

## TRANSGENDERISM AND THE CHALLENGE OF ONTOLOGICAL PERSONHOOD

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### Abstract

Transgenderism is a condition in which a person's chosen gender is different from their biological sex at birth, this has implications for personal identity theories. Previous studies on Transgenderism approached it from the physiological perspective by applying curative measures of realigning a person's gender, whereas minimum attention was paid to ontological being. This study was therefore, designed to interrogate the ontological being with a view to establishing that the surgical realignments of the body cannot change essential being. Interpretive design was used to interrogate Doyle and Paludi's *Sex and gender: The human experience*, it points to hormonal abnormalities in many people and the consequent gender dysphoria and gender phobia, translating to the experience and feeling of living in a 'trapped body' and [Conway](#)'s *Vaginoplasty: male to female sex reassignment surgery*. Proffer physiological and surgical attempts to realign a person's 'body', but research shows this as insufficient resolution. The work explored 'An essay concerning human understanding' for Locke's notion of personal identity to insists that identity lies in the sameness of continual life located in conscious memory, this served as the framework, leading to the crucial question about 'what should identify a person through time'. The philosophical tools of conceptual clarification, criticism and reconstruction were employed, thereby revealing that an understanding, and an attempt to examine the question of identity, will help reduce the gap that people feel when they examine their bodies along unrealistic social expectation. Self-examination when approached professionally, reveals the true self and individual essence.

**Keywords:** Gender phobia. Gender identity disorder. Transgenderism. Personal identity.

### Introduction

Transgender, as a term, refers to people who do not conform to prevailing expectations about social expressions of gender. It is an umbrella term targeted at different groups of people, including gender identity and sexual orientation, for example: the transsexual, drag queens, butch lesbians, male cross-dressers, transvestite, transmen, transwomen, gender queer and the like are all grouped under transgender. Hence, the term generally refers to "persons who are living in a gender not assigned to them at birth"<sup>1</sup>. This large umbrella becomes a common feature in political debates, but there is more to Transgenderism than meets the eyes, it's a biological condition, which boomerangs to social status hence it embraces other terms like "androgyny, polygender, dysphoria gender variant, dual gender, gender diverse, intersex and non-gender identity"<sup>1</sup>.

However those susceptible to transgenderism, claim gender dysphoria syndrome, intersex or choice as a reason for their status, but the real situation started with their biological sex rather than

social status of gender. It began with the development of the foetus, as medical science believes that it is the amount of hormones, not the kind of that determine the biological sex of the foetus. At formation, it is held that the foetus has the tendency to form any of the genders. According to James Doyle and Michele Paludis *Sex and Gender: The Human Experience*

most people talk as if women and men are dicotonomous hormonally as noted by the frequent reference to estrogen and progesterone as being female hormones. While referring to the androgens as the 'male hormones'. In fact, all three hormones are found in the blood stream of all men and women<sup>1</sup>.

In biology, we were taught that XX chromosome refers to a girl and the XY chromosome results in boys, but "studies"<sup>1</sup> show that there are hormonal abnormalities, where the X and Y chromosomes did not connect properly leading to abnormalities. These unusually situation is responsible for conditions like, the Turner Syndrome, KlineFelters Syndrome, androgyny insensitivity Virginia Agenesis and the like.

By interpretation then, biology is responsible for differentiated body, which led to the concerns about gender line blurring, this also show that hormone influences how people think or behave, which then allowed for certain thought patterns and gender traits. Those who fall outside the acceptable patterns were then said to have abnormal conditions, which explains why many people blur gender lines in their characteristic traits, especially in social characterization of genders where only two genders were specified, male and female genders. Inevitably, the abnormal biological conditions is also responsible for out of the box genders as "Studies"<sup>1</sup> show other variations, like feminine men, masculine women, miss macho and even intersex. Those susceptible in these conditions tend to express displeasure when they discover that they do not meet the characteristic traits assigned to their genders. This state results in different reactions, the common response to mismatch being the feeling of being trapped, which again is responsible for many seeking surgical remedies, believing that this will help them to align to social expectations, but statistics of transgender surgeries reveal the risky nature of the exercise, birthing the notion about transgender regret. In this wise, it becomes mandatory to seek another approach to social expectation of genders. It is clear that being human is greater than being gendered.

Philosophically, the question, "Who am I"<sup>1</sup>, is an inquiry that every living human being have to answer at one point in his or her life time as this tends to bring about self-analysis. Thus, leading us to the ancient problem of 'being'. And the mind and body concerns, like the question, on the congruence between their minds and their bodies. This time many people want to know about why mind is connected to the body. Or, if mind influences my body, how can body be made to reflect the mind? Answering these questions are critical to the current body concerns, the reason is that many believe that sex change surgeries is the answer. Sex change being the "The notion of being able to change one's sex, most radically through surgical intervention, has increasingly become a part of public awareness and social discourses. The boldness of the gender ideology movement has now brought it to the forefront"<sup>1</sup>. But transgender regret, "statistics"<sup>1</sup> that show that the surgeries did little to improve the person's feeling and many other things that go wrong after the sex change surgeries, raised many issues, and debates about

the necessity of continuing with transgender surgeries. Even when society frowns at “people who do not conform to prevailing expectations about gender by presenting and living genders that were not assigned to them at birth or by presenting and living genders in ways that may not be readily intelligible in terms of more traditional conceptions of gender”<sup>1</sup>. But the question is, must people be gendered to humanity? Does humanity require the gender codes to be? Must there be congruence between mind and body? And then what happens when there is no congruence between mind and body, or how does this impact human identity?

Therefore, exploring transgenderism is not complete without the examination ontological and metaphysical questions of personal identity. The significant concern here is what should identify a person through time? And how does body mutilation affect a person and their essential being? Hence exploring how losing a body part affects a person. By interrogating the connection between the past, present and future of a person with altered body parts?

### **Personal Identity Theories**

Personal identity theories are ontological in nature as it concerns itself with questions about personhood, persistence, population and evidence. There are three main arguments in this area; they include psychological approach proposed by John Locke, the somatic approach defended by William Bernard and John Perry and anticriterialism explored in the works of Fern Nicholas. According to John Locke, human identity is unique and different from animal identity, that personal identity consists in the sameness of consciousness. A person “is a thinking, intelligent being that has reason and reflection; and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking and it seems to me essential to it”<sup>1</sup>. In this explanation, it implies that thinking is what identifies a person? Yet, John Locke still believes that thinking is not sufficient for identity; rather that thinking must be accompanied with the ‘thinker’, he insists that there is no perception without the perceiver. According to him, consciousness always goes with thinking as consciousness identifies the self, this then result in personal identity. Following this, consciousness is the key factor responsible for constancy in personal identity, and consciousness cannot be shared nor transferred, as the entity with the consciousness, should be the one to claim identity. Thus, he posits that memory; consciousness and characteristic traits should be the main source of identity.

He concludes that consciousness belong to the one who can connect both present and past action, the reason is that consciousness goes with substance. He says.

Consciousness, as far as ever it can be extended, should it be to ages past, unites existence and actions very remote in time into the same person, as well as it does the existence and actions of the immediately preceding moment, so that whatever has the consciousness of present and past actions is the same person to whom they both belong<sup>1</sup>.

Hence John Locke’s answer to what should identify a person through time lies with “memory”<sup>1</sup>. To supports his position, he proposed a hypothetical experiment, a memory switch between a prince and a cobbler. In this experiment the cobbler keeps his mind but takes on the body of a prince and same

thing happens for the prince, but crises ensues when they try to live the body belonging to a different mind. At the end John Locke concludes that identity consists in the sameness of consciousness, that “whatever has the consciousness of the present and past actions is the same person to whom they both belong”<sup>1</sup>. However, Locke’s theory has loopholes, for instance, if thinking requires a thinker, in what category does the thinker fall? Again the theory fails to address the question of impersonator, the reason is that we have faced situations of impersonation like it happened in his analogy between the prince and the cobbler; a smart impersonator would get away with it. Here is an example about memory loss, but what happens when a person loses part of their body?

Thomas Reid theory helps us look into how one can deal with the loss of a body part; in conclusion he claims that the loss of a body part does not affect the person. According to Reid, the body part is lost but the person remains the same. How then can body become a tool of identity? John Perry argues for the body by claiming that identity is a function of the body, when compared to death, insisting that soul was insufficient form of identity as it would become difficult to identify or distinguish one person’s soul from the other, after death, especially when there is no definite answers as to what happens after the termination of the subject of consciousness. Here Perry contends the idea of memory as the true source of identity. He holds that:

Similarities of psychological characteristics- a person’s attitude, beliefs, memories, prejudices, and the like – is observable. These are correlated with identity of the body on the one side, and of course with sameness of soul on the other side. So the correlation between body and soul can be established after all by this immediate like<sup>1</sup>

Contentiously, even John Perry does not seem to have all the answers, as we are aware that people do change, criminals have been known to change. Religious conversion are such examples where the soul or consciousness turns 365 degrees and the body concurs, however it still begs the question of how to connect the past, present and future of these body, as it is very apparent that the body remains the same. In this view, John Perry views a person’s body as the prison for the soul, that the soul escapes its prison at death. This happens notwithstanding our inability to distinguish one soul or memory, or one’s ability to pair soul and body, after death. Hence, Perry concludes that neither the soul nor consciousness is sufficient for personal identity, hence the body.

Still supporting the body argument, William Bernard proposes another option by positing the Somatic theory; he argues that a change of body would definitely affect the person. Like John Locke, he proposes a hypothetical situation, by inviting us into the laboratory of the mad scientist. Here one dares to submit their body to the ‘mad’ scientist, as she attempts to separate mind and body, the body would be tortured, while the mind would be left intact. In this experiment, the mad scientist mercifully allows her victim to switch their mind with that of Napoleon; as it would be Napoleon suffering the torture. The question is then put to the audience, ‘how many people would take up the offer of a mind switch and allow the torture of their bodies? After considering that more people will refuse to partake in the experiment. Hence, William Bernard concludes that “we identify more closely with our bodies than our minds”<sup>1</sup>.

Again, there is a shortfall here, as the theory does not explain about dual identity, a scenario when one mind possesses another person's body. In which case, it becomes difficult to differentiate the two minds, like it happens in witchcraft, demonic possession or exorcism. Simply put is the case of identical twins and identical siblings, it usually difficult to tell the difference.

Therefore to bridge the gap between psychological theory and the somatic theory, Fearn Nicholas introduces a new preposition. He says "these thoughts experiments shows that while memory, personality, emotions and other psychological traits may be indicative of personal identity, they are not constitutive of it"<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, recommending anti-criterialism. Anti-criterailism is the position that acknowledges the relevance of both mind and body in identifying a person through time.

### **Transgenderism and Ontological Personhood**

John Locke's memory or psychological theory has implication for transgenderism; it queries how tampering with the body affect the consciousness of the person, and questions the impact of a changed body, and its effect on personal identity. Thus, resolving this question becomes necessary because those who choose sex change surgery believe that the intervention of the blade transforms them into a new person. Yet John Locke argues that changing the substance like body has no impact on the mind, rather it is mind that defines the body. That consciousness is what identifies body and whichever body holds consciousness, should take responsibility for its conscious experiences. Consequently, insisting that personal identity does not lie with substance but "in the identity of consciousness"<sup>1</sup>. In this light, a person could not possibly exist without consciousness as personal identity is located in the immaterial, not in the material. Yet he contradicts himself by introducing the thinker. However, in his view, anatomy then takes second place to the mind as each person only requires conscious mind for existence. But we have not resolved the impact of false identity or false consciousness. This is the case since we confuse the difference between dual identity and false identity, and have not addressed the impact of impersonation or stolen consciousness.

Contradicting John Locke, John Perry was unable to completely resolve the personal identity crises, the concern of what should identify a person through time, and the reason is that his assertion that identity should be located in the body was insufficient. Perry insistence that the soul was not sufficient or should be held responsible for personal identity through time is questionable but he is right to query the possibility of a person survival after the death of the body, even when bio-technology and beauty enhancers now make it possible to have changed bodies. Even with this, many people who plan to submit to transgender surgeries claim that they were but with the right body but wrong attributes, which allows us to query concerns about body and attributes. So instead of people discovering their unique self they are focused on attributes. What attributes do people require to be human? What happens when a body part is missing?

Transgenderism and the concerns about mutilations are critical concerns as one wonders whether a person can remain the same after a major life changing experience. Transgenderists seem to hold sway to the body theory, as many of them are motivated by their anatomies, in their views body is the most reliable form of identity through time. Yet, Rene Descartes views such notions as deceptive, and David Hume approaches this as sensations. According to Hume neither mind nor body was

responsible for our identity, “Nothing is responsible for our identity through time because, strictly speaking, it is only a fiction”<sup>1</sup>. Rather the self is a fiction we create to explain our perceptions, it is our efforts to forge perceptions into coherence. He explains that “I never can catch myself at any time without a perception and never can observe anything but the perceptions”<sup>1</sup>. In this view Personal identity is fictitious. He holds that what we call identity were only sensations, and nothing is responsible for our personal identity through time, he explains that the self to be an uncertain entity, it is not constant, but subject to changes. These changes are perceptions, and they do not exist. The “self or person is not any one impression but that to which our several impressions and ideas are supposed to have a reference...personal identity can never possibly be decided, and are to be regarded as grammatical as than philosophical difficulties”<sup>1</sup>. Transgenderism, when viewed from Hume’s position, makes the surgeries feeble and unable to resolve the question of identity. This takes us back to the debates about change and reality. It queries the self-examination processes that birth the decision for the blade, it necessitates one to go back to the original question, who am i? Again, David Hume views identity as the quality we attribute to things; the association of the union of ideas in the imagination, as memory is a faculty for raising images of past perception. In this light, memories helps to discover identity by creating the belief of resemblance in the different perceptions, hence, identity is the relation of ideas. To crown it all, he says that our debates, arguments and disputes concerning identity is a function of language. He explains that though memory gives us the notion of cause and effect “we cannot observe an ego through introspection. We alight only on our perceptions and emotions, never on the possessor of these qualities”<sup>1</sup>. This position necessitates a review of the self-analysis and self-evaluation processes. Though David Hume’s position did not resolve questions about what makes one person different from the other. Nor did it resolve issues that lead to the querying of identity, or what should account for our identities through time? Yet, we cannot but concede the fact that language compromises the understanding of the question and how to resolve it, take for instance, the interchangeable application of notions like being, substance, and essence. But of necessity is the answer to the question whether identity is the self we are now, or the self of the future, the question of what makes one self-differ from the other is critical to the transgender discourse, so also is the question of criteria for the difference. For instance, many people find it easy to consider such questions about mind and body, when others were thinking about poverty and safety. Hence culture and environment has a lot of influence on the life questions that people consider, this position again has consequences, as one would be considering the authenticity of the question and validity of the answers. Both the psychological theory and the Somatic theory have effect in transgender discourse, as it is apparent that body mutilation, mental torture or abuses, do have impact on people’s identities, but whether it makes them a new person is the debate. Thomas Reid explores body dismemberment further, he strongly believes that the mutilation of the body does not change the person because the person remains the same, that, the mutilated or removed part ceases to exist, while the person remains the same. For him the answer lies with common sense, he says that “common sense have a clear and distinct notion of Identity”<sup>1</sup>. As the same being should not be able to claim two existence, past and present, or claim any part in the existence of another being. He believes that such a claim would lead to contradictions. That that identity could not be conferred on our feeling and experiences since the experiences and feeling would never be the same, despite similarities. He further insists that personality is in something that cannot be divided, that one’s being remains the same, despite mutilation, lose or abuse as the reason is that a person is indivisible. This theory point more to

the question of essence as it emphasizes that the self is distinct from thoughts, acts and experiences. It begs the question, who am i? But for Reid, “Whatever this self may be, it is something which thinks, and deliberates and resolves, and acts, and suffers. I am not thoughts, I am not actions, I am not feelings, I am something that thinks, and acts and suffers”<sup>1</sup>. He concludes that identity has no fixed nature, hence identity is just about words. He opines that thought, acts and feeling resonates the relationship between identity and performance.

The above position points to the debates about a personality that can be ‘put on’ and ‘put off’ at ones will. It also portrays identity as a façade, a fake phenomenon, this means that what we call identity is like a stage performance, people acting their different parts, and, this has implications for transgenderism, on the one hand, it points to those claiming to be trapped in their bodies, or those trapped in a mental state, as acting, on the other hand it could mean that we were all acting, reminding us of William Shakespeare’s believe that the world is a stage and we are all actors. But what does this say about authentic existence?

But then again, if we were all preforming, then it’s time for those who believe in the surgeries to pause and reevaluate their action, as transgender regret is real. This call for caution becomes important because many people only discover their errors after making life impacting decisions. The question is, if they were in an environment that makes it difficult for them to access surgeries, wouldn’t they survive? This means that those who frown at transgender surgeries have a point, as they insists that surgery is not the solution to gender dysphoria. They could employ another approach, like hormonal therapy and counseling. After the entire true person seem to be more essence than body. Fearn Nicholas speculates about our imperfection, especially where memory is concerned, the reason is that two people can experience one event, differently. He explained this from the angle of memory lose or lapses in memory. Memory loss or blanks in their mental record is a reality, elderly people or those who suffer the debilitating Alzheimer’s disease confirms this as Alzheimer disease is said to wipe off the memory. This is another reason why personal identity may not be located in consciousness, for when memory goes body remains to help, yet without body memory is nothing.

Characteristics traits come in here, but can we determine which are the best defining traits? Or the most authentic trait? For Fearn Nicholas “while personality, emotions and other psychological traits might be indicative of personal identity, they are not constitutive of it”<sup>1</sup>. This means that attributes and traits would not serve as a sufficient form of identity, as both body and memory were necessary for identity through time. Yet we may not be able to totally discountenance the impact of experience. For instance, Susan Brison shares how sexual assault affects our identity. She explains that the trauma resulting from such violence and bodily mutilation could leave a person feeling less than human. She says, "One can no longer be oneself even to oneself, since the self exists fundamentally in relation to others"<sup>1</sup>. In this case she posits the loss of self, a kind of loss that has little to do with body, but more about mind. Yet people could approach the concern in many ways, either by living in denial or self rejection showing two selves, the one before and after the experience.

When seen in this light, the condition which propels people to transit from one self to another may not be as compelling as it seems, it may just be the result of approach or perspective. Again, self examination, done professionally can help many people , even after embarking on the life changing

surgery. As it is apparent that those surgeries did not guarantee change, Bricson posits that victims of abuse change the source of their personality from body to mind, showing that, it is possible to choose between identifying with either mind or body. She calls it a 'shattered self', "one which could 'stay tortured' and never feel comfortable again in that body. According to Bricson, the individual would then remake oneself by finding meaning in a life of caring for and being sustained by others"<sup>1</sup>. This raises concerns about those who live in denial or have transferred their memories, like the Lockean prince and the cobbler. The proposal then is, for a body to acquire a new mind, training or grooming becomes inevitable, as each body needs a conscious being choosing which to identify with. In that Lockean analogy, anyone who is familiar with the noble class, can assume that the Prince is an Aristocrat, and that he would have been groomed to the etiquette of the ton, is not over assumption, hence if grooming was done once, it can be done again, just like it is required for people who wish to switch their genders. Taking us back to the question of performance, another word for grooming. As people submit themselves to fit into a kind of box, which means they leave one box to fit into another.

## Conclusion

It is apparent that trends in transgenderism is the attempt of man at self discovery, this is not surprising, since the ancient times, man has been searching for the self, and in a bid to discover who the self is, man came up with many prepositions, many inconclusive. This has implication for contemporary man, the lesson is not farfetched. It is time to engage in self evaluation, as each person must find a self that is unique to them, and stick with its identity and pattern. It is clear that waiting for other people to validate such a self may be an ignorant approach to self actualization. This remains the case even when we still need people, like professionals to help in this discovery process, but after the session, we must still review our answers and discovery in line with our beings.

The reason for recommending professional help is not farfetched; they will be guided by rules, unlike the regular persons on the street. Again we only need to look around to know that those people whom one may be waiting, to help affirm the self, are yet to discover themselves. So how can one expect assistance or direction for a man who is also searching for the way, a blind man cannot lead a blind man. The recommendation 'Man know thyself' is a must for everyone, when asked to reflect on 'who I am'. Some people could find their answers in biology, that is, in anatomy. They can check how anatomy is, to help them determine what identity to choose, but allowing anatomy to guide us could become confusing, when there are abnormal conditions. This undetermined state is the lure to transgenderism; we must then determine whether body is enough for identity, and the consequences of our choice. That is, if identity is a dress that people can put on, and put off at will, then identity is fickle, it is too easy to change, where exactly is gender located, mind or body?

Just like the question of identity, there are so many inconclusive answers, for instance, transgenderism create another critical questions, like the question; why are there more men transiting from their gender? What is it about being a woman the makes the female gender attractive? Could the lure be that people are thinking the ease of being female, or what is it about femininity that seems so attractive? Though being female is associated with beauty, yet there is a lot of pain in femininity too. Again, many people believe that government policies lean more favorably to women, making women's life easier.

In reality such favorable government policies can only be found in a few societies. In many other societies women are still struggling to be human, they are still coping with being allowed to exercise their fundamental human rights, like being educated and even earn a living, so who is thinking that it is easier to be a woman? No wonder the early transgender were accused of rape.

Raymond Janice, a leading critic of transgenderism, accused transgendered people of “raping women consciousness”<sup>1</sup>. She believes that by transiting from male to female, they were enjoying the benefits of being women, without partaking in the history of the oppression. Hence it is not out of place to wonder why more men are transiting from their genders, or wonder about men’s fear of masculinity. Why are men escaping their genders? What social expectations make manhood difficult? Gender fears boils down to making a distinction between social expectations and self actualization, as it becomes apparent that when meeting social expectations becomes too difficult people must look to something else, this time, it would be the mind.

Mental identity seems to be a better approach to self discovery, but it seems to be the harder option as it requires people thinking critically, a notion which the current trends seem to be eroding. It appears that people would rather spend time on social media, consuming technology, liking sharing and commenting on other people products. The ability to spend time in reading has suddenly become a herculean tasks. Same social media is responsible for the current trend of identity, where people prefer to be identified through their sexuality, and body rather than mind. Sexual orientation and sexual opinions used to be personal and private views, but is now for public consumption. We hear people talking about being straight, bisexual, heterosexual or homosexuals. We also hear comments like transmen, transwomen or cisgender.

Finally, the mind and body problem which started in the ancient time is real, since the problem was not resolved then, it is no different in these modern times, but it is certain that no amount of surgery or application of hormonal drugs could change the essence of the person; this is because the character traits, emotions and consciousness of a person play a vital role in identifying the self. The ontological being includes both material and immaterial essences. Hence, the major justification for this study is the need to critically explore modern personal identity concerns and its implications for ontological personhood.

As the work seeks to pave the way for a new conceptualization of the concept of gender categories, to fill the vacuum created in the lack of the study of the issues of Transgenderism from the ontological and agency perspective. It seeks to create an understanding of transgenderism philosophically, psychologically, socially and medically. The reason is that in exploring transgenderism, the crisis of personal identity, and the reality is that these surgeries, which play a very minimal role in resolving the predicament of incongruence between mind and body. Especially as social psychology and biology created the predicament with the belief that nature assigns sex, which evolves into gender. This is why we should have an open approach to those vulnerable, helping them with therapy and supporting them with their goal self actualization.

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