Lecture 7 – Dualism and Transgender Issues

Christine Overall – “Sex/Gender Transitions and Life-Changing Aspirations”
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The philosophical question regarding the nature of the mind and body is not merely an abstract issue without any practical significance. Instead, philosophical ideas such as dualism (which may be latent in public culture) can have concrete effects on how we frame, understand, and treat actual bodies such as those belonging to transgender people. Ideas impact reality.
Terms

**Sex:**
The classification of people as male or female. Infants are usually assigned a sex at birth. Sex is a combination of bodily characteristics including: chromosomes, hormones, internal and external reproductive organs, and secondary sex characteristics. Overall defines sex primarily in terms of the presence of genitalia: the vulva (usually with clitoris and vagina) in the case of female, and the penis (usually with testicles) in the case of maleness.

**Gender:**
Overall defines gender as “the presentation or identification (or both) of self as being a woman or a man or some permutation thereof” (11).
Terms

**Gender Identity:**
One's internal, deeply held sense of one's gender.

**Gender Expression:**
External manifestations of gender, expressed through one's name, pronouns, clothing, haircut, behavior, voice, or body characteristics. Society identifies these cues as masculine and feminine, although what is considered masculine and feminine changes over time and varies by culture.
Terms

**Transgender:**
An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth.

**Transition:**
Altering one's birth sex is not a one-step procedure; it is a complex process that occurs over a long period of time. Transition includes some or all of the following personal, medical, and legal steps: telling one's family, friends, and co-workers; using a different name and new pronouns; dressing differently; changing one's name and/or sex on legal documents; hormone therapy; and possibly (though not always) one or more types of surgery. The exact steps involved in transition vary from person to person. *Avoid the phrase "sex change."*
**Terms**

**Cisgender/Non-transgender People:**
People who are not transgender

**Sexual Orientation:**
An individual’s enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction to another person. Gender identity and sexual orientation are not the same. Transgender people may be straight, lesbian, gay, or bisexual.
The Genderbread Person v3.2 by its pronounced METROsexual.com

Gender Identity
- Woman-ness
- Man-ness

Gender Expression
- Feminine
- Masculine

Biological Sex
- Female-ness
- Male-ness

Sexually Attracted to
- Nobody
- (Women/Females/Femininity)
- (Men/Males/Masculinity)

Romantically Attracted to
- Nobody
- (Women/Females/Femininity)
- (Men/Males/Masculinity)
Sex and Gender as Social Constructions

“Gender and sex are not identical but distinct, yet are equally products of social construction.... it is by means of social processes, not biological determinism, that an individual’s sex gets defined in historically specific ways and becomes almost always the most significant way of categorizing her or him” (12).
Two Theories of Sex/Gender Transition and Personal Identity

“(1) the ‘true’ person is thought to be the individual manifested through and by the original sex/gender status, and the transition is, metaphorically, the donning of a mask that conceals the true sex/gender, or

(2) the ‘true’ person is thought to have been hidden behind a metaphorical mask of the wrong sex/gender, and the individual’s true sex/gender is accurately revealed via the process of transition” (12).
Problems with the Transition-as-Masquerade Theory

(1) The transition is the donning of a mask that conceals true sex/gender.

This theory means that the person undergoing the transition is either deluded or duplicitous.

• Characterizing trans individuals as deluded is condescending and patronizing.

• There are too many people to make it plausible that all are either deluded or duplicitous.

• Some trans people have ‘outed’ themselves as individuals who have transitioned, so they couldn’t be duplicitous.
Problems with the Gender-Within Theory

(2) The ‘true’ person and ‘true’ sex/gender is revealed via the process of transitioning. Overall calls this the “gender-within” theory.

“The theory appears to entail the adoption of a rather simple mind-body dualism, involving a woman’s mind or spirit or soul in a male body, or a man’s mind or spirit or soul in a female body. It is hard to make sense of this form of Cartesianism. All the traditional criticisms of mind-body dualism apply: What is the relationship between the nonmaterial subject and the body? How do the body and the nonmaterial subject communicate? How does the nonmaterial subject succeed in controlling the physical body?” (15)
Problems with the Gender-Within Theory

• How does a nonmaterial woman entity develop inside a material male body? How does a nonmaterial man entity develop inside a material female body?

• The gender-within theory will claim that the gendered nonmaterial subject was always already there.

• But gender is socially constructed. “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Simone de Beauvoir).
Problems with the Gender-Within Theory

How does the dualism of the “gender-within” theory differ from strict Cartesian dualism?
Problems with the Gender-Within Theory

The “gender-within” theory implies a form of gender essentialism which has dangerous political implications.

“If people are or can be born with a particular gender, then one is what one was born to be, and one has little or no choice about gendered characteristics, behavior, and goals” (15).
The Personal Aspiration Model

• “The metaphysical problem of identity in sex/gender transitions arises from assuming that these transitions must necessarily be qualitatively different from other major changes in people’s lives” (19)

• “Sex/gender transition is best understood... by analogy to other life-changing and life-enhancing aspirations for personal transformation and self-realization” (19).

• Sex/gender identity involves choices and interpretations that is bound up with social categories and contexts. It is an ongoing narrative life project.
The Personal Aspiration Model

Sex/gender identity involves choices but not necessarily complete freedom.

1. Gender/identity and presentation are heavily policed so that nonconformity is punished.

2. Aspects of our sex/gender identity constitute a deep part of our selves and develop from the very beginnings of our socialization. Most people do not experiences their sex/gender as a matter of choice.

3. There are only two widely recognized and approved sex/gender categories: female/feminine and male/masculine.
Objections and Replies to the Personal Aspiration Model

1. The personal aspiration model implies many trans people are deluded about the nature of their identity because many describe themselves as having a gender within.

Reply: The personal aspiration model takes seriously what trans people say about themselves. The metaphor used in the gender within theory is founded on an untenable metaphysics.
Objections and Replies to the Personal Aspiration Model

2. “The personal aspiration model cannot account for the experiences of those trans individuals who say they have ‘always’ felt that they were a different sex/gender from that which others attributed to them or from what the physical evidence of their bodies might indicate” (23).

Reply:

1. Trans individuals may be reading back or reinterpreting into their personal history.

2. Many trans individuals may have longstanding or lifelong aspirations to transition.
Question

• Are these replies from Overall satisfactory or do they likewise characterize trans people as deluded?
• Do the experience of trans people provide evidence for a certain form of dualism?
• Or do implicit dualistic beliefs negatively affect how we frame, understand, and treat transgender individuals and their bodies?