

30. This is not to suggest that cis people never experience uncertainty, discomfort or ambivalence about their sex/gender identity. As Spade notes, "The diagnostic criteria for GID [Gender Identity Disorder] produces [sic] a fiction of natural gender in which normal, non-transsexual people grow up with minimal to no gender trouble or exploration" (2006: 321).

31. This type of movement occurs less frequently vis-à-vis sex. Although many women, for example, might be ambivalent about embracing various expectations of femininity such as make-up and high heels, very few women are ambivalent about having a vagina and feel as though they really ought to have a penis. A desire for a different sexual morphology is characteristic only of trans people.

32. See, e.g., Bornstein (1994).

33. Ironically, trans people are at the forefront of trying to liberate themselves from oppressive sex/gender norms: they vehemently reject the identity assigned to them at birth on the basis of genitalia. Some feminists and other critics are so offended by the apparent reinforcement of the gender binary that they overlook the hugely subversive step trans people take in challenging sex/gender assumptions.

34. She seems to take it for granted that the "lifelong aspirations" to which she compares sex/gender transition are philosophically unproblematic: "Still, the skeptic might persist: Where do the aspirations of trans persons come from? How can they be explained? Again, my point is that aspirations for sex/gender transition are not necessarily different in kind from other deeply felt and long-held aspirations" (Overall 2009: 23).

35. Trans writers have made other bodily analogies. Hale compares trans narratives to claims of being a thin woman trapped inside a fat woman's body (2009: 50). Spade jokes about "a small-nosed woman trapped in a large-nosed body" (2006: 315). Analogies have also been drawn between sex/gender transition and race change (Heyes 2009; Appiah 1997).
36. She explicitly acknowledges that sex/gender transition may involve more than choice: “That does not mean, however, that their aspiration to transition is entirely a matter of choice, for the aspiration may well be experienced as unbidden and imposed” (Overall 2009: 21). This concession seems to reinforce the masquerade hypothesis rather than her own alternative.

37. McLachlan says, regarding one of her study participants, “Even though he is busy transitioning physically to being a man and experiences himself as being a man, he claims that he has not chosen this as he would have preferred to be a woman” (2010: 39). The participant said, “I think, I wouldn't want to be a man if I had a choice” (McLachlan 2010: 39; emphasis added).

38. “What the trans individual cares about is authenticity” (Overall 2009: 19).

39. Similarly, it has also been noted that candidates for sex reassignment must adhere to narrow sex and gender binaries in describing the bodies and identities they hope to achieve through surgery: “Often transgendered [sic] individuals desiring surgery conform to strict heteronormative roles in order to legitimize their transition ... the medical system restricts individuals' ability to make gender transitions that do not produce normative sexed and gendered bodies” (Johnson and Repta 2012: 33).

40. Overall is very influenced by this concern. She cites Mason-Schrock’s observation that trans people “learn, from others in the transgender community, to find biographical evidence of a differently gendered ‘true self’ and to fashion this information into a story that leads inexorably to the identity ‘transsexual’” (Mason–Schrock 1996: 176–77, qtd. in Overall 2009: 24).

41. For theoretical discussions, see, e.g., Prosser (2006); for autobiographies, see, e.g., Morris (1997 [1974]) and Bornstein (1994); for qualitative studies conducted by trans-positive researchers, see, e.g., McLachlan (2010); Meyerowitz (2006).

References


