

On Self as Object:
Sex, Gender, and Transgenderism

Mark Tracy

Crystal Teardrops (on Gender)

My poems are crystal teardrops
born of confusion, crystallized
by its resolution.
They work their way out;
I cannot push them.
Here's one.

I am the lightest amongst women
and I beat the heavy drum
amidst the company of brothers—
And why shouldn't I?

I carry years of
Knowing and Unknowing,
of the hardening and softening,
of the chortles and the fire;
and it turns out I am all of it,
(or at least a pretty bird or two
has bounced around before me while I
paid attention to my head and noticed
it within me.)

Now if I bow down to your office,
will you carry me awhile?
Life's too wonderful to be something;
and all that's there to choose
are silly beats within a background that is
Orchestral,
so why bother?

That I may be nothing to myself,
I am Yours.

Part I: The Self as an Object of Analysis

Before we wade into the turbulent and contested waters of gender ideology (or indeed before we realize that we already have), I would like to take a moment to consider how we think about ourselves, and what sort of language we use to describe ourselves.

Processual and Objectifying Language

Self-reflexive or meta-cognitive statements such as "I think...", "I believe...", or "I feel...", are crucial for thinking about oneself, but they are not the type of statements I am interested in here. Discussed here are statements of the form "I am..." These are an especially important sort of statement. They are statements of knowledge about oneself as an object. By contrast, statements like "I believe..." or "I think..." or "I feel..." are not statements about oneself as an object, but rather about one's experience as a subject. I am committed to the importance of knowing oneself as a subject, but I am especially interested in how we know and characterize ourselves as objects.

Statements one makes of oneself as an object are distinct from statements one makes of oneself as a process. This distinction is of interest to me because I believe one is always in a process of becoming, i.e. I make myself and I am the making itself. At the very least, it must be acknowledged that the full extent of who or what we are is not merely a story of what we have done or experienced but also what we are yet to do or experience: not only of what we have been but also of what we can be. Nonetheless, at a given moment one may regard oneself as an object of knowing with a certain internal state, a location, spatial extent, etc. What I am particularly interested in here are statements that are implicitly or explicitly contrary to the view of oneself as a process, e.g. "I am lazy," or "I am a man," or "I am a doctor." The focus is therefore on how we encapsulate this process of constant change and becoming into static self-descriptions. This poses a philosophical and practical challenge as it goes against the fluid, ever-evolving nature of our identities. When we make "I am" statements like "I am lazy," "I am a man," or "I am a doctor," we are crystallizing a multitude of experiences, traits, behaviors, roles, and societal expectations into a single, seemingly unchanging entity. Such statements might be called "essentialist self-statements."

These statements suggest that there is some unchanging essence or core to our identity that remains constant amidst change. They bring stability and coherence to our sense of self, yet they risk oversimplifying the complexity of our identities and ignore their dynamic, evolving nature. At the same time, they can be limiting or liberating. Some religions (especially Buddhism) assert the ultimately illusory nature of this static "core" of essentialist self-statements. Nevertheless, it is considered by others to be of practical importance to maintain a balance between acknowledging one's current state (as captured in "I am" statements) and recognizing one's potential for change and growth (reflecting our inherent "process-ness"). Underlying this balance is a tension between our need for coherence and stability in our identities, and the reality of our identities as fluid and constantly evolving. Essentialist self-statements illustrate how language, while a powerful tool for self-expression, can also constrain our understanding and expression of the self, given its tendency to categorize and fix things into stable, distinct classes.

I may be accused in this endeavor of attempting to produce such stable, distinct classes of essentialist self-statements, which (if the above logic of self-as-process is followed to its most extreme

conclusions) may be regarded as ultimately illusory. Yet I acknowledge from the beginning that classification of any particular statement into the foregoing classes is “fuzzy,” and that a single self-statement can fall into multiple classes, i.e. the classes are not distinct. Rather, they are intended as a means to organize thought and to establish a vocabulary for ongoing conversations about personal identity, which are at the heart of discourse in our politics and are moreover a timeless component of people’s inner dialogues.

Conventionally Measurable Essentialist Self-Statements

A first class of essentialist self-statements are what one would be forgiven to call “objective” or could better be called “conventionally measurable” self-statements. These involve physically measurable quantities such as lengths, weight, mass, times, locations, etc. For example, “I am 6 feet tall” or, “I am in Times Square.” These statements, though seemingly straightforward, merit a word of further exposition. These statements are most aptly regarded as being of the form, “According to an explicit convention, I am measurably thus.” This characterization is helpful to remember.

Subjective Essentialist Self-Statements

There is a second, important class of essentialist self-statements, which we might call “subjective” essentialist self-classifications. Some examples of statements from this class are, “I am lazy” or, “I am brave.” These are a sort of statement that we routinely make, but which we cannot in fact reasonably make, since one knows oneself first-personally and others only third-personally, and also because one’s state is subject to constant flux and change based on one’s own decisions. For this class of statements, one cannot rightly say “I am thus” nor even “I am thus relative to X,” but merely “I have tended to behave thusly relative to Y during time period Z,” because this final statement views oneself and others from the same third-personal perspective, i.e. via outward manifestations of inner states, and makes explicit the point of reference for judgment. Moreover, it acknowledges the provisional nature of this self-knowledge and in particular that it is subject to change based on one’s own decisions. It is important to realize that even with the third-personal restatement offered above, the classifications, and the associations one has with the labels according to which one is classifying oneself, are one’s own and may differ from others’ classifications and associations. Hence the label of these statements as “subjective” essentialist self-characterizations.

How do we use statements of this second type? Should we use them at all?¹

It may be noted that subjective self-characterizations of this sort serve a practical purpose as abstractions from experience that have potential explanatory power. As such, they reduce the search time for explanations of phenomena involving oneself. It is much easier to say of oneself, “These phenomena in which I am involved make sense because I am X” than to delve into the underlying reasons why one is or has become “X-like.” However, relying on labels of this sort can produce bad explanations because they are often not arrived at by reasonable means. Moreover, the reliance upon such labels for explanations of phenomena, if they are accepted unconsciously and regarded too much

¹ It’s interesting to note that it is an endeavor of psychometric testing to bring certain statements of this subjective sort into the class of conventionally measurable essentialist self-statements as described above.

as fixed, can produce self-fulfilling prophecies (as in the case, “I will fail to complete this task, as I have failed to complete other tasks, because I am lazy”) or even existential anxiety when the labels seems not to hold (as in the case, “If I am smart, why am I struggling with this course?”). Often these labels are constructed in practice by our interactions with others, either directly or indirectly, by imagining what others would say or think of us. The eye and voice of the hidden or internalized “other” is a powerful force in shaping self-perception; but in truth the eye and voice are one’s own to avert and to quieten.

Declarative Essentialist Self-Statements

Yet another class of essentialist self-statements are declarative self-statements, especially of desire for affiliation or non-affiliation, e.g. “I am a Libertarian” or, “I am Catholic” or “I am not a member of my family.” These are acts of self-declaration, assertions of the desire to be classed by others in a certain way. These statements themselves may be further classified as contingent or necessary statements about oneself. For example, one can say, “I am (contingently) Libertarian” or one can say, “I am Libertarian” in the sense that if he were not he would not be himself, i.e. “Libertarian” is a necessary property of what the person calls “I.” These essentialist self-statements can be especially liberating. Like the previous class, these labels tend to be relied upon as having potential explanatory power. The difference with this class of self-labeling statements is that they are a positive assertion, rather than a tacit, often subconscious acceptance, that the narratives one tells of oneself and the social scripts that others follow in regarding and interacting with them can and should be colored by the power and implications of the label itself.

Performative Essentialist Self-Statements

In this quest to identify classes of statements that are structured around “I am,” I would like to consider a final class related to “performativity.” These statements aren't just descriptions of the self, but also acts that can affect the self and the world around it. For instance, statements such as “I am sorry” or “I am indebted to you” are not only expressions of a state of being, but are also actions in their own right that bear an impact on our relationships and responsibilities. They are in general not essentialist self-statements of the sorts discussed above, though there may be overlap. However, they underscore the dynamic, performative nature of our identities, reminding us that who we “are” is not just about what we think or feel, but also about what we do and how we interact with the world and with others.

Classifying the Classifications

From here we can ask interesting questions, such as: In what class or classes of statements is the declaration, “I am female”? What about a transgender person’s declaration, “I am a woman”? How about, “I am a Republican,” or, “I am a Democrat”? What about, “I am gay”? How do these statements relate to each of the classes enumerated here? Are they of a nature not considered above?

Part II: Sex, Gender, and Transgenderism

Introduction to Terms

As we know, biological sex is typically assigned at birth, and it falls into one of three categories:

Male / Female / Intersex

Gender at adulthood, on the other hand, falls into one of three categories:

Man / Woman / Non-Binary

Under the umbrella of “Non-Binary,” we have

Trans-Man / Trans-Woman / ... many others

Now, there are also many roleplay terms, which are used recreationally (some associated with kink) and are not necessarily tied to gender. One obviously need not be a trans-person or non-binary to use roleplay terms in the bedroom. However, gender is not about roleplay, and it is not limited to any particular setting.

Sex and Gender as Narratives: Gender is a Bundle of Expectations

I acknowledge that gender is itself a narrative “placed on top of” the irreducible, processual individuality of the person. Sex is likewise such a conceptual narrative. In the language established above, an assignment of sex at birth is closest to a conventionally measurable essentialist self-statement. An election of gender at adulthood is closest to a declarative essentialist self-statement. Both are constructs, and processual individuality is closest to the real.

In direct response to the questions posed at the end of the previous section, we consider how a transgender male person’s declaration, “I am a woman” may contrast with a cisgender female person’s declaration of the same. To the transgender male person, this is a declarative essentialist self-statement: a statement of desire for affiliation with a group. At its most extreme, it may be a necessary declarative essentialist self-statement, insofar as the person proclaims their affiliation amongst women to be definitive of their being. To the female cisgender person, the declaration, “I am a woman” is often considered a conventionally measurable essentialist self-statement: it serves as a claim to the conjunction of maturity and female sex assignment. As long as the former sort of claim is conflated with the latter sort, there can be no sensible beginning for the discussion of sex and gender. From a perspective other than that of the declarant, the honesty or dishonesty of a necessary declarative essentialist self-statement is not measurable in a conventional sense; while from the perspective of the declarant, such a statement is not of lesser import than any conventionally measurable essentialist self-statement. Therein lies the fundamental tension, which our taxonomy of essentialist self-statements allows us to name and face, even while our understanding of processual selfhood allows us to transcend the ideological divide. It is worth acknowledging that both advocates for and critics of transgenderism are prone to conflating these sorts of essentialist self-statements when it serves their rhetoric. It is an existential violence to deny a person an affiliation that is definitive of their selfhood as they regard it as an object of analysis, even while the unfalsifiable nature of their desire for affiliation is an epistemic deflator in the public space. The task before us is not to settle a question of fact, but to rethink the premises of gender from which the confusion arises.

I believe that given the construct of sex, there will in any society arise certain stereotypes, or simplified models, of male, female, and intersex dispositions and behaviors, which influence the roles and scripts associated with that sex. These simple models associated with sex constitute “gender.” In other words, gender is a sort of bundle of expectations for a sex. In an ideal society, these simplified models, though they may arise, would have no bearing on our treatment of others, with all focus being instead on the individual personality. In our society now, gender is fraught with problems.

Expectations: Normative vs. Statistical

One problem is that people confuse what should likely be (in statistical expectation) with what ought to be (normatively). In fact, they are utterly unrelated. A second is that gender expectations are not even statistically accurate summaries! The simplified models and the reality have become decoupled, if they were ever coupled to begin with. This relates to the third problem, which is that power has influenced gender expectations. In particular, male domination (or “patriarchy”) has forced females into subordinate roles and scripts.

I am partial to the view that while sex as a construct is useful for medical purposes, gender itself ought to be radically reimagined. It doesn’t make much sense to talk about abolishing gender, because as long as sex categories continue to be recognized, gender will arise in the form of simplified models of sexes; but these models should not have normative force. Focus should be on the individual foremost. Perhaps the concept of gender can be shrunk from normative bounds to mere statistical summaries associated with sex.

It ought to be that an individual sexed as male (or female or intersex) can freely behave however he or she wants to behave without being classed as not-male (or not-female, or not-intersex). It is tautological to say that if you are classed as a male (or female or intersex), then however you are is within the bounds of how males (or females or intersex persons) are. And yet, individual freedom includes the right to request different pronouns; to explicitly and publicly disavow the predominant gender scripts assigned to one’s sex (in one’s personal experience); and also to declare alignment with and the desire to participate in the predominant gender scripts associated with the other sex (in one’s personal experience). I emphasize the point that gender scripts that are rejected or chosen are those understood from one’s personal experience because there is obviously not one definitive account of gender roles; there is no central governing body that says, “All men must behave thusly.” So what it means to be transgender at all is very much dependent on the individual.

Normative Expectations are Harmful insofar as they Restrict Freedom

The normative, proscriptive role of gender expectations is a problem. Transgenderism is a sensible response to this nonsensical system. As long as there are still normatively binding scripts and norms, one should be free to trade one set of scripts for another. Simultaneously, we should work to dismantle the current scripts and their attachment to normative “oughts.”

One manner of dismantling the predominant scripts is through multiplication: a proliferation of positive “gender identities” beyond the man/woman bifurcation allows a means for people to create themselves by declaration. The multiplication of gender identities is driven in part by a technical need: people need search terms and hash tags to find each other. Our identities are created in intersubjective dialogue, and not all at once. We are communal products, constructing and reconstructing ourselves over time.

Declaring oneself a member of a certain gender community will affect one’s reality insofar as it

brings them into contact with new individuals who are like-minded. It may also expose one to new gender scripts in their interactions with others. These experiences might in turn inform their self-concept, which may then evolve beyond their initially chosen label.

So we see that transgenderism and multiple gender identities have emerged as part of the radical reimagining of gender that is already underway. Ideally, after so much noise, we will settle on a world where males and females are freer to identify as neither, and as nothing else in particular as it relates to gender. This would be a world in which sex differences are not necessarily erased, but in which sex affects neither equality of opportunity nor normative social expectations. This would be a world in which individual expression is prized and encouraged, though there may still remain statistical differences in chosen expressions between males and females.

Lingering Questions: What of Diversity and Classification?

Does this erase diversity? I would submit that it erases only the normative power of labels, while leaving meaningful diversity unchanged and, eventually, unnamed. Does the multiplicity of genders undermine the meaning and significance of gender as a construct at all? Yes, I believe it does. This is for the better. Does transgenderism reify and reinforce gender identities? Not necessarily; but even if it has some marginal impact, we should make up for that effect with our other work as it relates to reimagining gender, rather than invalidating trans-identities.

A number of broader philosophical questions follow from what I have described here regarding gender.

For example: Does respect for irreducible individuality require moving beyond classification systems about persons altogether? Can we retain categories without inevitable normativity, even informally?

Call me an optimist, but I believe that we can. There is nothing about a label for a group of people that is intrinsically normative with regard to their behavior, even if there may be non-behavioral prerequisites to group membership (e.g. national origin). Most people who confuse statistical expectations with normative expectations don't even know that they are doing it. People are in general ethically uneducated or under-educated.

However, we already see the seeds of this re-imagining of group labels in the term "gatekeeping." Members of a particular identity group are told not to "gatekeep" their identity—that is, not to enforce norms on what "qualifies" a person for membership in the in-group. This word has arisen as a means of policing against policing by means of communal shaming. I think that this ethos ought to be extended to all group labels; and in time, with sufficient education in the ethics of conversation and identity formation, it can be.

One may then ask something along the lines of, "But wait a minute, isn't there a loss of meaning or coherence if identities become totally disconnected from expected expressions?"

Well, let's consider an example. I am Cuban-American. This is a conventionally measurable statement of self-identity. My grandmother and grandfather came from Cuba, and we live in the USA. Suppose I go to a meet-up organized by an online community of Cuban-Americans. Might I have a preconception, based on my experience with other Cuban-Americans, of how people in this group might act? Sure. Do I need to have an opinion about how the other individuals in this group *ought* to act, by virtue of their being Cuban-American? Of course not! I might find at this meet-up a transgender person, a cyclist, a libertarian, a socialist. They might be rude, respectful, shy, loud, and any other number of things. On the other hand, the group could be fairly uniformly behaved and politically oriented. Either way, the ways that I find those people to be will inform my simplified models of what it means to be Cuban-American (in the conventionally measurable sense).

In just this way, I say that expectations (simplified statistical summaries) will arise around group labels in any society, but they need not have normative force associated with them. If surprising features are not actively discouraged, and likewise surprise itself is not understood to be a tacit discouragement, then expectation in the statistical sense need not imply expectation in a normative or ethical sense.

Closing Thoughts: An Evolving Dialogue

I aim to evolve my views on these complex topics in continual dialogue with good-faith interlocutors. I don't wish to speak unduly for groups of which I am not a member, and I don't want any voices to be left out. If you disagree with what I have said, or if it resonates with you, then please let your voice be heard.