Osaka University Knowledge Archive

Title	Transgender Experience and Gender as an Aristotelian Essence
Author(s)	Miki, Nayuta
Citation	Philosophia OSAKA. 2022, 17, p. 19-28
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/85575
rights	
Note	

Osaka University Knowledge Archive : OUKA

https://ir.library.osaka-u.ac.jp/

Osaka University

Nayuta MIKI (Osaka University)

Transgender Experience and Gender as an Aristotelian Essence

Abstract Witt's gender essentialism treats gender as an Aristotelian essence of social individuals. This perspective appears to explain the transgender experience by suggesting that trans people experience a lack of unification as social individuals. However, this view is implicitly connected with the assumption that there is no gap between the evaluative and motivational aspects of social norms, though this gap is crucial to explain the transgender experience. This paper explains how this assumption from Witt's theory can be discarded and how the modified version of it can be employed to account for the transgender experience.
Keywords: gender essentialism; Charlotte Witt; transgender; gender dysphoria; gender euphoria

1. Introduction

In this paper, I argue that even though an important modification is required, Witt's (2011) metaphysical theory of gender provides a foundation to explain some aspects of the transgender experience. Especially, it has the potential to account for the following aspects:

1. why some people need transition,
2. why people with gender dysphoria suffer, and
3. why it is imperative that transition moves in the direction of matching recognized gender with gender identity.

Witt's perspective is a form of gender essentialism, specifically, Aristotelian essentialism, which posits that gender is the essence for the unification of social individuals. She referred to the latter as *uniessence.* Social individuals are essentially social position occupiers. Consequently, the notion is that gender unifies multiple social positions and shapes them into a social individual.

This perspective appears to pave the way for characterizing gender dysphoria as a lack of unification in those who suffer from it as social individuals. However, Witt hardly pursued this possibility and there is an implicit assumption in her view that prevents us from doing so too. In this paper, a way to modify Witt's gender essentialism in an endeavor to explain the transgender experience is proposed.

(Throughout this paper, when I refer to a person in examples, I use a pronoun corresponding to their gender identity or their motivational gender.)

2. Witt's Metaphysics of Gender

Witt explained gender essentialism as "gender is essential to social individuals" (2011, p. 3, n1). To fully understand her position, we need to clarify what she meant by *gender*, *essential*, and *social individual*.

Gender may be viewed as "a position associated with a social role, a complex set of social norms" (Witt 2011, p. 32). Gendered social roles are defined in terms of reproduction but distinguished from biological functions of reproduction. They are socially mediated reproductive functions or what Witt called *engendering* functions. In order to occupy the social position of being a woman, one must be recognized by others as able to perform the reproductive role that is normally associated with femaleness. However, being a woman does not only involve being recognized as being capable of fulfilling this role, but also being responsive to and evaluable under various social norms associated with the role. *Being responsive to* may be interpreted broadly as including instances where individuals rebel against a social norm under which they are evaluated. It is noteworthy that individuals do not have to possess the biological function usually associated with femaleness to perform the corresponding engendering function. Witt argued, "Since contemporary social norms governing family formation, and, hence, engendering in a broad sense, include families in which children are not biological offspring of their parents, it is possible to engender without satisfying any of the material constraints that govern biological reproduction" (2011, p. 38).

Witt assumed that gender is binary. In other words, gender is just being a woman or being a man. She postulated that a third gender may be described in relation to women and men, for example, as "neither man nor woman" (Witt 2011, p. 41). Thus, she claimed that her view of gender as a social position associated with engendering is compatible with the existence of a third gender. The Hijra in India is the only exemple of a third gender she mentioned. It is unclear if, which I doubt, differences among various nonbinary identities can be explained this way. In particular, I am unsure how Witt could explain the difference between, for example, being a woman and being a nonbinary feminine. The individuation of different categories of gender appears to require more elaborate treatment. However, this topic is not within the scope of this paper[1].

The notion of essence on which Witt relied is the one of Aristotelian essence. An

[1] It is my opinion, which I will not discuss here, that a better theory can be obtained by combining Jenkins's (2016; 2018) theory on gender identity with Lewis's (1973) analysis of counterfactuals.

Aristotelian essence may be distinguished from an essence of a kind. While the former is "a property or characteristic that makes an individual the individual that it is" (Witt 2011, p. 5), the latter refers to a property that defines the membership of a kind. An Aristotelian essence is a property an individual must have to be that very individual. Thus, Witt's gender essentialism does not concern a property that defines who is a woman and who is not. Rather, her gender essentialism proposes that having a certain gender makes a human individual the individual that they are.

Witt's notion of essence also differs from Kripke's (1980). For Kripke, it is the identity of an individual across multiple possible worlds that is at issue. In everyday conversations, we often make a modal statement such as "Socrates could have been a carpenter." The question that concerned Kripke was what makes this possible Socrates the same person as the actual Socrates. On the contrary, the notion of Aristotelian essence is related to unification (in the actual world). For example, consider a wooden chair. Although it is made of wood, it is not just a collection of wood. Rather, the whole of it constitutes an individual, the chair. What makes it what it is, namely the chair, and not merely a collection of wood? This is what Aristotle referred to as the essence of the chair, which he considered to be its function, namely, the function of something on which to sit. Witt's gender essentialism is essentialism in this sense of essence. Gender is an engendering function, which constitutes a social individual out of its parts.

What is a social individual and what are its parts? Witt defined social individuals as social position occupiers (2011, p. 55). This definition implies that the parts of a social individual are social positions. Witt noted that social individuals differ conceptually from human organisms and persons (ibid.). As a social position occupier, the existence of a social individual presupposes social positions and, therefore, the social world. Unlike social individuals, human organisms can exist outside of human societies. Crusoe in one of Defoe's novels exemplified this. A social individual also differs from a person in that "to be a person is essentially to have a first-person perspective (or self-consciousness)" (ibid.). One can have a first-person perspective outside the social world, which Cruso also exemplified. This implies that one can be a person without being a social individual. Although we are normally a human organism, a person, and a social individual simultaneously, these three concepts have different implications.

With regard to social positions, Witt adopted what she called the *ascriptivist* account, which posits that to occupy a social position and be responsive to and evaluable by the associated norms, one does not need to identify with that social position. Once a mother is recognized as a mother, she is evaluated by the social norms of how mothers should behave and she is expected to be responsive to them, whether or not she herself has a

maternal identity. Thus, social individuals are social position occupiers. However, which social position they occupy is not determined by their sense of identity but rather by others' recognition.

Witt's gender essentialism theorizes that gender as a social position associated with an engendering function is what makes a social individual out of social positions. Although social positions I am placed in are mere collection of social norms as they are, being a woman unifies them and makes me a social agent who acts under a coherent set of norms. I am, among others, a university lecturer, my students' teacher, a Japanese citizen, and my parents' child. They are social positions in which I am placed. In other words, they are what others recognize me as being in. Regardless of whether I have a sense of identity, I must be responsive to and evaluable by those social positions. People will evaluate me as a university lecturer and therefore, whether I conform to the norm and endeavor to behave as a good lecturer or rebel against the norm and dare to behave like a bad lecturer, I must act as a response to it. However, how I am expected to act is not determined fully by these social positions because according to our society's norms, a female lecturer is expected to behave differently to a male lecturer. Therefore, one cannot behave fully as a social agent without a gender. However, once individuals have a gender, their social positions are unified in one way and they become social agents. Although gender itself is a social position, it is a social position that governs other social positions in this way. According to Witt, in this sense, gender is essential to people.

An important implication of this view is that gender is not merely one of many properties. If it were just one of many properties, it would be unclear why trans people often suffer considerably from not living as a gender with which they identify. Some might even declare it is a shame people cannot live with the properties they have and come to terms with what they have. They may further regard trans people as being selfish. However, Witt's view implies that gender is not merely one among many properties. Rather, gender is the essence for one to be a social agent and thus, is literally a life-altering issue for a social individual because without it, a social individual cannot even exist, at least not in the full sense.

However, Witt's theory is not sufficient to make sense of the way trans people experience gender. In relation to trans people, Witt noted, "it is reasonable to think that a change in gender marks the end of one social individual and the beginning of another" (2011, p. 88). In other words, trans people are supposed to destroy themselves as social individuals and give birth to themselves as new social individuals. However, one may ask why they would endeavor to do that. If they were social individuals with consistent unification even before transitioning, there would be no reasonable sense for them to break this unification. Rather, it would make sense for them to be just as they were.

McKitrick (2015) noted that to make sense of trans people's experience of gender, it is imperative to consider "the subjective or psychological aspects of gender" (p. 2577) or rather, the *motivational* aspect of social norms in my term. Witt's ascriptivist theory posits that to be in a social position is essentially to be recognized as such and to be recognized as occupying a social position is enough to be evaluable by the relevant social norms. This appears to be plausible. However, Witt, without justification, saw being evaluable by a social norm as equivalent to being responsive to it. Being responsive to a norm is being motivated by it, even if one is motivated negatively, as, for example, having very short hair as resistance to the norms of a woman. Subsequently, Witt assumed that the social norms employed to evaluate one are the same as the norms that motivate their actions. This is an implicit cisnormative assumption underlying Witt's theory. She thought that there is no gap between the evaluative and motivational aspects of social norms. However, it is this gap that is crucial to a sense of the trans experience. In the next section, a modified version of Witt's theory in this regard is presented.

3. Gender Dysphoria and Gender Euphoria

The set of X's *motivational* norms may be defined as the social norms that positively or negatively motivate X's actions. As noted in Section 2, a collection of social norms does not fully determine one's actions. Rather, the norms have to be unified under a gender. When X's set of motivational norms is unified under a gender, this may be referred to as *X's motivational gender*.

Similarly, X's set of *evaluative* norms may be defined as the social norms that are associated with the social positions X is recognized to possess and by which X is evaluable. When X's set of evaluative norms is unified under a gender, this may be referred to as *X's evaluative gender*.

The following two notions are relevant to the trans experience: *gender dysphoria* and *gender euphoria*. If X's motivational gender and X's evaluative gender are different, X is known to suffer gender dysphoria. If X does not have gender dysphoria, that is, if X's motivational gender and X's evaluative gender are the same, X is known to enjoy gender euphoria. *Transitioning* occurs when those who have experienced gender dysphoria resolve it and acquire gender euphoria.

Although I introduced the notion of gender dysphoria as a technical term, I also intended it to overlap with the actual phenomenon generally called by this name. On the contrary, my notion of gender euphoria is distinguished from the feeling of gender euphoria trans people refer to even though the former may depict an important part of the reason for the latter.

In order to clarify the point, consider a woman named Hana. Others recognize her as a teacher, a parent, a Japanese citizen, and a woman. People identify her as a mother who teaches at school and has Japanese citizenship. People evaluate her as a mother, a female teacher, and a Japanese woman. If she leaves the care of her children to her parents, people may criticize her. If she exhibits empathy toward her students as a female teacher is expected to do, people are likely to praise her. If her partner is not Japanese, some nationalists may condemn her for that. She may not necessarily identify with these positions. While she consciously has a maternal identity as well as an identity as a teacher, she may not identify as a Japanese citizen because she is in the ethnic and racial majority and thus, has had little opportunity to be conscious about her citizenship. However, these social positions and the related social norms motivate her actions. As a mother, she has a critical stance toward the norm that a mother must take care of her children by herself. This stance is motivated by her social position as a mother. As a teacher, she believes she must show her students empathy, even if she thinks that may be classified as stereotypical behavior of a female teacher. Even though she does not consciously identify with the social position of a Japanese citizen, she may wonder what is wrong with Japanese people having non-Japanese partners. Her actions are motivated by the social norms that are connected with the social positions she is recognized to be in. Although she may feel frustrated by the social norms imposed on mothers, her evaluative gender and her motivational gender are the same. Her set of evaluative norms and set of motivational norms are unified under the social position of being a woman. She experiences gender euphoria.

Hana has a child named Haru. He is recognized by others as a high school student, as Hana's child, and as a woman. People recognize that he is Hana's high school daughter and evaluate him in accordance with the social norms connected with being a high school girl as well as those connected with being a daughter. However, his actions are, as my use of the pronoun *he*/*his*/*him* suggests, not motivated by these social norms. He is positively motivated by the social norms associated with being a high school boy. He prefers pants to skirts and likes to cut his hair short because these are what boys following the latest trends do. He appears to be negatively motivated by the social norms of being Hana's son. According to social norms, a son is expected to be independent when he is old enough. Haru believes that this norm is ethically problematic and hopes to keep a friendly relationship with Hana. Consequently, he tries to stay close to her. Although his evaluative norms are unified under the social position of being a woman, his motivational norms are unified under the social position of being a man. Therefore, he has gender dysphoria. His actions are motivated by social norms that differ from those connected with the social positions he is recognized to be in. His actions and other people's evaluations thereof are not in harmony. Although he may

feel frustrated, this frustration differs from that of Hana.

Some may wonder if one's motivational norms can be defined as the norms connected with the social positions they recognize themselves to be in. If so, individuals' motivational gender could be equated to the gender with which they identify. However, such a definition is problematic because individuals can be unconscious of their motivational gender. Agnes Borinsky's novel, *Sasha Masha*, thus depicts how a person with gender dysphoria can be ignorant of their motivational gender:

> I have this theory that some people are Real People and some people are not. Real People are comfortable being themselves and don't have to think about what they want. They laugh out loud and they eat when they're hungry and they say what they're thinking no matter who is listening. And the paradox of it is that the harder you *try* to be Real, the deeper you know that you're not. Going to pool parties tricks you into thinking you might get to be Real for a little bit. But then you wake up the next morning and you almost don't want to get out of bed because you feel like your body is a costume and your voice is a recording and whatever little kernel of Realness you might have is buried or drowned or dead. That kernel will never, not in a million years, see the light of day. (Borinsky 2020, pp. 6-7)

The protagonist, Sasha Masha, just knows that there is something wrong, that they are not Real[2]. At the beginning of the story, they attempt to be a "Real man" but fail to do so without even knowing why. This depiction implies that their motivational gender is different from their evaluative gender. That is why they cannot be a "Real man," no matter how hard they try. However, the story is concerned with their gradually becoming conscious of their own gender identity. They do not know who they truly are until the end of the story. Their motivational gender is not given at the beginning, but is rather something to be discovered. Trans people often talk about this experience of discovering what has been wrong and who they truly are. As such, one can have a motivational gender without, at least consciously, identifying with it.

Although the notions of gender dysphoria and gender euphoria have been introduced, the reason why gender dysphoria causes suffering is yet to be explained. Another notion, namely, *derived norm* may be employed to explain the suffering caused by gender dysphoria. Haru is recognized as a high school girl and motivated as a high school boy. Although being a high school girl and being a high school boy are different social positions, they overlap

[2] Sasha Masha is a trans feminine person, but the novel does not show their exact identity nor their appropriate pronoun, so my use of *they/them* is just tentative.

because both of them involve being a high school student. For example, in Japanese society, if students disobey their teacher, they will be blamed and sometimes punished. Haru's teacher recognized Haru as a high school girl and thus, told Haru to behave as a good high school girl. Furthermore, she believed that Haru should wear a skirt school uniform and be demure. This has an effect on Haru, because even though he is not directly motivated by the social norm of being a high school girl, he is still motivated by the social norm of being a high school student. So, what the teacher tells Haru to do motivates Haru's actions positively or negatively. Haru is influenced by the derived norm of being a high school girl through the student-teacher norm. In general, X is said to be motivated by a derived norm of social position P if even though X is not motivated by P, X is motivated by social norm N that is not identical to P but to comform to N X must behave as though X is motivated by P.

Haru was directly motivated by a social norm connected with being a high school boy, but also by the derivative norm of being a high school girl. If the social position of being a high school boy and the one of being a high school girl are inconsistent, he is faced with a dilemma. His motivational gender is of a man. Consequently, to exercise his agency, he has to act as a high school boy. However, then his teacher will punish him. On the contrary, if he acts as a high school girl to avoid being punished, he will be acting under his teacher's compulsion rather than exercising his agency. In other words, he will have to choose between punishment and abandoning autonomy. Regardless of his choice, he will experience it as painful.

It is possible that trans people may generally be in this kind of situation before transitioning and it is for this reason that they need transitioning. Transitioning is a process of dissolving gender dysphoria to achieve gender euphoria. It is generally carried out by changing one's evaluative gender. Once gender euphoria is achieved, they will not have to experience the particular type of dilemma that Haru faced even though they might feel frustrated with the social norms connected with their new evaluative gender. They will have at least regained their autonomy as a social agent.

One may question why transitioning generally moves in the direction of altering evaluative gender. It is possible that agency is more strongly related to existence as a social individual than others' recognition is. In this sense, it may well be motivational gender, not evaluative gender, that corresponds to so-called gender identity. If one attempts to transition by fitting their motivational gender into their evaluative gender, they will have to give up their autonomical agency and surrender to the coercion of others. This is self-destructive as Meredith Russo's novel *Birthday* portrays convincingly. Morgan, one of the protagonists, has been suffering gender dysphoria since she was a small child. In the middle of the story, she oppresses her motivational gender and tries to conform to derivative norms based on her evaluative gender.

> Dad now seems happy when he's around me. Eric seems happy too. *I'm* not happy, but I'm maybe sort of less miserable. Now I only get punched when I punch first. All in all, this last year's worked out pretty well for everybody. (Russo 2019, p. 172)

Morgan conforming to what her father and her friends tell her to do makes them happy and people stop punishing her. She now behaves according to her evaluative gender. But this deprives her of her autonomous agency.

> I grip. I flex my knees, and they burn like a wildfire. Nothing happens at first. I close my eyes and grind my jaw. My feet shift slightly and I put my back into it. The weight starts to lift and the guys go silent. No more smartass comments now. With shaking knees, I bring my legs, inch by inch, to their full extension. Almost there. None of my muscles want to listen but, and this is the secret, the most *important* secret: I am not my body.
>
> My body is a machine.
>
> Machines don't get to say no. They take orders until they break. I don't care if this machine breaks. I growl and give the order, over and over. And suddenly, though unsurprisingly to me, my back straightens out and my shoulders roll back. The guys start hollering, jumping around, pumping their fists in the air. Their disrespect evaporates like a shallow, scummy puddle. (Russo 2019, p. 175)

She is now split into two halves: one is ordering her to behave as people expect her to behave and the other is a machine that takes the orders without saying no. She is no longer an autonomous social agent like other people. One may assume that almost no one could bear to live their life like this.

Thus far, the argument has an important implication. I am of the view that misgendering is a way of depriving trans people of their autonomous agency. By misgendering trans people, one can produce derived norms based on the evaluative gender that does not motivate them. Thus, trans people have to face the dilemma people with gender dysphoria experience, even if only after they once acquire gender euphoria. Accordingly, passable trans people[3] fear outings[4] and being read[5]. Another of Russo's novels *If I Was Your Girl* describes how trans people experience fears even after transitioning and even if they are fully passable.

---

[3] Individuals from the transgender community who look like cisgendered individuals.

[4] The practice of revealing without consent that someone is a transgenedered individual, gay, lesbian, etc.

[5] Being recognized as an individual from the transgender community.

> "Sorry for choking you with my lame pun, Amanda," he said. "I meant it as a compliment, but that kind of thing must be pretty old at this point."
>
> "Why would you say that?"
>
> "A girl like you?"
>
> I narrowed my eyes. What did he mean, *a girl like me*? My fears from earlier returned in a rush. "Are you messing with me?" (Russo 2016, pp. 21-22)

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, I have argued that Witt's gender essentialism can be employed to make sense of the transgender experience. However, this is on the condition that the assumption that one's motivational gender and evaluative gender are always the same is discarded. Once the possibility that they are different is acknowledged, gender dysphoria and gender euphoria can be defined. People with gender dysphoria suffer from it because it deprives them of their autonomous agency through deprived norms. Thus, those with gender dysphoria often hope to achieve gender euphoria through transitioning.

References

Borinsky, Agness (2020) *Sasha Masha*, Farrar Straus Giroux, New York.

Jenkins, Katharine (2016) "Amelioration and Inclusion: Gender Identity and the Concept of Woman," *Ethics*, 126 (2): 394-421.

Jenkins, Katharine (2018) "Toward an Account of Gender Identity," *Ergo*, 5 (27): 713-744.

Kripke, Saul A. (1980) *Naming and Necessity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Lewis, David (1973) *Counterfactuals*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden.

McKitrick, Jennifer (2015) "A Dispositional Account of Gender," *Philosophical Studies*, 172: 2575-2589.

Russo, Meredith (2016) *If I Was Your Girl*, Usborne Publishing Ltd., London.

Russo, Meredith (2019) *Birthday*, Usborne Publishing Ltd., London.

Witt, Charlotte (2011) *The Metaphysics of Gender*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

©2022 by Nayuta Miki. All rights reserved.