

Trans and non-binary experience and the philosophy of mind: A brief comment on Salamon's Assuming a Body.

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v1, 2025/07/02 – this manuscript is dedicated to LK on the occasion of her coming out

Over the last decades, trans and non-binary experience has inspired a rich philosophical literature.^{1,2} Also as a reaction to gender critical feminism and going along with queer theory following Judith Butler's work,³ trans studies by for instance Sandy Stone⁴ or more recently Susan Stryker,^{5–7} as well as trans philosophy following amongst others Talia Bettcher⁸ have provided important insights into this multi-faceted topic. Most importantly, besides philosophizing about trans issues based on interest and assessment from outside the community, 'philosophizing from and with trans lives' (Bettcher) has established itself, too.

Trans and non-binary experience ...

Many of the above works explore trans and non-binary experience (TNBE) beyond a search for an 'essence' of gender and wo/manhood, or ideas of illness and/or disability attached to not fitting to them. To mark out any such physical, social and mental characteristics remains an active field of research, as does the discourse about the obstacles for doing so. But even when retreating to the linguistic problem alone, and applying 'wo/man' as cluster concepts or as a concepts with context-dependent extension, there will always be individuals commonly accepted as wo/man, who will still not fit properly to any cluster-definition or contextual implications. The complexity of the situation invites politically motivated abuse, when the well-being of trans- and non-trans people is pitted against each other and the alleged threats of 'gender ideology' and the 'trans lobby' are invoked.

People do of course also continue to investigate the question of what constitutes TNBE, for instance following Rubin in trans phenomenology.⁹ Like in trans metaphysics, the focus is then most

often still on gender, for instance when teamed up with critical theory to understand how the social as well as physical world shapes the possibilities of individual experience. In *Beyond Personhood*, Bettcher for instance argues against ideas of being in the wrong body or being oppressed by the gender binary as wrongly focused on the subject, where in reality interpersonal relations constitute the trans and non-binary (like all other) sexed experience.¹⁰

As an expansion to such gender-focused projects of approaching TNBE, Gayle Salamon draws on Merleau-Ponty and psychology to argue for a universal disjunction between physical and phenomenological ('felt') body.¹¹ (And this view seems well supported also by what psychologists have found for phenomena like phantom limbs etc.) According to her, the relevant difference underlying TNBE is then not the physical body, but a non-pathological, though norm-deviating relation between physical and felt body. For Salamon, the existence of such special modes of relatedness are not evidence for a purely social constructedness of gender, but shows that there is something that underlies those constructions. (And this again seems to be well supported by what psychologists have found for our most basic, largely culture-independent, bodily experiences.) Nevertheless, also for Salamon body images are not innate, as they are complex constructs, build up on top of those basic experiences and over our whole lives through physically as well as socially guided processes, so that a certain 'lack of fit' will be true for almost everyone. The issue at hand is then how to let others witness our internal sense of gender (and receive the proper, especially social, but also physical-causal response to it), that is so central for our model of the world and thus our being in the world.

... and the philosophy of mind

This way, Salamon is able to give a powerful account of general human experience, as well as specifically TNBE, that can capture not only insights about biological sex and socially constructed gender, but also 'sexual self', i.e. bodily phenomenological experiences concerning one's own sex. In my following brief comment on Salamon, I would like to elaborate on how such a phenomenological approach touches on a number of open questions in the philosophy of mind, which I have discussed in a recent book.¹²

When investigating human thought, philosophers are often split on whether one should do

this with a rather deflationary approach, based on the assumption that human experience is essentially quantitative, biophysically implemented information processing, or a more inflationary approach which puts emphasis on subjective, qualitative, conscious experience. The problem with the inflated approach is that we are still missing good ideas for how to bring this together with neuroscience; the problem with the deflated approach is that it is still very unclear how broad and stable concepts could self-implement in neural-network type systems, let alone how structural relations from the individual coordination of quantitative information could be uniquely connected with identity, quality or universal elements of meaning. (Research into artificial intelligence is very much based on such a deflationary view, and is accordingly now running into all the philosophical problems of abstraction, stability/truthfulness and generalizability.)

If we follow the deflated approach, TNBE would have to result from a lack of fit between physical body and physically implemented information processing, which would suggest either special developmental or genetic features, or more likely their interplay. Given what we now know about such features, gender as a cultural construct (in the deflated view: informational context) could then indeed be the single most impactful influence on development. Only that the deflated approach can anyhow not account for phenomenological experience and thus also not for bodily phenomenological experiences concerning one's own sex. Like implicitly suggested by Salamon turning to phenomenology for her explanations, the sheer existence of TNBE (or in fact any non-normative experience of embodiment) could be seen as strong argument against a deflated view of human thought, quite in analogy to the 'hard problem' of (other) qualia. (As E.R. Fightmaster put it; trans people 'know despite the world'.)

Quite to the contrary, if we follow the inflated approach, the existence of TNBE seems almost like a necessary consequence: If we assume that there is indeed subjective, qualitative, conscious experience, then there is simply no reason why this experience would have to always perfectly fit physical constellations. We would have to assume that during evolution and then again in individual development, non-physical entities would become in some way related to physical ones. But evolution being evolution and development being fundamentally malleable by small influences, we would then indeed also have to assume a certain amount of dispersion of relations between physical and phenomenological processes and entities; trans or non-binary 'couplings' would simply have to come up in a small number of cases. Whoever accepts the hard problem to indeed be a

problem (and most philosophers seem to do¹³), should therefore think twice before denying TNBE.

As a way out, doubters might want to make a distinction between narrative and experiential parts of the self. Humans being rational animals, parts of our self are formed by socially guided narratives that are somewhat open to our deliberation. Other, experiential parts of our self are delivered to us by our subconsciousness and are therefore not available to our wants. When following the inflated approach, doubters will try to locate TNBE in the narrative part, while those affected will mostly likely insist on the at least partly experiential nature of TNBE. But having turned to the inflated view and consequently accepting the hard problem, there is no epistemological basis for arguing against the reports of personal experience of the later. The idea that TNBE has to be a question of narrative choice instead of phenomenological experience is then a consequence of having either a strongly deflated view of human thought or from (maybe unintentionally) accepting a vacuum between neuroscience and phenomenology.

Outlook

Having turned to an 'inflated' view of human thought, consequently including TNBE, the interesting questions don't stop coming in: If the trans and non-binary experience is at least partly in the experiential part of the self, then how can we imagine this self to be realized in a person that has a brain-anchored mind? What are the non-physical qualities that make up our internal model of our world? Having a certain phenomenological body does not seem to mean having a monolithic entity in our mind; rather a bundle of qualities (most likely without a core essence), that is build up during our life and is thus indeed subject to cultural construction, too. Only that the experiential part can also lead to an acutely felt conflict with both physical-causal response from the environment, as well as 'incoming' gender constructs; i.e. to trans and non-binary experience.

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