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Gender Identity and Existentialism: A Transgender Analysis

Existentialism is a field of philosophy that affirms the importance of personal choice, freedom, and authenticity. Philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre, a key existentialist figure, and his partner, Simone de Beauvoir, have provided a variety of contributions to this field that are still topical and worthy of discussion today. Particularly, Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is especially relevant in today's social climate, especially with respect to gender identity and transgender theory. *Transsexualism and Existentialism*, an essay by Christiana Richards, provides an existential perspective on gender identity based on the ways in which transgender/transsexual people are treated both socially and medically. These ideas are compatible with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which they write about extensively in *Gender Trouble*. I argue that gender identity, especially as we understand it today, is profoundly linked with the existentialist concepts of freedom and facticity, and the experiences of transgender individuals are a strikingly relevant way to demonstrate this.

I wrote about gender and its relation to Sartre's ideas of radical freedom and bad faith in my previous paper, *A Feminist Perspective on Radical Freedom*, but my analysis still provides important context for my paper on *The Second Sex*. Sartre's famous assertion that humans are "condemned to be free" implies that we must always make choices to define ourselves through our actions. As I mentioned previously, I (and Judith Butler) believe that gender identity is nothing more than a performance that is produced and sustained through our actions. It is also

important to acknowledge the fact that this choice takes place in the context of the Western restrictive framework of the gender binary, making the pursuit of authenticity in gender expression a challenge for everyone, especially for both cisgender women, like Simone de Beauvoir, and transgender individuals.

There are a variety of existentialist concepts that can be used in an analysis of gender roles. One of these ideas is facticity, which acknowledges that one's freedom is constrained by circumstances they have no control over, such as their sexual characteristics (sex is also arguably a social construct, but that is outside the scope of my essay for now) and the societal norms in the place and time in which they live. Transcendence, on the other hand, is the belief that these circumstances can be surpassed through our individual choices. Transgender individuals are the perfect demonstration of the dichotomy between facticity and transcendence—they are forced to navigate their innate biological characteristics and society's oppressive gender roles and actively make the choice to define and present themselves authentically. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir famously claims that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (Beauvoir 283). demonstrating her belief that gender is a socially constructed role imposed on individuals rather than an innate quality. She challenges gender essentialism and calls for individuals to assert their freedom to freely define themselves. This clearly relates to trans experiences, as transgender people push against rigid binaries, providing a concrete example that gender is a self-defined, not biologically dictated, aspect of identity.

While some may argue that gender *is* an immutable characteristic assigned at birth, research shows that the reality is far more complicated. *Transsexualism and Existentialism* mentions several peer reviewed studies that find that gender formation is a "multi-factorial etiology"—it is influenced by both social and biological factors (Richards 273). Transgender

people do have the freedom to choose their gender identity and presentation, but they are also forced to live in a world where there are both social and biological limitations to doing so. Additionally, even cisgender people are "condemned to be free" with respect to their gender presentation, and we see this in the way cisgender people often experiment with gender presentation during their adolescence (Richards 274). Beauvoir also acknowledges that while biology does play a role in the formation of gender identity, a woman's relationship with her gender extends beyond her physical form: "It is true that her situation especially disposes her to be seen in this image. Her physiological destiny is very complex; she herself endures it as a foreign story; her body is not for her a clear expression of herself; she feels alienated from it; the link that for every individual joins physiological to psychic life—in other words, the relation between the facticity of an individual and the freedom that assumes it—it is the most difficult enigma brought about by the human condition: for woman, this enigma is posed in the most disturbing way" (Beauvoir 269). Clearly, one becomes a woman not solely as a result of biological determinism or societal influence, but from a complex interplay of these factors.

While social constructs and physiological "givens" can be powerfully influential, they do not fully determine one's gender identity—this always involves some degree of individual choice and agency. Richards argues that transgender people, in seeking their authentic gender expression, exercise a deep existential freedom despite societal and internal constraints. She also acknowledges certain aspects of our existence—such as physical characteristics, cultural background, and time of birth—are fixed existential "givens," gender does not necessarily fall within this category. Instead, she suggests that gender is something we actively shape—it transcends both biological and societal determinism. While this applies to everyone, this perspective is especially relevant with transgender individuals—by choosing to express their

gender in ways that diverge from societal expectations, they embody the existential act of transcending their facticity through personal freedom and authenticity. Richard emphasizes that for transgender people, navigating this process often requires confronting both external societal pressures and internalized norms. This often-difficult journey involves not only a strong commitment to self-determination but also a radical acceptance of the uncertainty and personal responsibility this existential freedom entails. However, there is a complex interplay between this demonstration of personal agency and the constraints of "givens." While one might decide that they want to medically transition to better align their body with their gender identity, this choice is influenced by various "givens," such as access to medical resources, societal acceptance, and the physical limitations of modern medicine. By choosing to affirm their gender identity in the face of these limitations, transgender people are choosing to assert the agency within the boundaries of facticity. This illustrates that the essence of gender for transgender individuals lies in the continuous act of choosing and their becoming their gender—a dynamic process that inherently defies static and predetermined definitions.

While facticity and transcendence are important existentialist concepts that can help us work towards an understanding of gender identity, the idea of bad faith cannot be understated in revealing how individuals are compelled to perform their gender in a specific way by society. Bad faith, as Sartre defines it, is a condition which occurs when individuals deny themselves their absolute freedom to define themselves. As we've just established that gender identity is not a predetermined characteristic entirely outside of one's control, we can argue that someone who denies themselves the freedom to explore their own gender identity is acting in bad faith, as they are accepting societally defined gender roles without being concerned about maintaining their authenticity. Some feminists, like Judith Butler, claim that gender is a performance that is

artificially “manufactured through a sustained set of acts” (Butler 16). While this affirms the existentialist idea that everyone defines themselves solely through our actions, Butler also acknowledges the extent to which society limits freedom with respect to gender, writing that “gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences” (Butler 108). This is what creates the problem of bad faith—while gender identity is left to each individual to discover and construct, society attempts to severely erase gender expression that falls outside the gender binary. The societal expectations around gender force individuals to conform, creating a pressure that limits the freedom to define themselves. Beauvoir also acknowledges these pressures, writing that “the passivity that essentially characterizes the ‘feminine’ woman is a trait that develops in her from her earlier years. But it is false to claim that therein lies a biological given; in fact, it is a destiny imposed on her by her teachers and by society” (Beauvoir 294). For transgender individuals, this often manifests as invisibility or severe marginalization, as society expects one’s gender presentation to align with their assigned birth sex. This enforcement of rigid, binary gender norms encourages bad faith by pushing people toward an inauthentic existence, compelling them to adopt roles that may feel deeply misaligned with their true identity. Butler’s theory of gender performativity highlights this struggle by emphasize how repetitive social norms create and reinforce gender identity through performance. However, Butler also suggests that subversive acts can challenge these norms, which resonates with existentialism’s emphasis on personal authenticity. Beauvoir also describes subversive action with respect to gender in *The Second Sex*: “[Men] want to confine her in a dilemma: either you agree or you don’t; she has to agree in the name of the whole system of accepted principles: in refusing to agree, she rejects the whole system; she cannot allow herself such a dramatic move; she does not have the means to create another society: yet she does not agree with this one”

(Beauvoir 651). Beauvoir touches on the difficulty of subversive action, which she sees as something that inherently requires a complete rejection of dictates gender norms. This resonates with Butler's assertion that individuals who challenge gender expectations are, in fact, performing acts of resistance. For both Beauvoir and Butler, the struggle against societal norms involves not just passive rejection but active transformation and revolution, highlighting the existential challenge of pursuing authenticity within the modern restrictive framework of gender. For transgender individuals, subversive action takes the form of rejecting rigid gender binaries and biological determinism, instead asserting a self-defined identity. This act echoes existentialism's call for individuals to define themselves authentically in the face of societal constraints—a perfect example of how freely-defined gender identity is compatible, and even affirmed, by an existentialist worldview.

Overall, the experience of transgender individuals powerfully illustrates the existentialist view that gender identity is both something assigned to us by society *and* a construct that we must continuously shape and define ourselves. Through their resistance to rigid, binary conceptions of gender, transgender individuals not only navigate their own complex journeys toward authenticity but also reveal the fluidity and self-defined nature of gender for all individuals, including those who do not identify as transgender. This process of self-definition aligns closely with existentialist themes of freedom, facticity, and the rejection of bad faith, emphasizing that gender is not merely a static, immutable attribute but a continuous act of becoming, requiring courage to confront and transcend both personal and societal constraints.

Beauvoir and Butler's perspectives further illuminate this existential struggle for authenticity, emphasizing that achieving this authenticity with respect to gender expression is not a passive acceptance of identity but an active, often subversive, rejection of society's restrictive

roles and binaries. For both philosophers, gender performance involves the tension between societal expectations and individual freedoms, highlighting the existential challenge of asserting personal identity within systems that often demand conformity. Transgender individuals embody this struggle and serve as a powerful example of how existential freedom—asserting a self-defined, authentic identity—is exercised within, and sometimes against, the pressures of societal norms. In rejecting biological determinism and embracing their self-defined gender, transgender individuals exemplify the existentialist call to live authentically, showing that true freedom lies in the choice to define oneself, even in the face of limitations.

Works Cited

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